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Saving Languages Through Korean Soap Operas

By Rose Eveleth

About 350,000 people in the world speak Udmurt, a language native to eastern Russia. Nearly [50 percent](#) of global languages are at risk of going extinct, and Udmurt is one of them—a so-called “endangered language.” Preserving these languages is hard; as communities age and disperse, and as globalization pushes younger generations to study English, the incentives to learn an obscure, local language diminish.

But for Udmurt speakers, there’s a new way to share the language: the movie *Apocalypto*. A team of translators has gone through the film and subtitled the whole thing in Udmurt. And it’s not just *Apocalypto* either—the translation is part of a wider push to take popular television shows and movies and leverage them in the fight against language extinction.

Aleksey Shklyaeв is the leader of the group that translated *Apocalypto*. His team has a number of projects going, all aimed at keeping Udmurt alive—everything from movie translations to inventing new words to keep the tongue up to date. Together they’ve created words for “PR” and “retail” and “crowdsourcing,” among others—and an online forum for promoting and sharing Udmurt.

So when Shklyaeв stumbled upon a website called [Viki](#)—an online platform that licenses movies and television shows from around the world and opens them up for crowdsourced translation—he realized it would be a perfect place to bring his translation efforts. Shklyaeв and his team are now translating into Udmurt everything from *Jungle Emperor Leo*, the 1997 Japanese movie that inspired *The Lion King*, to *The Heirs*, one of the most popular Korean dramas of the last decade.

Viki has teamed up with the [Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages](#) to encourage those who speak endangered languages to contribute their own translations of the shows. They’re currently adding projects for everything from [Cherokee](#), a language spoken by about 18,000 people in the southeastern United States to Maori, a language spoken in New Zealand by about 60,000. The most popular endangered language on the site is Basque, spoken by about 720,000 people in the Basque region on the border between Spain and France.



[Click here for more \(Viki\)](#)

Viki wasn't designed as a safe haven for endangered languages. The company's goal when it launched in 2010 was to build translation communities, and have them share culture from other parts of the world. "We're opening up the world," Viki's CEO Razmig Hovaghimian told me. "Not only the content travels, but the language, the nuance, the culture is suddenly crossing borders."

And in fact, the site has seen some interesting trends when it comes to who watches and translates what. A Korean series about an alien who falls in love with an actress is one of the most-watched shows in Hebrew and Arabic. Spanish speakers can't get enough of a Thai drama about a maid who winds up working for a mafioso in Hong Kong. Japanese shows are most commonly watched in Lithuanian. Viki's 33 million monthly visitors are just a slice of the world as a whole, but Hovaghimian says they offer clues about overlooked markets around the world that content producers may want to tap into.

When Shklyaeff contacted Hovaghimian to find ways to work together, Hovaghimian said it was hard to say no. "I have a soft spot in my heart for this," he told me. "I'm struggling teaching my own kids Armenian."

David Harrison, a linguist at Swarthmore University and the director of research for the Living Tongues Institute, thinks partnering with Viki is an effective way to bring languages like Udmurt to younger people. "Suddenly you have something that isn't a dry textbook or a grammar lesson," he says. "Seeing it on TV or on the Internet helps them see that it's not backwards or obsolete, it's suited for the modern world. They can restore their pride in the language, which is really the X factor that causes language to be abandoned."

But there are still a number of challenges associated with this kind of preservation. Some communities in which endangered languages are spoken don't have access to reliable Internet, which makes it hard for them to participate. A full two-thirds of the world's languages don't have a written form, Harrison says, which makes subtitling difficult. And translation is hard work—it takes hours and hours to

translate a single episode of a television show. ShklyaeV has assembled a dedicated team of volunteers, but finding people who are willing or able to put the time in can be difficult.

Still, Harrison believes in the work groups like Viki are doing. “I think we’re at a kind of threshold moment where we’re going to pass through an extinction event in terms of languages,” if we don’t do anything about it, he says. And convincing people to care about that isn’t easy. “Everybody knows that we benefit from biodiversity and we’ll suffer if we lose it. It’s not clear to people why that’s true for linguistic diversity.” As Harrison sees it, losing traditional languages means losing a huge amount of knowledge about the world and history. But without concerted effort, languages like Udmurt and Cherokee and Maori may simply disappear. Or they could be saved—by Korean soap operas and Mel Gibson movies.

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