Book review: visiting threatened languages

Our acquaintance with languages teaches us that a person is only truly him or herself when speaking their own language, and that the world appears to us at its most real when perceived through our own language. Swearing only has the power to shock in your own language - the language in which you learned the taboos that swearing breaks.

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Spoken Here: Travels among threatened languages
Author: Mark Abley
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"We live among shadows. The dodo and the passenger pigeon have fresh company every month" (p191).

By definition we deal in our job with established languages of international diplomacy, trade and discourse; we should also take time to consider the languages currently spoken that could be lost in the years to come.

Mark Abley considers Aboriginal languages of Australia, indigenous languages of North America, the facility and limitations of international English, Manx, Provençal, Welsh and Yiddish and paints a varied portrait of slow decline, revival and co-existence as the neighbour of a big (widely spoken) language.

Consider the last speaker of an Aboriginal language who can now only dream in it; colonialism carried in belief in the intrinsic superiority of one - the colonist's - language and the imported power structure caused speakers of the indigenous language to see more point in learning the language that opened doors to education, influence and power. Status leached from languages commonly described as "brutish" by the colonisers.

Languages that have no system of writing seem to have been the most vulnerable to the arrival of other, high status languages. These languages tend to be found in displaced communities such as the Australian aborigines and among the Native American population. The arrival of Europeans destroyed the fabric of societies and the descendants are dealing the problems of crime, alcoholism and drug abuse; their language carries little status and is not the way to get on.

No book on languages can ignore the phenomenon that is English but it is not seen as a universal force for good. In East Timor the languages are Tetum and Portuguese but the suggestion has been made that the country should instead adopt English - against the advice of an Australian language expert who advises the government. He labels English "a killer language".
In modern German you come across many English words for which a German one exists - Lunch, Flatrate, Shopping, Meeting - and Abley concludes: "It is as if German is beginning to give up the creative struggle to invent its own terms - as though its speakers are consuming language rather than producing it" (p87). Interestingly enough, within Germany books commenting on and poking fun at Neudeutsch are very popular; people still care.

Even though he has lived among moribund languages Abley is upbeat about the revival and future of Welsh, the most successful of the Celtic languages. The revival of Hebrew, the support for Irish, Cornish and Manx illustrate that language is bound up with identity.

Many of us know languages from the same family (Indo-European) so it is worth thinking about how others function. The book offers two intriguing examples.

"A Mohawk verb - any Mohawk verb - is polysynthetic. Not only does it describe an action; it must also indicate the agent, recipient and time of the action. In Mohawk grammar objects matter less than actions" (p175).

In Algonquian languages (Cree, Innu, Ojibwa and Mi'kmaq) the grammatical first person is not "I" "me", "we" or "us" but "you". We should pause to consider the implications of a world view that does not put "I" at its centre.

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