The Day a Language Died

### Pre-listening Discussion

*Have you ever found yourself unable to understand what people around you were saying because you did not know their language and they did not speak Arabic? Describe what it was like and how it made you feel.*

### Vocabulary Preview

ecology (عِلْم البيئَه)

*Oil spills have a negative effect on the ecology.*

learn by heart (يَحْفَظ عن ظَهْر قَلْب)

*She learned the song by heart.*

record (يُسَجِّل أسْطُوانَه)

*Alyssa has just recorded a new CD.*

reservation (أرْض مَحْمِيَّه)

*Chief Joseph, who was a Native American (Red Indian) belonging to the Nez Percé tribe, lived on the Nez Percé reservation.*

species (صِنْف، جِنْس، فَصيلَه)

*There are several species of horses.*

unique (فَريد، فَذ، مُنْقَطِع النَّظير)

*The way he speaks is unique. I’ve never heard anyone speak that way.*

### Reading Passage

*After reading the passage below, answer the interactive questions found on the Listening page. Then, complete the questions on the handout your teacher will give you.*

Recently another language died. Carlos Westez, more commonly known as Red Thunder Cloud, the last speaker of the Native American language Catawba, died at the age of 76. With his death, the Catawba language died, too.

Anyone who wants to hear the songs of the Catawba can contact the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., where, back in the 1940s, Red Thunder Cloud recorded a series of songs for future generations. Some people might even try to learn some of these songs by hearts. But Catawba is gone forever.

We are all aware of the danger that modern industry can cause the world’s ecology, but few people are aware of the impact widely spoken languages have on other languages and ways of life. English has spread all over the world. Chinese, Spanish, Russian, and Hindi have become powerful languages as well. As these languages become more powerful, their use as tools of business and culture increases. As this happens, hundreds of languages that are spoken by a few die out all over the world.

Scholars believe there are around 6,000 languages around the world, but more than half of them could die out within the next 100 years. Aore is the language native to Vanuatu, located in the Pacific Ocean. Like Catawba before Red Thunder Cloud’s death, it is spoken by that island’s only remaining native inhabitant, so it, too, will soon die. A large number of Ethiopian languages are used by tiny numbers of people. Two speakers of the Ethiopian language Gafat were fine until a researcher took them out of their native jungle, at which point they caught cold and died. In New Guinea, more than 100 languages could disappear. In the Americas, 100 languages, each of which has fewer than 300 speakers, are dying out. North America, which once had hundreds of languages, has only about 100 languages left.

It was for this reason that Red Thunder Cloud’s death made the news. He was one of the first to recognize the danger of language death and to try to do something about it. He was not actually born into the Catawba tribe, and the language was not his mother tongue. However, he was a frequent visitor to the Catawba reservation () in South Carolina, where he learned the language. The songs he sang for the Smithsonian Institution helped to make Native American music popular. Now he is gone, and the language is dead. What does it mean for the rest of us when a language disappears?

When a plant, insect, or animal species dies, it is easy to understand what has been lost. However, language is only a product of the mind. To be the last remaining speaker of a language must be a peculiarly lonely destiny, almost as strange and terrible as being the last surviving member of a dying species. When a language dies, we lose the possibility of a unique way of seeing and describing the world.