

The language garden

There are around 7,000 languages in the world today. However, about 95% of languages are spoken by approximately 5% of the world's population. About 25% of languages are spoken by no more than 1,000 people.

Technology and globalisation have led to the rise of what are called 'super languages', such as Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, Hindi and English. Younger people start to use these dominant languages in education, work, communications and travel and so minority languages slowly disappear.

For many people, language is closely connected to culture and identity. Experts liken the death of minority languages to a 'language garden': so a garden with just one or two different flowers in it is seen as less beautiful and less rich than a garden with a great variety of flowers. They also compare the 'death' of languages to the death of endangered species of animals.

Some feel that language death is a natural fact of life and a part of progress. Languages such as Mandarin Chinese are growing fast. There are already about 870 million Mandarin speakers in the world, mostly in China itself. However, the number of people studying it abroad is now increasing too, in countries like the USA, Canada and the UK. In fact, the number of English state schools offering Mandarin to pupils has tripled over the last four years to 16%.

As languages like Mandarin grow, others decline. Just over half the population in China speaks Mandarin but there are many other Chinese languages which are now at risk. The United Nations has stated that around 100 of China's native languages are dying out and the Chinese government itself is now trying to save some of them.

Even Mandarin itself is at risk: while the number of Mandarin speakers is growing, the written Chinese characters, which are based on spoken Mandarin, are now in danger. This is because many young people no longer use the characters very much: when using computers or writing text messages they use a script called 'pinyin', which uses the Roman alphabet (a, b, c etc). In fact, nowadays, many young Chinese only use characters to write their signature or to fill in forms.

The earliest examples of written Chinese date from around 3,000 years ago, making it one of the oldest forms of writing, one closely related to Chinese art and culture. So it is no surprise that the Chinese government is now trying to encourage young people to use it, through different programmes. After all, language is part of a people's identity.

1 In how many languages can you say the following words? Tell your partner.

goodbye	my name is ...	ice-cream	cat
---------	----------------	-----------	-----

2 In pairs, answer the following questions with numbers from the box.

870,000,000	95	16	3,000	100	7,000
-------------	----	----	-------	-----	-------

- 1 How many languages are there in the world? _____
- 2 How many speakers of Mandarin Chinese are there? _____
- 3 How old is the first example of written Chinese characters? _____
- 4 What percentage of the world's languages is spoken by about 5% of the population?

- 5 How many Chinese languages are in danger? _____
- 6 What percentage of state schools in England offer Mandarin Chinese to pupils?

3 Now read the text and check your answers.

4 Which of the following aspects does the text talk about?

- a how super languages become dominant and minority languages die out
- b the importance of minority languages
- c the growing number of Mandarin speakers in China and other countries
- d how China's minority languages are being protected
- e the historical development of written Chinese characters
- f what older people use written Chinese characters for
- g why Chinese characters are important for Chinese people

5 Discuss the following points from the text.

- 1 Look at the numbers in the first paragraph. What do you think they mean in terms of minority languages and their possible future?
- 2 25% of languages are spoken by around 1,000 people. Do you think these are usually older or younger people? Why?
- 3 What does the term 'language garden' mean, in your own words? Do you like this term?
- 4 Why do you think a growing number of students in England are choosing to study Mandarin?
- 5 Why do you think computers and phones in China use a Western alphabet (pinyin) and not Chinese characters?

6 What do you think? Choose two points which you agree with and be prepared to say why to your partner(s).

- If a language is dying, there is nothing you can do to save it.
- It is natural that languages die. It is part of modern life and progress.
- One 'super' language for the whole world would be very advantageous.
- Governments should put time and money into saving languages.
- There are many good reasons to protect minority languages.
- It is as important to save a written language as a spoken one.

7 Match these words from the text into pairs of words that mean the same.

grow (par 5)	around (par 1)
about (par 4)	related (par 7)
slowly disappear (par 2)	'super' (par 2)
liken (par 3)	in danger (par 6)
at risk (par 5)	such as (par 2)
connected (par 3)	increase (par 4)
dominant (par 2)	compare (par 3)
like (par 5)	die out (par 5)

Glossary

character (*noun*) - picture-like symbols used to write Chinese and Japanese (kanji)

culture (*noun*) - a set of ideas, beliefs and ways of behaving: *societies that share the same language and culture*

dominant (*adj*) - more important or powerful than other people / things of the same type

encourage (*v*) - to try to persuade someone to do something that you believe would be good

identity (*noun*) - the qualities that make someone / something what they are and different from others

minority (*noun*) - a part of a population that is different in race, religion or culture from most of the population. **minority language** - a language spoken by a smaller percentage of people than the majority.

progress (*noun*) - the process of developing or improving

triple (*v*) - if something triples, it increases so that it is three times bigger than before

variety (*noun*) - a number of different people or different things