

Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World's Languages

An Interview with Suzanne Romaine

Casey Walker: In *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World's Languages*, you and your co-author Daniel Nettle wrote: "In our languages lies a rich source of the accumulated wisdom of all humans. While one technology may be substituted for another, this is not true of languages. Each language has its own window on the world." Will you begin by describing the complexities of those windows?

Suzanne Romaine: Linguistic diversity gives us unique perspectives into the human mind because it reveals the many creative ways in which humans organize and categorize their experience. Anyone who has learned another language can appreciate the uniqueness of expression that is lost in any translation.

The vocabulary of a language is an inventory of the items a culture talks about and has categorized in order to make sense of the world and to survive in a local ecosystem. For example, the economic and cultural importance of fish is reflected in the Oceanic languages of the Pacific. Centuries before there were marine biologists and scientific methods of classifying fish and other marine life, Pacific Islanders were passing on orally their accumulated knowledge about the behavior of each of hundreds of varieties of fish. The species of fish most heavily relied upon for food often have more than one name, depending on the stage the fish has reached in its life cycle. Names may also refer to different habitats, behavioral patterns, or characteristic colors, or to different fishing techniques used in catching the fish. Hawaiians probably knew more about the fish of their islands when Captain Cook first arrived in 1778 than scientists know today. Indeed, many Hawaiians have now forgotten more of that local knowledge accumulated and handed down orally over the past 2,000 years than western scientists will ever learn.

Like many people living intimately with the sea and dependent on it for their living, islanders' languages are rich in words, a variety of proverbs, and metaphorical expressions relating to marine life. Tahitians, for instance, called a restless person a *tunahaavaro* (a species of eel). A person who is difficult to find is termed an *ohua* (a species of fish that hides under a rock). Long forgotten fish names are still preserved in stories, myths, and proverbs. In Hawaiian, for instance, one of the largest categories of proverbs concern fish, fishermen, and fishing activities; for example, *Aia a kau ka i'a i ka wa'a, mana'o ke ola*, or, "one can think of life after the fish is in the canoe." Palauans call a person who is hard to wake up bad el wel, or "sleeps like a turtle." Many



SUZANNE ROMAINE has been Merton Professor of English Language at the University of Oxford since 1984. She has also held a variety of visiting fellowships at other universities, including the Kerstin Hesselgren Professorship for outstanding women in the Humanities, awarded by the Swedish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences. She has also received honorary doctorates from universities in Sweden and Norway. She is the author of numerous articles and books, including *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World's Languages* (Oxford University Press, 2000), co-authored with anthropologist Daniel Nettle.

such expressions have little or no meaning to today's younger generation, who have grown up eating canned fish bought from supermarkets.

In Tahiti, hooks for catching tuna were traditionally fashioned from numerous varieties of pearl shell, with each shell distinctive to a particular stretch of coast of an island. A good fisherman would know the names of every kind of shell from every district of every island. In particular, hooks with a strongly inward-curving (rather than straight) point, or hooks without barbs, are more efficient for catching many varieties



of fish than imported metal fish hooks that have to be purchased with cash. Even Captain Cook commented of the native Hawaiian fish hooks he found in use that they were a "triumph of stone age technology. . . . Their strength and neatness are really astonishing; and in fact, we found them, upon trial, much superior to our own." Traditional fish hooks were fashioned in many different ways, often seemingly ineffective to outsiders, but their manufacture was based on centuries of knowledge of local fishing conditions. The advantage of modern western hooks now used by many Pacific fishermen lies only in their availability, providing one has the cash to buy them.

Will you give a historical survey of the world's languages in numbers, periods of equilibrium, and recently accelerated extinction rates?

The rapid loss of linguistic diversity has really only occurred in the last thousand years or so. For much of human history, the number of languages was roughly constant. That is because there were no massive, enduring differences between the expansionary potential of different peoples of the kind that might cause the sustained expansion of a single, dominant language.

This equilibrium has been punctured forever, first by the invention and spread of agriculture, then by the rise of colonialism and the Industrial Revolution, and today by globalization, electronic technology, and so forth. These forces have propelled some few languages—all Eurasian in origin—to spread over the earth during the last few centuries.

No one knows for sure how many languages there are on earth today, but we estimate that there are around 6,700. However, huge disparities exist among them in terms of numbers of speakers. Speakers of the ten most commonly spoken languages—Mandarin Chinese, English, Spanish, Bengali, Hindi, Portuguese, Russian, Japanese, German, and Wu Chinese—make up half the world's population, and this figure is increasing. The hundred most commonly spoken languages account for 90% of all people, with the remaining 6,600 confined to 10% of the world's most marginalized peoples, who have generally been on the retreat for several hundred years. The majority of these less commonly spoken languages may be at risk.

Why is this problem ignored or misunderstood?

There are many reasons why language extinction has been ignored. One reflects a common, but mistaken, belief that the existence of many languages poses a barrier to communication, to economic development, and modernization

more generally. Yet it is easy to find examples where the sharing of a common language has not gone hand in hand with political or indeed any other kind of unity. Northern Ireland is one such example from the English-speaking world. The attempt at Russification of the member states of the former Soviet Union did not ensure unity in that part of the world either. Moreover, many modern countries (such as Singapore) function multilingually. Monolingual English speakers usually are unaware of the fact that their circumstances are *not* the norm in a world that has long been and is still predominantly multilingual. It is hard for most English speakers to imagine how it would feel to be the last speaker of English on Earth. Another reason the problem is ignored is that linguistic extinction, like the biodiversity crisis, is seen as largely a Third World problem.

However, extinction rates are also high in developed countries, such as the United States, Australia, and Europe. The worst country, in fact, is Australia, with 90% of its estimated 250 Aboriginal languages near extinction. Only some fifty languages are widely spoken today, and of these only eighteen have at least 500 speakers. These eightenn account for roughly 25,000 of the remaining 30,000 speakers of Aboriginal languages today. There is no Aboriginal language that is used in all spheres of everyday life by members of a sizeable community. The situation is not a lot better in North America. Of an estimated 300 languages spoken in the area of the present-day United States when Columbus arrived in 1492, only 175 are spoken today. Most, however, are barely hanging on, possibly only a generation away from extinction. Only a handful of the native languages spoken in what is now the United States have as many as 10,000 to 20,000 speakers.

No children are learning any of the remaining Native American languages in California.

Another reason the problem is ignored is that it is very difficult to capture visually the pain and distress underlying language loss. Language is not a tangible object. Photographs can movingly portray the bleak scenes left in the wake of environmental disasters such as oil spills, the clear-cutting of the rain forest, or the death of coral reefs and marine life from water pollution. Campaign posters of beautiful wildlife such as the panda, whale, and tiger can arouse sympathy for endangered species. Despite the increasing attention given to endangered species and the environment, there has been little awareness that peoples, cultures, and languages can also be endangered. At stake is the right of peoples all over the world to survive and to maintain their distinctive cultural and linguistic identity. One reason we

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put photos in our book of some of the last speakers of languages like Yahi, Eyak, and Ubykh was to bring out the human dimension of the tragedy of language loss.

Still another reason for neglect of the problem of language endangerment is that people are not used to thinking of languages as natural resources in need of conservation because they have not seen the link between the loss of biodiversity and linguistic diversity. We cannot ignore such extinctions any more than we can ignore the passing of dinosaurs and spotted owls and the destruction of the rain forest. They are part of the history of the Earth, of our human species, and of life on this planet.

How did it become obvious that the extinction of languages could be seen as inextricably linked with biodiversity losses and worldwide ecosystem collapse?

We were led to the connection between linguistic diversity and biodiversity by a number of striking correlations.



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The most important of these is an overlap in geographic distribution between areas of greatest biodiversity and areas of highest linguistic diversity, which allows us to talk about a common repository of what we will call “biolinguistic diversity”: the rich spectrum of life encompassing all the Earth’s species of plants and animals along with human cultures and their languages.

The highest concentration of biolinguistic diversity occurs in the tropics and semi-tropics. As an example, consider Papua New Guinea, perhaps the most biolinguistically diverse country in the world. With over 800 languages (13.2% of the world’s languages), but only 0.1% of the world’s population and 0.4% of the world’s land area, it is an outstanding hotbed within an ocean of diversity. Over 80% per cent of Papua New Guinea’s land area is covered by forests and is home to one of four significant rain forest wildernesses remaining on the planet. There is also an

incredible wealth of some 22,000 plant species, 90% of which are found nowhere else in the world. The forests are home to over 200 species of mammals, 1,500 species of trees, and 780 varieties of birds, including 90% of the world’s spectacular Birds of Paradise, the country’s national emblem. There are 252 different varieties of reptiles and amphibians, including huge saltwater crocodiles. The greatest diversity of corals in the world is found off the south coast at Port Moresby.

Not only are the world’s biodiversity and linguistic diversity concentrated in similar places but both are also threatened with potentially catastrophic consequences, of the destabilizing activities of a few powerful groups. Much of the world is now being covered by a few agricultural species of Eurasian origin—wheat, barley, cattle, and rice. These monocultures are replacing a profusion of endemic diversity whose functions we are only now beginning to understand and appreciate. The linguistic situation is uncannily similar, but the spreading varieties are English, Spanish, Chinese, and so forth.

Moreover, the underlying causes, and even the rates of spread, are extremely similar in both cases. Languages can exist only where there is a community to speak and transmit them. A community of people can exist only where there is a viable environment for them to live in and a means of making a living. Where communities cannot thrive, their languages are in danger. When languages lose their speakers, they die. Cultural, linguistic, and biological diversity are thus not only related but often inseparable, connected through coevolution in specific habitats. The similar dire fate facing indigenous peoples, their languages, and cultures as well as the Earth’s remaining biodiversity is, therefore, not coincidental. Where there are indigenous peoples with a homeland, there are still biologically rich

environments. Where people have lost their traditional authority over their land or been forced from it, large scale transformations of the environment have occurred, accompanied by cultural and linguistic decimation. The dangers facing these small communities are greater than ever.

Will you describe the various ways languages become moribund or die?

There are many reasons why languages can become moribund or die. Many instances of extinction are due to conquest and genocide. A man named Ishi was the last survivor of the Yahi Indians, murdered or driven into exile by white settlers in California in the 1860s and 1870s. Similarly, the extinction of Ubykh with the death of its last speaker, Tefvik Esenc, in 1992, is the final result of a genocide of the Ubykh people, who until 1864 lived along the eastern shore of the Black Sea in the area of Sochi (northwest of



Abkhazia). The entire Ubykh population left its homeland when Russia conquered the Muslim northern Caucasus in the 1860s. Tens (and possibly hundreds) of thousands of people were expelled and had to flee to Turkey, with heavy loss of life, and the survivors were scattered over Turkey. Russian conquest of the Caucasus continues to this day, threatening the lives, lifestyles, and languages of people such as the Chechens. Meanwhile Turkey itself is a country with a long history of human rights abuses directed against the Kurds and their language, which is banned from public use. The Turkish census does not even count Kurds because the government denies their very existence. Kurds have been sent to prison even for saying they were Kurds and are not allowed to claim that their mother tongue is Kurdish. Many indigenous people today, such as the Kurds, Welsh, Hawaiians, and Basques, find themselves living in nations they had no say in creating and find themselves controlled by groups who not only fail to represent their interests, but, in some cases, actively seek to exterminate or assimilate them.

Another related factor is environmental destruction, particularly where indigenous peoples reside. In the late 1970s the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand built two hydroelectric dams on the two branches of the River Kwai. These dams flooded the locations of two Ugong villages, and the inhabitants were relocated elsewhere. With the unity of the villages destroyed and their speakers scattered, the older speakers who still preserve the language have few, if any, people to speak to in Ugong. Ugong has literally been swamped and the speakers immersed in Thai villages.

Still another factor is globalization, which has spread a few international languages on a scale never before possible. The corporations and financial institutions of the English-speaking countries have dominated world trade and made English the international language of business. Books in the English language have dominated the publishing business. English has become the lingua franca of the internet because the technology facilitating developments in mass communications originated largely in the English-speaking world. Language loss is symptomatic of much larger social processes that have brought about the global village phenomenon, affecting people everywhere, even in the remotest regions of the Amazon.

Here are a few examples of what is being or has been lost. Some of the last speakers of dying languages are treasure houses of detailed local knowledge passed down orally for generations. One Palauan traditional fisherman born in 1894, for example, had names for more than 300 different species of fish and knew the lunar spawning cycles of several times as many species of fish as have been described in the scientific literature for the entire world. In the Native American language Micmac, trees are named for the sound the autumn wind makes when it blows through the branches about an hour after sunset when the wind always comes from a certain direction. Moreover, these names are not fixed but change as the sound changes. If an elder remembers, for example, that a stand of trees over there used to be called by a particular name 75 years ago but is now called by another,

both names can be seen as scientific markers for the effects of acid rain over that time period. During World War II an American fighter plane returned from New Guinea into northern Australia, where it crashed. The four survivors had no compasses or navigational equipment but proceeded to set out to try to find help. Three starved to death with food all around them. Unlike the Aborigines, the Americans had no idea what was edible and inedible. Many of the trees and vines have parts that can be made edible if treated in certain ways. None of this knowledge is written down but is passed on orally from generation to generation, much of it encoded in the classification systems of Aboriginal languages, which group all edible fruits and the plants that bear them into one category. This knowledge is always only one generation away from extinction.

How does the study of linguistics overturn commonly held assumptions about an inherently superior life made possible by the agricultural and industrial revolutions? What real choices existed for indigenous peoples against the "biological waves" imposed by new people, diseases, and livestock, or "economic waves"?

Reports about the existence of hundreds of names for fish or plants often surprise speakers of English and other European languages, many of whom have stereotypes about the languages spoken by small groups of people. I was shocked on returning from a field trip to Australia to be asked by a colleague at Oxford whether it was true that "the Aborigines' language" had only a few hundred words. She was unaware not only of the existence of many Aboriginal languages but also of the rich knowledge contained in them.

The complexity found in some of these small languages spoken in remote places often comes as a surprise because non-linguists tend to take a society's state of technological development as an index of linguistic development. In fact, it would appear that grammatically the most complicated and unusual languages of the world are often isolates (i.e., unrelated to any other languages) spoken by small tribes whose traditional way of life is under threat. Languages that are used only for in-group communication in small groups can afford complexity. The very processes that make a language more complex and more localized and specific to a small group also make it ideally suited to marking a distinctive identity. The more different it is, the better it serves this function.

By contrast, the world's major languages are becoming more like one another through the process of inter-translation and culture contact. Most languages, for example, have borrowed English terms for words in the field of science and technology. If some horrific catastrophe wiped out all the languages of western Europe tomorrow, we would lose relatively little of the world's linguistic diversity. Europe has only about 3% of the world's languages, and most of the largest European languages are also widely spoken outside Europe. More importantly, however, most of the languages of Europe are already structurally quite similar, because they are related historically. If we were to lose the same number of languages in Papua New Guinea or South America, the loss would be far more significant, because the divergence between languages there runs much deeper.



Correspondingly, the same amount of habitat destruction in the tropics would lead to many more species extinctions than would occur in the higher latitudes. A lack of appreciation for linguistic diversity has led some to dismiss indigenous languages and cultures as primitive and backward-looking and to see their replacement by western languages and cultures as prerequisites to modernization and progress. They envision a future ideal world in which everyone speaks only one language (preferably their own!). The rise to dominance of a few Eurasian languages and the global spread of western technology and culture are not a case of survival of the fittest or a triumph of some innately superior civilization. Instead, they are the result of deeply complex structural conditions that obtained in Eurasian societies and not elsewhere.

Eurasia had by far the world's most productive farming and livestock complex. This was no more than a fluke of biogeography, but it allowed Eurasians to boom in number and eventually expand beyond their shores. It also made them hosts to the great killer diseases, which, paradoxically, gave them an edge over other peoples when the continents collided. Finally, dense population and high agricultural productivity, in Europe at least, unleashed a process of diversification and specialization that set those economies on the path to industrialization.

The changing face of linguistic diversity in the modern world is really the story of how a few metropolitan languages expanded very rapidly at the expense of the rest, as smaller communities have been pulled into the orbit of more powerful ones. These power disparities have allowed a few metropolitan groups a virtual stranglehold upon global resources and global power. This power takes many forms, including controlling the flow of information through radio, television, and the internet.

Hence the question of choice is a very important one.

The dictum that people make history, but not under conditions of their own choosing, applies very well to the kinds of choices people make that lead to language loss. People did choose English and other global languages repeatedly and consistently but did not themselves generate the conditions under which they had to choose. They were choosing within a framework defined and overcast by systematic political and cultural domination.

Aboriginal Australians or Native Americans, for example, can hardly be thought to have exercised free choice in coming to live in white society. They were dispossessed by groups exercising a greater power over the environment (because of their crops, diseases, and technology), such that the natives'

options were reduced, not increased. Language shift occurred not because of an increase in available choices, but because of a decrease in choices brought about by the exercise of undemocratic power. Such power is almost always wielded by denying access to resources from which communities make their living. The relative contributions of the pull of economic advancement on the one hand, and the push of political domination on the other, are often intertwined in complex ways.

It is far from clear that language loss would have been inevitable under a more equitable political system. Those who control particular linguistic resources are in a position of power over others. The power is economic as well as symbolic. Linguistic capital, like all other forms of capital, is unequally distributed in society. The higher the profit to be achieved through knowledge of a particular language, the more it will be viewed as worthy of acquisition. The language of the global village (or McWorld, as some have called it) is English: not to use it is to risk ostracism from the benefits of the global economy. It is at least partly for this reason that many newly independent countries opted to use the language of their former colonizers rather than try to develop their own language(s).

Moreover, the elite in these countries had acquired these languages through schooling and could use this knowledge to retain their positions of power over the majority of citizens who did not know them. True development of a political, economic, or social nature cannot take place unless there is also development of a linguistic nature. Democracy is severely limited where people cannot use their own languages. Note that we are not arguing against either the spread or usefulness of global languages such as English, or modern technology, but against the loss that results when more and more people acquire international languages at the expense of their own, rather than simply add them to their linguistic

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Both are about giving people real choice about what happens in the places where they live. Language maintenance is part of the promotion of sustainable, appropriate, empowering development. Good development involves local community involvement, control, and accountability. Indigenous peoples should be seen as essential allies, and not obstacles, in the struggle for conservation. The problem of language endangerment raises critical issues about the survival of knowledge that may be of strategic use in the conservation of the world's ecosystems. Yet traditional knowledge tends not to be valued as a human resource unless it makes an economic contribution to the West.

Pharmaceutical companies, for instance, have been scouring the rain forests for potential new drugs. More recently, the genetic material of indigenous peoples themselves has been appropriated for the potential benefit and advancement of western science and technology. Of the many similarities between threatened languages, endangered species, and diverse ecosystems, the most obvious one is their irreplaceability. To remove one language from the mix of languages existing today is to remove it from the world forever. Allowing languages and cultures to die directly reduces the sum total of our knowledge about the world, for it removes some of the voices articulating its richness and variety, just as the extinction of any species entails sacrificing

repertoires as second languages. People should not have to lose their mother tongues if they choose not to do so.

Ironically, the same forces of cultural and linguistic homogenization we document are now being pressed into service on behalf of indigenous peoples, and so it should be. Many native peoples and their organizations have websites in English capable of reaching millions of people around the globe.

Leading development economists like Amartya Sen see freedom of choice as both a principal means and end of development. We argue that the need to preserve languages and the need for economic development in the world's peripheral societies are not opposing ones, as widely supposed, but complementary aspects of the same problem.

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The loss of most of the world's languages and cultures may be survivable, but the result will be a seriously reduced quality of life, if not the loss of the very meaning of life itself for some of the people whose unique voices will vanish. It is ultimately self-defeating and maladaptive to exploit the environment because it increases the likelihood of a deprived and diminished existence, not just materially (which is the main concern for economists who look primarily at short-term balance sheets and not at the long-term bottom line) but in intellectual, cultural, and emotional terms as well. With the passing of each voice, we lose a little more of who we were and are and what we may become. A varied natural system is inherently more stable than a monoculture. We should also preserve our linguistic diversity for moral, ethical, and aesthetic reasons. Variety is not just the proverbial spice of life, it is a prerequisite for life.

In your chapter "Lost Words/Lost Worlds" you wrote: "Thousands of languages have arrived at quite different, but equally valid, analyses of the world. . . . The most important revisions to current ways of thinking may lie in investigations of the very languages most remote in type from our own, but it is these languages which are most in danger of disappearing before our eyes." Will you speculate on the revisions both necessary and possible?

Western science (now conducted primarily in English to the exclusion of virtually all other languages) has no privileged position in the solution of critical problems faced in local ecosystem management. Almost all major scientific breakthroughs have been made not so much by accumulating new facts as by radical departures from ordinary and habitual ways of thinking about things. Einstein once said that a problem cannot be solved by the same consciousness that created it. Indeed, most real advances in science are resisted at first precisely because they do not fit preconceived ways of thinking about things. So far, however, little serious effort has been made to tap indigenous knowledge about local ecosystems.

Western scientific knowledge about effective marine management, for instance, is still scarce. Strategic planning is particularly difficult in the tropics due to the greater diversity of the marine (and other forms of) life there. In Palau, for example, the number of fish species probably approaches 1,000. Using conventional methods of scientific research, it would take decades to accumulate enough information to manage the most important marine species as effectively as salmon or other species of temperate waters. At the same time, proper management of marine and other resources is critical. Coral reef communities cover around 230,000 square miles of shallow tropical sea bottom, which represents an enormous potential of six to seven million tons of fish per year. This would yield enough fish to feed the United States for about four years at its current rate of fish consumption. Traditional fishermen, particularly on small islands where the people still depend on the sea for most of their food, are still rich sources of information unknown to western scientists. Centuries before biologists existed, Palauans knew that certain types of vibrations could be used to attract sharks. Sea



cucumbers, for instance, have been traditionally used in Oceania as a fish poison, but biologists established their toxicity only in the 1950s.

Furthermore, our own western calendar obscures a lunar patterning of life cycles with which islanders have long been familiar. Although marine organisms whose spawning patterns are tied to a lunar cycle lay their eggs during the same portion of the lunar month year after year, their spawning dates vary apparently by up to a month or more without any reason within the western calendar. A lunar month averages 29 1/2 days, so twelve lunar months adds up to only 354 days, or eleven days short of a solar year. The need to keep the lunar calendar in synchrony with the seasons meant that an extra month had to be inserted every so often. Palauans did this automatically and unconsciously. For them, the New Year starts only when the stars and moon are “right,” no matter how many lunar months have passed since the last New Year.

Only a few cases of lunar spawning cycles are recorded in the western scientific literature, but learning and committing to memory the timing and location of the spawnings of various species was part of the fisherman’s training. The names given to certain days of the lunar month on various Pacific Islands foretell the likelihood of successful fishing. On Namoluk Atoll in the Caroline Islands, the night before the new moon is called Otolol, which means “to swarm.” In Kiribati (formerly the Gilbert Islands), the name of the day after the new moon also means “to swarm.” The Trukese name for the night of the full moon is bonung aro, meaning “night of laying eggs.” The tides are also timed in relation to lunar phases, and these, too, were committed to memory. Most Pacific Island languages and dialects have specific terms for the paired currents that form on either side of a given island, a region in which these currents converge downstream, and a back current flowing toward the island from this convergence point. The islanders have been using their knowledge of current patterns in both fishing and navigation long before such patterns were documented by oceanographers.

For many years the prevailing western theory of the colonization of the Pacific assumed that islanders discovered the islands by accident (by being blown off course, for instance, while out fishing), rather than by deliberate navigation. Instead, it was western navigational techniques that were primitive compared to those the islanders used based on the natural environment around them. Until the chronometer was invented, which made precise calculation of longitude possible, early European voyages of discovery were rather hit-or-miss affairs.

Because a large part of any language is culture-specific, people feel that an important part of their traditional culture and identity is also lost when their language disappears. As one Native American, Darryl Babe Wilson, put it: “We must know the white man’s language to survive in this world. But we must know our language to survive forever.”

Globalization on an unprecedented scale does not change the fact that most people everywhere still live their lives in local settings and feel the need to develop and express local

identities to pass on to their children. Pick-up trucks, jeans, and pop music are not inherently incompatible with cultural continuity and indigenous identity any more than speaking English need be at odds with speaking Welsh or Navajo too.

We must think locally but act globally, using local languages to express local identities and global languages to communicate beyond local levels and to express our identities as citizens of the world. Far from being a divisive force that weakens the bonds of nationhood and political identity, cultural and linguistic pluralism can be a powerful source of a new humanity within a world of diversity. The active cultivation of stable multilingualism can provide a harmonious pathway through the clash of values inherent in today’s struggle between the global and local, between uniformity and diversity.



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