

BOOK REVIEWS

CRYSTAL, David: *Language Death*. Cambridge University Press 2000. X+198 pp. ISBN: 0-521-65321-5 (hardback). Price: £13.95 (US\$19.95).

In response to the Endangered Language Project, adopted by UNESCO in November 1993, several important events followed: in 1995 an International Clearing House for Endangered Languages was inaugurated at the University of Tokyo and, the same year, an Endangered Language Fund was instituted in the USA, and the same year, once again, the Foundation for Endangered Languages was established in the UK.

Such a truly universal rise of professional linguistic concern betrays the awakening of public consciousness to something really ominous that is taking place. The educated public, however, is still not fully aware of the global impact of the massive extinction of languages we are just witnessing.

David Crystal, one of the world's leading authorities on language issues, addresses in his thought-provoking book three fundamental questions: Why is the death of a language so important? Can anything be done? Should anything be done? These questions have to be answered urgently because languages are rapidly dying while solutions are being looked for.

The book's structure best displays main lines of Professor Crystal's investigation:

1. What is language death (1-26);
2. Why should we care? (27-67);
3. Why do languages die? (68-90);
4. Where do we begin? (91-126);
5. What can be done? (127-166).

The book is introduced by an informative Preface (vii-x) and is completed by several additional parts: Appendix: some relevant organizations (167); References (1970); Index of dialects, languages, language families, and ethnic groups (182); Index of authors and speakers (185), and a Subject Index (188).

A language dies with its last speaker, so the date of extinction, amazingly enough, can be expressed not only in centuries, decades, years or months, but also – in some cases – in days and hours. Cameroon's Kasabe, for instance, is said to have died with its last speaker Bogon who took Kasabe with him to his grave on 5 November 1995. Irrespective of whether such an exact date of a language death can be established or not, the disquieting nostalgia endlessly continues.

More frequently, however, the records available refer only to the moribund stage of languages or groups of languages: the immense territory of the Khanty-Mansi District of the late Soviet Union, in West Siberia, is an exemplary cemetery of Ob-Ugric languages with no or only negligible literary tradition. Rombandeeva & Vakhrusheva (1984), referring to T.D. Frank-Kamenskaja, aiming to investigate the Southern (Tavda) branch of Mansi (Vogul, the closest linguistic relative of Hungarian), succeeded in finding only one elderly woman who still remembered a couple of Tavda Vogul words but, after the death of her husband, many years ago, no longer had the opportunity to speak it. According to

Honti (1997: 327-8), Southern dialects of Vogul were still spoken along the Tavda River, a tributary of Ob, at the beginning of the 20th century. Neither the Western group of Vogul dialects, spoken along the lower and middle Lozva and the Pelymka rivers, has apparently any living speakers (*ibid.*).

Much the same sorrowful story is narrated by Wolf Leslau (1956: 12-13) in connection with the Ethiopic language Gafat which was still spoken at the end of the 18th century. Leslau, trying to find out whether there were still some speakers of Gafat, after an investigation of about three weeks managed to find four speakers of this language in the region of Blue Nile, in Womberna. Despite a certain possibility that some more speakers of Gafat are still living, it is quite obvious that this language is definitely disappearing.

Of course, apart from this emotional aspect of the world-wide extinction of a steadily growing number of languages, there are several much more important factual problems to be solved: Is it worth being concerned about the massive extinction of world's languages at all?

The confrontation of various series of pros and cons, each of them advancing fairly rational arguments of its own, obviously fails to offer anything going beyond highly relative and floating answers. They may range from the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel – multilingualism having resulted from the confusion of tongues imposed by God on humanity – up to the unpredictable perspective of a global monolingualism. The monograph overtly argues for linguistic diversity: because we need diversity (32), because languages express identity (36), because languages are repositories of history (40), because languages contribute to the sum of human knowledge (44) and, finally, because languages are interesting in themselves (54).

Whatever may be said about the recent trend of linguistic mass extinction, statistical data – at least some of them – depict apocalyptic scenarios: "... at the rate things are going – the coming century will see either the death or the doom of 90% of mankind's languages" (Krauss 1992: 4-10).

The book further offers intelligent and well-founded analyses of forces that bring about and keep going this annihilating process and proposes hopeful measures to stop it or to slow down its progress.

Crystal's monograph, based upon sound analyses, is inspiring by its inexhaustible optimism and its firm belief that something can and should be done: 'It is already too late for many languages, but we hold the future of many others in our hands' (166). The book will no doubt operate as a powerful stimulus in raising public awareness of this suicidal phenomenon which is, at the same time, the first step towards rescuing what still can be rescued.

Ladislav Drozdík

REFERENCES

- Honti, László. 1997. *ObUgrian*. In: Daniel Abondolo (Ed.): *The Uralic Languages*. University of London, UK, 1997 (Routledge Language Family Descriptions).
- Leslau, Wolf. 1956. *The Scientific Investigation of the Ethiopic Languages* (An inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Addis Ababa on 12 February 1954). Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- Krauss, Michael. 1992. 'The world's languages in crisis'. In: *Language* 68. 4-10.
- Rombandeeva, E.I. & M.P. Vakhrusheva. 1984. *Mansijkij jazyk* (Mansi Language). Leningrad: Prosveshchenie.