Rescue Mission

American Indian tribes across the U.S. are working to revive their lost languages


The Shinnecock and Unkechaug tribes on New York’s Long Island have not spoken their native tongues in more than 200 years.

But now, the two Native American nations and Stony Brook University are trying to revive the tribes’ lost languages, using yellowed documents like a vocabulary list that Thomas Jefferson wrote during a visit in 1791.

The goal is to resuscitate the Shinnecock and Unkechaug languages and get tribe members comfortable speaking them, according to the tribe and researchers involved in the effort.

Chief Harry Wallace, the elected leader of the Unkechaug Nation, says that for tribal members, knowing the language is an integral part of understanding their own culture, past and present.

"When our children study their own language, they perform better academically," he says. "They have a core foundation to rely on."

The New York effort is part of a wave of language reclamation projects that have been undertaken by Native Americans in recent years. For many tribes, language is the cultural glue that holds a community together, linking generations and preserving a heritage and values. As one official involved in the effort said, language is "the DNA of a culture."

Historically, language loss occurs for two reasons, says Robert D. Hoberman of Stony Brook University’s linguistics department. Some groups voluntarily give up their languages for economic reasons, like immigrants who come to America and learn English. Others, like African slaves and Native Americans, were virtually forced to give up their mother tongues.

In the 1870s, the federal government set up boarding schools to assimilate Native American children, who were often punished for speaking Indian languages. That came on the heels of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which required Indian tribes to leave their ancestral lands and relocate west of the Mississippi River, eventually to reservations. When older generations of speakers died, there were no new speakers to keep the languages going.

Of the more than 300 indigenous languages once spoken in the U.S., only 175 remain, according to the Indigenous Language Institute, which tracks the status of endangered languages. It estimates that without restoration efforts, no more than 20 will still be spoken in 2050.

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Saving Endangered Languages

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By Scott Rappaport, Staff Writer

On a planet that seems to be growing smaller by the day, it's surprising to discover that people still use approximately 6,500 languages for their day-to-day communication. But linguists estimate that nearly half of these will be gone within the next hundred years, an extinction rate equivalent to one language lost every two weeks.

Throughout history, language loss has been attributable to such human behaviors as war or to natural events like earthquakes or tsunamis. In recent decades, however, the erosion is driven more by economic and cultural pressures. "People are abandoning their native languages in favor of globally dominant tongues such as English, Spanish, Arabic, or Mandarin Chinese," notes UC Santa Cruz linguistics professor Judith Aissen.

"Parents around the world want their children to speak mainstream languages to give them an economic advantage," Aissen says. The result of this transformation: half of the world's population now speaks just 10 languages.

Aissen and other linguists liken the magnitude of this language loss to the decline of plant and animal species. "When a language dies, it takes with it a vast array of knowledge--the stories of plants and their medicinal uses, songs, history, art, culture, and the very identity of the people--which is embedded in their language," says Aissen. As a result, a concerted effort has been undertaken by experts in the past decade to document currently spoken languages and, where possible, reverse the trend.

Aissen's own research focus is on Tzotzil, a language spoken by about 250,000 people in Chiapas, the southernmost state of Mexico, and one of 30 Mayan languages still spoken in Mexico and Guatemala. Since 1995, she has made repeated trips to the area to teach indigenous Mayan speakers there how to analyze and help preserve their languages.

"I teach workshops in syntax to native speakers--undergraduates and grad students in linguistics so they can do research on their own languages," Aissen says.

Aissen cites one student from these summer workshops--an indigenous Mayan speaker working toward a Ph.D. in linguistics at the University of Texas--who is going back to his community and digitally recording his native language. He is also employing assistants from the area and training them to help him. "When people in a community see documenting a language as a worthwhile thing to do, it reinforces the value of the language," notes Aissen. "It is viewed as a heritage worth passing on to their children, and this is essential if a language is to be saved from
extinction."

Several Mayan languages are already extinct and others are highly endangered. While 250,000 remaining speakers of Tzotzil may seem like a large number, Aissen points out that preserving the language is a fragile balancing act, as more members of the community begin to learn Spanish and become bilingual.

Aissen notes that saving endangered languages like Tzotzil is more than the preservation of culture and historical traditions. It's also about exploring the connection between the grammars of different languages and learning more about the way in which the human brain processes language.

"Linguistics is the scientific study of language," says Aissen. "Linguists are interested in studying what the human capacity for language is; they want to understand the full range that humans can acquire. But a theory based on 5,000 languages will be much richer than one based on 50."

Or to cite an analogy from the plant world, it's the difference between a botanist having only a few different species to study in a flower shop, or assessing the amazing diversity of the Amazon rainforest.

"Languages that serve large numbers of people, such as English, become simplified because they have to serve the communication needs of so many people," adds Aissen. "Indigenous languages may actually be more complicated in grammatical structure, and that's a very compelling reason to document them. It's about preserving vital knowledge for future generations."

Adapted from the University of California Santa Cruz Newscenter
Linguist on mission to save Inuit 'fossil language' disappearing with the ice

Cambridge researcher will live in Arctic and document Inughuit culture and language threatened by climate change

By Mark Brown, arts correspondent
The Guardian, Thursday 12 August 2010

Stephen Pax Leonard will soon swap the lawns, libraries and high tables of Cambridge University for three months of darkness, temperatures as low as -40C and hunting seals for food with a spear.

But the academic researcher, who leaves Britain this weekend, has a mission: to take the last chance to document the language and traditions of an entire culture.

"I'm extremely excited but, yes, also apprehensive," Leonard said as he made the final preparations for what is, by anyone's standards, the trip of a lifetime.

Leonard, an anthropological linguist, is to spend a year living with the Inughuit people of north-west Greenland, a tiny community whose members manage to live a similar hunting and gathering life to their ancestors. They speak a language – the dialect is called Inuktun – that has never fully been written down, and they pass down their stories and traditions orally.

"Climate change means they have around 10 or 15 years left," said Leonard. "Then they'll have to move south and in all probability move in to modern flats." If that happens, an entire language and culture is likely to disappear.

There is no Inughuit written literature but a very strong and "distinctive, intangible cultural heritage", according to Leonard. "If their language dies, their heritage and identity will die with it. The aim of this project is to record and describe it and then give it back to the communities themselves in a form that future generations can use and understands."

The Inughuits thought they were the world's only inhabitants until an expedition led by the Scottish explorer John Ross came across them in 1818.

Unlike other Inuit communities they were not significantly influenced by the arrival of Christianity in Greenland – so they retain elements of a much older, shamanic culture – and their life is not very different now to how it always has been. Many of the men spend weeks away from home hunting seals, narwhal, walruses, whales and other mammals. And while they have tents, they still build igloos when conditions get really bad.
Their language is regarded as something of a linguistic "fossil" and one of the oldest and most "pure" Inuit dialects.

Once he arrives at the most traditional Inughuit outpost in Siorapaluk, the most northern permanently inhabited settlement in the world, where about 70 Inughuit live, Leonard hopes to hear the storytelling that lies at the heart of this culture.

It is during the arctic darkness—when the sun sets on 24 October and does not rise again until 8 March—that the elders talk and pass on their stories and poetry.

Leonard's interest in the Inughuits began 10 years ago when he read Marie Herbert's book *The Snow People*, an account of life with the Inughuits, but it is only recently that he learned how imminent the threat is to their way of life and their culture.

"I just hadn't realised how endangered the community was and this whole culture could simply die, disappear. Normally languages die out because it is parents deciding they don't want their children to speak it."

Leonard intends to record the Inughuits and, rather than writing a grammar dictionary, produce an "ethnography of speaking" to show how their language and culture are interconnected. The recordings will be digitized, archived and returned to the community in their own language.

"These communities, which could be just years from fragmentation, want their cultural plight to be known to the rest of the world," he said.

Although the climate change catastrophe facing the Arctic is well documented and the Inughuits are visited frequently, Leonard hopes his visit will be more meaningful than others because his efforts to report on not only environmental but also *cultural* deterioration in this region.

**Mind your language**

A language dies every 14 days, and half the languages spoken today are expected to vanish by 2100. Languages on the endangered list include:

- The secret language of the Kallawaya, who live in the Bolivian Andes, is more 400 years old and is spoken by fewer than a hundred people. In daily life, the Kallawaya use Spanish or Aymara, but when discussing the medicinal plants central to their role as healers, the men speak their own private language.

- Aboriginal Australia holds some of the world's most endangered languages including Amurdag, which was believed to be extinct until a few years ago.
• Siletz Dee-ni is spoken on the Siletz reservation in Oregon. When the reservation was created in 1855 it held speakers of many different languages. In order to communicate with each other residents adopted a pidgin version of Chinook, in the process nearly wiping out their indigenous languages.