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In 1998 science fiction novella *Story of Your Life* and its film adaptation, *Arrival*, the protagonist deciphers an alien language which changes her linear perception of time and allows her to experience events that have yet to happen. Popular culture and the media routinely advocates for the world’s linguistic ecosystem because – so the story goes – each language provides a lens through which we can access the unique worldview of its speakers. It’s an intoxicating idea. Indeed, many enter the field under the influence of this notion.

Most agree that language offers insight into just how pliable the human mind is. The claim that speaking a language can empower the speaker to perceive the surrounding world in all sorts of novel ways makes a stellar case for language revitalisation. But the fact is, the jury is still out on exactly how language and cognition are linked.

Linguistic determinism is only tenuously supported in the academic sphere, and the debate surrounding the topic is contentious due to its dark past in linguistic supremacy. At its worst, determinism implies that individuals are somehow confined by the constituents of their language. This confinement is surely not what’s intended by researchers exploring the thought-language relationship in the context of linguistic relativity. Researchers are well aware of the ways in which determinism can be used to intensify the boundaries between dominant and minority cultures. However, well-intentioned bloggers still use its central ideas in defence of language maintenance, broadcasting even disproven claims as absolute truth.

So why is linguistic determinism still widely considered to be valid in the public arena? Well, the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis is arguably our field’s most accessible theory known in the mainstream. With a versatile and elastic profile, it seems its popular appeal outside of academia comes, to a certain extent, down to our preoccupation with science fiction and futurology: the postulation of possible futures. Unscholarly interpretations suggest an alternate reality where speakers of minority languages are hiding exceptional abilities – like unfamiliar perceptions of the space-time continuum – in plain sight. The promotion of determinism is often compassionate, and rooted in a desire to celebrate difference and represent an array of experiences in the media.

Without an educational background in the history of determinism, it’s unsurprising that some laymen make the leap from “language and thought are intricately bound in a relationship that is not yet fully understood” to “language both facilitates and limits cognitive processes”. That’s where matters can become a little more sinister.
Determinism can stir interest from outside the field, but is, dare I say, poor marketing for endangered language research; language simply does not have the degree of power inferred by its more far-fetched interpretations. One’s ability to understand one’s surroundings is categorically not confined to the grammatical systems of one’s native language.

Most linguists and social scientists reject bona fide determinism, and the important distinction between relativism and determinism is usually implied in their work. However, mainstream content making the results of studies in linguistic relativity accessible to nonprofessionals is rarely explicitly distanced from hard-set determinism. The thought traps accompanying these closely related theories are seldom discussed in media coverage of evidence for relativity. There is a host of possible explanations for this trend. Speakers may be placed under time constraints. Feature editors may cut content under the belief that it does not relate to the main subject matter. An academic offered the opportunity to cross over into mainstream content production may be discouraged from frittering away limited space on a topic that seems – from an outsider perspective – to be largely irrelevant.

This is a conversation that needs to be initiated with the media to dispel misconceptions and prevent further damage to the speech communities with which we work. While simplifying linguistic relativity for the masses is generally well-intentioned, the prevalence of content promoting fallacies warrants a more determined effort by language popularisers to highlight a distinction between the two schools of thought to our audiences outside of academia.

Armchair linguists are the spokespersons of our field. They perform the ground-level communication about the social importance of minority languages that we, as academics, simply cannot. Without access to global audiences, our scope can be somewhat limited to intellectual domains. That’s precisely why, especially in the case of labyrinthine theories like relativism, communication of academic research to the population at large must be administered in a way that the target audience can clearly interpret. As academics, it is our responsibility to explain our work to the mainstream in an objective way that acknowledges its potential to support problematic discourses.

A reluctance to publicly dispel the myths of determinism assumes that Western audiences will be most concerned with language revitalisation if they can stand in awe at just how different and “other” minority cultures must be. It fails to acknowledge that many examples of language extermination have been part of a larger effort to exterminate a people. Language is important to its speakers first and foremost as a tool that facilitates self-expression and communication. It is a vehicle through which we can discuss experiences central to our cultures, and has plenty of characteristics beyond the determinist lens that legitimise study and widespread discussion. Ensuring that journalists can easily access these facts will refocus the conversation and shift our efforts into the human rights domain.

Portraying language as a worldview ultimately creates a barrier between a minority language and its speakers, who may already be marginalised. Surely, we should focus on the universals of the human experience, all the while respecting and celebrating difference in a way that does not separate our object of study from its speakers, who are, when all’s said and done, infinitely more important than our work.
Four years ago a petition was issued to the European Union to ensure that the lesser-used languages of Europe were not forgotten in its language policy formulations.

Since the last issue of Ogmios, there has been little activity in the sphere of advocacy, and no press releases have yet been issued. Our editor has come up with several bright new ideas for the future running of FEL, and press releases are among them. In an image-conscious world, an organisation of international membership like our own needs to present itself carefully and conscientiously. We (if I may use that collective pronoun) need to check our facts before assuming that language rights are being infringed. We need to issue our statements in a timely way, riding ahead of the crest of a wave of news if we can – though of course offences against languages are usually committed over a long period, and not by sudden fiat. We need to present them visually in a distinctive house style, consistent from release to release, to show that we are not fly-by-night operators who are only going to get angry once and withdraw. And we need to contact the world from an identifiable address and on a verifiable date. We also have to learn more about effective distribution to the media, including social media.

In my article in the last issue, I mentioned that the current outrage against the Rohingya Muslims of Burma, by implication, is an outrage against speakers of Arakanese. Of course, language is not considered a major issue in this persecution, either by the media or by the oppressors of the Rohingya. Our focus has to be strictly on language, so we have to be well-informed about the situation of the Arakanese language.

As we go to press with this issue, a lot of publicity is being given to the last member of an uncontacted tribe in Rondonia state in Brazil, his fellow tribesmen having been murdered 22 years ago. One man’s solitude is suddenly world news. That is food for thought. What language he speaks can’t be known yet, but whatever it is, it is endangered. The Brazilian organisation for the protection of uncontacted tribes, FUNAI, has placed an embargo on any invasion of his territory or contact with him. Our pals at Survival International, based in London, have taken an interest in the case. But this is not an issue in which FEL can intervene – as far as I can see, it isn’t a matter for our advocacy or action. How can we fail to be curious, though?

Since the writing of this comment, Brazil has undergone major political changes that could have irreversible impact on the indigenous communities of the Amazon. With the recent election of far-right political candidate Jair Bolsonaro’s as President, the efforts of the Brazilian governmental protection agency for indigenous peoples – Fundação Nacional do Índio (FUNAI) – are now threatened. Bolsonaro has stated intent to close down FUNAI, which currently protects over 100 uncontacted tribes – leading up to his election, he stated: “If I become president, there will not be one centimetre more of indigenous land.” And the dispossession of land is not the only peril that the indigenous peoples of the region face under this new government – with suicide and disease due to contact with gold-miners rife in the already-crowded conditions under which these tribes live, assassination is just one more adversity these individuals are already up against. In the face of a world leader who has said that it’s “a shame that the Brazilian cavalry wasn’t as efficient as the Americans, who exterminated their Indians,” we at the FEL believe that the world needs to act now. You can find out more about any future action taken by us on our website and social media platforms, and see the letter issued by Chris Moseley on the opposite page.
Dear Mr. President,

The Foundation for Endangered Languages has learned with alarm of your declared intention, as the newly elected President of Brazil, not to demarcate any more indigenous reserves in your country, and to open up existing reserves to mining. If this is truly your intended policy, it will amount not only to an ecological catastrophe but also to the effective denial to Brazil’s indigenous people of the few rights that they do have. The exploitation of indigenous lands in your country is already well documented: for the purposes of logging, large-scale industrial farming and mining, vast tracts of Indigenous land have already been devastated.

Our Foundation is an international charity which monitors the endangerment of the world’s precious and dwindling stock of minority languages. Your country is particularly rich in such languages, though many of them are already on the brink of extinction. We urge you, in the name of humanity, to renounce this claim upon the lives and rights of Brazil’s indigenous people, of whom we should all be proud.

(Source: flickr.com/photos/lubasi)
IN MEMORIAM:
JAMES LOUGHRAN
- Claudia Loughran

James and I met on the steps of SOAS in 2007. We were both active in the Stop the War Coalition, protesting the government’s belligerence in the Middle East – I was in the final year of my Politics BA, and he had just started his MA in Endangered Language Documentation and Description.

We first got to know one another at a banner-making session. The idea was to write ‘peace’ in as many different languages as we could. I was a little late, and as I arrived, I saw that someone had already written pokój: the Polish word for peace. As a second-generation immigrant child who had spoken Polish at home before learning English at school, I’d rather hoped to be the one to contribute the Polish. I asked who’d written it – it was James! So we got talking and it turned out he’d just returned from teaching English near Krakow, and was fluent in Polish.

From there, a friendship blossomed, and many an evening was spent in one another’s company at the weekly SOAS Quiz, house parties, Ethiopian restaurants, and independent film nights. After years of will-they-won’t-they, and a number of aborted attempts at a relationship, our paths took us to different corners of the globe.

James spent time in Poland and later the Crimea, while I pushed further east to South East Asia. Eventually, in 2013, I found a teaching job in post Gaddafi Libya. I’d tried to convince James to come to Libya, and he had tried to convince me to join him in the Crimea. During his time there, James perfected his Russian to a native level, which was his primary motive for living and working there.

Claudia Loughran has raised more than £4850 for the FEL in James’ name. To date, this is our most generous donation ever. These funds are now being used to revitalise and document languages around the world. You can find out more about any future collaborations between Claudia and the FEL on our website.
He spent three years in Ukraine, from September 2011 to August 2014, where he perfected his Russian language skills and learnt Ukrainian. He spent large amounts of his free time travelling throughout the country and interviewing consultants in an effort to determine language-speaking preferences amongst the population, depending on the locale. His efforts were to determine language use in a non-politicised and culturally-neutral fashion, and to verify whether there was any truth to the widely-held view that whereas Russian was spoken predominantly in the East, the South and in Kiev, Ukrainian was predominantly spoken in the West. I have since blogged extensively on these tendencies of language usage, as well as native speakers’ beliefs regarding them, and found that those views are at best subjective, at worst erroneous, and that Russian has a tendency to dominate in most locales. A few months into my stint in Libya, there was a protest against the militia control of Tripoli, during which scores of unarmed civilians were killed. James picked up on the ensuing violence in Tripoli and called me relentlessly to ensure I registered my presence at the British Embassy. Due to his insistence, I fired off an email, only to be instructed to check Facebook and Twitter for updates, because the “Locate” service had been scaled back. It was at that moment I realised exactly how important we were to one another.

In May 2014, having temporarily left the country on a visa-run, the militias blew up Tripoli International Airport. This left me in the curious position of being in possession of a return flight to an airport which no longer existed. At a loss for what next to do, I finally accepted James’ invitation to come to Kiev, where he’d just moved in the wake of Russia’s annexation of the Crimea. Thrown together through circumstances beyond our control, I arrived in Kiev, to James’ Soviet-style apartment with a view of Kiev Zoo’s bison enclosure from the kitchen window.

He gave me Russian lessons, he wined and dined me in local restaurants and pubs, and we plotted our next move. A state of civil war in Libya and a rapidly-declining Hryvna in Ukraine meant we were both on the lookout for a new adventure. We decided to travel together to Odessa, and then to Moldova, making a side-stop at the disputed territory of Transnistria; James and I shared a love for obscure states.

During that time, we sent applications to language schools around the world, and were both offered positions at universities in Riyadh. Within a few months, we had both relocated, and we decided to get married at the [British?] Embassy – we were so very much in love (not to mention we agreed it would be helpful to be married with regard to being able to live together, and avoiding beheading).
On 27th November 2014 – or 4 Safar 1436 – we were married by the British Consul in his home in the Diplomatic Quarter, with only two witnesses present: some Pakistani friends we’d recently met there. After standing around with a bouquet of flowers and some non-alcoholic champagne we got changed out of our gladrags and jumped in the car for an epic 2000km round-trip journey to the Nabatean ruins of Mada’in Saleh. There, we camped and explored the tombs and rock formations, and what is left of the old Hijaz railway. On our return to the UK, we had our wedding celebration at the Caribbean Community Centre in Coventry, James’ hometown. The theme was traditional dress from around the world – I was the Chinese Dowager Empress and James went was in Saudi thobe and shemagh. We chose each other’s outfits. We had karaoke, a quiz, a henna artist and a Ukrainian bread ceremony. For years after, everyone told us it was the best wedding they’d ever attended.

James worked as an English teacher at the University of King Saud, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia between 2014 and 2015. In his free time, he carried out an empirical, informal study on Arabic usage amongst the migrant worker and expatriate community. The language situation in Saudi Arabia, along with other Arabic countries, is one of diglossia. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is the official language of the country, whereas the local population communicate using Arabic dialect, which is about as far removed from the standard as say Latin from the Romance languages. As formal language instruction (which at any rate is out of reach to migrant workers due to the costs involved) only exists in MSA it appears that a largely creolised form of Saudi Arabic has arisen, which foreign workers use to communicate. The results of any such study are noteworthy, especially as migrant workers make up a significant part of Saudi Arabia’s population.

After a brief time spent volunteering in Andalucia, we started our own business. I taught English online and James translated Russian, Polish, German, Spanish, French and Dutch texts into English. As we were able to work from anywhere, we took our backpacks and laptops and moved to Brazil, staying a month or two in each place for about nine months. We then spent another six months in Cusco, Peru. James picked up Brazilian Portuguese effortlessly, and studied Southern Quechua in Cusco. His Quechua teacher, Julia, invited us to her wedding.

James considered doing a PhD on the ongoing revitalisation of Southern Quechua amongst the younger generations, which look great on paper, and the actual reality on the ground, as well as the influence from the Spanish language.

Jame’s health began to decline, though, and in February 2017, we decided to moved back to the UK. Our last trip abroad together was to attend a friend’s wedding in Algiers. James picked up the basics of Algerian Arabic in the ten days we were there, and also relished the opportunity to speak French and Russian with my friend’s mother, who is originally from Eastern Ukraine.

On 2nd April 2018, James tragically made the decision to take his own life, and thus our great love story ended.

Language has always been an integral part of my own life; I spoke Russian, German and English at home, and all before the age of seven. With that in mind, I’ve never met anyone so adept at language acquisition as my late husband, James Loughran, for whom language-learning was a personal passion.

Curiously, his captivation only began in his late teens, during his time spent in Israel volunteering on a variety of kibbutzim. Because he hadn’t enjoyed French at school, he was certainly not planning to become a linguist. But, he quickly picked up German and Swedish from the other kibbutz volunteers, and after a brief spell in Germany, he decided to study German and Spanish as part of his Modern Language undergraduate degree.
He went on to achieve a high level of fluency in German, Swedish, Dutch, Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, French and Hungarian. Hungarian was one of his last additions; he chose to learn it so he could develop skills in a non-Indo-European, agglutinating language. Southern Quechua added to his proficiency in agglutinating languages, but it also helped him perfect ejective consonants, evidentiality and topic marking. During his travels and work, he also learnt, to various degrees, Mandarin, Standard Arabic and Najdi Arabic, for the purposes of verbal communication. As a friendly, curious and outgoing person, he found language-learning incredibly easy and enjoyed being able to interact with different peoples in their native tongues.

But for James, the documentation of new languages was most important; he believed that they all require research before it is too late. Upon completion of the MA programme, James was awarded a PhD studentship with the SOAS-based Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project. The title of the doctoral thesis was Topic and Focus in Tundra Yukaghir, a member of the Yukaghir language family spoken in Siberia. Irina Nikolaeva was assigned as his tutor. He originally intended to carry out data collection on-site in the Kolyma Basin, but was unable to take up the studentship due to a shortage of funding.

While James was never formally diagnosed with a specific condition, he struggled for two decades. The drugs offered by modern psychiatry couldn’t ease his pain, which was ever-present and at times debilitating. Despite his brilliance and his gregarious nature, he always felt a failure. James struggled with mental health problems from puberty, and sadly this held him back with regards to pursuing his research interests. Had he been able to manage his health effectively I have no doubt that his contribution to endangered language documentation would have been tremendous.

I wanted to choose a cause to remember James’ passion in life: languages, and their preservation. His former SOAS colleagues recommended I donate to the FEL. I felt it was the perfect organisation to fundraise for, so I set up a JustGiving page and also collected money at the funeral service. At this point, I have raised £4,865, and the page remains open. It has been truly humbling to receive such generous donations from friends all around the world, and a testament to just how loved James was.

The money I have fundraised in his name will go towards a variety of projects in all corners of our globe; it will be the last thing James does for this very worthwhile cause.

I recently had James’ collection of books on linguistics and language learning stamped “From the Library of James Loughran, who loved these books”, and sent to Mosul via Bradford and Erbil. While the city was under Daesh control, the Mosul University Library was destroyed. Now it has been liberated, there has been a worldwide call for donations of books and publications of all kinds, about any subject and in as many languages as possible. I hope one day a budding Iraqi linguist will find the page with the stamp and wonder who James Loughran might have been. It is rather poetic to have sent the books there, given that James’ last project was learning Sumerian (or Akkadian - I am not sure) Cuneiform, of Ancient Mesopotamia. He was looking at old Epic of Gilgamesh tablets and trying to learn the script.

If you also have any reference books that could assist this project, and you would also like to contribute, please contact the Director of Mosul University Libraries, Mohammed J. Aalhajahmed, at mjasim.1977@gmail.com.
How has the Kodrah Kristang movement grown since we spoke in April 2017?

By our estimates, there is much greater awareness of Kristang in Singapore now. This is of course almost impossible to quantify, but based on media articles and mentions in the public sphere, we’re still being featured almost every month by a different media publication, and still appearing in features with a fairly large audience reach, like Channel NewsAsia (August 2018) and Suria (November 2018). I am also being featured this year on collateral in the run up to Singapore’s National Day, so mentions of Kodrah Kristang are on street banners, bus stops and outdoor screens across the island, and I’m part of a lineup of speakers called LumiNation who are introducing parts of Singapore’s forgotten history to tie in with National Day.

How does the future of Kristang look?

I honestly think the future is still very uncertain, because our movement is still small, and we haven’t quite embarked on a full-scale launch of children’s classes and other material intended to reach families and the next generation — which is really important and probably the most crucial gap that we need to fill (we’re being held back by a lack of specialised manpower). The locus of the movement is also still with the community as a grassroots initiative, which of course means inherent uncertainty as the community continues to evolve; additionally, all five Core Team members will be working in full-time jobs starting next January, which may have some impact on how frequently we can organise events. But thanks to what we’ve achieved in the last two-and-a-half years, I think that the future for Kristang in Singapore is probably significantly brighter.

How has Singapore, as a state, received your push to revitalise Kristang?

Really well! Aside from the National Day coverage, we applied for and won state-sponsored grants to run the Festival in May 2017, mainly from the National Heritage Board and Our Singapore Fund, as well as an initial micro-grant from the Young Changemakers’ Programme at the National Youth Council in August 2016. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean, Minister S Iswaran and Member of Parliament Joan Pereira have all featured us either in speeches or on their Facebook pages, and a number of our media features are also by statutory boards or ministries, such as the National Heritage Board, the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre and the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth.

We also maintain close ties with the Singapore Eurasian Association, which is the main entity sponsored by the state that represents Eurasians in Singapore; the EA has featured and hosted us on innumerable occasions, and also provided financial support for the Festival. In general the state seems very supportive of what we’re trying to do, and we’re happy to maintain and grow that relationship.
Tell me about your recent advertising campaigns.

We focus a lot on social media, since a big target for us is to reach younger people by word of mouth, and the other big target is to reach, well, everyone! Kodrah has very active Facebook and Instagram accounts. For example, we post a Word of the Week in Kristang, alongside media features and profiles, and photos of people just having fun in class. This helps to attract people who don’t have existing friends, family or ‘nodes’ in our Kodrah community.

But most of our publicity has actually come from people who have attended the classes, enjoyed them, and then said to family and friends: “I think you should go for this.” I think that’s really why the classes are still growing (we’re on our tenth iteration of our beginner class, with 30 people) and why people continue to be interested in coming.

We advertise what we are: fun, serious and systematic. But [part of the appeal] is also that we’re laid-back about language-learning – learners check their own homework, if there even is homework – and sincere about our intentions. We love languages, and we love Kristang as well as the friendships and relationships it’s given us.

What else have you done to take the language mainstream?

I promote the language as often as is possible and natural in my other lives as a trainee teacher and writer. Friends often find me cutting cards and other material for Kristang class in the National Institute of Education canteen, and I teach Kristang in the evenings during my own time, so I’ll sometimes come to class in NIE with a huge black roller bag full of Kristang things! On my own, I also translate and sing popular songs in Kristang, and post these covers on YouTube.

Of course, we also talk a lot about Kristang – and in Kristang – on social media. Most of these things aren’t extraordinary, but it’s these little efforts in combination which cumulatively have translated into a lot of interest in Kristang from those around me.

With regard to finances, how do you keep the project running?

Everything we do for Kodrah is done as volunteers – the initiative is not-for-profit. Outside of the very large-scale Festival, we actually run on pretty minimal funding for everything else, other than two micro-grants from the Young Changemakers Programme and the Awesome Foundation in August 2016 when we were getting started. We’re big on community and internal resource sustainability, and so we try to minimise our dependence on money as far as possible. A big part of this is venue support and sponsorship from external partners, but for other things like class materials and games resources, we try and reuse material, and share content online or through the Cloud wherever possible.

“We talk a lot about Kristang – and in Kristang – on social media.”
Who else is involved?

The Kodrah Core Team consists of four other individuals in addition to myself, all youth of varying ethnicities residing in Singapore and volunteering with Kodrah.

Andre D’Rozario is an artist and a full-time National Serviceman who will complete his NS in September 2018. Frances Loke Wei is a research assistant at the National University of Singapore (NUS). Luís Morgado da Costa is a PhD student at Nanyang Technological University (NTU). And Fuad Johari is a civil servant, currently on overseas posting for three years, but helping with all online material.

Beyond the Core Team, we also have 11 of the remaining Kristang speakers in Singapore helping out as advisors in class and in our other initiatives as our Advisory Circle, and another 16 current or former Kodrah students who help as assistants and facilitators (we call them Judanti or “Helpers”) in our classes. Classes themselves have played host to about 500 people since March 2016, with about 250 people completing 1A our first-stage module and 25 people now in 4A our seventh and penultimate stage. We teach three different modules in the same week; currently it’s 2A on Mondays at the National Library, 4A on Thursdays at the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre at Clarke Quay, and 1A on Fridays at Cairnhill Community Club. Our venue partners are multitudinous: other past supporters include the College of Alice & Peter Tan at the National University of Singapore, the Eurasian Association, the Substation and 10Square.

Kristang’s grammar likely has its roots in Malay and possibly Hokkien, and features primarily Portuguese vocabulary.

Kristang is spoken more widely in Malacca than in Singapore, but its reach is still limited in both cities.

Based on your experience with Kristang, what place do revitalisation and documentation have in a project of this kind?

It’s totally dependent on context! Some languages have excellent documentation in place, and some don’t; conversely, some languages may have contexts very well-suited to revitalisation, while for some that context may be poorly understood or unmapped. I don’t think any language is inherently suited to documentation or revitalisation; all other things remaining equal, every language would merit both. The difference is context and what the community that speaks the language wants and needs. In Singapore, our Portuguese-Eurasian community wanted adult classes and activities focused on revitalisation. Documentation is understood to be important, and we do do that too, but we focus our energies on what the community has demonstrated it desires, and that’s how Kodrah has evolved. Language is always about people, and their relationships with the language in question. Understanding what they want and need will help you decide what the language wants and needs.

What have you found most surprising about this experience?

The level of interest in Kristang has been extremely surprising. I never expected our little class — that first little class with just 12 people — to lead to this, two-and-a-half years later. It’s all well and good that I get so much publicity as the founder and director of Kodrah, but my planning would have come to nothing if people hadn’t shown up, and if people stop showing up, the initiative is dead! I want to recognise the effort and interest that everyone else has put in, and to acknowledge how wonderful that has been, because it shows that this is really something that people are coming together to do. That’s surprising in our current context, and it’s something that keeps me going — the fact that so many other friends (and family) are still going at it too.

“Many speakers remember when the language was derided for being a patois with no grammar, and they were told not to speak it.”

Many speakers remember when the language was derided for being a patois with no grammar, and they were told not to speak it.”
Under what sorts of pressures are the speakers of Kristang who have come forward to be advisors?

Even though we try our best to avoid making them uncomfortable, they often feel put on the spot — after all, they are now cast in the role of expert, and so they feel enormous strain to be grammatically “correct” all the time.

Many speakers remember when the language was derided for being a patois with no grammar, and they were told not to speak it. We also had a few distressing moments early in the initiative when individuals were criticised online by people from outside Singapore for not being fluent speakers. This would be upsetting to anyone with a history with the language, but our speakers really have simply weathered all these storms and continue to contribute so much to Kodrah today. I respect and cherish them so much for that, and they really inspire me to keep doing what I’m doing.

How has revitalising Kristang impacted your relationship with family and heritage?

My relationships with all four of my grandparents have really blossomed since I first became interested in Kristang. I’ve learnt so much about all of them in trying to understand the language’s place in Singapore’s history, and to uncover my personal history with all the languages of Singapore which I can’t speak. Understanding how all four of them became the people they are today through and alongside these languages has been a tremendously powerful experience that I wish more people I know could share.

My Eurasian grandparents, Maureen and Peter Martens – Grandma and Grandpa to me and to many others in Kodrah too! – were part of the first class in July 2016. Now, seven modules later, Grandma and Grandpa are in 4A alongside the other pioneer students, reacquiring a language that my great-great grandmother spoke exclusively, but of which Grandma only remembers a little.

My Chinese grandparents, Por Por and Kong Kong, have also attended Kodrah classes, and represented Baba Malay and Hakka, of which they are native speakers, at the Languages of Singapore Trail at Festa.

I’ve also discovered very recently that my great-great-great-grandfather, Edwin Tessensohn (Grandpa’s great-grandfather), was a big patron of the Singapore Kristang theatre scene, which existed for more than 40 years between 1892 and 1926, while my great-great-grandfather and exclusively Kristang-speaking great-great-grandmother, Aloysious Thomas De Souza and Edith Klass, actually tried to revitalise branjo, a Kristang dance form, right before World War II!

So, it turns out Kristang goes very far back in my family, on both Grandma and Grandpa’s sides. It has been a real privilege to share the experience of unfolding my family’s language history with my grandparents.

Any words of advice for linguists in a similar position to you?

I’m echoing the words of countless other insider linguists, but especially Darrell Kipp, whose book I read just before I started Kodrah: Don’t wait. There’s just so much to do.
Unserdeutsch – literally “Our German” – is spoken by only a few people in Papua New Guinea and East Australia.

Unique among creole languages as the only known German-lexifier creole language in the world, it is also unusual in belonging to a small group of creole languages with their roots in boarding school dormitories, in having another pidgin-creole – Tok Pisin – as its dominant substrate language, and in being the first Papua New Guinean language to become extinct as a result of mass emigration overseas.

In spite of this, it has been almost totally neglected by the academic language community since it was first described, at which point it was already endangered. Professor Craig Volker, whose academic work focuses on Unserdeutsch, puts this down in part to a “reluctance on the part of German academics to engage with the colonial period.”

With its origin during the German colonial era, when the Vunapope Catholic Mission near Rabaul began a boarding school for mixed-race children whom they removed from their mothers’ homes, Unserdeutsch was the product of German’s use in the schools. During this era, a pidgin German was developed among the children. As they grew up and married one another, this language came into use in their households, and was thus creolised. The community remained socially isolated because of the racial stratification of colonial society at that time.

Unserdeutsch and its use as an in-group language were important symbols of identity, but as racial barriers went down in the 1960s and access to both Australian citizenship and Australian boarding schools became available, the language was no longer learned by most young people. At Papua New Guinea Independence, most of the community opted for Australian citizenship. The majority of these people moved to Australia, where today almost all speakers of Unserdeutsch live.

“Actually, its demise is a sign of the successful integration of Unserdeutsch speakers into the wider Australian society,” says Volker. “The language thrived when racism segregated its speakers from others.”

But despite its origin in the racist treatment of Papua New Guineans under German colonial rule, Volker and his colleagues believe that, in addition to its importance to our knowledge about language contact, an understanding about the language and the community associated with it can contribute to discourses about identity in Papua New Guinea, Australia, and Germany. With most of the language’s speakers aged over 70, this is probably the last decade where meaningful documentation will be possible.

In all three countries, Volker argues that increasing ethnic mixture and multilingual environments require a reassessment of national identities, something already dealt with a century ago by the grandparents of the current generation of Unserdeutsch speakers.
“Without contact to German academia and the possibility to learn German, Papua New Guineans are shut out from both their rich cultural heritage housed in German museums and the many historical, legal, and ethnographic materials written during the German colonial period.”

“One big problem is that Germanists tend not to read English-language journals and creole textbooks. Another is that my [own published work] at that time was in rather obscure publications that were often overlooked in the pre-internet days.” Volker believes that it should not be possible to study German as a major subject without some awareness of the history of the German language outside Central Europe, including the former colonies.

“There should be a set number of scholarships available to persons from the ex-colonies to study in Germany. In Germany itself, academics should lobby for the barriers to people from the former colonies to study in Germany be removed. The requirement that Pacific Islanders travel to Singapore to hand-deliver visa applications is ridiculously expensive.”

“German academics should also lobby for their universities to establish partnerships with universities in the former colonies. The project at the University of Bremen to translate and annotate German historical and ethnographic works about Papua New Guinea into English is exemplary.”

Of the limited academic exploration of Unserdeutsch and its speakers, research can also be seen in the context of the growing interest in Europe at examining and analysing the heritage of German colonialism. This is a welcome, if belated, correction to Germany’s ‘colonial amnesia’.

“I know that Germans are not particularly loved in many parts of the world. But in the former colonies in the Pacific, they are quite highly regarded. Could it be that there is something in the psyche of the German nation that rejects being admired and even loved, so that for that very reason, the German government avoids having any real interaction with its former colonies in the Pacific?” Volker wonders.

The first, and for many years only, fieldwork with Unserdeutsch speakers was Volker’s 1982 University of Queensland thesis, and the subsequent articles based on it. Until recently, there has been little interest shown in it other than analyses by creolists based on data from Volker’s fieldwork.

From time to time, articles in the media appeared about the language, and a German masters student made a webpage about the language in the late 1990s. As a result, in 2009, a play about and partially in Unserdeutsch supported by the Goethe Institute brought the language to the attention of a wider public in Germany. In particular, there has been no documentation about the current linguistic vitality of Unserdeutsch or the extent of linguistic variation between basilect and acrolect speech in this last generation of speakers. The current Unserdeutsch Documentation Project, started in 2014 at the University of Augsburg under the leadership of Professor Péter Maitz, aims to record enough natural and structured speech to enable the creation of a corpus of spoken Unserdeutsch that can be used for research by linguists in future and enable the descendants of the last generation of speakers to have contact with the language of their ancestors. It is by far the most comprehensive attempt to date to document the language and bring it to the attention of both linguists and the general public.

To facilitate authentic speech and natural conversation, speakers are interviewed in pairs. The conversation focuses on the speakers’ past lives in Papua New Guinea, so that information about the history of the community can be gathered. These taped conversations are supplemented by a questionnaire with stimuli in English and Tok Pisin to be translated orally into Unserdeutsch and recorded. The stimuli have been chosen to elicit basic vocabulary and important grammatical variables. Finally the interviewer fills out a questionnaire about the linguistic biography and self-identity of the speaker.
The data is used to build a corpus using EXMARaLDA and analysed using automated lemmatisation and part of speech-tagging. This corpus will be placed in the Institute for German Language; parts will also appear on the project’s University of Augsburg webpage for easy access by the public and, especially, the Unserdeutsch community.

The most important part of the project is to record, transcribe, and analyse at least 50 hours of authentic Unserdeutsch speech from as many different speakers as possible. This is being done in consultation with the community and with the aim of making as much of the material available to them and to other researchers as possible. The analysis of these data will help in linguists understand the variation in the post-creole continuum, the effects of de-creolisation, and the influences of Tok Pisin and English in this multilingual community. The researchers hope that the project will stimulate the production of both academic publications aimed at linguists, and more popular works of interest to the Unserdeutsch community itself and the general public in Papua New Guinea, Australia, and Europe.

So, what kind of resources are most urgently required for the project?

“Well, a time machine would be wonderful. But failing that, we have fantastic people transcribing and analysing but, of course, even more fantastic people would be great.”

Funded by the German Research Foundation in an initial grant from October 2015 to September 2018, the project has already supported four field trips to Papua New Guinea and Australia. Because Papua New Guinea and Australia are very expensive countries to travel to and in, Volker also highlights the requirement for “financial support to enable more travel to Papua New Guinea and Australia and for longer periods by my colleagues in Europe who are doing most of the work.”

Given that the only fluent speakers are all over the age of 60, revitalisation will be possible only if there is enough documentation – currently the focus is on building the corpus. “Whether there should be revitalisation or not is a matter for the community itself to decide, not outside linguists,” says Volker. “There is much nostalgia for the loss of the language, but no real efforts to start using the language more with the very young.”

“A time machine would be wonderful. But failing that, we have fantastic people transcribing and analysing, and even more fantastic people would be great.”

Many speakers of Unserdeutsch reportedly also use English, Standard German, and Tok Pisin.

(Source: deutschland.de via H. Wilhelmy – Neuguinea “Unserdeutsch”)
As is often the case with creole languages spoken by socially marginalised groups, Unserdeutsch speakers in the past have tended to be reluctant to share their language with outsiders or sometimes even to acknowledge its existence. This was especially true in the presence of German speakers from Europe.

Perhaps because of the growing ideology of multiculturalism in Australia and individual speakers’ successful assimilation into broader Australian society, attitudes have changed remarkably in the past decade, and members of the community have been particularly open and supportive of the project. They are enthusiastic users of an Unserdeutsch Facebook page with more than 300 members, “Unserdeutsch: The Creole German of Vunapope / Papua New Guinea”, originally set up by the University of Augsburg team, and have helped the team meet many more speakers and semi-speakers than were originally thought to exist. In some cases this has led to reunions among people who grew up in New Britain together but who had lost contact after moving to Australia. A number have expressed more positive feelings about their language as a result of participation in the project and seeing respectful academic works written about it, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of increased linguistic and cultural confidence. Several grandparents have even expressed an interest in speaking Unserdeutsch with their young grandchildren.

Although as yet, there is still limited action on the part of the language community to revitalise Unserdeutsch, Volker believes that this would be achievable, although it would require enormous effort. “Speakers do not live in one neighbourhood and many, probably most, have married outside the community. These are welcome signs of their successful integration and a willingness of mainstream Australian society to try to overcome its racist past.”

“Whether the language should be revived is a matter for the community to discuss. As yet they have not done so. Certainly, being better-known and more self-aware of their past is important for members of the group and for both Papua New Guinean and Australian societies. Documentation alone has already done much to foster cohesion within the community and an awareness of what a unique history they share.”

“Unserdeutsch originated in the Gazelle Peninsula of New Britain.”
Never one to shy away from a challenge, I’m currently in the process of creating the world’s first digital atlas of indigenous and minority writing systems.

Here’s why. More than a third of the world’s writing systems are endangered – not taught in schools, denied official status, and in some cases actively suppressed or marginalised. Even though I had no training in linguistics or anthropology (or art or woodwork!) I was so fascinated by these unfamiliar scripts I decided to start carving pieces of text — sayings, words, even individual letters — as a way of preserving them. Once I started meeting people from cultures whose scripts I had been carving, I was struck by the urgency of the situation and became increasingly activist. So, now in addition to carving, I create (and in some cases publish) endangered alphabets educational materials, games, even furniture. And now this Atlas.

When I give talks on the Endangered Alphabets Project, everyone wants to know more about the scripts I carve, their origins, the cultures that use them, the regions of the world where they are to be found, and what can be done to help. But there’s one major problem: there simply is no one source for such information. And as long as this information remains scattered and hard to find, the crisis will continue.

Why is this important? Because by definition, we write what seems most important, what most needs to be recorded. When a culture (almost always a minority or indigenous culture) chooses or is forced to adopt another writing system, everything they have seen as being valuable enough to be written — sacred texts, poems, personal correspondence, legal documents, family recipes, the collective experience, wisdom and identity of a people — becomes incomprehensible within two generations, and is lost. Moreover, denying members of a culture the right to read, write and speak in their mother tongue defines them as inferior and unimportant, and leaves them vulnerable, marginalised, and open to abuse.

When I started the Endangered Alphabets, I had heard of the sterling work being done in researching and documenting endangered languages, and I assumed the same was happening with scripts. It was actually David Crystal who told me, to my surprise, that script loss was hardly being studied at all. I’m not sure why.

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The Endangered Alphabets Project grew out of my stumbling on Omniglot.com in 2009, and realising that fully a third of the world’s writing systems were in danger: not taught in schools, denied official status, and in some cases actively suppressed or marginalised. Even though I had no training in linguistics or anthropology (or art or woodwork!) I was so fascinated by these unfamiliar scripts I decided to start carving pieces of text — sayings, words, even individual letters — as a way of preserving them. Once I started meeting people from cultures whose scripts I had been carving, I was struck by the urgency of the situation and became increasingly activist. So, now in addition to carving, I create (and in some cases publish) endangered alphabets educational materials, games, even furniture. And now this Atlas.

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A few years ago I wrote a book about the global campaign to eradicate polio, and one of the central questions was this: more money, time and personnel have been devoted to eradicating polio than any other collective enterprise in human history. Why hasn’t it succeeded? There are many answers to that question, but what interests me most is the tone of the question: bewildered, frustrated. It assumes that money plus good intentions should equal success—whereas once you get out into the developing world where polio is still at large, people may quite reasonably have very different priorities. This is to say that no matter how sound our intentions and our reasoning, those of us who are in the privileged position of either documenting or working toward revitalisation may not be best placed to make that call. It’s entirely possible that those resources should not go toward either revitalisation or documentation, but toward providing a reliable supply of clean water.

It’s very hard to know if and when you’re doing any good. The areas where I’ve seen signs of positive outcomes are those where I’m collaborating with individuals and groups who are already working actively to preserve or revive their mother languages, such as the ourgoldenhour.org project in Bangladesh and the Abenaki in Vermont. I’m only getting on a train that is already moving, and even though I may make suggestions, the people who are trying to revive their own cultures are the ones who know what methods—children’s books? video tutorials? an app? a wiki dictionary?—may work best.

My aim is to create an interactive digital world atlas, based on Google Maps, with pins corresponding to the locations of cultures with endangered scripts. Click on a pin, and it will identify the script in a small thumbnail. Click on the thumbnail, and a page about that script will open up, with links to images, text, and video. The Atlas allows anyone to see at a glance the extent of the crisis: it’s right there scattered across the world. I intend to let visitors to the site know about the language and script—its history, its current use, the reasons why it is endangered, and, above all, what efforts are under way to preserve or revive it.

“When a culture is forced to adopt another writing system, everything they have seen as valuable enough to be written becomes incomprehensible within two generations, and is lost.”

Endangered Alphabets also helps to produce educational tools, teach endangered written languages, and advocates for the cause on social media and in audiovisual content.
But there’s also another value I’m really hoping will take off. Someone who is from an indigenous or minority or indigenous culture can visit the Atlas and see how and what their counterparts across the world, who are working hard to revive their language and cultural identity, are doing. Maybe they’ve developed a wiki-based dictionary. Maybe they’ve created a language-learning app. Maybe they’re putting video language lessons online — or other, even more creative ideas.

My hope is that they’ll say, “Hey, there’s this organisation in Canada that’s writing and publishing children’s books in indigenous languages — and here’s one in Bangladesh doing the same thing. How did they do that? Where did they get the funds? How are they using these books? Is it working?” And they can contact and potentially help each other.

I love a challenge, and I’m also rather impatient, so I am barreling into the project first and working on raising the funding next: We already have the basics of the platform created and have a substantial chunk of research done — enough to show, to my surprise, that across much of the world the movement to preserve traditional cultures and their languages has more energy than I thought, and certainly far more than when I started this project nearly a decade ago. I aim to launch the Atlas on January 1, 2019 — the UN Year of Indigenous Languages.

“The Atlas allows anyone to see at a glance the extent of the crisis: it’s right there scattered across the world.”

Endangered Alphabets works worldwide, and has been involved in more than 15 projects to date. This map shows the countries where endangered alphabets are found, and where the Endangered Alphabets Project has worked.
Natasha Meredith reports on the awarding of £415,000 from the AHRC (the UK government’s Arts and Humanities funding body) to the University of Surrey to work on Endangered Languages in the Caucasus region.

The project will investigate the rare linguistic phenomenon of ‘external agreement’, which, while rare in the rest of the world, is found in 17 languages of the Nakh-Daghestanian family of languages in the Caucasus. Building on work already done on the Archi language, the endeavour will help to document two other endangered languages in the region, Andi (5,800 speakers) and Rutul (30,000 speakers).

Dr Oliver Bond, Senior Lecturer in Linguistics at the University of Surrey, said: “We are delighted to have received this award, which will help further our work examining linguistic diversity in Dagestan. If more work is not done in maintaining minority language use, there is a danger that they will cease to be spoken and the linguistic and cultural knowledge of large groups of people will be effectively lost. Examining ‘external agreement’ and understanding its complexities will help us better understand what is possible in human language, whilst supporting endangered languages and increasing awareness of their special properties.”

Megan Hartman, a linguist at UNK who studies dead languages including Latin, says that when languages die, many just evolve into something else. “They are integrated into a society where another language is being spoken and if that other language is prominent enough, then a lot of those speakers, especially the next generation, will say ‘oh well we don’t need to speak that, our parents’ language, it’s not useful. We’re gonna speak this new language,” said Hartman.

Sydney Edwards of nebraska.tv reports on linguist David Harrison’s philosophy on why saving endangered languages is so important.

The University of Nebraska at Kearney has held a presentation to explain why it is important to save endangered languages. This was followed by a media report. Linguistics professor David Harrison, who travels the world working with villages and towns to document endangered languages, estimates over half of today’s languages are in danger of going extinct and argues that preserving linguistic diversity is as important as preserving biodiversity for the future of humankind. This is because languages contain information about the planet, plants, animals and human ingenuity which would be forever lost if these languages die.

“The beautiful Caucasus region boasts a higher level of linguistic diversity than either neighbouring Europe or the Middle East. (Source: Wikipedia)

The Source: https://www.surrey.ac.uk/news/university-surrey-awarded-over-ps400000-support-endangered-caucasian-languages

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SOURCE: National Geographic
Joanie Faletto of curiosity.com reports on the incredible linguistic diversity to be found in one of the most famous cities in the world.

According to the Endangered Language Alliance (ELA), there are an astounding 800 languages spoken in New York City, with some 138 found in Queens borough alone. However, Daniel Kaufman, adjunct professor of linguistics at Graduate Center of the City University of New York, estimates that many of these languages will not survive the next two or three decades.

Why, then, is such diversity to be found here? It is because the city of the Statue of Liberty has been the point of arrival for countless thousands of immigrants to the United States. As a result, you can now hear languages ranging from Greek to Indonesian, and from Russian to Minangkabau in the city. In fact, according to 2015 Census data, more than half of the Queens population over five years old spoke a language other than English at home.

The Max Planck Institute reports on the Bora tribe’s innovative method for communication over long distances. In the Amazon and without a mobile phone, how can you communicate with somebody far away in the Amazon, without a mobile phone? By mimicking your language using a musical instrument! While the human voice can only reach about 200 metres, the Bora use manguaré drums - pairs of wooden slit drums traditionally carved from single logs - to extend this by a factor of 100, to ask someone to bring or do something, announce the arrival of visitors or even the result of non-alcoholic drinking competitions.

“In this model, only two pitches are used and each beat corresponds to a syllable of a corresponding phrase of spoken Bora. The announcements contain on average 13 words and 60 drum beats.”

The Boras use drummed Bora to mimic the tone and rhythm of their spoken language and to elaborate Bora phrases in order to overcome remaining ambiguities.

“Rhythm turns out to be crucial for distinguishing words in drummed Bora”, says Seifart. “There are four rhythmic units encoded in the length of pauses between beats. These units correspond to vowel-to-vowel intervals with different numbers of consonants and vowel lengths. The two phonological tones represented in drummed speech encode only a few lexical contrasts. Rhythm therefore appears to crucially contribute to the intelligibility of drummed Bora.”

Frank Seifart of the former Department of Linguistics at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology says that:
steemit.com reports on a fake marketing campaign.

In 2014, media outlets began covering the “tragic tale” of the two last speakers of Ayapaneco, an endangered language from the Mexican state of Tabasco. It was reported that Manuel Segovia and Isidro Velazquez refused to speak to each other over a forgotten argument, but thanks to German telecom giant Vodafone, they reconciled and agreed to help preserve the language. According to an advert they released, a new school was constructed in the state of Tabasco in Mexico where the two men would pass on their language to the younger generation.

However, this was later revealed to be a case of false information. In truth there was no such rift, and there are approximately 15 remaining speakers of Ayapaneco. According to Segovia and Velazquez, the agency paid them to appear in the commercial and paid the other speakers to stay out of it. Rather than constructing a new school house, the company simply painted the old one.

In reality, linguists have been working for close to a decade to write a dictionary for Ayapenco, and in 2008 – six years before the Vodafone advert – the Mexican government paid Velazquez to teach children Ayapeneco, which he did alongside his son and four other speakers.

Ayapaneco is believed to be close to 600 years old, a few centuries short of the advert’s assertions, and has existed as a regional language surrounded by groups of more politically powerful and widespread languages like those of the Mayans, Aztecs, and Spanish. Linguist Jhonnatan Rengel argues the language has a unique beauty to it, with phrases like chük mbūñye translating to “the house of the thunder,” a poetic way of saying “cloud”.

The remaining speakers now teach many of the city’s youth about the language, even holding speech contests at festivals.

David Friend of The Canadian Press reports on a musical attempt to draw attention to the fading language.

“Wolastoqiyik Lintuwakonawa” is an ambitious 11-track project where Jeremy Dutcher duets with the voices found on the wax cylinders of the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau, Quebec in order to reinvigorate Wolastoq, which is spoken in the Tobique First Nation, one of six Wolastoqiyik reserves in New Brunswick.

According to recent census data, the language is spoken by only 305 people, while only 55 people said they speak it as a primary language at home.

“When we lose them, we also lose their entire world view - all the songs and words they know and the jokes they carry,” Dutcher says. “There’s an incredible sense of urgency.”

The inspiration for the project came from his degree at Dalhousie University in Halifax, where he’d switched from studying music to anthropological research on his community.

Fascinated with the content of the recordings, he hopes listeners can have a similar connection with these voices from the past, and that his album will spark inspiration for further projects on the Gatineau archive and highlight the contributions of indigenous women.

“There are so many stories that need to come forward, and I’d like to think that I’m uniquely positioned to tell them,” he says. “I get so much from doing this stuff, and it brings me to a closer understanding of who I am and where I fit. We should all be so lucky to have that kind of work.”
Taiwanese is widespread in Taiwan; in fact, over 80% of the population speaks it at home. Yet historically, it has not had equal status with Mandarin, which was declared the dominant language of the island in 1940 when the Kuomintang party, fleeing from the Chinese Communists, arrived.

If passed, the new rule would allow areas with large numbers of Taiwanese speakers to use it in official documents and legal affairs. The government will also have to be obliged to teach Taiwanese and other indigenous languages in schools, and develop writing systems and dictionaries in these languages.

The shift illustrates the growing cultural differences between Taiwan and China. In the latter, Mandarin is the only national language, and is promoted because minority languages are seen by the Communist Party as interfering with the larger goals of national sovereignty and cultural unification which Stalin advocated.

For example, this can be seen with the Tibetan language, which is being replaced in classrooms by Mandarin. This is because the Chinese state perceives minority languages as something which should be treated more as artefacts in museums, and is not concerned with their preservation as phenomena valuable in themselves. Taiwan is moving in a direction divergent to China by following a path towards pluralistic democracy – a move which most likely has political motivations as a rebuff to China’s approach to language.

The EU currently funds several minority language-speaking areas, but the loss of this due to Brexit could have catastrophic consequences. Furthermore, the removal of EU citizenship for immigrants will leave them:

“at the mercy of governments that have shown neither the interest nor the desire to protect and promote the rights of speakers of their nations and regions’ language, and have throughout much of our shared history conducted aggressive policies designed to eradicate our languages”.

Smith suggests that only English is expected to survive Brexit unscathed – but since it is being proposed that French or German be adopted as the lingua franca of the EU, it seems it will lose some of its status, even if the fact that it is the official language of Malta and Ireland will guarantee its maintenance as one official language of many.

Minority languages, and others such as Cornish, have all benefited from UK and devolved government support, but that has been reinforced by their status as recognised minority languages within the EU. The fear is that Brexit will lead to less support, and especially less money, for education, promotion and cultural aspects, and this is particularly worrying because minority UK languages are found in areas of fragile economic status (Irish Gaelic, Scottish Gaelic and Welsh).

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### WHAT BREXIT MEANS FOR MINORITY LANGUAGES

Maurice Smith of *The New European* reports on why leaving the EU will endanger minority languages.

The state of the languages of the British Isles has always fluctuated with time. However, Brexit could potentially be the biggest threat of all. The situation is particularly fragile in Ireland, where the status of Irish Gaelic is politically sensitive – in recent months, the two main parties, the DUP and Sinn Fein, have come into conflict over the latter’s insistence that Irish become the devolved government’s second official language. Furthermore, Scots Gaelic and Welsh have become increasingly important in terms of preservation, education and broadcasting investment. However, as Scotland moves towards another referendum on independence, we can expect more conflict on this issue.

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### TAIWAN PLANS TO PUT TAIWANESE ON PAR WITH MANDARIN

Nikhil Sonnad of *Quartz* reports on Taiwan’s attempt to increase linguistic inclusivity.

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If passed, the new rule would allow areas with large numbers of Taiwanese speakers to use it in official documents and legal affairs. The government will also have to be obliged to teach Taiwanese and other indigenous languages in schools, and develop writing systems and dictionaries in these languages.

The Taiwanese language, will soon have equal status to Mandarin in Taiwan.

**SOURCE:**

**SOURCE:**
https://www.theneweuropean.co.uk/culture/tongue-twisting-what-brexit-means-for-minority-languages-1-4954477
Finns losing their language

Frederika Fellman, Lilia Makashova and Viktoriia Zhuhan from *The Guardian* report on how Sweden Finns are losing their language.

Comprising 7% of the Swedish population, the Sverigefinnar are, according to Sari Pesonen of the Institute of Slavic and Baltic languages at Stockholm University, in “severe danger” of losing their language. “The signals we get from teachers, for example, they tell us that the situation is bad. Something needs to be done, and quickly.” The figures confirm this fear – of approximately 6,000 children entitled to Finnish mother tongue education in Gothenburg alone, only 177 are receiving it.

“Losing your language is like losing your soul,” said Tomas Hänninen, a school teacher in Gothenburg. “It’s not like losing a country, but losing your identity.”

“I do not want to move my daughter to Finland for her to go to Finnish-language pre-school, but that’s exactly what I have to do today if nothing changes fast,” wrote Sonja Jakobsson, under an online petition in the summer calling on Gothenburg council to deliver on bilingual schooling rights.

“Swedish-speaking people have an obvious place in Finnish society and are given clear Swedish-language schooling in Finland – why is it not the same for Finns here?”

These developments are a major reversal of policies put in place after the fall of Communism in ex-Soviet countries, when tensions between majorities and minorities were high due to certain elements of the latter enjoying special privileges during Communist rule. These policies were implemented through the Oslo Recommendations, established 20 years ago by the OSCE in order to increase the chances of joining institutions such as the Council of Europe, NATO and the EU – but more than 25 years later, nationalist and anti-Russian sentiment seem to have reduced the perceived importance of multilingual, minority education in these countries.

Language takes on a political dimension again in ex-Soviet countries

Frank Elbers of *muftah.org* reports on recent linguistic developments in Latvia and Ukraine.

Latvia recently amended its education law in order to remove Russian language teaching in its bilingual Russian-Latvian curriculum by 2021, despite protests by several pro-Russian organisations, and the fact that there are 641,000 Russians in the Latvian capital, Riga.

Meanwhile, in Ukraine, the parliament has introduced an education law which makes Ukrainian the primary language in all public secondary schools and restricted the teaching of minority languages such as Hungarian, Polish and Romanian. This was not received well by the Council of Europe, which concluded that “the strong domestic and international criticism drawn especially by the provisions reducing the scope of education in minority languages seems justified.”

FINNISH UNDER THREAT IN SWEDEN


LANGUAGE TAKES ON A POLITICAL DIMENSION AGAIN IN EX-SOVIET COUNTRIES

SOURCE: [https://muftah.org/post-soviet-language-politics/](https://muftah.org/post-soviet-language-politics/)
The geographical region generally known as the British Isles has long been the topic of a semantic disagreement. While many inhabitants accept the title as politically neutral—especially in Great Britain—the name is hotly contested by some in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Because of the ongoing dispute, for the purposes of this feature, the region is referred to as the Anglo-Celtic Isles. However, we are aware of other proposed reclassifications for the region, and are open to all opinions on the subject! Email hayley@ogmios.org to have your say on the naming dispute.

SPOTLIGHT:
ANGLO-Celtic Isles
I am one of the founders of an international committee about cities, in Moscow in 2005. It’s one of 30 international committees of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) - a partner of UNESCO. Both organisations are, to quote from ICOM’s manifesto: “committed to the promotion and protection of natural and cultural heritage, present and future, tangible and intangible.”

To me, the greatest intangible heritage is language, that which defines us as human beings. To quote Irina Bukova, the former UNESCO Director General: “Language loss entails an impoverishment of humanity.”

Neither ICOM nor UNESCO has neglected our intangible heritage. There is, for example, ICOM’s International Journal of Intangible heritage. It’s admirable, though with limited coverage of languages, as if saving some craft tradition is more important than saving the language of those who preserve the tradition. There are various conventions and statements from UNESCO and ICOM, and of course, more specifically, there is UNESCO’s Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger, which makes for enlightening, if alarming reading. Then there is the work of other agencies such as the Council of Europe. There are also one or two small museums devoted to languages.

However, you know all this, and better than I do. What I have been doing, because of my position in ICOM and my contacts in UNESCO (one of whom has been responsible for World Heritage sites), is trying to raise awareness. There are many possibilities: another ICOM international committee is one (it does not have to be about something tangible like mine), or a standing committee, of which there are a number in ICOM - I’m the vice-chair of one which funds ICOM’s international bodies and I’d love to fund one on languages. Though whether a committee is the right way to go about things, I am not so sure.

Another possibility is the ICOM Red List of Cultural Objects at Risk. It does great work in raising awareness, identifying objects at risk and alerting those who can actually do something. In my view, a Red List of endangered languages could, perhaps, be effective, as a complement and continuing update of UNESCO’s Atlas. Documenting languages before they die has its merits, but a language only exits if it is spoken out there in the streets. It’s not an artefact which can be put in a glass case. The Red List can be a spur to action.

Above all, in my view, it’s about getting language higher up on the agenda. Both ICOM and UNESCO have new, and quite exceptional people in charge, and can be receptive.

What I would like ultimately is for languages to be given the same status as tangible objects, from the Sistine Chapel to the Great Barrier Reef. We have rightly been enraged with the destruction of Palmyra and other ancient cities and artefacts. Yet, a language dies and we pass by on the other side.

The Welsh for snow is “eira”, which is far more evocative to me, but maybe not to a non-Welsh speaker. Difference is everything, it helps make us human. I think that is as good a reason as any for preserving language. Languages are the ultimate exercise in diversity.

So, finally, I am asking my colleagues in UNESCO and ICOM to put languages much higher up on the agenda. It can be done and we can work out the steps. Both organisations could help complement the great work of the Foundation.

- Ian Jones

MY NATIVE LANGUAGE, WELSH, IS DYING AS I WRITE. A LINGERING DEATH ADMITTEDLY.

- Ian Jones
When compared to trade deals and worker rights, minority language issues appear to be considerably lower than other conversations on the negotiating agenda for the United Kingdom’s exit of the European Union.

With 11 languages indigenous to the UK inclusive of sign languages, there is justifiable concern among minority language communities that Brexit might undo the positive steps made toward supporting these languages over the last decades. And while the Crown dependencies never have been part of the EU, Britain’s exit from the EU may still have a knock-on effect on their three indigenous languages. Political upheaval could lead to Britain distancing itself from European agreements intended to protect languages for which the country is responsible. Rather than through the EU, however, the charter is made through the Council of Europe, an international organisation with 47 member states, working to uphold human rights in Europe. The Council of Europe enforces the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty in which Prime Minister Theresa May agreed to keep the UK earlier this year. Because the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages is not directly associated with the EU, a Brexit thankfully does not render the agreement void.

Whether Brexit will have negative consequences for British minority languages and other human rights obligations of the UK remains to be seen. “At one time it didn’t look like it, given that the antagonism was towards the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg and not to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg,” says Professor Matthew MacIver, a member of the Committee of Experts at the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. “Our work in minority languages relates to the latter. But, as the process has developed, it is almost impossible to predict what will eventually happen.”

Treaties aside, it is also true that Britain has allocated significant European project funding to some of its minority languages under EU membership. In 2016, an open letter backed by the European Language Equality Network expressed concerns that minority language speakers are already “often overlooked by Government policy makers,” opposing the fact that they had been neglected so far in the Brexit debate.

The group argues that “the European Union Lisbon Treaty and the attached Charter of Fundamental Rights means that respect for linguistic and cultural diversity and the prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of language is European Union primary law,” with concerns that following Brexit, minority language groups in the UK will “be excluded from the rights shared by European citizens.”

The letter continues: “We would furthermore be at the mercy of governments that have shown neither the interest nor the desire to protect and promote the rights of speakers of our nations and regions’ languages, and have throughout much of our shared history conducted aggressive language policies designed to eradicate our languages.”

IS BREXIT BAD NEWS FOR BRITAIN’S MINORITY LANGUAGES?

A call for a localised approach to minority languages in post-Brexit Britain.

“We would be at the mercy of governments that have throughout much of our shared history conducted aggressive language policies designed to eradicate our languages.”

(Source: Council of Europe)
“Neither would we have access to European language project funding, which would be detrimental to non-governmental and educational bodies. Leaving would impede our young people’s prospects and employability; European funding has offered vital investment for many of our communities’ economies. The EU has been, and can be further still, a great bastion of hope for the minoritised languages of our countries.

“At no point under the current Brexit debate has there been any informed deliberation concerning the future of the lesser used indigenous languages of these islands. We fear that Brexit would lead to an insecure future for our communities, as the UK Government’s recent abolition of funding for the Cornish language demonstrates. Being a part of a heterogeneous European Union with its robust congregation of minority and majority cultures allows for a better understanding and protection of our own languages.”

Potential loss of the monetary benefits to an EU membership is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the consequences of Brexit for minority languages. Living in a sovereign country with a long history of minority language oppression, many non-English nationals have felt their cultural interests were best represented under EU membership. Anti-Irish sentiment – or Hibernophobia – was rife throughout much of the last millennium, and is documented as early as the 12th century. And discriminatory practices in education, like the Welsh Not – an object teachers passed between children caught speaking Welsh at school, the last of whom would be punished – contributed to the language’s decline.

“People still feel a sense of identity to and a feeling of protection towards their mother languages.”

(Source: Raul Mee)
And alongside its murky past as the language of colonialism, the technological revolution supporting English as history’s most widely-accessible lingua franca is of course having an undeniable impact on minority languages, which are falling out of use at an unprecedented rate worldwide. “We have, of course, specific problems in the UK, given that English is now the international language. English can be seen as the great enemy of minority languages.” says MacIver.

And with three-quarters of the British population unable to confidently speak any language other than English, concerns from minority language groups that their languages will lose further support are not unfounded. “Nevertheless, our minority languages are still alive in the UK and it is encouraging to see the efforts that are presently being made in Cornwall and the Isle of Man to keep Cornish and Manx alive. People still feel a sense of identity to and a feeling of protection towards their mother languages.”

Despite fears of project funding cuts, Brexit may eventually lead to the reinforcement of individual identities in Islands of the North Atlantic, amid the potential localisation of government policies. Indeed, it’s possible the ‘great repeal’ of European legislation could bring opportunity for strengthening growth of minority languages, but only if there are strong voices pushing for their prioritisation in Westminster during the process. An individualised approach for every affected minority language – matching, or improving upon, the support that minority languages have received while the UK has been part of the EU – will support these areas. In order to satisfy minority language speakers, the issue will likely need to be brought to the forefront of the Brexit agenda, and councils will have to exploit the opportunities a more localised governing force can bring.

Given the “devolved nature of the UK”, MacIver says it is difficult to comment specifically on the attitude of the Westminster Government, although he suspects “that activists in Cornwall and the Isle of Man would argue that they are not as well-served and supported by Westminster as Welsh and Gaelic are in Wales and Scotland.”

Tackling EU bureaucracy could offer a more individuated approach to the different minority languages in the UK. In Cornwall, the EU’s oft-criticised bumbling is just one reason cited for the overwhelming vote to exit the EU. And, with the 2016 cuts for government support of the Cornish language in mind, strongly promoting the relevant minority languages in areas with populations that report feeling culturally hegemonised – as part of a larger effort to support the individual needs of local cultures – might support a Brexit that simultaneously satisfies the voters and instils increased trust in the governing bodies.

But, while this approach might work in the areas that voted to leave the EU, what about regions that did not vote for Brexit, and whose people have reaped the benefits of an EU membership? Unable to vote in the election due to their non-membership of the EU, Crown dependency language communities are at the mercy of mainland policy. Similarly, Scotland – whose Gaelic has received significant government funding under EU membership – voted with an overwhelming majority to remain. “In Scotland, there has been huge political support from all parties over the years to Gaelic, my own mother tongue,” MacIver explains. “To a great extent, that can also be said of Welsh.” Whether regional parties are in support of or in opposition to Brexit, there is little doubt that promotion of indigenous languages in all affected areas will demonstrate governmental respect for cultural heritage and history.

Despite limited discussion in mainstream media regarding the impact of Brexit on most minority languages, the urgent affair of the Irish language in Northern Ireland has been widely reported. With 58% of the Northern Irish voters in support of remaining in the EU, the region is in a precarious position with regard to the potential impact of Brexit on the Good Friday Agreement. Two decades on, Northern Ireland remains a divided society, and a hard Brexit could have serious implications for the people living there.
Many people in the region report feeling that Brexit demonstrates just how out-of-touch British policy is with Northern Irish issues, and regional support for an Irish reunification is not insignificant, but is currently not supported by a majority. In the 2007 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 36% of respondents identified as ethnically Irish, but as only a small minority of native Gaelige speakers make up the general population there, at present the use of the Irish language is still banned in courts. The Irish language is just one aspect of a much more complex conversation, and has as a result become highly politicised. “[It is] in a difficult position at the moment,” says MacIver. “In fact, it is one of the real issues in the Brexit negotiations. Recognition of Gaelige is at the very heart of Brexit negotiations.”

The current language controversy arose from the 2006 St Andrews Agreement, in which the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin agreed to terms for the introduction of a power-sharing government in Northern Ireland. At this time, the two parties discussed an Irish Language Act, and a section of the agreement states:

“The Government will introduce an Irish Language Act reflecting on the experience of Wales and Ireland and work with the incoming Executive to enhance and protect the development of the Irish language.”

However, in 2017, DUP member Edwin Poots asserted that “The DUP at no point has ever agreed to establish an Irish Language Act with the UK government, with the Irish government, with Sinn Féin or anybody else.” And indeed, the agreement was made with the British government, rather than the DUP, and subsequent legislation is at odds with it. Following the St Andrews Agreement, the British government legislated a language strategy, but did not pursue the Irish Language Act any further. With Irish language promotional organisation Conradh na Gaeilge calling on the British government to fulfil its obligations to implement an Irish language act earlier this year, the language still represents a major cause of political stalemate in the Brexit debate in Northern Ireland.

According to MacIver, recognition of the Irish language is one of the key issues in the Brexit debate.

It seems that the only thing certain in the Brexit debate is that nothing is certain. However, the consequences for endangered languages may not be as disastrous as many predict. There is no doubt that the economic benefits of EU membership for minority languages will be missed. Despite this, there’s room for governing bodies to step up and take local cultural needs seriously, including specific linguistic ones, and make sure that those who feel unheard are listened to more carefully in the future. “My own private view is that the UK will continue to honour its Human Rights commitments,” MacIver tells me. “Some of the signatories of the Charter for Regional and Minority Languages are not members of the EU. So, there would not be anything unusual about the UK continuing with its commitments to minority languages in particular and to human rights in general.”

While strong language policies won’t reconcile Britain’s history of oppressing its non-English communities, a future UK could not be unified without taking into account the importance of maintaining these languages and cultures. “The contribution of these languages to any society is immense. They all carry a history, a literature, a way of life and a heritage that can only enrich our world. Monolingualism is not the road to a diverse and well-rounded society,” says MacIver.

“There would not be anything unusual about the UK continuing with its commitments to minority languages in particular and to human rights in general.”
There are around 6,500 languages in the world. 96% of these are spoken by only 4% of the world’s population. These peoples are also threatened.

**Why does this matter?**

When a language dies a culture dies and a way of looking at the world is lost.

The languages most under threat belong to indigenous peoples in areas where crucial traditional knowledge is passed on through language.

**Is language loss inevitable?**

Like many endangered species, languages are under threat from human activities – urbanisation and the destruction of traditional ways of life, migration to other cultures in search of employment, discriminatory pressures from governments which suppress the use of minority languages.

**I am only one person, what can I do?**

By supporting the Foundation for Endangered Languages, a UK-based charity, you are supporting efforts to maintain, preserve and encourage languages. The Foundation exists to support the revitalisation of threatened languages by supporting work that is based in the communities concerned.

**Get involved!**

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The Foundation exists to:

- raise awareness of endangered languages
- support their use in the home, in education, in the media and in social, cultural and economic life
- monitor linguistic policies and to seek to influence appropriate authorities

Through the first twenty years of the Foundation’s existence, its programme of grants has supported numerous revitalization projects all over the world in a range of countries, each of them intended to benefit the speech communities directly. Amongst the work that the Foundation has supported are:

Publication of a dictionary for the speakers of Tangam, in Kugging village, Arunachal Pradesh, India. Our FEL grant covered the cost of printing 200 copies of the dictionary, with a grammatical sketch and a small collection of texts.

Production of a Botanical Dictionary in the Nungon language of Papua New Guinea. Community members collected specimens of rainforest plants, entering details of the plants on a database, using a Nungon taxonomy, thus passing on valuable information about medicinal and other plants.

Supporting the world’s threatened languages since 1996
Each year the Foundation holds a conference in a different country, with the involvement of local institutions and communities, on a particular theme related to language endangerment. The Foundation’s grant funds come from membership subscriptions and from the sale of the Proceedings of these conferences.

The Foundation has actively collaborated with UNESCO in accord with its Convention on Intangible Heritage.

The Foundation publishes its Ogmios journal three times a year for the membership.

For further information about membership and the Foundation’s activities please, visit its website www.ogmios.org

Production of illustrated dictionaries in the Si’ban language, spoken on the headwaters of the Baran River in Sarawak, Malaysia. The dictionaries represent two stages: one an illustrated dictionary mostly of nouns, and another covering verbs, pronouns and other words with typical greetings and conversation.

Continuing documentation of the Ksêddêj language, which has about 350 speaker in 5 villages in the state of Mato Grosso, Brazil. Narratives, interviews and songs have been recorded and a dictionary produced for use by the community. Native speakers are being trained to continue this work.

Asmat, Akram, Hayat, Sifatullh from Dameli group, Khowar, Pakistan. Photograph: Fakhruddin Akhunzada

Miriwoong speaker Minnie Lumia telling a dreamtime story about the Spillway area to Agnes Armstrong and others. Photograph: Christina Murmann

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