Global experts discuss threatened languages

**Some of the world’s most endangered languages are the focus of an international conference being held in Wales for the first time.**

**A Dr Hywel Lewis**

Many languages are on the verge of extinction. Their fate can be compared to that of many animals facing extinction, but they probably receive less global attention than the fate of many animals. As a foundation, we are very concerned with highlighting the part language plays in cultural variety and diversification. It’s also important to consider the economic repercussions of promoting different languages; they can play a massive part in the identity and profile of various parts of the globe and they can be powerful economic factors. But it’s not all doom and gloom as there are languages in Russia which are making a comeback after years of oppression.

**B Conchur O’Giollagain**

Many threatened languages find themselves in a complex situation. Gaeilge, the Irish language, spoken in the Irish-speaking region of Ireland (the Gaeltacht) provides a good example of this. It is spoken by just under half the population of the Gaeltacht. The number of people learning the language is growing and great progress is also being made in terms of educational provision. But the number of learners does not necessarily help the number of native speakers; for a language to succeed you have to have a high population of active language speakers concentrated in a given geographical area. Based on existing trends, there is a strong threat to the communal use of Irish and, if these trends continue, Irish will not exist as a language in 20 years’ time.

**C Nicholas Ostler**

Different languages have their quirks which tell us something about being human, and when languages are lost, most of the knowledge that went with them gets lost. People do care about identity as they want to be different. Nowadays, we want access to everything but we don’t want to be thought of as no more than people on the other side of the world. Apart from English, the United Kingdom has a number of other languages; half a million people speak Welsh, several thousand Scots are fluent in Gaelic, the Scottish language, about 400 people speak Cornish while the number of Manx speakers – the language of the Isle of Man – is perhaps as small as 100. And I do think it’s a good thing for a child on the Isle of Man to learn Manx. I value continuity in a community.

**D Kenan Malik**

It is irrational to try to preserve all the world’s languages. Earlier this year, the Bo language died out when an 85-year-old member of the Bo tribe in the India-owned Andaman Islands died. While it may seem sad that the language expired, cultural change is driving the process. In one sense you could call it a cultural loss. But that makes no sense because cultural forms are lost all the time. To say every cultural form should exist forever is ridiculous, and when governments try to prop languages up it shows a desire to cling to the past rather than move forwards. To have a public policy that a certain culture or language should be preserved shows a fundamental misunderstanding. I don’t see why it’s in the public good to preserve Manx or Cornish or any other language for that matter. In the end, whether or not a language is viable is very simple; if a language is one that people don’t participate in, it’s not a language anymore.