Wall Street Journal

**What the World Will Speak in 2115: A Century From Now, Expect Fewer But Simpler Languages On Every Continent** (FK 11.8)

By **John H. McWhorter** Jan. 2, 2015

…Two thousand years ago, English was the unwritten tongue of Iron Age tribes in Denmark. A thousand years after that, it was living in the shadow of French-speaking overlords on a dampish little island. No one then living could have dreamed that English would be spoken today, to some degree, by almost two billion people, on its way to being spoken by every third person on the planet.

Science fiction often presents us with whole planets that speak a single language, but that fantasy seems more menacing here in real life on this planet we call home—that is, in a world where some worry that English might eradicate every other language. That humans can express themselves in several thousand languages is a delight in countless ways; few would welcome the loss of this variety.

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Thankfully, fears that English will become the world’s only language are premature. Few are so pessimistic[[1]](#footnote-1) as to suppose that there will not continue to be a multiplicity of nations and cultures on our planet and, along with them, various languages besides English. It is difficult, after all, to interrupt something as intimate and spontaneous as what language people speak to their children. Who truly imagines a Japan with no Japanese or a Greece with no Greek? The spread of English just means that earthlings will tend to use a local language in their own orbit and English for communication beyond.

But the days when English shared the planet with thousands of other languages are numbered. A traveler to the future, a century from now, is likely to notice two things about the language landscape of Earth. One, there will be vastly fewer languages. Two, languages will often be less complicated than they are today—especially in how they are spoken as opposed to how they are written.

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Yet more to the point, by 2115, it’s possible that only about 600 languages will be left on the planet as opposed to today’s 6,000. Japanese will be fine, but languages spoken by smaller groups will have a hard time of it. Too often, colonialization has led to the disappearance of languages: Native speakers have been exterminated or punished for using their languages. This has rendered extinct or moribund[[2]](#footnote-2), for example, most of the languages of Native Americans in North America and Aboriginal peoples of Australia. Urbanization has only furthered the destruction, by bringing people away from their homelands to cities where a single lingua franca[[3]](#footnote-3) reigns.

Even literacy, despite its benefits, can threaten linguistic diversity. To the modern mind, languages used in writing, with its permanence and formality, seem legitimate and “real,” while those that are only spoken—that is, all but a couple hundred of them today—can seem evanescent and parochial. Few illusions are harder to shed than the idea that only writing makes something “a language.” Consider that Yiddish[[4]](#footnote-4) is often described as a “dying” language at a time when hundreds of thousands of people are living and raising children in it—just not writing it much—every day in the U.S. and Israel.

It is easy for speakers to associate larger languages with opportunity and smaller ones with backwardness, and therefore to stop speaking smaller ones to their children. But unless the language is written, once a single generation no longer passes it on to children whose minds are maximally plastic, it is all but lost. We all know how much harder it is to learn a language well as adults.

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There are diligent efforts to keep various endangered languages from dying, but the sad fact is that few are likely to lead to communities raising children in the language, which is the only way a language exists as its full self.

Instead, many communities, passing their ancestral language along by teaching it in school and to adults, will create new versions of the languages, with smaller vocabularies and more streamlined grammars. … New versions of languages will be part of a larger trend, growing over the past few millennia in particular: the birth of languages less baroquely[[5]](#footnote-5) complicated than the linguistic norm of the premodern world.

The first wave in this development occurred when technology began to allow massive, abrupt population transfers. Once large numbers of people could cross an ocean at one time, or be imported by force into a territory, a new language could end up being learned by hordes of adults instead of by children. As we know from our experiences in the classroom, adults aren’t as good at mastering the details of a language as toddlers are, and the result was simpler languages.

Vikings, for example, invaded England starting in the eighth century and married into the society. Children in England, hearing their fathers’ “broken” Old English in a time when schooling was limited to elites and there was no media, grew up speaking that kind of English, and the result was what I am writing now. Old English bristled with three genders, five cases and the same sort of complex grammar that makes modern German so difficult for us, but after the Vikings, it morphed into modern English, one of the few languages in Europe that doesn’t assign gender to inanimate objects. Mandarin, Persian, Indonesian and other languages went through similar processes and are therefore much less “cluttered” than a normal language is.

The second wave of simplification happened when a few European powers transported African slaves to plantations or subjected other people to similarly radical displacements. Adults had to learn a language fast, and they learned even less of it than Vikings did of English—often just a few hundred words and some scraps of sentence structure. But that won’t do as a language to fully live in, and so they expanded these fundamentals into brand-new languages. Now these languages can express any nuance of human thought, but they haven’t existed long enough to also dangle unnecessary things like willfully irregular verbs. These are called Creole languages.

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Hopefully, the languages lost amid all of this change will at least be described and, with modern tools, recorded for posterity. We may regret the eclipse of a world where 6,000 different languages were spoken as opposed to just 600, but there is a silver lining in the fact that ever more people will be able to communicate in one language that they use alongside their native one.

…The future promises both a goodly amount of this diversity and ever more mutual comprehension, as many languages become easier to pick up, in their spoken versions, than they once were. A future dominated by English won’t be a linguistic paradise, in short, but it won’t be a linguistic Armageddon either.

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| Text Specific Questions for Students | Teacher Notes and Possible Textual Citations |
| Please follow the instructions for implementing a close read as posted on www.projecttahoe.org. |
| Source the document: author, date, publication, and title. Rewrite the title of the article as a clear, concise claim statement.  | This question orients students to the text and helps them to focus on the often-overlooked title. By stating the title as a claim, it will help students focus on the argument to follow. |
| In lines 10-11, the author suggests a concern that “some worry that English might eradicate every other language.” What evidence does he provide for this concern in the first paragraph? | Students might note that English started out as a very small language on a small island controlled by a more prevalent language, French, but grew: Line 7-8 “English would be spoken today to some degree by almost 2 billion people”Line 8 “spoken by every third person on the planet” |
| On line 14, the author states: “Thankfully, fears that English will become the world’s only language are premature.” In this paragraph, how does the author paint a more optimistic picture of the growth of English? | Lines 18-19 “The spread of English just means that earthlings will tend to use a logical language in their own orbit and English for communication beyond.”Supporting ideas in the paragraph include: “We cannot imagine Japan without Japanese or a Greece with no Greek.” And “It is difficult, after all, to interrupt something as intimate and spontaneous as what language people speak to their children.” |
| Using lines 5-26, add at least three important details to the title of the article. | The world will likely speak English. * Line 7-8: 2 billion people already do
* Line 10-11: fear of English eradicating other languages

Languages will be less complicated in how they are spoken (lines 22-23).People will be bilingual - one language for community and English for communication with others (lines 18-19).The number of languages will decrease to ten percent of the current number – 6000 down to 600 (lines 25-26).Smaller languages will be weaned out (line 26). |
| What reasons does the author give for languages dying out in lines 25-40? | * Colonialization and extermination of native peoples or punishment for using native languages (line 27-28)
* Urbanization – as people move to cities, they are forced to assimilate the mainstream language (line 29-30)
* Literacy/written languages – when people have a written language, it seems more powerful and legitimate than those that are not written; if a language is not written then the first generation that fails to pass it on to children, it can be easily lost (line 31)
* Small languages appear to be backwards whereas larger languages are associated with opportunity (line 37-38)
* Hard to learn a language as an adult (40)
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| What clues in the reading help you understand what the word “backwardness” means? | Teacher note: Unlike finding context clues which are similes or provide examples of a word, in this case students will need to understand how to use contextual opposites and comparisons to come to meaning. For instance, the word “opportunity” is contrasted with backwardness in line 37. And students learn that backwardness is associated with small languages and that parent don’t want their kids to learn these small languages that don’t afford opportunity. |
| In the sentence on lines 38-39 that begins “But unless…”, what word or phrase could you use as a synonym or replacement for “maximally plastic”? | The word, “plastic” is used in a very different way than most students know it. The sentence is playing on the idea that a child’s brain is pliable and sponge like. Students should be able to use what they know about plastic as a substance to draw some conclusions about the word and will also be aided in their understanding by the sentence that follow describing how much more difficult it is to learn a language as an adult. |
| For a language to survive, what variables are necessary? (Hint: lines 42-48) | The most significant variable is that a language must be taught to children. A second variable is that languages tend to survive if they become less complicated. |
| What impact did “massive, abrubt population transfers,” otherwise known as migration across an ocean, have on language?Break down the two examples of this: the Vikings and the slaves. What made the language difficult to access? What caused the change to a simplified version?

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| Example | What caused the change to a simplified version? |
| Vikings |  |
| African Slaves |  |

 | This question orients students to the premise that will be explored in the next two paragraphs (examples of Vikings and slaves). Students should understand that since adults are not good at learning new languages, when they are forced to do so, they simplify the language (line 51-53).

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| Example | What caused the change to a simplified version? |
| Vikings | There wasn’t schooling and kids were just hearing their father’s broken Old English and took this broken English as the language. |
| African Slaves | Slaves had to learn a new language quickly but also only had to know a few hundred words for survival and did not learn complex sentence structure. |

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| With what tone does the author conclude the article in the last two paragraphs: Disappointed or Optimistic? | On a quick read, students might miss the optimistic tone of the article. The last two paragraphs do include disappointed-seeming phrases like: we may regret (line 70), won’t be a linguistic paradise (line 75), Armageddon (line 75). But, the tone is definitely optimistic as noted in words and phrases like: silver lining (line 71), more people will be able to communicate (line 71), the future promises both a goodly amount of this diversity (line 73), more mutual comprehension (line 73), languages become easier to pick up (line 74), it won’t be a linguistic Armageddon (line 75). |

**Culminating Activity**

Student Directions:

1. With your partner(s), read through the example of a currently used language.
2. Based on your understanding of the text and the example, rank the language example on a scale of 1-5, with one representing “very likely to die out” and five representing “very likely to survive” to the year 2115.
3. Explain each of your rankings and cite a piece of evidence from the text to support your reasoning. Explain how the evidence supports your ranking in a complete sentence.

| Examples Taken from “What the World Will Speak in 2115” (before it was excerpted) | Ranking | Text Evidence (line number and quote) | How This Evidence Supports Your Ranking |
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| Some may protest that it is not English but Mandarin Chinese that will eventually become the world’s language, because of the size of the Chinese population and the increasing economic might of their nation….The tones of Chinese are extremely difficult to learn beyond childhood, and truly mastering the writing system virtually requires having been born to it….Mandarin Chinese requires you to distinguish four tones to get meaning across.” (14% of the worldwide population currently speaks Mandarin Chinese.) |  |  |  |
| “The Navajo language made news recently when a politician named Chris Deschene was barred from leading the Navajo nation because his Navajo isn’t fluent. One wishes Mr. Deschene well in improving his Navajo, but he has a mountain to climb. In Navajo there is no such thing as a regular verb: You have to learn by heart each variation of every verb. Plus, it has tones.”(There are currently 148,500 speakers of Navajo in the United States. It uses the Latin alphabet, which is the basis of many languages today.) |  |  |  |
| “A ‘click’ language of southern Africa typically has not just two or three but as many as dozens of different clicks to master (native speakers develop a bump on their larynx from producing them 24/7).” (The 10 million Zulus of southern Africa speak using the click language. Certain words include a click at the beginning, middle, or end of the word. Zulu is a written language.) |  |  |  |
| “It’s far easier to manage a basic conversation in a Creole than in an older language. Haitian Creole, for example, is a language low on the complications that make learning Navajo or Hmong so tough. It spares a student from having to know that boats are male and tables are female, which is one of the reasons that it’s so hard to master French, the language from which it got most of its words.” (There are many forms of creole languages around the world based on the merging of two languages in that region. Some are written while others are not.) |  |  |  |

1. doubtful or negative [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. dying [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. common language used for business, science, and politics in a region [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. a language used by Jewish people [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ornate and finely detailed [↑](#footnote-ref-5)