

at a great disadvantage in our understanding of myriad domains of knowledge, even history: “All this achieves ... is to leave us literally at a loss for words when confronted with certain major aspects of human history.”⁴⁰⁰ And the inability to understand history is bound to impact the shape of the future we are able to even imagine or perceive.

Over millennia, cultures developed languages to preserve their way of life, belief systems, food and medicine, spiritual traditions and practices—their very essence. In that backdrop, the extinction of languages over the past few centuries is tragic and instructive. 90 percent of the world’s population today speaks 100 of the most well-known languages. The remaining 6,000 or so languages are spoken by only 10 percent of humanity. Each one of almost 3,000 languages has only 5,000 or fewer speakers.

No wonder, at least half of the world’s current languages are expected to be extinct within the next few decades. (Every two weeks, we lose one of them.) The destruction of the carrier of a culture then automatically entails the devastation of the culture.

In traditional cultures, the human connection with nature is captured by the language of myth and ritual. Unfortunately, such richly traditional languages are under threat of extinction. This homogenization may be convenient in terms of commerce and statehood. Analogous to the biodiversity loss afoot, the rapid decline in languages and cultures takes away from us precious value systems, the richness of different philosophies, practices, and ideas. It is these value systems that would function as the vehicles of transformation needed in today’s world.

The Place of Language in A Democracy

If we humans are political animals (*zoon politikon*) as Aristotle stated, our capacity to reflect upon, deliberate, and negotiate social direction would be one of the foremost values in a society—especially a democracy. Yet, parallels of what was described in the previous section as the “loss of words” can also be seen in a democratic country with one dominant language when the sophisticated use of that dominant language becomes limited to a small subset of its

population. The larger percentage of the society is thus made to disconnect from various sources of knowledge. In effect, most in the society are disempowered from exercising their prerogative and agency in the affairs of the country, even though it would still be called a democracy.

The reasoning here can be looked at as a corollary to the examples, in the previous chapter, of Shakespeare and Paine. Frederick Douglass⁴⁰¹ would be another example of the same phenomenon. They all exhibit that developing command of language was instrumental in the development of their intellectual and communication faculties even though they had little formal schooling. They were thus able to influence the thought process within society. In the case of Shakespeare, he still influences the thought process of much of the English-speaking world. Paine's role in the American Revolution can simply not be overstated. As for Frederick Douglass, we have to realize that there would be no Abe Lincoln as we know him if it weren't for Douglass. The point is this: as indicated by Harley's example in the previous chapter, the effective denial of not only education but even literacy to a large percentage of society is tantamount to disenfranchisement. And that is just one mechanism of subverting democracy.

Most cultures, even in the presence of relevant written material, have traditionally transmitted their principles orally using parable, allegory, song, poetry, etc. The Iliad and the Odyssey were products of an oral tradition, transmitted over several generations of Greek poets to become the epics they are. (This also means that Homer was likely not the original creator of these works!) The texts in the various sacred scriptures were also oral traditions for a long time and are meant to be heard, not merely to be read. Arguably, hearing a text in its original language may have a deeper impact that simply cannot be replicated by reading its translation.

Education through oral transmission is unique in many regards. In that respect, the loss of oral tradition is a loss of culture and religion in one dimension or the other. Such loss in our culture amounts to a loss in our education that cannot be made up by books or diplomas.