**ER 12.4 Global languages and murder**

We have already thought about, in 9.3 and elsewhere, the advantages of lingua francas, both intranational and international. But nowadays we must think globally, with countries wanting to communicate, to do business, to interact across the globe. All the arguments for intranational and international lingua francas apply equally to the globe as a whole. The case for there being a global language is strong.

But there are associated disadvantages. The more one language holds power, the less other languages are used, and this may reduce the number of speakers using them. There is plenty of evidence that powerful English has had this effect. It has for example now replaced other languages in ASEAN country schools (Kirkpatrick, 2009), while the teaching of Russian and German has dramatically dropped in Hungary in recent years (Dörnyei and Csizér, 2002). The effects can be much worse for local languages, resulting in what is rather morbidly called ‘language death’. The statistics are dramatic: there are some 5000-6000 language spoken in the world today, and one estimate suggests that by 2100 some 3000-4000 will have disappeared (Grenoble and Whaley, 1998a[[1]](#endnote-1)). In fact, languages are at present dying out at the rate of four a year. This is the prediction of the ‘Endangered Languages’ Project’, partly administered by the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Their website has list of endangered languages, with information about them[[2]](#endnote-2). For Britain (one of English’s ‘homelands’, you might think) there are twelve on the list. They include Manx, the language of the Isle of Man (off the north west coast of England), and Guernésias (also known as ‘Guernsey Norman French’), from the Island of Guernsey, lying off England’s south-west coast, very close to France. As for the United States (another homeland of English), there are no fewer than 165 languages listed. To give just one example: the language of ‘Ahtna’ is spoken in eight villages in south central Alaska. ‘Among the Ahtna population’, the Project’s website says, ‘there are approximately thirty first-language speakers . . . alive today, all of whom are at least sixty years of age’. The language’s chances of survival into the future are put at zero, and when a language disappears, ‘a unique vision of the world is lost. With every language that dies we lose an enormous cultural heritage; the understanding of how humans relate to the world around us’. As for the case of Ahtna, the site also hints at the culprit: ‘Although most children know some phrases and vocabulary items in the language’, it says, ‘English is the language taught in homes today’. The same is true of many languages worldwide, a fact that leads some to regard English as a ‘killer language’. But is it first-degree murder? There are some who regard the domination of English as a deliberate act, to further the interests of native English-speaking countries – what Phillipson (1992) calls ‘linguistic imperialism’; Pennycook (2001) is also interesting on this topic. Certainly, the slaughter does not worry some: the British linguist and philosopher Charles Ogden said in 1934: ‘What the World needs most is about 1,000 more dead languages—and one more alive’. The alive one, for him, must, of course, be English!

1. The statistics are taken from Galloway and Rose (2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The Project’s website is at <http://www.endangeredlanguages.com>. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)