

get away with scamming their customers. Mutz suspects that it is this initial sense of apprehension followed by the pleasant surprise of an honest transaction that builds trust. When e-commerce becomes a more routine form of shopping (much as catalogs are today), no one will be surprised when an order arrives on time and as advertised, and the positive effects on general trust will diminish.

Of course, businesses act honestly because it's in their self-interest to do so, not out of altruism. Mutz writes, "By engaging in economic transactions with those we do not know and probably will never meet, we enhance our faith in the general goodness of others. . . . Thus good business practices have important ramifications for the long-term well-being of societies."

SOCIETY

Don't Cry for Eyak

THE SOURCE: "The Cosmopolitan Tongue: The Universality of English" by John McWhorter, in *World Affairs Journal*, Fall 2009.

IN 2008, THE LAST NATIVE speaker of Eyak died in southern Alaska. Her death, and that of her mother tongue, was the subject of international news media attention. Observers mourned the loss of another indigenous

EXCERPT

Twain's World

Perhaps you will believe with me that civilizations are not realities, but only dreams; dreams of the mind, not of the heart, and therefore fictitious, and perishable; that they have never affected the heart and therefore have made no valuable progress; that the heart remains today what it always was, as intimacy with any existing savage tribe will show. Indeed the average human brain is not a shade higher today than it was in Egyptian times 10,000 years ago.

—MARK TWAIN, in a letter to Carl Thalbitzer, who had asked Twain to write about "the advantages and drawbacks of civilization," in *Harper's* (Dec. 2009)

language, one of thousands that are expected to meet the same fate in the next 100 years.

Get over it, says Columbia University linguist John McWhorter. The passing of these languages is not as meaningful as some think, and strenuous efforts to keep them alive are unlikely to succeed.

A small but vocal number of people have romantic notions about the unique "cultural worldview" an individual language represents. But language differences have more to do with geography than culture. The fact that the Latin *augustus* became *agosto* in Spain and *août* in France is merely one of the many "chance linguistic driftings" with no cultural significance that separate languages. And elements of a culture often remain intact long after the death of an indigenous language. "Native

American groups would bristle at the idea that they are no longer meaningfully 'Indian' simply because they no longer speak their ancestral tongue," McWhorter points out.

There is undeniably an aesthetic loss when a language dies, but it is meaningful to relatively few people. Technology allows us to record and preserve the clicks, whistles, and trills of obscure languages that delight linguists (and frustrate students). Ultimately, language death is "a symptom of people coming together," with all the

good things that entails: economic opportunity, shared space, and the exchange of ideas. Indigenous languages survive only in isolation, "complete with the maltreatment of women and lack of access to modern medicine and technology." When given the opportunity, these languages' users often voluntarily abandon their own ways in pursuit of a better life.

A hundred years from now the world could have as few as 600 living languages, with English serving as the "global tongue." As someone who has learned more than a few languages himself, McWhorter says the world could do much worse than English. Unlike, say, Czech, English has no sounds that a non-native can't closely approximate; nor does it require three genders, as Russian does, or the memorization of immense numbers of characters,

as other languages do. To read a simple story in a Chinese newspaper, a reader needs a working knowledge of 2,000 characters—yet another reason why a Chinese imperium is not a pretty thought.

SOCIETY

Crime's Great Convergence

THE SOURCE: "Crime and U.S. Cities: Recent Patterns and Implications" by Ingrid Gould Ellen and Katherine O'Regan, in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Nov. 2009.

FROM THE EARLY 1990S TO 2005, crime rates in America plunged by a third. But the overall national trend obscures other important developments, including the much bigger strides that have been made in reducing the victimization of minority groups.

In a study of 278 cities, New York University public policy professors Ingrid Gould Ellen and Katherine O'Regan describe drastic changes in

the period between 1992 and 2005. Property crime decreased by 38 percent and violent crime by nearly half. In 2005, one-quarter of cities were safer than their surrounding suburbs had been in 1992.

But the benefits were not universal. Northeastern cities with large minority and immigrant populations and high rates of poverty experienced the greatest drop. These cities tended to have higher crime rates to begin with. In contrast, the 70 cities where crime decreased the least—or even, in a few cases, increased—were on average three-quarters white, had far fewer immigrants, and were mostly in the South, West, and Midwest. Overall, the trends indicate a regional convergence.

Another convergence emerged when Ellen and O'Regan trained their sights on the dynamics within cities. Each population group (white, black, Hispanic, immigrant, poor, and not poor) experienced far less crime in 2005 than it had in 1992. Sectors of the population that saw the most crime in 1992 were exposed to less in

2005 than those that were safest 20 years earlier. But again, the trends did not affect all groups equally: The incidence of crime fell more sharply among minorities than whites, narrowing the gap between them.

The sole exception to this general convergence was found in an expanding gap between foreigners and native-born residents. In 1992, they had nearly the same level of "crime exposure." By 2000, immigrants experienced noticeably less crime than the average U.S.-born city resident. In fact, at the start of the millennium, the jurisdiction of residence of the average American Hispanic city dweller was safer than that of the average white city dweller.

The authors venture no explanations for the trends they describe. Among those commonly advanced are changes in the number of young men in the population, improved policing methods, and the ebb and flow of illicit drugs such as crack and methamphetamine and the criminal activities that accompany them.

PRESS & MEDIA

Can a Free Press Hurt?

THE SOURCE: "Watchdog or Lapdog? Media Freedom, Regime Type, and Government Respect for Human Rights" by Jenifer Whitten-Woodring, in *International Studies Quarterly*, Sept. 2009.

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE OBSERVED that a free press is "the chief democratic instrument of freedom." Today, this bit of

conventional wisdom pops up in the demands of human rights groups and the ideals of American foreign policy: Where a free press flourishes, democracy will surely follow. One small problem: In countries with autocratic regimes, a free press may actually incite an increase in human

rights abuses.

Jenifer Whitten-Woodring, a political scientist at the University of Southern California, argues that a free press can only reduce human rights violations such as political imprisonment, murder, disappearance, and torture if citizens have a means of holding their leaders accountable. Where leaders rule with impunity, critical media coverage has the opposite effect—regimes crack down on journalists and political activists. Whitten-Woodring's case rests on