

NAME:

SCHULE:

READING COMPREHENSION:

a) You are going to read a magazine article. Six paragraphs have been removed from the article. Choose from the paragraphs A – G the one which fits each gap (7 – 12) There is one extra paragraph you do not need to use. Put the letter to the number in the box below. There is an example at the beginning.

Mind your languages

Thousands of the world's languages are dying, taking to the grave not just words but records of civilisations and cultures that we may never come to fully know or understand. It is a loss of which few people are aware, yet it will affect us all. Linguists have calculated that of the 6,000 languages currently spoken worldwide most will disappear over the next hundred years. As many as 1,000 languages have died in the past 400 years. Conversely, the handful of major international languages are forging ahead.

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But the vast majority of the world never had need of phrases in Heiltsuk (a Native Indian language from the Canadian Pacific coast of British Columbia which is now dead). Nor will most people be interested in learning any of the 800 languages spoken on the island of New Guinea or the 2,400 spoken by Native American Indians (many of which are threatened), but their deaths are robbing us of the knowledge needed to write many chapters of history.

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Documenting a threatened language can be difficult and dangerous, requiring consummate diplomacy with tribes, some of which may be meeting outsiders for the first time and may well be wary about why these strangers need so much information about their language. 'Some peoples are extremely proud of their language while others are sceptical of the "white man",' believing he now wants to rob them of their language as well,' says Kortlandt.

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'There are about 200 Tibeto-Burman languages, only about ten of which have been properly described,' says Kortlandt. 'We now have fourteen PhD students describing different, unknown languages.' The problem is it can take years to document a language.

'We are generally happy when we have a corpus of texts which we can read and understand with the help of a reliable grammar and dictionary provided by a competent linguist, preferably including texts of some particular interest,' says Kortlandt.

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To non-linguists it must seem an odd issue to get worked up about. Why waste so much time saving languages spoken by so few and not concentrate on the languages of the future that most of us speak? Why look back instead of forward? 'Would you ask a biologist looking for disappearing species the same question?' Kortlandt asks. 'Or an astronomer looking for distant galaxies? Why should languages, the mouthpiece of threatened cultures, be less interesting than unknown species or galaxies? Language is the defining characteristic of the human species. These people say things to each other which are very different from the things we say, and think very different thoughts, which are often incomprehensible to us.

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Take, for example, the vast potential for modern medicine that lies within tropical rainforests. For centuries forest tribes have known about the healing properties of certain plants, but it is only recently that the outside world has discovered that the rainforests and coral reefs hold potential cures for some of the world's major diseases. All this knowledge could be lost if the tribes and their languages die out without being documented.

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Kortlandt is blunt about why some languages have suffered. 'If we look back to the history of the Empire,' he says, 'for social, economic and political reasons, a majority never has an interest in preserving the culture of a minority.'

Linguistics at Leiden University in Holland, has a mission to document as many of the remaining endangered languages as he can. He leads a band of language experts trekking to some of the most inaccessible parts of the earth to save such threatened languages.

B This is one of the factors worrying Paul Qereti, a linguist in Fiji in the South Pacific. There are hundreds of known remedies in Fiji's forests. The guava leaf relieves diarrhoea, the udi tree eases sore throats, and hibiscus leaf tea is used by expectant mothers. There are possibly scores more yet to be discovered. We will only be able to find them and benefit from their properties through one or more of the 300 languages and dialects spoken on the Fijian islands. If the languages die, so too will the medicinal knowledge of naturally occurring tonics, rubs and potions. Science could be left wondering what we might have found. English is now spoken by almost everyone in Fiji and Qereti is teaching Fijians how to speak their own disappearing native languages and dialects.

C In September this year, like-minds met in Kathmandu for a conference on how to save some Himalayan languages spoken by just a handful of people. A great number of languages in the greater Himalayan region are endangered or have already reached the point of no return.

D As Kortlandt stresses, 'If you want to understand the human species, you have to take the full range of human thought into

consideration. Language is the binding force of culture, and the disappearance of a language means the disappearance of culture. It is not only the words that disappear, but also knowledge about many things.'

E Kortlandt knows a language is disappearing when the younger generation does not use it any more. When a language is spoken by fewer than forty people, he calculates that it will die out. Every now and then language researchers get lucky. Kamassian, a southern Samoyed language spoken in the Upper Yenisey region of Russia, was supposed to have died out, until two old women who still spoke it turned up at a conference in Tallinn, Estonia in the early 1970s.

F According to the *Atlas of Languages*, Chinese is now spoken by 1,000 million people and English by 350 million. Spanish, spoken by 250 million people, is fast overtaking French as the first foreign language choice of British schoolchildren.

G Kortlandt is one of several linguists who have sounded the alarm that humankind is on the brink of losing over fifty percent of its languages within the next generation or two. This loss may be unavoidable in most cases,' says one authority, 'but at the very least, we can record as much as we can of these endangered languages before they die out altogether. Such an undertaking would naturally require support from international organisations, not to mention funding.'

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Score:/5