

# Where English is being replaced by a native language

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The story of English spreading around the world, killing off other languages as it goes, is a sad story. But it is not the whole story – not quite.

In the Americas, in the 16th century there were several thousand languages spoken between Alaska and Greenland in the Arctic, and Tierra del Fuego – where the southernmost languages in the world were spoken – in the far south of Chile and Argentina. Now, most of the languages of North America, where they are threatened by English and French, are likely to be extinct within a hundred years. And the future isn't much brighter for the languages of Central and South America, where very many of them are endangered by Spanish and Portuguese.

But in one small area of the continent, there has been a remarkable reversal of the normal tragic pattern of English killing off indigenous languages. In Paraguay, English is actually being replaced by a Native American language. The language is Guaraní, the main indigenous language of Paraguay, which is spoken by most of the population and has official status in the country.

The way this came about is a fascinating tale. The presence of English in Paraguay



■ Asunción, capital of Paraguay.

Picture: FELIPE ANTONIO

is the result of a utopian socialist settlement in the 1890s, when a colony of around 400 English-speaking people was established. The story started in Australia, during the Great Shearers' Strike in Queensland in 1891, during which over 10,000 agricultural workers went on strike and demanded the nationalisation of private property.

William Lane, one of the leaders of the movement, wanted to establish an egalitarian socialist society as an example for others to follow.

He chose Paraguay as the ideal place for this experiment because the government there was encouraging European settlement, in the aftermath of a disastrous war between Paraguay and its neighbours

which had killed much of the adult male population.

Many of the descendants of these New Australia colonisers can still be found in and around the town of Nueva Londres (formerly Nueva Australia) in Paraguay, where they still bear English-language surnames and remember their Australian origins and customs. But over the decades, members of the community have gradually assimilated with the native Paraguayans, including through intermarriage, and large-scale language shift has taken place.

English is being lost as a native language as younger members of the originally Australian community have become native speakers of Guaraní. This is the just linguistic revenge of the Native Americans.