CHAPTER 1 The Exodus of Languages

Before You Read
Lost Languages

A Answer the following questions.

1 What can cause a language to "die"?
2 What do you think is lost when a language dies?
3 Do you think people who speak different languages view life differently? How does language affect the way we think?

B Discuss your answers with a partner.

Reading Skill
Identifying Cause and Effect

Words and phrases such as *because*, *due to (the fact that)*, *as a result*, *so*, and *therefore* are used to show cause and effect relationships; in other words, they signal that one thing (the cause) makes another thing (the effect) happen. Recognizing these relationships can help you better understand and organize the information in a reading passage.

A Read the following sentences. Write whether each sentence is a cause (C) or effect (E).

1 ____ The Internet is an American invention.
____ Most of the information found on the Internet is in English.
2 ____ The English language is spoken differently in various parts of the world.
____ Native English speakers have migrated to different parts of the world.

B Read the following examples of how cause and effect can be joined in a sentence. With a partner, do the same using the other sentence pair from A.

- Most of the information found on the Internet is in English ***because*** it is an American invention.
- The Internet is an American invention. ***As a result***, most of the information found on it is in English.

C Scan the passage on the next two pages for the following information. Write whether each sentence is a cause (C) or effect (E). Underline the words or phrases in the passage that helped you determine the answer.

1 ____ The Inuktitut dialects have a common core.
____ The Inuit understood Rasmussen's Greenland dialect of Inuktitut.
2 ____ Languages seem to be converging to a smaller number.
____ Languages like English are becoming more dominant.
3 ____ New species of plants have been discovered.
____ Botanists studied the meaning of Aboriginal names of flora.
4 ____ There are more Maori language speakers in New Zealand.
____ "Language nests" are set up by the community.
5 ____ The culture has been deliberately suppressed.
____ Some languages are not passed on to children.

D Now read the entire passage carefully. Then answer the questions on page 177.

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The Exodus of Languages

I had halted to thaw my frozen cheeks when a sound and a sudden movement among the dogs made me start...I had often imagined the first meeting with the Eskimos of the American Continent, and wondered what it would be like...Three or four miles ahead a line of black objects stood out against the ice of the fjord...One man detached himself from the party and came running across the ice...These were the men I had come so far to seek from Denmark and from my familiar haunts in Greenland...I had yelled at the dogs in the language of the Greenland Eskimo. And, from the expression of the stranger's face, in a flash I realized that he had understood what I said...I was so delighted to find that the difference in language was so slight that we had not the least difficulty in understanding one another.

—"Across Arctic America" by Knud Rasmussen, 1927

Knud Rasmussen wrote about his 32,000 kilometer dog-sled journey from Greenland to Siberia with a focus on his meetings with Eskimo (now known as Inuit) people. They understood his Greenland dialect of Inuktitut since the dialects[1] have a common core: they share a common origin, or the same mother language. With migrating people, history shows a **divergence** of language which contrasts with a **converging** trend that is endangering global linguistic[2] diversity today.

Languages worldwide are converging to a smaller number as languages like English swallow regional ones. The three largest languages of first-language speakers are Mandarin Chinese, Spanish, and English. The value of dominant languages can be seen in its widespread use for business, politics, science, and popular culture. However, these dominant languages are squeezing out valuable local tongues. Linguists estimate that of the approximately 6,500 languages worldwide, about one-third are endangered or **on the brink of** extinction. According to some linguists, the estimated global rate of extinction is one language lost every few weeks. If this sounds like the world is losing a species, in a way, it is.

When a language is lost—meaning no living person can teach another—a world perspective is lost. Some foreign language expressions simply cannot be translated. **Colloquial** phrases usually reflect a unique aspect of a culture. For example, aboriginal languages in Canada and Australia have words that reflect a way of life that is connected closely to the environment. Words can **encompass** whole situations of time and landscape that differ from an English speaker's experience. The Inuit can describe "snow" in many specific ways. In Algonquian languages, the grammatical first person is "you"—so the listener comes first.

[1] A **dialect** is a form of a language spoken in a particular geographical area, distinguished by its vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.

[2] Something that is **linguistic** is related to language.

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These views are essential to learn more about the human and the natural world. Botanists[3] have discovered new species of plants after examining the meaning of Aboriginal names of flora that seemed identical. Archaeologists are using languages to track migrations of historical cultures. University of Waterloo Professor Robert Park knows that the ancestral origins of existing Inuit communities can be partly explained by the similarity of the Inuktitut spoken by the Thule culture and present-day Inuit. The ancient Thule migrated east from Alaska to Labrador and Greenland by evidence of the mutually **intelligible**, living dialects of today.

An Inuit girl holds her Canadian Eskimo dog, an ancient breed of dog only found in the Arctic.

Languages are much like living creatures that become endangered when numbers **dwindle** without regeneration. Local natural disasters, war, and famine[4] are some of the reasons languages slip through the cracks[5] of history. Some languages may not have been passed on to children because of forced cultural **suppression.** Linguistic communities can show **resilience** when a sense of pride is restored to them such that elders are heard and youth can continue to speak.

Various groups are taking action to preserve endangered languages. UNESCO[6] has made its *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* available on-line. The editor of the atlas states that it is still more common in the world to be multilingual; and, although multilingualism is declining, there are favorable conditions that support the continued use of minority languages. Communities need encouragement to hear, read, and speak their language in multiple places, such as schools and media.

School children in New Zealand say goodbye with a *hongi*, a traditional Maori gesture of pressing one's nose and forehead to another person's.

Preservation of languages with only a few living speakers may first require very targeted methods. Linguists can engage with the community to develop a catalog of the language components, such as sounds, vocabulary, grammar, and traditions. The Internet has provided a means to share archived recordings and documentation. If language resides in a culture, then it may also be important to find ways to teach children and their parents as a community. The Maori language of New Zealand has seen **resurgence** in the proportion of speakers since the 1960s and '70s when there was virtually no parent to child transmission. This is a result of "language nests" set up by the community where elders speak Maori to children and parents in a kindergarten setting. This model of preservation has been used elsewhere, such as Hawaii.

There is growing recognition that preserving endangered languages is vital; a loss in global languages means a loss of the diverse thought and traditions those languages hold.

[3] **Botanists** are people who specialize in the study of plants.
[4] **Famine** is a period of extreme lack of food in a region.
[5] To **slip through the cracks** is to pass by virtually unnoticed.
[6] **UNESCO** is the widely-used acronym for the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization.

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Reading Comprehension
Check Your Understanding

A **Answer the following questions using information from the passage.**

1 Why does the author include the excerpt from Knud Rasmussen's book?

_____

_____

2 In addition to language, what is lost when speakers of a particular language die off?

_____

_____

3 What is one example of how language can help people learn more about the natural or human world?

_____

_____

4 What are some ways that languages can become endangered?

_____

_____

5 What is an example of an action that can be taken to preserve a language?

_____

_____

B **Read the following sentences. Check (✓) whether they are true (T) or false (F). If the sentence is false, change it to make it true.**

		T	F
1	Rasmussen's account describes his first meeting with the Eskimo.		
2	According to the author, languages are diverging.		
3	6,500 languages are in danger of going extinct.		
4	Australian aborigines have a close relationship with the environment.		
5	The Maori language is spoken more today than in the 1960s and '70s.		
6	According to the editor of the UNESCO atlas, there are now more people who speak only one language.		
7	The Internet has made it more difficult to preserve endangered languages.		

Critical Thinking

C **Discuss the following questions with a partner.**

1 What do you think the advantages would be if everyone spoke the same language? What about the disadvantages?

2 What are some ways to encourage people to speak their native dialects?

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