

THE VIRTUAL HAKKA COMMUNITY: A NEW DOMAIN OF REVITALIZATION¹

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Abstract

Hakka language is one variety of Chinese language in the Sino-Tibetan family. Hakka speakers themselves have many sub-dialects which mean they come from several areas in China such as Guangdong, Southern Fujian, Jiangxi, Guangxi, Hunan, and Sichuan provinces. In Thailand, the Hakka descendants are scattered throughout every province. However, there are only few older Hakka speakers who can speak Hakka language well. How do they preserve language and culture before the end of 21st century? The purpose of this paper is to present a new domain of Hakka revitalization via Hakka online community. This website was created just over three years ago by the webmaster who would like to preserve his ancestor language and culture. Although he cannot speak Hakka well, he wants Hakka speakers who are fluent in the language to use this website to communicate or transfer Hakka language to the next generation using Thai language. So far, this website is quite well known among Hakka descendants who are interested in Hakka language and culture. There are some new members joining the website every day. They exchange opinions and knowledge on many aspects of Hakka language and culture. It seems that they live in a community although they stay in their homes scattered in many parts of the world. The most important thing is that there are members in every age group. This phenomenon reflects the positive way and hope for preserving Hakka ethnicity because the Hakka speakers themselves have realized the need for language and culture revitalization.

Keywords: Hakka, online community, language revitalization, sociolinguistics, Hakka in Thailand

Introduction

Hakka language is known as one of seven Chinese dialect groups, namely, Mandarin, Wu, Xiang, Gan, Hakka or Kejia, Min, and Yue or Cantonese. There are many Hakka sub-dialects such as Meixian, Xingning, Dabu, Jiaoling, Fengshun

and Jiayang. The names of each sub-dialect come from the district areas of Guangdong and Fujian provinces in Southern China. Besides, there are Hakka speakers living in Jiangxi, Guangxi, Hunan, Sichuan, and Taiwan (Egerod, 1967; Ramsey, 1987; Wang, 2003). They also migrated to Southeast Asia and around the world. Worldwide they are estimated to number about 80 million (www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/252138/Hakka) including nearly one million in Thailand (Chawalkorn, 2011) today. Hakka has only a spoken language and no written language because Chinese has only one writing system known as Pu tong hua or Mandarin.

Most Hakka speakers in Thailand came from Meixian and Hongsun in Guangdong, China and nowadays they are scattered throughout every province, especially in Hatyai district, Songkhla province and Betong district, Yala province where Hakka people speak their language the most. Besides that, Bangkok and the central part of Thailand also have Hakka descendants but new generations cannot speak Hakka anymore (Ungsitipoonporn, 2007).

Language revitalization models in concept

In the book, *Saving languages: An introduction to language revitalization* (Grenoble and Whaley, 2006), Grenoble and Whaley identify such models for revitalization as follows:

Total immersion programs

These programs are agreed by most linguists and educators as the best option for language revitalization because these programs create an environment that use only that language in the community. However, some key elements are needed such as good speakers, advocacy and endorsement from the community, and financial resources. Maori language in New Zealand is well known as one of the best-documented under the program which is called language nest.

Partial-immersion or bilingual programs

The bilingual education programs use the local language as the language of instruction as much as possible, or teach the local language as a foreign or second language. The purpose of this program type is to teach the children first the local language and then transfer to the language of wider communication (or official language). This model allows ethnic minority children to be bilingual speakers. The Malayu-Patani in the southernmost part of Thailand are an example of this program, known as mother tongue-based bilingual education.

The local language as a second, "foreign" language

This model begins the revitalization of the language with the current adults relying on knowledge of the elders to provide content for teaching children. This program is suitable for endangered languages such as many ethnic groups in Thailand like Chong, So Thaveung, Bru and Mon.

Community-based programs

These programs are known as informal learning or natural learning styles because they are developed within the framework of local learning styles focusing on the domain of language use rather than language instruction. So they do not use formal classroom, and have no need for a learning process but the learners just observe repeatedly until they feel comfortable performing it as a whole. The advantage of this model is that the local language speakers can create a domain for using their languages automatically.

Master-apprentice program

This model is suitable for seriously endangered language groups which have a few speakers such as many languages in California. In Thailand, the Kasong ethnic group in Trat province opts to use this model for revitalization. This program is designed to pair "apprentices" or language learners and the "masters" or elders who still use their language and serve as teachers. The program needs to use oral language, not written language, and real-life situations or activities such as cooking, gardening and sewing. Funding is indispensable to free the masters and apprentices from other work obligations so that they can devote themselves full time to language teaching and learning.

Language reclamation program

Language reclamation also refers to the revival of languages which are no longer spoken. Language reclamation differs from language revitalization in the sense of native speakers; namely, in the case of language revitalization, the native speakers are still available to serve as consultants and teachers but for language reclamation, the speakers are forced to rely on whatever documentation of the language remains (Grenoble and Whaley, 2006: 63-64). As Paulston et al. (1993) mention, "Hebrew is the only true example of language revival" (as cited in Grenoble and Whaley, 2006: 63). Hebrew is a very special case for the most successful language reclamation. Modern Hebrew was developed in the late 19th century and early 20th century in a process often referred to as the "Revival of the Hebrew language" (as cited in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modern_Hebrew). Although it had been lost as a spoken language, classical Hebrew is used for prayer or study in Jewish communities around the world and ancient Hebrew is

also the liturgical tongue of the Samaritans, while modern Hebrew or Arabic is their vernacular (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebrew_language).

Documentation as revitalization

This model is not exactly considered to be language revitalization but some linguists usually document as much knowledge of endangered languages as possible; as Leanne Hinton argues in *The green book of language revitalization* (Hinton and Hale, 2001). It is important to collect a wide range of information to give an idea to the next generation on how those languages were used, especially through dictionaries. Therefore, dictionaries play an inevitable role in revitalization where literacy is the objective.

The models for language revitalization as mentioned above are related to language in the education system. Unfortunately, some ethnic groups do not have such an opportunity as this but it does not mean they do not want to preserve their language and culture. An example is the Hakka group in Thailand which is regarded as a large ethnic group but the Hakka speakers are scattered throughout Thailand and not just in one small community or village. As we know, nowadays is the period of modern high technology. We can easily contact others around the world via internet. Meanwhile, the 1996 UNESCO declaration on linguistic rights in Barcelona, Spain (UNESCO, 1996) considers everyone as having the right to use one's own language and maintain their culture. Therefore, many language minority groups in the world have been encouraged to revitalize and preserve their language with the support of linguists. However, linguists cannot help every ethnic group to revive their language and culture, so there is a need for other approaches or models to do that. Can the local language speakers themselves wake up to preserve and document their cultural heritage? How do they do this?

Hakka attitude and realization toward their language and culture

From my dissertation (Ungsitipoonporn, 2007), I interviewed many Hakka speakers in every part of Thailand about their attitude towards Hakka language and summarized notably that they have a positive attitude towards their ethnicity but not their language. They are also proud of Hakka ancestors but they did not like to teach Hakka language to other people or even their children. The reason was that their children had to learn Thai because they live in Thailand, and to learn English or Mandarin as a foreign language which they view as more important than their own language. Some elderly Hakka speakers realized that Hakka language had been in decline and they worried about it but it seemed that nobody knew how to preserve it. Although there is no statistics on language attitude survey of Hakka people, we can assume that they want to preserve their language and culture if they can. In 2008, I met a businessman named Nopphadol

Chawalkorn who wanted to preserve the Hakka language and culture for as long as he can. He is the first Hakka speaker that I met and I was very impressed with his intention for Hakka preservation. I proposed one article about his inspiration of Hakka ethnicity in the title of *Language revitalization awareness in the Hakka group in Thailand*, which was presented at the Third International Conference on Southeast Asia in 2009, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (Ungsitipoonporn, 2011). After that, he introduced one important website of Hakka named Hakkapeople.com which is available at www.hakkapeople.com. This website is mostly written in Thai language so that Hakka descendant in Thailand can read it. The details of this website will be presented in the next section.

Information of the online Hakka community

The Hakka people in Thailand are united for many purposes. There are many associations of Hakka people such as the Hakka Business Association, Hakka Association in Thailand, the Fey Jou Association Thailand, Taiwan Hakka Association in Thailand, World Chinese Unity Center Oversea Chinese, etc. The name of each association identifies the purpose or target group of members. But the form of these associations is limited to a group of people and usually involves expenses. So a lot of people are not interested in joining.

Hakka online community in Thailand: a new alternative model for language revitalization

In response to the restrictions of association member as mentioned above, the Hakka speakers who want to know their origin, history, and language have developed a website called Hakkapeople.com (www.hakkapeople.com) and everyone can join this website like a community as long as they can access the internet. Although you stay in your home, you can communicate with other members if you would like to share your ideas, knowledge or other information.

There have been many websites of Hakka information before. One well known website is www.asiawind.com/hakka which was established in 1995. This resource is written in English with many issues of Hakka knowledge such as history, language, Hakka people, Hakka house, association and Chinese culture. It is a good resource for analyzing “what it means to be Hakka in cyberspace” (Eriberto, 2009). Besides that, you can link to other websites like <http://www.hakkaonline.com> to see Hakka information in Chinese. These websites, as mentioned, only document some issues related to Hakka language and culture and they are not updated anymore.

Foundation of Hakkapeople.com

The webmaster developed a website called Hakka people which was formally opened on 21 November 2007 with many reasons. He told me his inspirations as follows:

“I want to find and gather a trace of Hakka ancestry in order to be written down and transferred to the next generation but I cannot find the reference documents or sometimes have difficulty to reach the good data. If I need the primary data, I have to ask the elderly Hakka who know the Hakka information. If I can create the website that can unite Hakka speakers or Hakka scholars, it will be great for anyone who would like to find Hakka data. It’s supposed to be reference data based on a website about many areas such as Hakka history, Hakka language, Hakka culture, or even Hakka activities. I myself have knowledge of information technology (IT) and act as webmaster. My intention is to produce this public website for everyone who wants to be a member and develop useful data forever.” (pers. comm.)

The webmaster wants not only to create the website but also needs to keep it always alive in the future. This is challenging for him because he thinks that “if the website is motionless, it is not different from the dead web” (pers. comm.). This is the fact that I agree with him.

From the personal communication with the webmaster, the purposes of this website can be summarized as follows:

- (1) To be an area for exchanging communication, ideas, and brainstorm knowledge of Hakka people in the cyberspace community.
- (2) To record Hakka stories and Hakka legends, and transfer history to the Hakka descendant using pictures, characters, video recorders, songs, and others using storytelling, opinions, and essential knowledge of everyone who joins this website.
- (3) To facilitate contact with the organizations and associations which do not have their own website for searching information about Hakka.
- (4) To publish a list of Hakka people who have merit in social support.

Pattern of website

This website is open for everybody who wants to apply or does not want to apply to be a member. If anyone wants to write opinion or post something, he/she needs to apply to become a member and the order number will automatically run. For example, I myself also applied to be member number 540 and you can see on the taskbar of user number like this <http://www.hakkapeople.com/user/540>.

Language use on the website is mostly in Thai because it was developed mostly for Hakka-Thai people who cannot read Chinese. They can write in

Chinese, English, or other language which used Unicode (UTF-8) font. So far, there are only three languages (Thai, English, Chinese) used in this website. Besides that, some Hakka members write Hakka spoken language in the Thai alphabet so that they can communicate using Hakka dialect with other members who know spoken language and can read in Thai alphabet too. Furthermore, some Hakka users write Hakka language in Thai together with Chinese characters for people who can read Chinese. It will be very useful if they translate the meaning of that content into Thai so that the younger generations can learn Hakka language from this website.

The Opinions of users for applying to be members in this website

I ask a question with a group of website members who I know about why they decided to apply to be a member. I got answers which are interesting as follows:

(Member1) M1 *"At first time, I do not know how to search the webs. My younger brother discovered this web and he applied for me to be a member. After I read the content in the web, I found that there are some Hakka descendent want to know the address of their relatives in China but no anyone answer. I would like to help them because I know quite well about the Hakka area in China so I am pleased to answer them. I myself want the new Hakka generations do not forget their ancestor or their origin."*

M2 *"I did not apply to be a member around nearly two years since this web has been opened but just only read the contents. Then, I decided to be a member because I found that there are some users post the issue in order to divide Hakka into two groups; deep Hakka and superficial Hakka. So I want to share my opinion that Hakka people in Ratchaburi province, where I live, never think to separate among Hakka group."*

M3 *"I found this website because I search for Hakka food. After I read the content, I am interested in it very much and then I apply to be a member."*

M4 *"I accidentally found this website and decided to be a member because I am Hakka descendant. After applying I did not enter this website for a while. I have just opened this web again recently and exchange my knowledge with others until now."*

M5 *"I want to participate for answer questions and disseminate Hakka information in the right way especially Hakka culture. I receive Hakka cultural knowledge from elderly Hakka speakers who have much knowledge about that and accepted by other people. I want to preserve this important heritage because some members do not know and some have misunderstanding."*

M6 *"I apply to be member because I want to know all Hakka people in Thailand. I myself have very few relative. I just have one family of my mother."*

M7 *"I'm Hakka people but know very few about Hakka so I want to look for Hakka history and every issue about that. This web has many topics of Hakka knowledge so I'm interested to be a member."*

M8 *"I'm interested in cultural art and variety in this website. Knowledge contents which selected to upload in the web are also useful and interesting. Moreover, this web is a modern communication way."*

It can be concluded that the members apply to this website because they feel that they are of Hakka ethnicity and need to know more about Hakka knowledge and Hakka people in Thailand. Besides that, the Hakka speakers who have knowledge want to share ideas or help other members.

The outstanding point of this website

From my survey, the answers of the question which I asked some members in the website are as follows:

M1 *"Most Hakka members in this website are harmony and unity except only some. I find some sincere friends from this web."*

M2 *"This web is the area where are the Hakka offspring aggregation as worthy of notice."*

M3 *"It is the only one Hakka website written in Thai which never appear."*

M4 *"There are many good and valuable contents in this web although some members in this web dispute or disagree in some opinions."*

M5 *"This web is gathering Hakka identity the most for the new generation but there are only few people who know well of special issues such as fortune-teller about Chinese cemetery, a midwife, a matchmaker, and a scholar. Therefore, sometimes someone answers in the wrong way, then make the readers misunderstand."*

M6 *"This web is different from other webs in the point of the members are familiar with others. A great deal of scholar Hakka descendants who have special knowledge express their ideas in this web."*

M7 *"Members in this web have a good relationship with each other."*

M8 *"This web is modernized and can exchange experience with other members."*

It can be summarized that the eminence of this website is modern and written in Thai. Besides, members exchange knowledge or experiences with each other like a familiar relative in the same family.

Content topics in the website

A variety issues or topics are posted in this website. So far, there are content types of book pages as follows:

- Hakka people/Hakka community
- Hakka People Radio

- Hometown of grandpa
- Foundation fund
- Public relations of Hakka business/ enterprise in this website
- Chinese naming of places in Bangkok and other provinces
- Web's activities
- Information of the clans/ family surnames
- Hakka vocabulary
- Chinese nationality
- Chinese tea
- Hakka people in China
- “Tham Gong Yia” the young god who is Hakka
- Fiction “life”
- Compositions of the Institute of Chinese Language and Culture in ChiangMai
- Essays of Hakka study center
- History of many Hakka associations in Thailand
- Travel experience with Spirit of Asia “Hakka people”
- Chinese customs and traditions
- To guess a riddle “ton-yok”
- Smile and laugh a little each day and be cheerful to be safe from diseases
- Collections of tales and proverbs
- Collections of education language and dictionaries in Chinese
- Collections of Dhama and prayer in Buddhism
- Collections of maps and cities
- Substances from Chen Siw Cheng
- “Hong Siw Chuan” the emperor people
- Song book
- About Hakka “Where will they go?”
- Table tennis competition for the Hakka cup
- Introduce travel places in Meixian
- Story telling of Hakka people

It can be summarized that the main issues are: history and origin, song, Dhama, customs and traditions, language, hometown in China, and Web's activities. If you are interested in specific topics, you can search by typing the keyword that you want. Therefore, you can find the related topics easily.

Interesting topics in this website

Since I was introduced to this web, I have observed that there are some topics which are usually asked by the new members. The popular topics are concluded as follows:

- want to learn Hakka language
- want to find their hometown and relative in China
- want to know Hakka history and the meaning of Hakka
- want to know Hakka food and where it can be found
- want to know Hakka ceremony and worship especially that related to the dead

The reflection of this phenomenon shows that the Hakka descendants still recognize their roots or ethnicity. They want to know about Hakka language and culture even though most of their parents or grandparents have already passed away. It is a good tendency to encourage them to realize the Hakka situation in Thailand. If there are Hakka speakers who have knowledge about Hakka language and culture and desire to share it, the Hakka people group who want to preserve their heritage will grow in number.

Activities that occur in Hakka community online

One activity that allows them to know each other is the arranged meeting among the members in this website. To date, they already have had four meetings for dinner and conversation. It is obvious that the members were keen to join every meeting. It can be assumed that the members in this website not only want to join in the website but also want to meet each other like in a 'real' community. Some members are good friends and some just discovered they are relatives through this website.

Another activity is announcing academic seminars for members or general visitors. It is useful for anyone interested in going to the seminar or conference related to Chinese or Chinese dialects which are usually for free. Some universities (Thammasat and Chulalongkorn) frequently arrange academic seminars on Chinese topics. The advantage is that the website helps education institutes promote academic activities.

Furthermore, this website is a forum where the members can make the advertisement of visiting relatives in China or sometimes the webmaster will arrange a trip to the Hakka homeland in China.

Statistics in this website (till 24 September 2011)

I would like to list some statistics which are important to show that this website is very active and quite popular among Hakka offspring. Some details are as follows:

- Age of website is three years nine months.
- There are 1346 applied members.
- There are 1,219,634 clicks to visit this website.
- The contents of web blog are 2528 web blocks.

- There are 7248 opinions.
- There are more than 500 visitors per day.

As mentioned earlier, it is the challenge of the webmaster to keep the website alive. From the statistics, we can assume that it is not a dead website now because the webpages are active all the time.

Analysis of Hakka revitalization in this case

Crystal (2000) raised the postulates for a theory of language revitalization from Fishman (1991 and 2001) which are “prerequisites for progress towards the goal of language being used in the home and neighbourhood as a tool of inter-generation communication”. Then, he proposed six significant factors for progress in language maintenance. Furthermore, Yamamoto (1998b, cited from Crystal, 2000: 144) also gave nine factors of terminology that help maintain and promote the small languages, and Landweer (1998 cited from Crystal, 2000:144) proposed eight indicators of ethnolinguistic vitality for an endangered language. I summarize those factors into a table and investigate the Hakka community online criteria for the definition of language revitalization.

Table1: Consideration of Hakka community situation or criteria which defined as revitalization

Postulates for language revitalization, maintenance and vitality from many linguists	Criteria of Hakka community online which match with those postulates
Fishman’s postulates Use mother tongue in the home (family domain) as a tool of inter-generational communication	no, but I think there are just a few families still using Hakka language in the home
Use mother tongue in the neighbourhood as a tool of inter-generational communication	sometimes, we can see the evidence in the website
Crystal’s postulates 1. An endangered language will progress if its speakers increase their prestige within the dominant community	Yes
2. An endangered language will progress if its speakers increase their wealth relative to the dominant community	unsure
3. An endangered language will progress if its speakers increase their legitimate power in the eyes of the dominant community	unsure
4. An endangered language will progress if its speakers have a strong presence in the educational system	No. there are no schools teaching Hakka now
5. An endangered language will progress if its speakers can write their language down	Yes. now the Hakka community online write their language using both Thai and Chinese characters
6. An endangered language will progress if its speakers can make use of electronic technology	Yes. now the Hakka speakers can communicate in the website
Yamamoto’s postulates 1. The existence of a dominant culture in favour of linguistic	Yes. there is still a dominant cultural

diversity	Hakka especially for funeral ceremonies
2. A strong sense of ethnic identity within the endangered community	Yes. they know they the Hakka identity which includes language
3. The promotion of educational programs about the endangered language and culture	No
4. The creation of bilingual/ bicultural school programs	No
5. The training of native speakers as teachers	No
6. The involvement of the speech community as a whole	unclear
7. The creation of language materials that are easy to use	Yes. there are Hakka songs, video of Hakka lessons, etc.
8. The development of written literature, both traditional and new	No
9. The creation and strengthening of the environments in which the language must be used	Sometimes. for the meeting of Hakka association
Landweer's postulates	
1. The extent to which it can resist influence by a dominant urban culture	No
2. The number of domains in which it is used	Yes. some families use Hakka language and some use it with friends
3. The frequency and type of code switching	Yes. it is usually a mix between Hakka and Thai
4. The existence of a critical mass of fluent speakers	No. just a few
5. The distribution of speakers across social networks	Yes
6. The internal and external recognition of the group as a unique community	Yes
7. Its relative prestige, compared with surrounding languages	Yes. most of them I think
8. Its access to a stable economic base	No

From Table 1, the results show that the Hakka community online meets about half of the criteria for language revitalization, maintenance and vitality according to four linguists mentioned above. For some postulates, I am not sure whether they are in the Hakka group. However, the tendency is possible for revitalized progression. At least, they try to unite Hakka offspring to be part of Hakka community via internet. Then, they try to record Hakka heritage by Hakka speakers who are experts on special issues such as history and origin, Hakka language, tradition and custom, etc.

The future of the Hakkapeople website

These are some opinions from the members who I interviewed via Facebook and email about the Hakkapeople website in the future:

M1 *"Everyone must help each other because this web will expand much wider."*

M2 *"I'm sure this web will be better and better in the future because the members are increasing in everyday. Moreover, there are many other visitors open and read this*

web. Anyway, Hakka associations in other areas should have more participation with the web too."

M3 *"I want to see more Hakka descendant apply to be a member in this website."*

M4 *"I cannot say anything in the future but from the movement in the web with the new members still increased everyday, it will be good. I think many Hakka speakers who have knowledge do not apply now meanwhile the new generations who do not know about Hakka apply to be members because of the word 'Hakka'. Anyway, the Hakka youth know more IT will easily leave the web if there are anything new or interesting for them. It is important to do research further."*

M5 *"It is no anything better in the future. I suggest we should change to be a Hakka club and welcome volunteers who have expert knowledge such as cooking, Kakka funeral, speaking fluently in each Hakka sub-dialect, etc."*

M6 *"I think it will progress in the future although there are some conflicts only if everyone adapts and accepts to each other."*

M7 *"The tendency of this web will have more and more members so it will flourish and better well known."*

M8 *"The website should be better management so that the communication will be easier among members."*

From the answers, we can assume that most of them have a positive attitude towards the Hakkapeople website. According to the increasing number of members, the website seems to be in a better and better progression. The membership, however, is unstable because some members, after applying, never enter this website again. Therefore, the number of members is not a reliable indication of a thriving website.

Conclusion and discussion

For models of language revitalization in general, linguists act as consultants who encourage the ethnic groups to recognize and wake up to do something to preserve their language and culture. Each revitalization program is suitable for each group according to their conditions or situations. One important method is to raise the language status in the community to promote it in order to be involved in formal education programs, or used as a local language as a medium of instruction in the bilingual education program. Examples in Thailand are Malay group in the far south, Northern Khmer in the northeast, Mon in the west, or even endangered language groups which teach the local language as one subject in school such as Chong, So Thavung, Nyahkur, etc.

The ethnic groups as mentioned above live together in communities. However, some ethnic groups, especially Chinese dialect groups in the diaspora including those in Thailand that live together with other ethnic groups or scattered across wide areas, seem to have less opportunity to teach the language in schools.

Worasak Mahatthanobol, a Hakka scholar in Thailand, said in Thai-PBS channel of Spirit of Asia program (on air 20 September 2009) that *“if Thai-Chinese descendants know the background or their origin where they come from, the realization of revitalized their heritage can be occurred.”* I agree with him in this point based on my experience and knowledge of many Hakka speakers and from data in the website Hakkapeople.com. It can be concluded that inspiration and realization are very important factors for revitalization.

In addition to the revitalization models mentioned earlier, I would like to propose an optional domain for language and culture revitalization and maintenance in which it is unnecessary to live in the same community. One example is the website of Hakka community in Thailand. Although it is not a perfect model, it seems to have good prospects. The most important thing is the first volunteer to start something which encourages the native speakers of ethnic groups to revive their heritage. The ethnic minorities should not wait for linguists to tell them or help them to act because linguists are outsiders, not the owners of the ethnicity. Only if they recognized and realized that their language situation is in decline, they can wake up to find ways to preserve or revive it before it is too late to do anything. If other ethnic groups can do like this, it certainly still has language diversity in the world through the twenty-first century.

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Endnotes

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