

Rare new language with only 800-1,200 speakers discovered in India

By Elizabeth Weise
 USA TODAY

In the midst of a period of rapid language extinction, with a language estimated to die every two weeks, linguists have found a small ray of hope, a language previously unknown to science in far northeastern India.

A team of linguists working with National Geographic's Enduring Voices project uncovered this hidden language, known as Koro, in the state of Arunachal Pradesh. A member of the Tibeto-Burman language family, it has only 800 to 1,200 speakers and is unwritten.

The team was led by Gregory Anderson, who directs the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages in Salem, Ore., and K. David Harrison, an associate professor of linguistics at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. They videotaped speakers telling stories and talking, and made extensive word lists using the English alphabet to help classify the language.

Koro is very distinct from other languages spoken nearby, and the researchers hypothesize it may have originated from a group of people enslaved and brought to the area, though more research is needed.

Koro is so different from other Tibeto-Burman languages that the researchers have not been able to identify any in the language family that are closely related to it. The people who live in the area speak Aka languages,

also very rare, and learn Hindi and English to speak to outsiders.

Koro was discovered when the research team went to the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh in 2008 to find out more about two poorly documented languages, Aka and Miji. To their surprise, they also began to hear a third, unknown language, Koro, which was not listed in any of the scientific literature.

Koro brings the number of known languages worldwide up to 6,909, Harrison says. He documents the discovery in a new book, *The Last Speakers: The Quest to Save the World's Most Endangered Languages* (National Geographic, \$27). A scientific paper on Koro will be published in December in the journal *Indian Linguistics*.

Languages are important for many reasons, says Andrew Garrett, a professor of linguistics at the University of California-Berkeley.

Not only do they contain the essence of a culture, they also help us understand how the human mind works. "There's so much that we don't know yet about language, and so much of what we know is based on the set of big languages out of Europe."

Every time a language is lost, a complex and ancient constellation of stories, poems, myths and legends also dies, especially in smaller languages that are often unwritten, Garrett says. "It's as if we suddenly lost Greek and all the literature associated with it."

Translations

Some Koro words and their English translations:

ala	moon
dougrey	star
mugba	cloud
laasu	monkey

Source: *The Last Speakers: The Quest to Save the World's Most Endangered Languages*

