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Street sign for Ffordd Pen Llech, said to be the world's steepest street, with text in English and in Welsh. Approximately 20% of Wales residents are fluent in Welsh, and the government is striving to increase that percentage." Wikimedia

Protecting endangered languages feels right, but does it really help people?

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Headlines abound with the plight of endangered minority languages around the world. Read a few of these and you'll see some common themes: the rising number of languages dying worldwide, the distressing isolation of individual last speakers, and the wider cultural loss for humanity.

These stories often mention efforts to protect such languages. This is seen as a way to buttress their speakers' sense of identity, to resist the grinding homogenisation of globalisation, and to set right minorities' historical marginalisation. However, these stories tend to focus less on how such efforts materially help speakers of endangered languages. As I explore in a peer-reviewed, open-access article, such efforts sometimes help, sometimes harm, and sometimes they do both at once.

Questions of identity

Encouraging someone to keep speaking – or to learn anew – a shrinking minority language could certainly buttress his or her sense of identity. But when a bigger language is adopted somewhere, it doesn't erase everything that came before. Often, intense contact between big and small languages leads to a fascinating new mixture – for example, Sheng in Kenya, Tsotsitaal in South Africa and Nouchi in Côte d'Ivoire.

In other cases, such language contact results in something closer to the incoming language, a new localised dialect. But as linguist Peter Trudgill argues, this too can hold a highly local identity. In another study in Ghana, one research interviewee says of the localised form of English: “I own this language that everyone speaks”. Similarly in Singapore, “Singlish” (a mix of English, Cantonese, Malay, and others) holds an important identity function. After all, these different new varieties are spoken nowhere else on earth.



An advertisement written in Singlish on a fence on Pulau Ubin, a small island that is part of Singapore. Michael Elleray/Wikimedia

These new contact-based vernaculars are globally unique, and many are spoken by disadvantaged minorities, but nobody calls for them to be celebrated or protected. Indeed, they are often looked down upon – for example, Singapore's government has a campaign to eradicate the “blunders” of Singlish. Linguistically, though, these are just as fully structured as any other language. Perhaps it's harder to romanticise something new than something old.

Addressing historical wrongs

The theme of righting historical wrongs among minority groups assumes they will somehow benefit from defence of their language. Sure enough, enabling a people to use their traditional language can make them feel better about themselves. But is it really *helping* them? Let's take this one step at a time.

If a people lost their language after being oppressed by colonialism and then further trampled on by rampant globalism, they probably lost a whole lot more than language. Canadian researcher Chris Lalonde focused his work on health and well-being in Canada's indigenous communities, and what he found was much more complicated. A co-authored report did find positive effects of increased fluency in their native languages, but here comes the most important – and politically most difficult – point. In a later analysis (chapter 30 of this book), he and his colleagues showed that simply promoting language on its own – even language *and* indigenous culture – was not influential on a fundamental measure of well-being, suicide rates:

“While culture [and language are] important, it is the integration of social, family, education and training, job creation and other elements that bring cohesion to a community. Indigenous youth suicide must be addressed as a community by forming community cohesion.”

Simply adding your ancestral language as a new school subject isn't very helpful if your school is falling down, you're not eating well, your people are disproportionately incarcerated, or you don't have adequate political representation. To think anything much can be solved just by performing CPR on a minority language is to ignore how complicated human society is, and how many different simultaneous needs we have.

Details matter

If it's possible to intervene but not really help, is it also possible to intervene and cause harm? Let's look at a couple of examples.

In Wales, legal recognition of the Welsh language has been momentous, countering centuries of denigration and decline. There have been significant benefits, but closer inspection reveals drawbacks as well.

Welsh is currently taught in schools across Wales, and that's good news for families, be they Welsh- or English-speaking. Some schools use Welsh a bit, some a lot, and an increasing number use only Welsh. According to the 2021 census, only around 20% of Wales's population (538,300) is fluent in Welsh and the government's plan is to reverse that decline and reach 1 million speakers by 2050.

It's an ambitious goal, and requires children from non-Welsh-speaking families to attend Welsh-medium schools. Sometimes parents actively choose this – indeed, it's often prized – while in other cases it's the only option. Either way, there are upsides and downsides.

On the one hand, students who leave school with Welsh proficiency go on to earn more on average than their monolingual peers, at least within Wales. There is also cultural enrichment that comes with any additional language, and some studies have suggested bilinguals generally enjoy cognitive advantages in life, though the evidence is mixed. But on the other hand, those who didn't speak Welsh before entering a Welsh-medium school often struggle and their grades can suffer. Overall, Welsh-medium schools report lower grades than English-medium schools (page 120 of that linked report has some sobering detail), and this despite receiving equal or higher funding.

As is to be expected, Wales's ambitious plan to substantially increase the use of Welsh brings with it many challenges. These include a shortage of teachers fluent in Welsh, reported tensions between Welsh- and English-medium students, and difficulties accommodating children with additional learning needs. Understanding and facing up to these and other challenges could enable a more accommodating and ameliorative approach.



While French remains a majority language in Quebec, the percentage of native speakers has fallen slightly despite numerous laws to protect and promote it. Wikimedia, CC BY

Another example is in Canada, where French is a minority language that has been declining for decades. In Québec, French remains dominant, with just under 75% of residents having it as their native language, but the percentage has fallen slightly over the past five years despite muscular policies to promote its use.

Most recently, in 2022 the Québec Legislature passed Bill 96, which among other changes, requires civil servants to exclusively use French for official speech and writing, with certain exceptions. While the government has said that the bill will not affect access to health care and social services in English, medical professionals and students have expressed serious concerns about the law's potential impacts. This is an example of the prioritisation of language even in matters as essential as health care, yet it's unclear if the law will actually improve Québec residents' lives, or even help preserve French in Québec.

Uncomfortable questions

These are uncomfortable questions to ask given the scale of minority language loss worldwide, alongside an acrid legacy of colonialism and repression. However, it's in no one's interests to cause new problems while trying to right past wrongs.

So, next time you see a media report about efforts to preserve a minority language, think whether they'll be part of a broader range of support. Next, consider potential unintended negative consequences, and how those balance against the positive ones.

Promoting endangered languages can be a positive force, but we shouldn't assume that's universally true. In the end – and this is especially difficult for a linguist to say – perhaps we should focus less on languages in themselves, and pay more attention to the lives of the people who speak them.