

Another endangered species: This one leads to the extinction of ideas

By AARON HOWARD

Languages are dying in our world at a faster rate than mammals, plants or the polar ice caps, according to K. David Harrison, Swarthmore College assistant professor of linguistics. On our planet, 6,912 distinct human languages have been classified. By 2101, half these languages will be extinct. At present, 10 percent of these languages have 99 or fewer active speakers. Harrison is a specialist in endangered languages. In his new book, “When Languages Die” (Oxford University Press), Harrison said that languages have been shaped by people to serve as repositories for culture. When languages die, it means the extinction of ideas, ways of knowing and parts of the human experience.

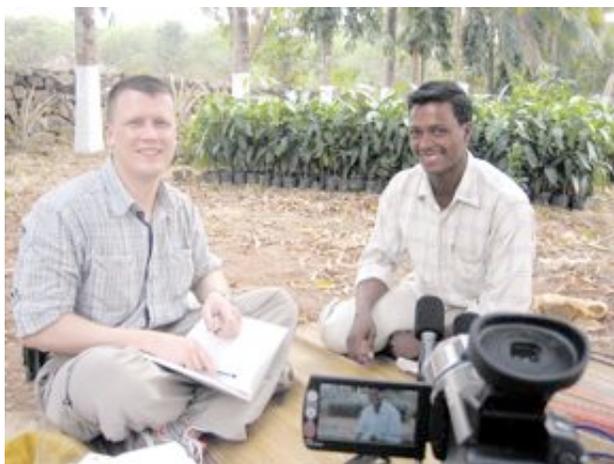
The process of language death usually begins with political or social discrimination against its speakers or the language, Harrison said. This can take the form of official state policies to suppress speech (as in the former Soviet Union) or benign neglect (as in the United States with its Native American language speakers). The critical point is reached when young speakers choose to speak the more dominant tongue, instead of their native language. A language no longer learned by its young is a moribund language.

Once a language becomes moribund, it rapidly declines, as its use becomes more restricted to the home and to its elders. The elderly speakers become invisible and, in time, begin to forget.

“The decision to give up a language is typically made by children under duress,” Harrison argued. “It’s not a freely made decision. I’ve spoken to many elders, and they universally express a sense of loss and regret. The elders say, ‘I was made ashamed or punished for speaking my language.’ So, it was almost never a free decision. And, it certainly doesn’t fit with our idea of human rights, of all groups having their own languages and cultures. Of course, there are some benefits to not having so many languages to translate but [not when] the process getting there is one of coercion.”



David Harrison flanked by “Old Man” Patrick Nunadjul and Mona Nunadjul, among the last speakers of the Magati Ke language, Western Australia.



David Harrison interviewing Opino Gamango, a speaker of Sora, in Orissa, India.

especially in North America.”

Harrison said the most threatened cultures and languages are those of indigenous peoples. These are places on the globe where populations are small and sparsely populated. Alaska’s 86,000 indigenous population, for example, speaks 21 different languages – the largest number of languages spoken anywhere on Earth. English rapidly is extinguishing these languages.

When a language dies, Harrison argued, knowledge about the natural world, myth and beliefs systems and a certain human cognitive capacity contained in language systems are lost. “Besides these other things, what is lost is a people’s place in the universe. I’ve heard this sentiment expressed by Native American groups: If we lose our language, we lose our sense of who we are and our connection to the land. What we [English-speakers] seem to be missing is that close connection to environment that indigenous people feel. We don’t even think of our language like that. Since land is a big part of people’s identity, it feeds into the problem of aboriginal people who have been pushed off their land and lost their language and their knowledge,

Increasing urbanization also is a key factor in language death. Cities don’t provide a supportive environment for small languages. “Kids go to school where the curriculum is going to be in the majority language. You don’t have a lot of bilingual teaching going

on,” Harrison said.

Jews, as a people scattered throughout the world, developed a number of unique languages, many of which are now largely extinct. At the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, most of the Jews in Israel spoke Aramaic. The original Hebrew language already had become mainly associated with religious life. In the Middle Ages, Judeo-Arabic became the major literary language. The rise of Yiddish in Europe and Ladino in the Mediterranean occurred in the 14th and 15th centuries. Smaller Jewish groups in Europe spoke Judeo-Italian, Yevanic (a Greek-Jewish dialect) and Karaim.

The Karaim language is a Turkic language with Hebrew influences, in a similar manner to Yiddish or Ladino. It is spoken by Crimean Karaites (also known as Karaim), ethnic Turkic adherents of Karaite Judaism in the Crimea, Lithuania, Poland and western Ukraine. It has very few remaining active speakers. Harrison met one of the last speakers of the Lithuanian dialect of Karaim, Mykolas Firkovicus, during his fieldwork in Trakai and Vilna in 1994 and 1996.

“When I sat down with Mykolas, he counted off on both of his hands maybe a dozen remaining speakers,” Harrison said. “He was one of the most fluent. He spoke the language, knew all of the ritual language and could perform all of the ceremonies. So, he was highly skilled at the language.

“The Karaim are a Crimean Turkic people who adopted a form of Judaism quite early, maybe the 14th century. They were invited to Lithuania in the 14th century and have been there consistently. They lost their language in the usual way: existing in a multilingual environment where Russian, Polish and Lithuanian were all spoken. I’ve been in a Karaim household where the kids speak Lithuanian, the television is broadcasting in Russian and the elderly speak Polish [which was the former dominant language before World War II]. Only the very oldest generation speaks Karaim.

“They are making an attempt at language revitalization. But you can’t judge the success of this project. in the short term.”

Can moribund or extinct languages be revived? Hebrew is the classic example of successful language revitalization. The success of Irish Gaelic is less certain. Both these languages are official languages of political states, and they have millions of people who potentially speak those languages. A better example of true revitalization, Harrison said, is the Hawaiian language, which is making a dramatic comeback.

“Hawaiians have become a model for other groups,” Harrison said. “They’ve created language nests for four to six hours each day in which preschool children are put in care of elders who speak the language. So, that model seems to work. But most of the communities cannot mount that kind of effort and resources. Once the number of speakers gets below a threshold number – we don’t know the number – revival seems unlikely.

“And, we have languages like Navajo, which is spoken by 150,000 people, but is in serious danger. Youngsters are not speaking it. The transmission rate, the percentage of children in the community who are speaking and keeping it as a first language, is very low. As long as you can motivate children to speak the language, you’re creating a new generation of speakers.”

And that’s why Harrison is not worried about Yiddish becoming an extinct language. Children are learning the Yiddish language, especially in the ultra-Orthodox community in the United States and Israel. “Yiddish may not have the large numbers of speakers it had prior to World War II,” Harrison said, “but, in terms of language transmission, Yiddish is robust.”

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For information on efforts to document the world’s dying languages, visit www.livingtongues.org.