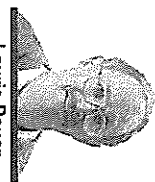


FEATURES

Maori an endangered species worth saving

More than half the world's languages are endangered, including one right here in New Zealand.



Laurie Bauer

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

ACCORDING to one website, "a shocking 12 per cent of all bird species" were threatened with extinction in 2000. A later report from 2005 suggests that the figure had then risen to 20 per cent. Though a smaller number will have been considered endangered at that time ("endangered" being nearer extinction than

"threatened"), this number seems frighteningly high. We should be pleased about the amount of work being done in New Zealand to save the kakapo, the saddleback, the robin, the takahē and other threatened or endangered birds, and we quite rightly support this work with donations. We probably

feel our lives are enhanced by the range of natural species in our environment.

So it may come as a surprise to learn that more than 50 per cent of the world's languages are endangered, in the sense that they are not being effectively passed on to the next generation. The proportion is far greater than the proportion of endangered birds. Though a great effort is being made worldwide to rescue some of these languages, most are doomed, and in many cases all we are able to do is note down some of their vocabulary and grammar, gathered from the last handful of people who once spoke the language every day. If our lives are enhanced by the range of species that are in our environ-

ment, the lives of our grandchildren are going to be considerably impoverished by the reduced range of species that will greet them where languages are concerned.

We have one of these endangered languages right here in New Zealand. Despite the encouraging figures recently released on the use of Maori in New Zealand, the future of the Maori language is far from being secure. It may not survive. If it does survive, it will be a very different language from what it once was. We should be pleased if we hear Maori spoken in its natural habitat, New Zealand, and support attempts to help it.

The other side of this alarming statistic is that about half of the world's population speak only 10 languages. As speakers of one of the 10, we may feel quite smug because our language has a guaranteed future. In one sense, that is clearly true. But there is another sense in which the very size of the English language is leading to a potential problem. The last time a language was used over most of the then known world, it was Latin, and it split up into a number of daughter languages whose speakers can now no longer understand one another: French, Portuguese, Romanian, and so on.

We have plenty of signs that the same could be happening to English. It is very hard for New Zealanders to understand speakers from Tyneside in England, who think they are speaking English, and it is very hard for Texans to understand New Zealanders who think they are speaking English.

We could, of course, write messages down and be understood. But we do have to wonder to what extent the fate of English will be the fate of Latin, and the great unifying force of the English language will be lost. This will not happen in our lifetimes, but it probably will happen eventually, as history repeats itself. So perhaps we will then start to get new languages emerging. This will add to the tally of languages in the world, so perhaps we should not worry about the current reduction in the number of languages — clearly just a blip in the statistics, historically speaking. But the new languages that

emerge from English, when they do, will have a lot in common with present English, and will be far less interesting and diverse than the range of languages which are in the process of dying out today. They do not provide an excuse for doing nothing about today's endangered languages, any more than new cross-breeds of chicken should prevent us from trying to save the kakapo.

■ Laurie Bauer is one of four linguists from Victoria University who contribute to *Watch Your Language*. He is the author of a dozen books on linguistics, most recently *The Linguistics Student's Handbook* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007).