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Half of world's 7000 languages to become extinct by turn of century

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 (ANI)

Washington, Sept 19 : Hundreds of languages around the world are teetering on the brink of extinction, and eastern Siberia, northern Australia, central South America, Oklahoma, and the US Pacific Northwest are among the worst affected zones, a new research has revealed.

At some places, the situation is so bad that only a single person knows the language, said David Harrison, a linguistics professor at Pennsylvania's Swarthmore College.

"Languages are undergoing a global extinction crisis that greatly exceeds the pace of species extinction," said Prof. Harrison.

Prof. Harrison and Gregory Anderson, both affiliated to the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages in Oregon, travelled across the world to interview the last speakers of critically endangered languages as part of the National Geographic Society's Enduring Voices Project.

The researchers used three main criteria to establish if a region could be considered a hotspot for languages extinction: the diversity of languages spoken, the level of endangerment to the tongue and the scientific documentation of a language.

They found that while in some places, languages had disappeared instantly, with small, vulnerable communities wiped out by natural disasters, but in most cases, languages died a slow death, as people simply abandoned their native tongues when they became surrounded by people speaking a more common language.

In the Northern Territory of Australia, the scientists documented found three speakers of Magati Ke. In western Australia, they found three speakers of the little-known Yawuru language, while deep in the outback, they located a single man with rudimentary knowledge of Amurdag, a language previously declared extinct.

In Bolivia, the duo found language diversity twice that of Europe. However, dominant languages such as Spanish were threatening that diversity, the findings revealed.

"This is a radically new way of looking at language diversity globally," said Prof. Harrison.

The researchers further found that more than half of the world's 7,000 languages would die out by the end of the century, often taking with them irreplaceable knowledge about the natural world.

"Most of what we know about species and ecosystems is not written down anywhere, it's only in people's heads. We are seeing in front of our eyes the erosion of the human knowledge base," said Prof. Harrison.

"Eighty percent of species have been undiscovered by science, but that doesn't mean they're unknown to humans, because the people who live in those ecosystems know the species intimately and they often have more sophisticated ways of classifying them than science does.

"We're throwing away centuries' worth of knowledge and discoveries that they have been making all along," he said.

In Bolivia, the scientists came across the Kallawayaya people who have been traditional herbalists since the time of the Inca Empire.

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In daily life, the Kallawaya used the more common Quechua language. But they also maintained a secret language to encode information about thousands of medicinal plants, some previously unknown to science that the Kallawayas use as remedies, they said.

Similarly, the navigational skills of peoples in Micronesia, was also encoded in small, vulnerable languages, the researchers found.

"There are people who may have a special set of terms ... which enable them to navigate thousands of miles of uncharted ocean ... without any modern instruments of navigation," Prof. Harrison said.

Anderson, Prof. Harrison's colleague on the project, said the hotspots tended to have been settlement colonies and strung along migration routes.


"Among the top five hotspots, the major similarity is that they are the last bastions of the languages in areas that were successfully colonized in a settlement colony," National Geographic quoted Anderson as saying.

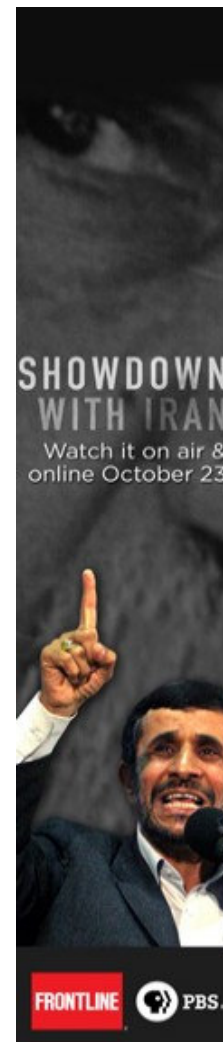
Prof. Harrison said, that while in the last 500 years, an estimated half of the world's languages, from Etruscan to Tasmanian, had become extinct, the vanishings now were taking place at a faster rate.

Fewer than ten people probably spoke more than 500 languages, he said.

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