

Languages in danger of extinction

By Chua Yini



Prof Suzanne Romaine warns that almost half of the world's languages are down to their last remaining speakers.

Imagine a world where people speak only English, or Mandarin or Spanish.

Up to ninety per cent of the world's languages could perish within the next hundred years, a phenomenon that is directly linked to the loss of biodiversity, said NTU's Toh Puan Mahani Idris Daim Visiting Chair Professor, Suzanne Romaine.

While most people are aware of the loss of plant and animal species and ecosystems, it is less known that a parallel danger threatens the world's languages, said Prof Romaine.

"The general public doesn't really know much about the extinction of languages, although it has appeared increasingly in the media over the last few years," she said.

Prof Romaine, who is also the Merton Professor of English Language at Oxford University, was speaking at a public lecture at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) on 24th January. As a visiting professor in NTU, she conducts research and teaches classes during her month long stay here.

Prof Romaine has written several books on the topic, and cited "alarming" statistic from various research reports: The 6,900 surviving languages in the world today are dying at the rate of one every fortnight.

The loss of linguistic equilibrium

According to Prof Romaine, throughout most of human history, the number of languages being lost have roughly equated to the new ones created.

"However, for the past 500 years, this linguistic equilibrium has been broken and small languages nearly everywhere have come under intense threat," she said.

She explained that no language was able to assert dominance in the past as people lived in small and distinct groups. Therefore, there were no empires that might cause the sustained expansion of a group of people and its culture.

However, this is no longer the case nowadays.

"While large languages are expanding, others are contracting" said Prof Romaine. This is due to the dominance of certain languages which are spread through agriculture, colonisation, the industrial revolution, globalisation of economies and the mass media.

Calling these forces the "global village phenomenon", she revealed that they have "propelled some few languages, all of them eurasian in origin, to spread over the last few centuries"

Prof Romaine added that the phenomenon is still active today. She cited the example of semi nomadic tribes in parts of Africa who are being pushed out by the expansion of foreigners.

The last speaker: custodians of dying languages

As a result of the global village phenomenon, the linguistic equilibrium has been broken, causing huge disparities between the sizes of populations that speak the languages of the world.

Therefore, almost half of the world's languages are left with their last speakers and face the threat of being wiped out from the face of the earth.

"If the last speaker [of a language] dies, the language disappears forever, leaving few or no traces," said Prof Romaine.

Out of the 6,900 languages in the world, 83 major languages are spoken by 79.4% of the world's population. In contrast, 3,586 small languages – half of the world's total number of languages – are spoken by only 0.2% of the world population.

Said Prof Romaine: "Most speakers of large languages like English or Chinese can't imagine the possibility [of being the last speaker], but a growing number of extinctions over the last 500 years or so has made that an all too real prospect for a great many people"

Parallel with biodiversity crisis

There is a close relationship between the biodiversity and linguistic diversity crises, said Prof Romaine. This may be due to a geographic overlap between languages and species. High concentrations of biodiversity and linguistic diversity are found in the tropics, and trails off towards the poles.

"Most of the languages are actually spoken in regions that contain exceptionally high biodiversity," she said, citing Papua New Guinea as an example of a common repository. She added that such hotspots are the ones most vulnerable to the pressures of globalisation.

However, while more research needs to be done, she remains hopeful for the future of biodiversity and languages in the world.

She said: "In a sense, this is good news...even if we don't know precisely the relationship or the unlying causes...it's a good thing in the sense that we're dealing with one bigger interconnected problem rather than with several isolated problems."

NTU's efforts in preserving endangered languages

- Funded by a MOE AcRF Tier 2 grant, researchers from HSS's Division of Linguistics and Multilingual Studies (LMS), and the School of Art, Design and Media will document four endangered Asian languages in north east India; northern Thailand; southern peninsular Malaysia, and eastern Indonesia. Language data collected will be stored in a digital repository in NTU called the Archive of Indigenous Languages and Cultures of Asia. The first of its kind in Asia, it will provide universal access to minority communities, academics, and members of the public. The project will also mount arresting exhibits of Southeast Asian culture, heritage, and languages.
- Funded by a MOE AcRF Tier 1 grant, researchers from LMS will document Zhongshan Min, a fast disappearing Southern Min dialect in Guangdong, China.
- The Digital Intangible Heritage of Asia, a research and development cluster in NTU, brings together linguists, historians, interactive media specialists, and computer engineers to conserve endangered languages and cultural knowledge through interactive digital media. One of its projects Singapore Voices produced sensitive, expressive presentations of interviews with elderly speakers of Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu, Teochew, Hokkien, Hakka, Hainanese and Baba Malay.

HSS hosts leading linguists in Sino-Tibetan languages

The Division of Linguistics and Multilingual Studies hosted the 45th International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics (ICSTLL) from 26 – 28 October, 2012.

Keynote speakers included Prof Hilary Chappell, Chair Professor in Linguistic Typology of East Asian Languages, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales; Prof James Matisoff, Professor Emeritus, University of California at Berkeley; Prof Luke Kang Kwong, Dean (Research), NTU's College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences; and Prof Randy LaPolla, Head, NTU's Division of Linguistics and Multilingual Studies.

The organiser also held workshops on Austroasiatic languages, on Miao-Yao languages, and on the use of a



Sino-Tibetan Etymological Dictionary and Thesaurus database.

The conference was sponsored by NTU's Centre of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences.