



Preserving last of dying breed

JOHN YEWELL

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During my time at UC-Santa Cruz in the 1970s, it was my good fortune to take linguistics from Bill Shipley. As a grad student in 1953, Shipley studied Maidu, the language of the Mount Lassen area, as an early participant in the Survey of California Indian Languages.

The program, created by Berkeley Professor Murray Barnson Emeneau, attempted to document and preserve as many native languages of California as possible. There were about 100 at the time of the Gold Rush, and probably fewer than 50 today — most moribund, spoken only by a handful of octogenarians.

Today a similar, worldwide effort is under way, according to Swarthmore professor K. David Harrison.

It comes not a moment too soon.

Harrison, who is also co-director of the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages in Salem, Ore., had disturbing news. Of the 7,000 or so languages remaining in the world, many are on life support. Every two weeks one dies, with more than half likely to disappear by 2100, taking with them a wealth of knowledge about our world.

crowded world, 80 percent of the people speak just 83 languages.

The research, in conjunction with National Geographic's Enduring Voices Project, hopes to preserve languages by identifying hotspots of language loss. Five were identified, two covering portions of the United States. One is the Pacific Northwest and parts of Canada, where 54 languages are at risk. Another is Oklahoma and the Southwest — a holdover of the deadly forced march of eastern tribes to the area in the 1838 — where another 40 languages are dying.

Such stories are most often couched in the legitimate language of concern for the loss of the knowledge of history, of specialized plants, or of the way language nourishes unique and instructive ways of looking at the world. Less often do we stop to consider the gravest meaning of a dying language: the irretrievable loss of a way of life. It is not just a language that dies. It is often a people, too.

Yet language preservation is not always appreciated by native speakers. Small wonder: For generations after the Civil War, through the establishment of Indian schools, it was the official policy of the United States to wipe out Indian languages — if not erase Indian culture itself.

That history was particularly cruel in California. Few today are aware that the most brutal exterminations of Native Americans did not take place in famous battles on the Great Plains, or on the Trail of Tears, but right here, where many towns and counties paid a bounty for killing an Indian.

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Languages contains many records of languages that no longer have native speakers.

But while we go about preserving language, an equal effort should be made to resurrect history — a small act of amends, perhaps, for our role in the loss of languages, and peoples, in the first place.

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