

The Importance of Language

Imagine, for just a moment, that you are the last native speaker of English. No one else you know speaks your language. You don't see any point in teaching it to your kids, because no one will ever speak it to them either. Imagine the loss you would feel. All those untranslatable English-language ideas:

A stiff upper lip

A stitch in time

A New York minute

“Sweet”

“Sick”

No one would ever sing “baa baa black sheep” or “Ring-a-ring o'roses” again. All those minute clues about our history, culture, collective memory – all gone.

What is lost if a language is lost? There are some who argue that the extinction of languages is merely a symptom of the gradual evolution of our species, where universal communication is prized, and increasingly homogeneity is just an evolutionary side-effect. Obviously there could be great benefits if everyone in the world spoke the same language – some industries already reflect this, with English a must for pilots and air traffic controllers. But it's clear that there is far more at stake than mere convenience. As languages are lost, whole ways of life and sets of knowledge may be lost along with them. Complex religious and social rituals disappear, oral histories die through lack of telling. Information about plants, animals and environments gathered through generations may never be passed on. And the richness of human invention, our unique gift of talking about what we see around us, would be much the poorer.

Put simply, language expresses something about identity, about our place in the world. Ani Rauhihi, a Maori teacher in New Zealand's North Island, sums it up: "If you grow up not speaking your language, you won't know who you are."

Williams, Jessica. *50 facts that should change the world*. Toronto: Penguin Books, 2004.