BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Saving dead languages

This is not a word-for-word transcript.

Neil
Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

Phil
And I'm Phil. And now that we've done our hellos, let's hear some greetings in different languages from around the world. But what do these languages have in common?

Neil
I'm afraid I don't know what they have in common because I don't recognise any of them.

Phil
Well, sadly the one thing uniting these languages is that they're all endangered. We often hear about animals at risk of extinction, but a recent study by the Australian National University found that out of the world's 7000 existing languages, half are under threat.

But what can be done to save languages from dying out? That's what we'll be discussing in this programme, and, as usual, we'll be learning some useful new vocabulary as well.

Neil
But first I have a question for you, Phil, and it's about a country which used to be one of the most linguistically rich places on Earth, Australia. Before European settlers arrived in the 1800s, Australia had over 200 languages spoken by the

native Aboriginal people who had lived there for thousands of years. Many Aboriginal languages were destroyed by the brutal laws of the Australian government at the time, however some survived. So, which of the following Aboriginal languages is still spoken today?

Is it:

a) Djinang?
b) Alawa?
c) Gagadu?

Phil
Hmm, I'll guess it's Djinang.

Neil
OK, Phil, I'll reveal the answer later in the programme. The sad truth is that it was no accident that the Aboriginal languages died out, given the cruel treatment of Aboriginal people. Children were removed from their mothers and sent to schools thousands of miles away to learn English, and even today Aboriginal communities experience racism and poverty.

Phil
Another Aboriginal language, Barngarla, officially died in 1960 when its last native speaker, Elder Moonie Davis, passed away. But Barngarla has been brought back to life, and today it's spoken between parents and children, and even learned in school.

Neil
So, how did a dead language with no living speakers come back to life? The unusual answer involves a dictionary and a professor of linguistics. Here's Professor Ghil'ad Zuckermann telling his story for BBC World Service programme, People Fixing The World.

Professor Ghil'ad Zuckermann
I had a dictionary written by a German Lutheran Christian **missionary** in 1844. His name was Clamor Wilhelm Schumann, and he wrote the dictionary with up to 3500 words, which is a lot, because he wanted to Christianise the, **in quotation marks,**

“heathens”. So, it’s a **topsy-turvy**, **righting the wrong of the past,** by using a tool written for one goal in order to achieve the diametrically opposite goal.

Phil
Professor Zuckermann found an English-to-Barngala dictionary written in 1844 by a German **missionary** – a person sent to a foreign country to teach their religion to the people living there. Christian missionaries used the dictionary to teach English to what they called "Aboriginal **heathens**". **Heathen** is an old-fashioned word for someone who belongs to no religion, or to a religion that is not Christianity, Judaism, or Islam.

Neil
Professor Zuckermann puts the word “**heathen**” **in quotation marks**. The phrase **in quotation marks** is used to show the actual words someone else has written or said, but here the phrase is used ironically. Professor Zuckermann is questioning the real meaning of the word “heathens”. He is signalling that he doesn’t think Aboriginals are heathens at all, a bit like adding a wink at the end of a sentence so people know you’re not serious.

Phil
What’s ironic is that Professor Zuckermann used the missionary’s dictionary not to spread Christianity and English, but to save an Aboriginal language from extinction, so he calls it '**topsy-turvy**', meaning upside down.

Neil
Professor Zuckermann also says he is '**righting the wrongs of the past**', a phrase which means doing something to correct a historical injustice from the past, in this case, the destruction of Aboriginal language and culture.

Phil
Speaking your own language is about more than communication, it means knowing your roots and feeling good about yourself. I think it’s time you reveal the answer to your question, Neil.

Neil
OK. Well Phil, you guessed that Djinang was another living Aboriginal language, which was… the correct answer! Right, let's recap the vocabulary we've learned starting with **missionary**, someone sent to spread their religion to a foreign country.

Phil
'Heathen' is an old-fashioned name for someone who believes in no religion.

Neil
The phrase '**in quotation marks'** is used to show the actual words spoken or written by someone else. It can also be used ironically to show scepticism, disagreement or belief that a word is misused.

Phil
'Topsy-turvy' means upside down or disorganised.

Neil
If you **right the wrongs of the past** you try to correct a historical injustice.

Phil
Once again our six minutes are up. Goodbye for now!

Neil
Bye!

VOCABULARY

missionary
person who is sent to a foreign country to teach their religion (often Christianity) to the people living there

heathen
person who belongs to no religion, or to a religion that is not Christianity, Judaism, or Islam

in quotation marks
used to show the actual words spoken or written by someone else;
used ironically to show scepticism, disagreement or belief that a word is misused

topsy turvy
upside down; disorganised

right the wrongs of the past
take action to correct a historical injustice