



The Last Language

Languages die like rivers

Words wrapped around your tongue today

Are broken to the shape of thought

Between your teeth and lips speaking

Now and today

Shall be faded hieroglyphics

Ten thousand years from now.

Carl Sandburg

In 1992 in a small Turkish village called Hac Osman, a man died who was the last speaker of Ubykh, a language that was once widely spoken in northeastern Caucasus. His name was Tevfik Esanç and the language that became extinct with his passing is just another example of a world-wide phenomenon...dying languages.

Ninety percent of the world's languages are expected to become extinct in the next hundred years. The reasons are complex; the implications are even more so. Culture, memory, identity and a host of other issues surround these extinctions and a sense of panic attends the discussion. It is estimated by different sources that there are between 5000 to 6700 languages in existence and that a large proportion is at great risk in the very near future.

15% of the world's population speaks Chinese (Mandarin), 5.4 % speak English, 1.2 % speak French. These percentage figures reflect billions of speakers but there are also languages that have a few thousand speakers, indeed some are down to the

last speaker and this appears to be an irreversible trend.

If bio-diversity is a critical conservation issue, what can be said of linguistic diversity? Which brings me to something completely different (in the words of Monty Python)... photography. In recent technologies of visualization, photography (born and raised in technology) has jumped the fence so to speak and is now free and everywhere at once. The proliferation of photographic imagery ranges from Mars bars to Mars itself, from news to art and, increasingly, from pornography to holiday snaps. The contrast between verbalization and visualization has never been so vivid. Television, the internet, shopping and entertainment are all visually led and are expanding exponentially.

Photography has achieved a new dominance in world art precisely because it is a transtechnological, universal visual language that has the power to be omnipresent. There is not an artist in the world that doesn't use photography, directly or indirectly (simple reproduction).

We have visual ideas, create mental maps and even fall in love, all with the mediation of photography. An incredible archive of photographs is enveloping the world, creating a giant collective memory that is refreshed every day, every second, every nanosecond. In Turkey, photography - still or moving- enjoys a huge audience.

In global rankings Turkish people are second only to Americans in TV viewing (5 hours per day), the media is lavishly illustrated, internet usage is growing, amateur photography is, probably after sports, the most widely organized activity. Artistically and culturally photography is a major force in Turkey. In the new century that will see the extinction of many languages and the continued proliferation of photographic images the function of spoken and written language and visual language will perhaps mutate into new languages.

How much of conceptual thinking will change in the move from atoms to bits? What will be the last language?

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