THE WORLD'S HARDEST LANGUAGE

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Category: Languages

Thanks to John (our man in Africa) for pointing me to this fascinating article in the Economist:

> *...which is the hardest language? On balance The Economist would go for Tuyuca, of the eastern Amazon. It has a sound system with simple consonants and a few nasal vowels, so is not as hard to speak as Ubykh or !XÃ³Ãµ. Like Turkish, it is heavily agglutinating, so that one word, hÃ³abÃ£siriga means â€œI do not know how to write.â€ Like Kwaio, it has two words for â€œweâ€ , inclusive and exclusive. The noun classes (genders) in Tuyucaâ€™s language family (including close relatives) have been estimated at between 50 and 140. Some are rare, such as â€œbark that does not cling closely to a treeâ€ , which can be extended to things such as baggy trousers, or wet plywood that has begun to peel apart.Most fascinating is a feature that would make any journalist tremble. Tuyuca requires verb-endings on statements to show how the speaker knows something. Diga ape-wi means that â€œthe boy played soccer (I know because I saw him)â€ , while diga ape-hiyi means â€œthe boy played soccer (I assume)â€ . English can provide such information, but for Tuyuca that is an obligatory ending on the verb. Evidential languages force speakers to think hard about how they learned what they say they know.*
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> *Linguists ask precisely how language works in the brain, and examples such as Tuyucaâ€™s evidentiality are their raw material. More may be found, as only a few hundred of the worldâ€™s 6,000 languages have been extensively mapped, and new ways will appear for them to be difficult. Yet many are spoken by mere hundreds of people. Fewer than 1,000 people speak Tuyuca. Ubykh died in 1992. Half of todayâ€™s languages may be gone in a century. Linguists are racing to learn what they can before the forces of modernisation and globalisation quieten the strangest tongues.*

A couple of thoughts inspired by all of this:

- The fact that a language requires you to say how you know something to be true, or (what time of day something happened - mentioned elsewhere in the article) shows how difficult translation is. Those who insist on 'word for word' Bible translations haven't grasped how difficult translation really is. Even between two closely related languages such as English and French you can't translate ever word: how much less when you start translating from Greek and Hebrew into Amazonian, African or Asian Languages.
- The article mentions that only a proportion of the languages of the world have been mapped. What they don't mention is that a large proportion of the language mapping that has been done has been carried out by Wycliffe members assigned to partner organisations around the world. If you would be interested in working in language survey, take a look here.Â The best online repository of the world's languages is the Ethnologue, which is produced by SIL.
- The hardest language to learn actually depends on your mother tongue. The closer a language

is to your own, the easier you will find it is to learn.Â Sadly for people who like to make lists, you can't actually say with any precision which is the hardest language.