

Identity lies more in language **than genes**



Dr George van Driem, chair for historical linguistics at University of Berne, has conducted field research in Nepal, Bhutan, northeastern India and western Indian Himalayas since 1983. He has also coordinated the endangered language documentation of Himalayan language project since 1993. He talks to Kinley Wangmo about the importance of language in preserving identity.

How and why are languages dying or disappearing?
The main causes of languages dying are socioeconomic.

Languages don't die because they're inferior to the languages which thrive. Languages die because parents choose to educate and raise their children in another language, which will help them earn more money and gain more social status. If the balance of economic power between language communities change, then the favoured languages also change.

Is it a common phenomenon around the world? If yes, are the reasons same for different languages extinction or near-extinction situation?

The phenomenon of language death is ancient. Latin and Sanskrit did not die, but changed to give us the modern romance and modern Indo-Aryan languages respectively. However, many ancient languages of great civilisations died out without leaving a living descendant, such as Elamite, Sumerian or Hurrian. Because we live in the age of globalisation, and the whole planet is being reduced to a single tightly interwoven community, languages are now going extinct at the highest rate in human history.

Why is there a need to document and preserve it?

Each language is a conceptual universe unto itself, with its own mental categories and notions, expressed in its grammatical structure and lexicon. When a language dies, a conceptual universe dies, and whole worldview and an entire linguistic identity vanish forever.

What can be established in Bhutan?

Bhutan has many different languages. If in future all Bhutanese were only to speak English, we'd actually have a different Bhutanese people. A new nation would emerge, and the original Bhutanese people would be gone. The identity of a people is more in the language than in the genes, because genetically we're all members of the same human family. Linguistically, however, we have our own unique culture, mental civilisation and conceptual universe.

Preserving what is truly Bhutanese begins with the languages and the national heritage of linguistic diversity, which the country has inherited from our ancestors.



When a language dies...

Bhutan is at the cusp of losing huge part of its languages, culture and knowledge of the environment that has been passed down for centuries.

Around the world this is said to be happening at a big scale. "But Bhutan has a strength like no other since it has always been proud of its cultural heritage and fierce in protecting and promoting what makes the country unique," Charity Appell McNab, co-director of the Bhutan oral literature and language documentation project said.

"There is a chance for sustaining and enriching the culture, language and traditional ecological knowledge by engaging young people in it and through the collective interest of the people."

Human knowledge, experience and how the world is perceived, she said, is embedded in a language and is unique to community.

"We can follow human migrations, social change and our relationship with our environment through language," she said.

"So when a language dies a community loses its history, the knowledge of its elders, the knowledge of how to survive and thrive in a given environment as well as its identity."