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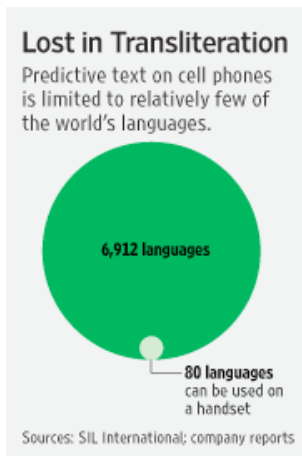
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How the Lowly Text Message May Save Languages That Could Otherwise Fade

By [WILLIAM M. BULKELEY](#)

Can a language stay relevant if it isn't used to send text messages on a cellphone?

Language advocates worry that the answer is no, and they are pushing to make more written languages available on cellphones.



Texting is the cheapest and most popular mode of cellphone communication in most of the world, and last year text messages topped voice calls even in the U.S. The world's three billion cellphones far surpass the Internet as a universal communications medium, and they are vital to business development in less-developed economies.

But companies that develop predictive text say they have created cellphone software for fewer than 80 of the world's 6,912 languages cataloged by SIL International, a Dallas organization that works to preserve languages.

One key to using the languages is the availability of a technology called predictive text, which reduces the number of key taps necessary to create a word when using a limited keypad. Market research shows that text messaging soars after predictive text becomes available.

"The idea of having your cultural identity represented in this technology is increasingly important," says Laura Welcher, director of the Rosetta Project of San Francisco's Long Now Foundation. Ms. Welcher, who says linguists fear half the world's languages will disappear in the near future, thinks at least 200 languages have enough speakers to justify development of cellphone text systems. "Technology empowers the poorest people," she adds.

Putting text on cellphones involves more than just printing letters on the number keys. Texting is cumbersome on a 12-key handset, requiring multiple taps on keys to select some letters. It is even harder in languages with more than the 26 letters of English. In Hindi, a language with 11 vowels and 34 consonants that is spoken by 40% of the Indian population, texting "Namaste," which means "hello," can take 21 key presses.

The solution for most users is predictive text. A phone with predictive text guesses what word a person is trying to type on the 12-key cellphone keypad, requiring far fewer keystrokes.

Typing "Namaste" with predictive text takes just six key presses. Nuance Corp. of Burlington, Mass., which dominates the predictive-text market, says that in 2006 cellphone users in India with predictive text in their handsets averaged 70 messages a week; those without it averaged 18.

The majority of users activate predictive text capability on their phones because, according to calculations by Nuance unit Tegic Corp., it is 30% faster than using the traditional method of hitting the "2" key once for "a", twice for "b" or three times for "c" with a Roman alphabet.

Michael Cahill, linguistics coordinator for SIL International, says, "There are cases where texting is helping to preserve languages" by encouraging young people to write in their native tongue.

Native-language boosters in Ireland and Britain have successfully pushed for development of Gaelic and Welsh languages on cellphones for texting so they remain relevant for young people.

Breandan Mac Craith, marketing director for Dublin-based Foras na Gaeilge, which promotes Gaelic, says, "It's extremely important that language isn't something that's only in books." In 2006, Foras began working to develop texting software for the Irish language with market leader Tegic. He says "texting way surpasses voice calls," but "trying to find the accent marks that we put on some of our vowels is very time consuming. So texts got written in English."

Once the software was available, Foras started pushing carriers and handset makers to install it on their phones. Last year, Samsung Corp., trying to steal a march on market leader Nokia Corp., added an Irish-language handset to its line. "They're fabulous tools for us," says Mr. Mac Craith. "It facilitates the Irish language as a communications tool for every day -- not just in the classroom."

In other parts of the world, text capability on cellphones can be vital to economic development and helping people who don't speak or read English buy and sell goods. Indian carriers offer at least 12 of that nation's 22 official languages, and Tegic says it is working to add Kashmeri to the list.

Says Christy Wyatt, vice president of software at cellphone maker Motorola Corp.: "Predictive text is one of the technologies that has opened up the handset." Motorola writes its own software for predictive text, but most other handset makers buy Tegic's T9 software from Nuance, with a growing number using EziText from Zi Corp., a Calgary, Alberta, firm with a big market in China.

Predictive text in Western languages has been available for more than a decade, and today it is on virtually every 12-key cellphone, although carriers don't always activate it.

Michael Wehrs, Nuance's vice president of industry affairs, says allowing texting in native languages makes it easier for people who don't speak English to conduct business. "The population needs to be able to use the device," he says. "To require them to use English is futile."

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