

English has hunted other languages to point of extinction

Peter
Trudgill



email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk

The 17th-century expansion of English out of the British Isles turned it into a killer language. The first casualties were the languages of the Bahamas, the Caribbean, and North America.

In what is now Canada and the USA, there were about 300 languages at the time of the first contact between the indigenous peoples and Europeans.

Now, well over 100 of these languages have gone, and another 75 or so are only remembered by a small number of elderly speakers. Ika'au, spoken in Hawaii and New Mexico, is the only North American language with more than 100,000 speakers.

Experts say that nearly all of the remaining 100-odd indigenous languages are likely to be gone by the end of the 21st century.

If this miserable prediction is correct, then it will only have taken 500 years from the time of the first English settlement in Jamestown, Virginia for English to have killed off nearly all the indigenous languages of North America.

Australia had about 250 languages at the time of the first British colonisation. More than half of these have died out already, and Australian linguists are constantly revising downwards the number of indige-



■ A traditional Maori welcome. The New Zealand Maori language is one of those under threat from the march of English.

Picture: JOHN STILLWELL/PA

nous languages they think will survive into the 22nd century. Now, no more than 20 are currently being learnt by children, so in another generation more than 90pc of all Australian languages will have been killed off.

This is partly due to language shift – meaning that a community has abandoned its language and switched to another.

In many cases communities had no choice about this: their children were forcibly taken from them and put into boarding schools where speaking Australian languages was not allowed.

But it was also partly due to genocide, especially in Tasmania, where natives were hunted down and killed. In the

Pacific Ocean, some of the 40 or so Polynesian languages, and 50-plus Micronesian languages are also threatened by language shift. Hawaiian and New Zealand Maori, which are both spoken in places where English is now dominant, are particularly vulnerable.

The expansion of English has been a remarkable phenomenon, but it has created many losers. In fact, there's an important sense in which we are all losers.

The loss of linguistic diversity from the world is a language-ecological disaster. Seven per cent of all mammal species in the world are on the endangered list. But when it comes to human languages, 90pc are in danger of extinction.