

# Olympic venue has a link to a language of the past

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Just over 20 years ago, on October 7, 1992, something really rather tragic occurred. An elderly gentleman called Tecfik Esenc died in his sleep.

This was very sad for his friends and family, but it was a tragedy for all of us. Mr Esenc was the last ever mother-tongue speaker of an ancient European language called Ubykh.

This was yet another nail in the coffin of world-wide linguistic diversity, adding to the growing list of dead and dying languages around the world.

Experts predict that, of the 7,000 or so languages in the world today, 90pc will disappear during the next two centuries or so.

Each language that dies will take with it, for ever, a unique product of the human mind, and the unique product of a particular human society. A unique repository of a special human culture will have gone for all time.

Ubykh was no exception. All human languages are objects of wonder; but Ubykh was particularly amazing. If you look at the Guinness Book of Records, you



■ The Winter Olympics are currently being held in Sochi, which was once the main centre of the now-extinct Ubykh language.

will see that it is listed as the language, of all the languages in the world, which had the most consonant sounds.

English has quite a lot of consonants – like most Norfolk speakers, I have 24 – but Ubykh had 81!

It had many fascinating grammatical structures too.

Ubykh was not related to any of the Indo-European languages like German, or Russian, or Greek, or English. Rather, it was part of a family of languages which had been spoken for millennia in the northwestern part of the Caucasus Mountains, by the Black Sea.

The language died out because in the 19th century its homeland was attacked and invaded by the Russians under Tsar Alexander II. In 1864 the people finally

decided to leave, to avoid subjugation at the hands of the Russian army, and to escape massacres which were reported to have occurred elsewhere in the Caucasus as the Russians attempted to take these lands for themselves.

The Ubykhs made for the neighbouring Ottoman Empire, and settled in Turkey.

There, over a few generations, as a minority in a foreign land, they shifted to speaking the majority language, Turkish.

One of the main centres of Ubykh language and culture which these unfortunate people were forced to flee from, taking their language and culture with them, was a place they called Soatshe. You may have heard of it.

The Russians call it Sochi.