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Another Kind of Language Expert: Speakers

By PETER MONAGHAN

As linguists search for ways to preserve at least a record of endangered languages, they increasingly are enlisting native speakers to help them in their work.

Since 2003, Peter Austin's endangered-languages program at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies has run a master's program to train about 16 students each year, whose eventual goal is to document an endangered language. Some 20 SOAS students have done that by undertaking doctoral work in the United States or Germany.

But Austin's program is also going out to the communities where endangered languages are spoken. Last summer, program linguists held a training course in Ghana to provide East African language activists with equipment and training. Austin told them about successful earlier efforts. [See [correction](#).]

He described, for instance, helping to persuade the state government of New South Wales, in his native Australia, to institute grade-school programs that teach Aboriginal children songs and stories in their fading local languages. "Part of the task is simply sensitizing people to the possibilities," he says.

Increased collaboration with native speakers reflects a growing recognition that "languages are owned by their native speech communities, as a kind of intellectual property," says K. David Harrison, of Swarthmore College. (His and colleagues' fieldwork was the subject of the documentary film *The Linguists*, which was enthusiastically received at last year's Sundance Film Festival.)

The last speakers of a language are often the most linguistically gifted members of their communities, and thus well suited to academic training, notes Nicholas Evans, a linguist at Australian National University. More's the pity that few universities will enroll them, citing their lack of formal academic credentials, he says. He objects that while candidates may enter Ph.D. programs with little or no knowledge of the languages they will study, the potential of expert speakers of languages rarely opens academic doors.

Collaborations with native speakers become more and more crucial given that "you wouldn't want to be sending your students into some of the environments where documentation is needed," many of which are dangerous because of wars or civil strife, says Suzanne Romaine, a professor of English language at the University of Oxford.

Sometimes native speakers can be found closer to home. "Here in London, we've got dozens of African and Asian languages that there is virtually no documentation on," says Austin. One of his students, for example, discovered that a housemate, an economics student at the London School of Economics and Political

Science, spoke a little-known Tibeto-Burman language. (Austin warns that hardened field linguists will scoff that taking a London bus to your site, rather than jungle trails, "is not real linguistics: It's not hairy-chested enough.")

Crucial to any language-revival project, of course, is that speakers want it to happen. Many do. In Hawaii and New Zealand, for example, immersion programs are thriving — "language nests" that allow students from preschool through college to take some of their studies in native languages. Under a master-apprentice program set up in 1993 by the Berkeley linguist Leanne Hinton, young American Indians in California have spent many hours with elders, learning what they can about 50 survivors of the more than 100 languages that were spoken in the state at the time of white settlement.

Among a few astonishing cases of people's reviving their own languages from seeming extinction is one in eastern Massachusetts. Beginning in the 1990s, language activists and a linguist-in-training from the Wampanoag tribe, working with a famed MIT linguist, the late Kenneth L. Hale, resuscitated their language. It had not been spoken or written for well over 100 years. To revive it, they used historical documents dating back to the 1600s, surviving stories, and comparisons with surviving languages, and taught it to a few children who were still capable of using it creatively, as children naturally do when learning any language.

But such efforts are extraordinary: They are so dependent on a small number of extremely gifted and motivated activists that they are unlikely to be widely emulated.

Correction From *The Chronicle*, June 2, 2009

The article was inaccurate in its description of the SOAS program. Some 20 SOAS students have undertaken doctoral work at the University of London, while others have gone on to study in the United States or Germany. The article also incorrectly stated that the course in Ghana trained East African language activists; it trained West African language activists. It was not in Ghana, but in a similar course in Argentina, where Austin told the participants about successful earlier efforts.

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