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At a Loss for Words

Scientists Scramble to Keep Endangered Languages From Becoming Extinct

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Everybody knows about endangered species such as sea turtles and humpback whales. But have you ever heard of the endangered Yawuru or the nearly extinct Magati Ke? They are two of the world's many endangered languages -- species of speech on the verge of extinction.

In much the same way that thousands of endangered plants and animals are struggling to survive in a changing environment, some languages are at risk of being lost forever because the people who speak them are dwindling in number and young people are not learning them anymore.

That has prompted a team of scientists to travel around the world with microphones and video cameras to document as many dying languages as they can before it's too late. In some places the researchers are starting programs to help young people learn these languages.

About 7,000 languages are spoken in the world today, but one dies out about every two weeks, says K. David Harrison, a linguistics professor at Swarthmore College and research director of a group in [Oregon](#) dedicated to preserving endangered languages.

That rate of loss is especially troubling, he says, because about half of those languages have no written form; they have been passed along orally from one generation to the next.

"If the last speaker of many of these vanished tomorrow, the language would be lost because there is no dictionary, no literature, no text of any kind," [Harrison](#) says.

Also lost would be all the unique knowledge in those languages, including information about animals and plants known only to native speakers.

In [Brazil](#), for example, the Kayapo language distinguishes among 56 kinds of bees, many of them not known to modern scientists. Each kind of bee is different in the way it flies, or the wax it makes, or the way it smells -- or, in one case, how tasty its larvae are. Lose *that* language and you could end up eating the totally wrong kind of bee maggot!

Among the rarest languages is Siletz Dee-ni, the last survivor of 27 languages once spoken on the Siletz Indian Reservation in Oregon. Only one Siletz Dee-ni speaker is left.

Yawuru and Magati Ke are two of about 230 languages spoken in [Australia](#), at least 50 of which have never been written. Among them is Kune, a language that even has a special word, *barrkmulbardme*, for "a hopping male Black Wallaroo," a kangaroo-like animal.

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