



ANDERSON SERANGOON JUNIOR COLLEGE

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PAPER 2

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Archibald Bisby defends the case for the preservation of languages.

- 1 Human language is indubitably one of the most complex forms of human behaviour. It is perceived to be a key trait that suggests our superiority to all other forms of life within the animal kingdom. There is no part of human life that is completely divorced from language – it is in the text messages we send, it is expressed in our private thoughts and it is the tool we use to understand the world around us. Language may have evolved over time, but its pivotal functions remain. Language today, as it did in the past, enables us to communicate, forms the basis of our relationships and drives the essential systems of our societies. It is therefore not an exaggeration to say that language is the most powerful tool at the disposal of humanity. 5
- 2 Language is so much more than a mere series of labels for things. It is also a remarkable social phenomenon, generally involving at least two or more parties. We form relationships - both platonic and romantic - through the way we communicate. Our furry counterparts - rhesus monkeys for example - mirror this as they make use of various solicitation calls in order to attract the attention of potential mates. Among humans, the formal structure of language evolved principally as a medium for conveying ideas and feelings, which tend to attract sexual partners by revealing our personalities and intellect. Babies also build knowledge about the language they hear even in the first few months of life. Given the complexity of language, it seems improbable that mere children could discover its underlying structure and use it deftly. Yet, most do so with eagerness and ease, all within the first few years of life, because infants quickly realise that it is the most expedient way of having their demands met and engaging with their caregivers. 10
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- 3 Words also have the power to trigger emotions, fire imagination and rally collective action. Martin Luther King Jr's historical "I Have a Dream" speech is perhaps amongst the greatest emotionally provocative speeches of the twentieth century and is one of the most defining moments of the civil rights movement. Linguists also believe that speech patterns correspond to particular actions, and it is what we use to articulate our political sentiments and influence people's behaviours and how they navigate social media. Social media platforms, for instance, may limit the exposure to diverse perspectives and favour the formation of groups of like-minded users who are framing and reinforcing a shared narrative. In one study, it was observed that Republicans and Democrats expressed their distinct views when discussing mass shootings on social media. "Democrats' language conveyed more sadness or trust than that of Republicans. Republicans' language, meanwhile, projected more feelings of fear and disgust, especially when the shooter is non-white." As we live in a highly divided world, understanding what different groups of people say and why is the first and most important step in determining how language can have a truly polarising effect. 25
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- 4 Language is the cornerstone on which identity is built and it is fundamental to the expression of customs and beliefs. It simultaneously fosters solidarity. This is clearly seen in immigrant societies, for example, America. These immigrants are accustomed to a certain language and continue to use it within their own communities and keep it alive, creating different and cultured communities in the foreign land. While the children of these immigrants will ultimately be well-acclimatised to the new environment, it is language that reminds them of their roots and their connection with their forefathers. The complex relationship between language and identity is further highlighted in our modern context as acceptance of a spectrum of gender and sexual identities grows. Traditionally, languages did little to reflect diversity - proffering exclusively male or female options which people assumed to reflect their genders. Today, we witness how language makes provisions for those who embrace unconventional gender understandings through the adoption of more ambiguous and neutral pronouns (such as "they" as opposed to "he" or "she"). It is the medium through which society affirms these individuals and how these individuals negotiate a sense 40
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of self.

- 5 However, languages are not always placed on an equal pedestal. In China, proficiency in the English language is often tied to social and educational success. Presently, around 600 million Chinese citizens are learners of English. This is a staggering statistic, not only because it implies that almost 50 percent of China's population of 1.35 billion is currently learning the language, but also because this number surpasses the English-speaking population of the United States. This may be confounding for some given China's current reputation as an economic hegemon that is carving its own path. In the global context, some languages are seen as social levellers – they are necessary acquisitions for the individual, regardless of his or her economic background, to secure better employment and business prospects. Ironically, this further advantages the rich who can easily seize any educational opportunities. 55 60
- 6 While some languages are thriving, the future of less commonly adopted ways of communication looks bleak. Approximately 7,000 languages are spoken in today's world, but experts have already begun bemoaning the impending loss as only about half of these are expected to survive this century. Conservative estimates are that the world's languages are currently dying at a rate of at least two languages each month. Governments in numerous countries are clamouring to preserve mother tongues and dialects, but their efforts are often greeted by waning enthusiasm from the public. Unsurprisingly, the Internet has been at the receiving end of a great number of finger pointing. A survey published by UNESCO in 2008 found that 98% of the internet's web pages are published in just 12 languages, and more than half of them are in English. This reduces linguistic diversity online to a handful of tongues, making it harder for those who speak one of the excluded languages of the internet. Consequently, users are coerced to adopt the more recognisable languages while less conventional ones end up displaced. Of course, there are other factors alluding to the reality bite that many languages are dying out. These include globalisation, the lack of support for regional languages in educational systems, the persecution of minority linguistic groups by governments, the disruption of communities during war, emigration... 65 70 75 80
- 7 The majority of lay people in the industrialised world might agree with the economist who said that "a single language for all humanity would bring huge economic benefits—and perhaps do more than anything else to unite the world's quarrelling peoples." However, we are compelled to question if such a perspective is too simplistic, given the efforts of some governments and international organisations to preserve languages. The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity and the UN Resolution 56/262 have both stressed the need for urgent action to promote linguistic diversity, as part of an effort to preserve the unique cultures that we embrace globally. To lose a language would be to put a severe dent in the preservation of culture, heritage and identity. 85 90
- 8 Each language is like a soaring castle: it is a thing of beauty and filled with rich tapestries of knowledge. Languages enrich our human ecology and contribute to the sum of human knowledge and history. Thus, even if it proves to be an onerous endeavour, we must aggressively defend it. 95

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