

Any last words? Our dying languages

By Andy Bloxham

TWENTY languages used in Britain, including Old Kentish Sign Language, have become extinct or are in danger of dying out within a generation, according to academics who are trying to save them.

Researchers from Cambridge University have compiled a database of all that is known about languages that have disappeared in the recent past or are at risk.

Among them are Old Kentish Sign Language, a forerunner to the standard British Sign Language which was documented by Samuel Pepys in his diaries when he noted a silent conversation between a friend and his deaf servant about a fire in Whitehall in November 1666. No one is now thought to use it.

Also included is Polari, a mongrel language which grew from Italian, Romany and Hebrew and was used by homosexual men in the mid-19th century as a secret code when homosexuality was illegal.

Polari, used only as a second language, was traditionally spoken by circus performers and was the

The Telegraph

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unofficial language of Punch and Judy puppeteers. It gained more widespread understanding with the characters Julian and Sandy in the 1960s BBC radio comedy *Round the Home*. Words that have entered the mainstream language from it include "camp" for effeminate, "clobber" for clothes and "slap" for make-up.

Other languages spoken in Britain which are at risk of dying out include Cornish, which with just 600 speakers is rated as "critically endangered"; Guernsey French, with 1,327 speakers is "severely endangered"; and Scottish Gaelic, which is used by 62,175 people is "definitely endangered".

Less likely candidates appear on the list. Welsh is still "vulnerable" but growing in strength due to support from the devolved Welsh Assembly.

The British languages in the database include indigenous ones which have died out, such as Manx, spoken on the Isle of Man. The last

Know Zazaki from Norn?

Examples of languages used in Britain:

• **Cornish** (worldwide speakers 600)
Benetugana – goodbye

• **Griko** a form of Greek, mostly spoken in Italy (20,000)
Kalini'tta – good night

• **Irish** (355,000)
Is mise – my name is

• **Manx** (extinct)
Gura mie moor ayd – thank you

• **Panamanian Creole English** (3,181,171)
Ka sa ye? – how are you?

• **Romani** (unknown)
Yov sasti – hi

• **Scots** related to English (200,000)
Guid morning – good morning

• **Scottish Gaelic**, a Celtic language (62,175)
Fàilte – welcome

• **Yinglish**, related to Yiddish (unknown)
Nextdoorekeh – woman living next door

• **Zazaki**, spoken mainly in Turkey (140,000)
Citana – hello

• **Norn**, spoken in Shetland and Orkney (extinct)
Favor – father

• **Polari** (extinct)
Bonaroo – wonderful

• **Classical Common Gaelic** (extinct)
Tris – three

native speaker, Ned Maddrell, a fisherman, died in 1974.

Also endangered is Panamanian Creole English, also known as Quashie Talk, which was brought to Britain and established by immigrants from Central America. In compiling the World Oral Literature Project database, the academics pooled information from the world's three large linguistic



Talking tough Dame Eileen tells actors to lose accents

Dame Eileen Atkins has criticised the trend for young actors to retain their regional accents.

The 76-year-old actress, star of *Cranford* and the BBC's new version of *Upstairs Downstairs*, said working-class drama

students should be taught to disguise their roots.

"There's a fashion not to get rid of your basic accent. That's bad for those from working-class areas. They'll never get classical leading parts. It's pretentious to hang on to

an accent to 'show where I come from'.

"There's such rot talked about roots," said Dame Eileen (pictured above right with Dame Judi Dench and Lisa Dillon in a scene from *Cranford*).

The daughter of a

seamstress and a gas meter reader, her roots lie in east London, but she shed her cockney accent before embarking upon her career.

"You have to be pushy to get out of the working class," she explained.

Ironically, Dame Eileen is now typecast as "posh" and hankers after working-class roles. In the new *Upstairs Downstairs*, which will be screened at Christmas she plays the aristocratic Lady Holland.

Anita Singh

Suicide boy 'bullied for speaking politely'

By Daily Telegraph Reporter

A 12-YEAR-OLD boy was found hanged at his home after apparently being bullied at school for being well-spoken.

Bradley Wiseman's body was discovered on Monday in Edlington, South Yorks.

Among the hundreds of friends who have left tributes to Bradley on an online memorial page, many suggested bullies had terrorised him at Sir Thomas Wharton Community College.

A neighbour said: "He was a lovely lad, so polite.

"It is completely out of character. He never would have done it if he wasn't being bullied at school.

"They bullied him because he talked politely, he was very well



Bradley Wiseman, 12, was found hanged. Friends suggested he had been targeted by bullies at school because he was well-spoken

spoken, you wouldn't have known he came from round here. He was a lovely kid and it is so sad what has happened. We are all devastated." She said the close knit community was supporting Bradley's 37-year-old mother, Erika.

Bradley, a keen sportsman, played for Doncaster Rugby Union Football Club's under 12s.

John Wills, his coach, said: "He was a lot of fun. There was no evidence of him being bullied at rugby practice or during games.

"He loved rugby and would come along with his mum and brother and sister. Bradley was really popular with all the other boys."

Mary McCorry, the head teacher at his school, said: "Bradley had settled into school well and there have been no reports of bullying or any problems that we are aware of. On behalf of everyone at Sir Thomas Wharton, we are deeply saddened to hear of the sudden death of one of our pupils."

Police are investigating.

resources: the online linguistics journal *Ethnologue*; the Unesco *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*; and the work of Prof William Sutherland, a Cambridge conservation biologist.

Languages are judged to be at risk if there are few speakers and little enthusiasm or support for learning. The academics hope the project will highlight which lan-

guages are most under threat and indicate gaps in knowledge which future researchers could fill.

They also aim to gain new information from speakers of rare languages around the world. There are 3,524 languages recorded as at risk on the list, from Inughuit, spoken in north-west Greenland, to Ifugao, from the Philippines. Among them, around 150 are criti-

cal and the numbers of their living speakers have fallen to single figures or just one.

Dr Mark Turin, an anthropologist who helped compile the database, said: "Languages develop over thousands of years but they can be lost in a generation. Languages are much more than words and grammar: they are vehicles for history, knowledge and a sense of identity

and they contain a whole pattern of understanding the natural world and its animals, plants and their medicinal properties and managing the land.

"This kind of work can throw up nice surprises. Sometimes you say a language is dead and you get an angry phone call from someone saying, 'That's not dead, my uncle speaks it!'"