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Lost Language, Lost Culture

*K. David Harrison is Associate Professor of Linguistics at Swarthmore College and Director of Research for the [Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages](#). His ethnographic research looks at indigenous knowledge, folklore, oral epics, and knowledge systems. Much of this research is described in his recent book *When Languages Die: The Extinction of the World's Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge* (Oxford Univ. Press. 2007)*

You write that there are currently several thousand languages on the planet and that many of those will be gone within the next century.

It's not commonly known, but there are nearly seven thousand languages in the world. People are typically surprised when they hear that figure and then their next reaction is "Why didn't I know this before?" Our best scientific estimates say that at least half of the world's languages are endangered and many could vanish in the coming decades or in the current century. It's a little hard to predict the exact pace.

One of the reasons for that is that although you do have isolated cases of famous last speakers—an example of that was a woman named Marie Smith Jones who was the last speaker of Eyak; a language spoken in Alaska—but that's an exceptional case. What is more typical is that as languages near extinction, they undergo a process of invisibilization because the speakers are elderly. They're living in a household where the language isn't used or spoken and maybe even members of their own family might not be aware that they speak the language. They don't converse in it on a daily basis. They may be isolated, living in separate

households or villages from other speakers.

And so the language falls silent and becomes invisibilized before it actually goes extinct. That means that it's very hard to pinpoint the exact moment when the language goes extinct.

It just sort of evaporates slowly and, upon the passing of these people, it just disappears. 

That's right.

That's kind of frightening, isn't it?

It is frightening if we care about knowledge, culture, sustainability and survival.

Beyond isolated, disconnected remote communities, what causes the disappearance of a language? Is it simply globalization and the survival of the fittest?

Languages go extinct for many reasons, but the main reason—which you could put under the heading *globalization*—is that there are very strong economic and social pressures against languages. Communities, speakers essentially abandon languages because they are forced to do so. They're pressured into it. They come to believe, based on more dominant cultures, that their language is obsolete, backwards and not suited for the modern world; or that the only way to advancement is to switch over entirely to global languages. The irony is that that's simply not true. Nobody has to give up one language in order to speak another.

I think anybody who speaks more than one language would find that to be an appalling choice. If I told you you're going to wake up tomorrow being monolingual, which of the languages that you currently speak would you be willing to sacrifice for the sake of progress? As a speaker of French and English, you would find it absurd. It's even more absurd if you were a speaker of say, Cree and English. We shouldn't be telling our children that you have to give up your heritage language in order to progress. In fact, kids will be smarter if they're bilingual or multilingual.

What are the hotspots, in terms of languages at risk? I'm assuming that languages that have an oral tradition and aren't based on written records might be more at risk? 

That's actually two separate issues. I'll just point out that most of the world's languages are not written. Writing is a relatively late technology and it's not an essential technology in terms of languages. A language doesn't need a writing system to exist as a full fledged language in all of its richness. Writing does have certain benefits and allows you to transmit ideas more broadly and keep them around longer. But oral cultures also have certain advantages that may be hidden to us because we come from literate cultures and we can't appreciate the extra sort of cognitive richness of an oral language.

So what about the "hotspot" question?

I coined the term language hotspots. It's two things: it's a promotional

metaphor that allows people to wrap their head around a complex global trend which is the extinction of languages. Secondly, it's a deep scientific model. We really are asking the question, "Where on earth do we find the convergence of three factors? The first factor is linguistic diversity. So where are the spots on earth where we have the greatest diversity of languages?"

Second is where do we have the highest levels of language endangerment on earth? Third is where do we have the lowest levels of scientific documentation? Many languages have never been documented; there's no dictionary or book or recording or archive anywhere where you can go to hear those languages. You can only hear them from the mouths of speakers. So where we have these three factors coming together—high diversity, high endangerment and low scientific knowledge—we have a language hotspot. I'm working with Dr. Greg Anderson of the [Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages](#) and also this project is part of the Enduring Voices program at [National Geographic's Society](#).

We have identified approximately two dozen hotspots including a couple in North America. There's one in Oklahoma and there's one in the Pacific West which includes part of British Columbia and Oregon, Washington State down into Northern California. For more detail, people can go to the site, there's an [interactive map](#) and all other sorts of media and information.

Beyond the language itself, what is lost when the language dies? △

It's a great question and people say you know, "Wouldn't it be a better world if we all spoke English?" I can appeal to a kind of intuition. Anybody who speaks two languages knows that you find things that just aren't translatable directly. There are certain concepts, certain ways of thinking about the world. You experience a gap or a loss if you try to render it directly in the other language.

To people who are monolingual and who haven't experienced that moment of frustration, I would say let's look at all the rich systems of knowledge where we can demonstrate that indigenous people know more about their ecosystem than scientists know about it.

Can you give an example of this?

In my book, [When Languages Die](#), I've focused a lot on Siberia because that's where I spent the most time doing field work. I talk about an amazing system for classifying reindeer developed by the Tofa people of Siberia. They have a four dimensional matrix; every reindeer can be classified by age, sex, ease of riding and fertility. And it's a highly complex system. It's a technology that has allowed them to survive and to thrive in one of the harshest environments on earth and it isn't directly translatable. They don't have words for all these things in Russian or in English and so when they shift to a global language rapidly and under pressure, they lose this knowledge; it erodes.

We are losing knowledge about medicinal plants, about marine ecosystems, about crops like rice of which there are more than one hundred and twenty thousand varieties—many of them are only known by indigenous people. They're losing this intellectual patrimony. Not to mention

the historical information, the mythology; creation myths. These are amazing things that have never been written down and don't exist in books anywhere.

It seems to be harder for people to grasp this scale of loss than it is when a section of the Amazon forest is clear-cut—they understand that species of plants that we don't even know exist are going to disappear. △

That's right; we're losing stuff and the fact that science doesn't know those species, doesn't mean that humans don't know those species.

That's a good point—can you elaborate please David?

Indigenous people are the experts on their ecosystems and it's very, very common to have this kind of false discovery paradigm, when a team of North American scientists will go into Venezuela or New Guinea and then they'll issue a press release saying "We discovered six new species of birds" and so on. What they didn't typically do on these expeditions is sit down and speak to the local indigenous people in their own language and say "Why don't you tell us what you know about the birds and the fish and the plants in your habitat?" The scientists who have done that have been awestruck at the complexity of knowledge. They often had more sophisticated and more fine-grained systems for classifying birds, for example, than we have in our Western scientific taxonomy. So there are many, many cases like that where local people know more about their ecosystem than science does. Northern people have incredibly sophisticated knowledge of ice and water patterns and migration patterns and in an era of global warming, this is of critical importance. So we have what I call the "triple threat" of extinction; you have ecosystems and species in collapse; you have languages in collapse, and you have the knowledge systems about those ecosystems which are contained in the languages also in collapse.

Are most of these last speakers or remaining speakers aware that when they pass away so does their language? △

They are aware and they have great feelings which they express more eloquently than I possibly can – the oppression of their languages and the failure to transmit them and in some cases, the disinterest or the disdain of the younger generation.

I don't want to paint a totally dire picture and what I'd like to say to your readers is that in parallel with the language extinction crisis, there is this incredibly vibrant, exciting grassroots movement worldwide for language revitalization in many of these very small language communities, including ones all across Canada and North America. It's not a foregone conclusion that just because languages are on a downward trend that all small languages must go extinct or that the trend cannot be reversed with the kind of efforts we're now seeing in grassroots communities.

As an outsider, how do you manage to penetrate these isolated communities, with all your recording equipment and such, and get them to trust you and open up to you?

The task of the linguist as an ethical scientist is to fully explain him or herself. We always do lots of careful preparation and meet with the head of the village; if there's a tribal council or something like that, we meet with them. We explain ourselves; we obtain their consent and their endorsement within the community. Similarly for individuals we work with; we obtain their consent to record them, to use their materials, and we also compensate them for their time.

We try to build collaborative relationships within the community. We're not just going in and extracting data and bringing it back home. We're looking for people who are engaged in the work of language activism and saying "How can we support them?", "What does the community want?" The community might ask us for something. They might say, "We need a video camera" or "We need an ABC book". I've build them Internet-based talking dictionaries for their communities. So we're looking across the whole spectrum of new media and the new technologies to support small languages.

Do you go through an interpreter or do you go through a common middle language when you're working in these communities?



If I'm working in Siberia, I could use Russian. What I try to do is learn as much of the endangered language as I can. So I'm conversant in several languages that are very, very small— say between ten and thirty speakers. I can actually go in and have a conversation and I can listen to and understand their stories.

In other cases we might work through the medium of English or Spanish or Russian or a global language. In the worst case scenario, where you have no common language whatsoever and no interpreter, there are still scientific techniques for learning something about a language.

In our film, [The Linguists](#), we have an interaction where we're basically pointing to body parts. Or we might go around the village and take pictures of culturally relevant objects, then show somebody a slideshow and ask them to name the objects. So we do have techniques or ways for sharing information. You have to start somewhere. There are languages out there of which even a single word has never been written down or recorded. So sometimes the recordings we're making in our fieldwork are the first ever recordings of a language and in some cases they may very well be the last ever recordings of a language because we're dealing with very elderly speakers.

Without getting into a very serious and complex academic debate, what is the role that language plays in defining a culture, or the role that culture plays in defining a language?

Language is absolutely at the core of culture and of human experience and I would like to quote Nora Vasquez, who appears in our film *The Linguists*, because I think often the speakers of these languages are more eloquent than I am expressing it. Nora is a member of the Chemehuevi Nation and they're down to just a couple of speakers. Nora says: "Language is a part of who you are. It's your breath that you breathe. Without your language, you may as well be dead."

Those types of statements are very powerful. You know, language informs how you view the world. There are entire universes of thought and of human genius. I like to think of languages as the true monuments of human culture. People would be outraged if the pyramids were demolished, but languages are even greater in terms of their monumental nature; monuments to human genius. They're much more ancient and they're much more complex than anything we've built with our hands.

What have you learned about yourself, over the course of doing all this fieldwork? 

One thing I've learned about myself is that it's almost impossible for me to learn new languages after age 30, much to my frustration! I've also learned that I need better people skills, and people skills are the key. Our work is so intensive and communicative and you have to build trust. Even with limited linguistic abilities, you need to be able to explain yourself and to gain someone's trust.

I've learned that there's so much amazing knowledge out there. I feel very ignorant at times and in the face of all this wisdom and this knowledge, talking with elders in these various communities, I feel very humbled by what they're willing to share with me. I'm literally sitting at the feet of these elders and I'm just trying to soak up every word they say; every story.

I'm sure your passion for this also comes through in your classroom and with your students.

I hope so, yeah. I try to bring back in the classroom my feeling of awe and enthusiasm for these incredibly complex knowledge systems.

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