The Canadian Language Museum, Toronto. See the interview with the Director, Elaine Gold, in this issue.

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1. Editorial

Our special feature in this issue relates to our sister organization FEL Canada, and more particularly to the way that country’s indigenous languages are presented to its public. We have an interview with the director of the Canadian Language Museum, which, as you will see, was an idea that preceded the formation of FEL Canada which was founded when we held our own annual conference at Carleton University seven years ago.

As I write these lines at the end of January 2021, the world is still locked in a grim struggle with the Covid-19 pandemic. Two issues ago, in June 2020, we attempted a round-up of news culled from various sources about how the pandemic was affecting indigenous communities, many members of whom have vulnerable immune systems, and the likely prospects for the survival of their languages. The pandemic is still with us, wreaking terrible destruction in multilingual countries where the public is not always adequately informed about Covid-19 and how to combat it. It’s time for another look at the current situation, which you will find in this issue.

Despite all the restrictions the pandemic imposed, FEL managed to hold a successful conference in September 2020, based remotely on UCL in London, and in terms of attendance it was our best ever! Our Committee is being cautious this year, and arranging our 2021 conference for as late in the year as possible – provisionally it will be held in Tirana, Albania, in December 2021 – exact date and venue yet to be confirmed. We are determined that it should be a face-to-face meeting once again, though we will not risk endangering the lives of supporters of endangered languages.

And in conjunction with this, we also plan to hold a Jubilee event in December, probably in London and a week before the Tirana conference, to celebrate 25 years of FEL’s existence. We hope that as many as possible of our members can take part. And for those attending in person, the two events in Europe within a week of each other could be a double attraction for our intercontinental members.

Chris Moseley

2. Development of the Foundation

FEL Subcommittees on Regulations and the FEL Jubilee

Two subcommittees are meeting regularly at the moment and reporting to the Executive Committee: one called the Regulations Subcommittee, aiming to overhaul the Foundation’s constitution, manifesto and regulations, including voting procedure for committee elections; and another to plan for the Foundation’s 25th anniversary celebration. In view of the current pandemic, we aim to hold the jubilee event, face to face, toward the end of 2021, preferably a week before the 25th annual conference, which is planned for Tirana, Albania, in the second week of December. Further details to follow in the next issue of Ogmios and on the www.ogmios.org web-site.

FEL grants announced for 2021

It has been decided to award 7 grants to the top candidates among the applicants for FEL grants this year. The total sum awarded is 6599 US dollars or 4735GBP. The grant winners this year come from the USA, Bolivia, Tajikistan, Nigeria, India and Australia (fieldwork in China). Congratulations to them all.

FEL blog

Don’t forget that the FEL web-site www.ogmios.org invites blog postings from members. You can send your blog posting to the blog co-ordinator, Cassie Smith-Christmas, at cassiesmithchristmas@gmail.com – and why not browse through the interesting postings we already have on the web-site? Here is the latest offering, released to coincide with International Mother Tongue Day on 21st February: Hi Everyone!

Just to wish you all a ‘Happy International Mother Language Day’- as per tradition, we have a new post up on the FEL blog today. Given these dark times, I wanted this year’s to be especially uplifting, and I think this one on Occitan by Dr. Sara Brennan (whom some of you may remember from the Soillse/FEL conference in Glasgow in 2016) does just that:


Do share this link far and wide!
3. Endangered Languages in the News

The Canadian Language Museum

An interview with its Director, Elaine Gold

Elaine Gold initiated the founding of the Canadian Language Museum and oversees its operations. She has a Ph.D. in Linguistics, an MA in Art History, and strong experience in arts administration and curatorial work. She taught Linguistics at the University of Toronto for over twenty years. She has lived in central, western and northern Canada, and is dedicated to promoting the country’s rich linguistic heritage. She is the recipient of the 2019 National Achievement Award from the Canadian Linguistic Association for her work with the Canadian Language Museum. She agreed to answer some questions from your Editor.

Can you tell us something about your career path to becoming Director of the Canadian Language Museum? Most immediately, it was my work as a linguist that led me to founding and directing the Canadian Language Museum. In my teaching I was particularly interested in languages and language variation across Canada and I had initiated a seminar course about the languages of Canada. However, I came to linguistics later in life. Before that I had completed a Master’s Degree in Art History, and had worked in several museums and as an arts administrator for dance companies. This experience with museums and with non-profit arts organizations gave me some preparation for leading a museum about language.

Was the Museum your own idea? What inspired it? Yes, having a museum about languages in Canada was my idea. I was inspired by a posting on Linguist List in 2007 that announced that a group in Denmark was considering setting up a language museum. Before that, I had never heard of a museum about languages and my immediate reaction to that posting was that, of any country, Canada needed a language museum.

I know that your Museum fosters interest in both First Nations and immigrant languages. Is your own background in linguistics in one of those fields? I had done quite a bit of research on the Yiddish language and on the influence of Yiddish on Canadian English. I had also done some research on Bungi, a contact language, no longer spoken, that developed in western Canada from interaction between speakers of Cree and speakers of Scots English. I had not done extensive research in other immigrant or Indigenous languages, although I have taken classes in Inuktitut, Italian and Japanese.

How do you attract visitors to the museum? I notice that you have travelling exhibitions, so you are prepared to travel to other parts of that vast country of yours. Does that work well? Our museum is located on a beautiful campus of York University, Glendon College. We do not get large numbers of tourists because it is not in the centre of the city where most tourists visit. When we have special events we are able to attract quite a few people from across the city to our gallery. However, for the most part, those who visit the museum are part of the university community or live nearby. The way that we reach a very wide audience is through our travelling exhibits. These exhibits have indeed travelled from coast to coast to coast – from Victoria, British Columbia in the west, to St. John’s Newfoundland in the east, and north to Moose Factory on James Bay. When we first started the museum, I assumed that I would always travel with the exhibits and set them up. However, it turns out that the exhibits are fairly simple to set up and so for the most part we ship them out to the host venues, and I stay in Toronto.

How much are non-Indigenous schoolchildren in Canada taught about their country’s linguistic history? That’s a very good question. I think on the whole, very little. While non-Indigenous schoolchildren are learning more about the history of treaties and residential schools, and the woeful effects of residential schools on Indigenous languages, they are not taught much about the languages themselves. Most Canadians I meet are extremely surprised to learn that there are over 60 Indigenous languages in 12 different language families. Of course, all Canadian schoolchildren are well aware that there are two official languages, and are taught both, at least to some extent. So they do learn a bit about the history of the French and English languages in Canada, and how they have affected Canadian society.

As to the history of other immigrant languages in Canada – it would depend where the schoolchildren are living. In a multicultural urban setting like Toronto, students would be very aware of the many different languages spoken in the city, even if that information is not part of the formal curriculum. I would think that all school children are at some point taught about multiculturalism in Canada, which must include multilingualism.

How much government involvement is there in your Museum? Does it depend on government funding? Does the Museum have a part to play in shaping language policy at the national level?
I recently calculated that less than 4% of the Museum’s modest budget comes from government funding. To date, as a museum about languages, we have fallen between the cracks of government funding. We depend completely on donations from our members and sponsors. Glendon College has very generously given us the gallery space, which is a huge contribution. We have benefitted enormously from the work of volunteers and of students placed at the Museum for experiential learning.

The Museum has participated in two symposia at Glendon College that have focussed on national Indigenous Language policy. While we are not directly involved in political lobbying, we support efforts to create policies that will ensure the maintenance and revitalization of Canada’s Indigenous languages.

**What are your plans for the Museum in the future, once we all get over the pandemic?**

We are very much looking forward to reopening the Museum and getting the exhibits back on the road! Our immediate plan is to launch our eighth travelling exhibit ‘Sign Languages of Canada’ and to begin touring it to both deaf and hearing audiences across the country. We identified six sign languages used in Canada, three of which can be considered to be endangered: Maritime Sign Language, Inuit Sign Language, and Prairie Indian Sign Language. In mid-2021 we plan to host a wonderful art exhibit entitled ‘Anthem: 15 Expressions of Canadian Identity’ and through it initiate widespread community discussion about the Canadian anthem – what it means to Canadians, which words are most meaningful, and which more challenging.

Our five-year plan includes new travelling exhibits about Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe), Italian in Canada, Chinese in Canada, and Indigenous-settler contact languages: Michif, Bungi and Chinook Jargon. We hope to continue improving the visitor experience to the Museum and to expand our website, as well as to work towards a more secure financial basis.

**I see from the blogs on the Museum’s web-site just how widely your interests range over the languages spoken and signed in Canada. They make me wonder: do you get a lot of inquiries from Canadians trying to trace their linguistic heritage?**

We more frequently get inquiries asking when we might be creating an exhibit about a specific immigrant language. As we create only one new exhibit each year, we can’t possibly represent each immigrant language individually. However, we would be delighted to advise groups on how they could go about creating their own exhibits. For example, we were recently approached for advice on setting up exhibits for Acadian French and for Gaelic.

**Are you able to direct interested people to courses they can take in their heritage languages?**

We rarely get asked those questions! Most community members seem to have access to places for learning their heritage languages.

**The Museum is about to celebrate a milestone, a big anniversary. Looking back, do you think the Museum is a product of its time? Would it have been possible to create a museum like yours, say, twenty-five years earlier?**

On the one hand, Multiculturalism had already been adopted as a government policy 40 years ago, and so twenty-five years ago there could have been some openness to a museum about Canada’s multilingualism. However, I think the Museum is very much a product of its time. It is only recently that the people in the Museum community and in the wider public have begun to appreciate the importance of intangible heritage. In addition, the Museum was created during the time that Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission was carrying out its research on the effects of the Residential School system and publishing its Calls for Action concerning Indigenous culture and languages. There is therefore more public awareness now of the need for reconciliation and therefore a great receptiveness to exhibits and programs about Indigenous languages and culture.

**Would you advise other multilingual countries to set up Museums like yours? Are you seeing that already happening?**

There are actually very few countries that support bilingualism and encourage multiculturalism in the way that Canada does. Most of the language museums around the world (and there are not many) focus on a single national language or writing system. There are also a few that present languages and writing systems of the world, but I don’t know of any others that focus on the multilingualism within their own country. I know of a group in Italy that are considering creating a museum like ours, that will focus on the multilingual nature of Italy that has resulted from recent waves of migration.

**Do you collaborate with international institutions?**

I am very interested in collaborating with international institutions. I am on the board of the International Network of Language Museums, that was set up in 2016 and spearheaded by the Centre for Norwegian Language and
Literature. There have been a couple of gatherings of language museums in Europe and in December 2019, a book was published based on presentations at a Florence workshop, entitled ‘Museums of Language and the Display of Intangible Cultural Heritage. This is the first book ever published about language museums and contains a chapter about the Canadian Language Museum’s unique touring exhibits program.

The Foundation for Endangered Languages held a conference in Ottawa in 2014. That was when our sister organization FEL Canada was established, and it has gone its own independent way. Is it collaborating with your museum on any projects?

The Canadian Language Museum displayed its exhibit ‘Speaking the Inuit Way’ at the Ottawa FEL conference, and I have been in touch with FEL Canada since that time.

How do you cater for schoolchildren and younger visitors?

We can adapt the guided tours of our exhibits to the age and interests of visiting school groups. We have a number of materials and activities available for children, such as worksheets to learn the syllabic writing system and scavenger hunts for information on the exhibit panels.

What would you say is unique about Canada’s language situation?

I think that Canada is unique in its openness to bilingualism and multilingualism. We are federally a bilingual country, but there is quite a bit of variation provincially. For example, the North West Territories has 11 official languages: French, English and 9 Indigenous languages. In addition, our large cities have immigrants, and immigrant languages from around the world. Canadians pride themselves on their openness to other cultures.

Here’s a list of the Canadian Language Museum’s travelling exhibits:

- Canadian English, Eh?;
- Speaking the Inuit Way;
- Le français au Canada;
- Cree: The People’s Language;
- A Tapestry of Voices: Celebrating Canada’s Languages;
- Read Between the Signs: 150 Years of Language in Toronto;
- Beyond Words: Dictionaries and Indigenous Languages;
- Sign Languages in Canada (2020)

They have published an article about the Museum and we always have copies of their newsletters on display in the Museum. I look forward to future collaborations with FEL Canada.
Travails and travels of a field-worker: the story of the Lawas flight

Jey Burkhardt, one of our FEL grant-holders, has been doing fieldwork in Sabah, Malaysia, in these difficult times of Covid. Along with her grant report to FEL, she submitted this little personal story of the travails of a field-worker in the cause of endangered languages:

Lawas, Wednesday, 7 October 2020.

I was anxious to return to Miri to catch my flight to Kuala Lumpur. I was stuck in Lawas, where all borders for surface travel were closed – Sabah to the north and Brunei to the south. I packed my luggage with my equipment and my personal effects, plus 15 kgs of rice given by various villagers as this is a customary gift for guests in the Lun Bawang culture (expensive organic black hill rice). I was also a courier for a few villagers who wanted me to bring baskets, bottles of jam and pickles, mountain salt and rice for their relatives in the city. That made my check-in luggage weighing as much as I was (50++ kgs). I said my goodbyes at 6 am and got my transport to take me to the airport to put my name on the waiting list.

Waited for the flight, flight arrived, and flight left. I did not manage to get into that flight. Lugged my luggage back to the homestay and after 2 hours, I went back to the airport. Flight came, flight left, and I was still at the airport. I looked around, people were bringing life chicken in bamboo baskets, cooked food still warm for consumption in Miri, large boxes, and lots of farewell bidders. I lugged my bag to and fro between the airport and home. After the fourth time and feeling exhausted by the sweltering heat, the 50++ kg luggage carrying, and the sheer tiredness of unproductivity, I begged the airport staff to put me on the fourth flight. The airport lady said, “Sorry Miss, you and your luggage are too heavy”. They weighted me and my luggage again and finally told me that I may need to leave some of the things behind if I wanted to fly on the fifth flight. I agreed. Finally, I got on the last flight of the day. The sun was beginning to set, and there I saw the most amazing sunset. I looked around with tears and snot (still concealed behind my mask). The other passengers had their eyes shut. I wasn’t sure if they were praying, or sleeping (reminds me of another story, for another time), or perhaps avoiding eye-contact with a screaming lady on the flight. Finally, I landed at Miri airport.

That evening, I was recounting the event to my Lun Bawang brother, Mutang Tagal. My local name is Bulan Tagal. He responded, “Oh Bulan, don’t worry. There are no mountains on the flight route between Lawas and Miri. If anything happens, we will find you.” This information processed in my traumatised brain as, “Don’t worry, it there was a plane crash, we would find your body.” The longest day of my life ended with a good dose of local humour. I had a hearty laughter, a warm meal, and a thankful heart. And, yes, I managed to bring all the 50++ kgs safely to Miri and beyond.

Twin-propeller flight in rural Sarawak
Phrasebook for 19th-century English tourists in Wales found

By Steven Morris, from the Guardian (UK), 24 November 2020

In the 19th century the wilds of Wales began to draw the intrepid traveller but there were sometimes communication breakdowns between visitors and Welsh-speaking locals.

A 182-year-old phrasebook, compiled to help English tourists speak with what the volume, uncomfortably, calls the Welsh “peasantry”, has emerged from archives in Cardiff.

First printed in London in 1838, The Welsh Interpreter is billed as “a collection of useful and familiar phrases” for visitors who “may wish to make themselves understood… during their rambles through Wales”.

The guide includes a wide range of phrases that the author deems to be essential for the traveller roaming the hills and valleys, including: “My good friend, is this the way to…?” (Fy nghyfll addfeway, ai hon y y ffordd i…?), and, “Are you a Welshman?” (Ai Cymro ydy chwi?).

Tips for English tourists who choose to explore the Welsh mountainside include being able to explain (or understand): “You are giddy because you look down” (Yr ydych wedi pendroni o rhan i chwi edrych i lawr).

It was written by Thomas Roberts of Pwllheli, north Wales, a businessman and a co-founder of London’s Cymreigyddion Society, a social, cultural and debating society for Welsh expats.

The hardback version belonged to the Welsh barrister and author Enoch Salisbury, who died in 1890, and whose life collection of Welsh phrasebooks and textbooks is available online and in person at Cardiff University’s Special Collections and Archives service.

Sara Huws, who works at the special collections, said it helped tell the story of early tourism to Wales before it became the important industry it is today. “It shows there was a desire for visitors to have conversations with Welsh people.”

Palawa kani and the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre

Introduced by the editor

It’s generally assumed that the indigenous languages of Tasmania were all extinct by the late 19th century, leaving very little trace of their existence. So I was taught in my school days in Australia. However, that is not strictly true. The following is an account of Palawa Kani, the reconstructed language of Tasmania, a hybrid language of sorts, regenerated from several
sources but indigenous to the state. It is promoted by the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, an organization set up over forty years ago to defend the interests and culture of the descendants of Tasmania’s Aboriginal population, and the following information about it is taken from its web-site.
language@tacinc.com.au

Tasmanian Aborigines did not grow up speaking our language as a first language – there is no shame in that. As a consequence of the devastating impacts of invasion and colonisation on every aspect of our lives, we have had to deliberately and arduously restore our language to its spoken life. After two decades, Aboriginal people of all ages can now speak palawa kani, the language of Tasmanian Aborigines, and children learn it from an early age. Read how we, like many other indigenous people around the world, and using the same methods, have brought our language back to life.
The Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre is acknowledged both within and outside the Aboriginal community as the body with responsibility for that work, conducted by the palawa kani Language Program across the state since the early 1990s. The palawa kani Program was among the first in the country in which Aboriginal people ourselves learnt the necessary linguistic methods which have since enabled us to do all the retrieval work on our language. palawa kani means ‘Tasmanian Aborigines speak’; it is the only Aboriginal language in lutruwita (Tasmania) today.

There are no living speakers of the original Tasmanian languages and spoken records of the original sounds are limited to a few sounds (that can only just be heard) which were spoken by Fanny Cochrane Smith on the 1899 record on which she sang traditional songs.

Between 8 and 16 separate languages could have been spoken here originally; we will never really know. Some tribes had been wiped out by contact sicknesses even before full scale invasion and the languages continued to die away with the people.

Fortunately, remnants of many of those original languages were written down in wordlists by more than twenty different European recorders, starting from Cook’s visit in 1777 right through the colonial period. Most of these recorders were speakers of different regional dialects of English; another was a Scot, one a Danish, many were French.

Each of them attempted to reproduce the unfamiliar sounds they heard in the Aboriginal words through the spelling system of their own languages. Different recorders wrote different spellings for the same word, and individual recorders even wrote several different spellings for the same word, indicating they heard it on different occasions and from different Aboriginal speakers.

Their different records also show frequent disagreement and confusion about the meanings of the words, and about the area of origin of either the word or its Aboriginal speaker, and often both.

Most tragic of all, there aren’t enough words or information recorded of any of the original languages to rebuild any one of them exactly as it was. As a result, palawa kani combines words retrieved from as many the original languages as possible. This brings us to the first of several major misunderstandings:

Firstly, some people think if you select a word or words from a wordlist, which the recorders have said are from the same area, you have ‘Aboriginal words’ of a ‘local language’. But a word list, however well or poorly researched and compiled, is just that: a list of ‘words’, not a language. Furthermore, we have found through over a decade of historical and linguistic research that not all the information given by recorders about the areas or languages they said the words came from is reliable, and some is just plain wrong.

Secondly, you need to look further than published books and compilations of wordlists to find evidence for languages no longer spoken. A wealth of manuscript material from the colonial period is amassed in libraries and other institutions both in Australia and overseas, and this primary source material contains the first-hand observer accounts necessary for the scholarship required to retrieve evidence of sleeping languages.

These primary source records, together with a very few later audio recordings of Tasmanian Aboriginal speech, and language remembered into the twentieth century, are the sources for palawa kani. We were able to collect over two hundred words, phrases and song fragments from the memories of over thirty Aboriginal people throughout the twentieth century. Many of these duplicate each other, across different families and time periods, and from both mainland Tasmania and the Bass Strait islands. People living today still sing songs they learned as children, which they have taught their own children, and these are recognisably anglicised versions of songs recorded from Aborigines in the 1830s. The third misunderstanding is that the spellings that appear in various lists of recordings of Aboriginal lan-
guage are Aboriginal words. In fact, they are only approximations by those European scribes of many nationalities who tried to capture unfamiliar Aboriginal sounds in their own European spellings. Those spellings of words written by the recorders, and since published by Plomley, Ryan, and other historians and writers in their books, and which now appear everywhere – on websites, in museums and other interpretative displays – are not in themselves Aboriginal words.

Retrieving evidence of the original languages

Nonetheless, the recorders’ spellings are essential. Without them we do not have any representation of how our languages sounded, and what the words meant. It is possible to use those spellings (also called ‘recordings’ and ‘spelling variants’) as a starting point for bringing back the words they represent to as close to their original sounds and correct meaning as is possible.

It is fortunate that there were so many different recorders of the original languages because this allows us to compare spellings and meanings. The palawa kani Language Program team recognised however that the value of any recording is only as credible as the person who wrote it down. One of the Program’s earliest tasks was to determine the most accurate, hence most reliable, recorders of the sounds and meanings. This enabled us to identify the strengths and weaknesses of individual recorders. These factors are taken into account with every word revived.

A linguistic research project undertaken by the palawa kani Language Program in the 1990s confirmed what sounds existed in the original languages, and an alphabet was custom designed to represent those sounds, in line with the decisions made by Aboriginal community members at large statewide meetings.

To retrieve the authentic sounds of each individual word, those spellings from the recorders are analysed through a linguistic process called ‘reconstruction’.

‘Reconstruction’ is a linguistic term for a standard process used world-wide in the recovery of languages which are sleeping or no longer spoken; most of these are indigenous languages. Unfortunately this term is too easily misunderstood or wilfully misinterpreted. It does not mean ‘to construct’ a language, or ‘to create’ one – in the sense of just making things up from no evidence, or randomly selecting European spellings from wordlists, and claiming those words to be ‘language’. On the contrary, it is a rigorous process by which linguists and language workers recover the original sounds and meanings of the words of a language from all the recorded versions of the words.

The most likely sounds of each word are determined by comparing the spellings of all the recorded versions of that word. All the possible spellings are transcribed into the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), which contains symbols for every possible sound in human speech. Through this analysis, we are able to determine as closely as possible the original sounds recorders tried to represent with their spellings. Those sounds are then written in the palawa kani sound and spelling system (alphabet).

The word’s meaning is worked out in a similar way, by comparing the translations given for all the recorded versions of that word and cross checking these where possible with the reliability of the recorder/s, the context of when, where and from whom the recording was made, the accuracy of the language region given by the recorder/s, other historical information related to the subject of that word, and cultural knowledge still held within the Aboriginal community.

For words for places and tribes, further historical and geographical research is often also necessary, together with knowledge still held within the Aboriginal community today. Only this thorough research ensures that words revived are, as far as possible, from the original language of the place. Taking information from wordlists at face value is how mistakes are made. A good example of this is the name for the Mersey River. tulaminakali (spelt ‘tollumenergully’ by Robinson) is the proper name. This is a word from the Port Sorell language, the northern language spoken in that area, and shared with Robinson when he travelled with two Port Sorell tribespeople in April 1832 to the Mersey River and the ochre site on the Gog Range. tulaminakali shares characteristics with the name of that important ochre site – tulampanga – and with other northern language names for places in that area. Yet another word in its English spelling – ‘paranaple’ – has been selected to name the Devonport Arts Centre; a word with no information at all about its provenance, recorded at Wybalenna by a recorder who, by his own admission, did not know the people well nor where they were from; and which, in a related form is also recorded to mean the Tamar River.

Applying this methodical process to the evidence from all the historical sources gives us the best chance to revive authentic Tasmanian Aboriginal language, as close as possible to the way it sounded before contact with European or other languages. However, palawa kani is
It was also believed that the revived language would inevitably need to rely upon grammatical features of English, as little or no evidence was thought to remain of original grammar. This was the assessment of some earlier linguists, based on small samples of records in wordlists. Since that time, the painstaking examination, word by word, of the original languages for the first time ever, by the palawa kani Program, has revealed clear evidence in the original languages of consistent patterns of use and grammatical functions which are now continued in palawa kani: ways to make plurals, word orders different to English, a range of suffixes to denote specific functions, borrowings, adaptation of traditional words to talk about things newly introduced by Europeans, to list a few.

Such grammatical structure is an integral element of an actual functioning language; and cannot possibly be gleaned from grabbing isolated words from wordlists.

So when people trawl through Plomley’s Wordlist, the 1966 compilation of most (but not all) of the recorders’ wordlists, for any one ‘word’ they may find an array of multiple and differing spellings. Faced with this, most people looking for an Aboriginial language word, simply opt for the easiest to say or the one with the prettiest or most fanciful translation.

An example of this is a phrase that is sometimes used as a ‘greeting’ – ‘yah! tahwatty’a’. The ‘yah’ part is indeed a greeting, spelt in palawa kani as ‘ya’ (hello). However, ‘tahwatty’a’ is an English spelling of a word for ‘catarrh’ – a respiratory-type illness not common before invasion (spelt takwatja in palawa kani). All the five variants of this word were recorded by surgeon Joseph Milligan, at Wybalenna where the people were dying of these introduced illnesses; two of his five spellings he translated as ‘woe’s me’; two others as ‘cough’ and ‘catarrh’; and one, with ‘yah’ attached, as ‘greeting’. Milligan is one of the most unreliable recorders of translations, and the comparative examination of his five recordings confirms this, as they show that what Aborigines were saying was something like, ‘Hello, I’m sick/feeling miserable’; and not ‘Hello, how are you?’

So, some twenty years on, isn’t it wonderful that we can honour the memory of the original languages and their speakers—our Ancestors—by bringing back into use those words that have until recently been resting.

In recent years, much work has gone into digitising the language materials into a database that is made available in Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre facilities around the state. The multi-media materials catalogued include documents, supporting images and audio recordings.

The second phase of this digitising process has seen the creation of two language apps, allowing users to read and hear words, either singly or through building phrases. A record function also lets them note their improvement in speaking the language over time.

This takes place in structured learning environments, such as the Aboriginal Children’s Centre in Hobart, the luwutina Children’s Centre in Launceston and across the TAC’s child and family programs statewide.

4. Letter to the Editor

From Dr. David Daintree, Coalbrook, Tasmania

When I read recently that the Wallabies sang our National Anthem in an aboriginal language I was mildly sympathetic. It could do no harm, I thought, as long as the translation was accurate. It might even be a good and positive bonding exercise.

But alarm bells started to ring when I saw an interview on television. The attractive young woman soloist who led the singing had a distinctly European appearance, as did her mother, and it was clear that she was in no sense a native speaker (‘I learned the words,’ she said).

The other emerging concern was that the language they chose for the rendition, Eora, had been extinct for about 150 years. According to my admittedly superficial researches, it was the language of the Sydney basin, and it died out within two or three generations of the British ‘invasion’ in 1788.

There are claims that it has been reconstructed, but the
odd irony is that any such work would have to be done on the basis of notes made by a dead white man, Lt William Dawes of the Royal Marines. Dawes befriended members of the Eora people.

He took pains to record a number of their words. Needless to say the phonetic alphabet had not been invented then, so his transcriptions would be difficult to interpret with assurance. If I’m misinformed about any of this I’d be glad of correction.

But if it’s true we’re left to conclude that the version they sang is unlikely to have been in Eora at all (saving a Miracle!), and that if it had been our knowledge of that language is insufficient to allow us to judge whether the translation was accurate.

But the biggest question is why Eora? Why not a language such as Arunta/Arrernte which is still extant and has nearly 5,000 native speakers?

Possible answers to that question leap out at us, but I’m too timorous to go there. I confine myself to the observation that dominant opinion nowadays apparently prefers falsehood to truth, darkness to light, conflict to resolution.

Dr David Daintree AM
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PO Box 68, Colebrook, Tasmania, Australia

5. Reviews

An introduction to the languages of Moreton Bay: Yagarabul and its Djandewal dialect, and Moreton Islands Gowar.

(Wulara-Nguru historical language mapping project) by Gaja Kerry Charlton and Barry A. Brown.

Published by the authors, Queensland, Australia 2019. ISBN-13: 978-0-646-80896-3

The ripples from the UN International Year of Indigenous Languages in 2019 spread far and wide. When I visited New South Wales and Queensland in December 2019, a year ago at the time of this writing, public awareness of Australia’s indigenous languages seemed to be reaching a new height. There were major exhibitions in both Sydney and Brisbane: in the State Library of Queensland the exhibition was called “Spoken: Celebrating Queensland Languages”, and the Mitchell Library exhibition in Sydney had a similar mandate for its state. Sydney was the city where we were holding our FEL conference at the time, with quite a few Indigenous participants.

As an adjunct to this new-found awareness of, and pride in, Indigenous languages in Australia, publications have been appearing that deal with specific local languages that are being reclaimed from disuse, written by people of Indigenous heritage. Such is the case with this professionally-produced volume about the languages of the Brisbane hinterland in south-eastern Queensland. Rather than being a dry, purely objective academic study, it is written from the point of view of proud inheritors of a language that has been asleep, and in the rest of the world’s terms, perilously close to extinction. It is sprinkled with anecdotes about speakers from previous generations (the ‘stolen’) who were deprived of the use of their own tongue. The tone is not self-righteous or self-pitying, but it is proud and intimately connected to their land. But this book is also a serious and informative effort at reclamation. After an introduction, including pictures of ‘Wularanguru Moreton Language Elders’, there is an exposition of the “journey of language revival and revitalisation” (even the orthography is not yet settled), a section about Transmission, and stories of Mission days, including the settlement on Stradbroke Island. The dispossession of the Wulara-Nguru speakers is outlined in a chapter called ‘Travelling languages and repair work’, followed by ‘Goori law protocols’ on the subject of Indigenous intellectual property. The rest of the book is a compilation of Word Lists and Surveyed Words. Clearly, then, the reclamation of the language of Moreton Bay is still a work in progress. This book may appear to cover a subject of limited local interest, but in a way it is a landmark: writing about Indigenous languages by Indigenous people, with the clear aim of revitalisation and raising awareness of one’s own people’s history. It is to be applauded.

Chris Moseley

Conflict, displacement and the implications for Ormaro /
Warmuri language, by Khan Zeb and Abdullah Wazir

(Chapter 9 of Forced Migration and Conflict-induced Displacement: Impacts and prospective responses)


The Ormaro, or Warmuri, language is an endangered language of the Northern Areas of Pakistan. The Encyclopedia of the World’s Endangered Languages says this about it: Afghanistan: Baraki-Barak area; Pakistan, Kaniguram area. Indo-European, Iranian branch. There may be as few as fifty speakers left out of an ethnic group of several thousand; severely endangered or moribund. It is a cross-border language, and a victim of displacement. As the article explains, the region was pushed into active conflict between Taliban and Pakistan security forces. These forces conducted Operation Rah-e-Nijat, which resulted in the displacement and forced migration of the Burki people, speakers of this language, for nine years. Pashto and Urdu were the dominant languages in their new homeland. Ormari is a reasonably well-researched language; the paper outlines the history of the study of it. Therefore the language can be learned by outsiders and heritage speakers. Baraki is one of a range of similar terms applied to the tribe; they call their language Warmaro or Warmuri. South Waziristan, their original homeland, is inhabited by several other tribes and languages (including the Waziri). A historical outline of the area is given, leading up to the recent situation of unrest and terrorism. This study is a rare opportunity to trace a recent case of language attrition which is due entirely to an avoidable cause: political and military conflict.

Chris Moseley

6. News Articles

Mez’oreta insema: Lombard conversations online

By Simona Scuri

The idea of organizing talks in Lombard via Google Meet or Zoom came to some associated with our association FarLombard, associazion per la lingua lombarda, soon after our first pandemic lockdown in Lombardy (occurred in March-April 2020).

Why not take the chance to meet online each Sunday evening for half an hour?

I thought it would have been fun to invite a different special guest each time, as a surprise. And we got started! Since 2012 we used to organize conferences and meetings in Lombard... we did 50 in different cities and on different topics with different specialists, professionals and teachers (from fashion to botanic, from architecture to astronomy and so on). But since things changed this year and gathering for Lombard conferences was and is still not possible, we took the chance to meet online.

Last Sunday [in October 2020] we were fourteen people for example, 7 women and 7 men, coming from Switzerland, Mantova, Milan, Bressa, Bergem, Crema, Verbania. Some were Lombards living abroad. In each meeting, some people already know each other, others don’t.

In our meetings, each participant speaks his own local variety of the Lombard language with others. This allows each participant to keep his own variety practiced and helps the ones who are developing linguistic rights awareness, that our local varieties are mutually intelligible to a very large extent, in practice totally after the very first experiences! This is a very important point for endangered languages that are not officially recognized as ‘languages’ by the State and are not allowed to be used as vehicular languages in national media and schools. At this stage of endangerment, in some areas Lombard is by now spoken almost exclusively in the houses with or only by grand-parents, and young potential speakers tend to ignore that they can use exactly the same ‘dialect’ they are used to hear only in their grand-parents’ kitchen in order to talk about everything (science, art, culture…) with people living 350Km far away, namely at the other side of the Lombard speaking region. During these meetings they make the pleasant discovery that they can practice their own ‘home dialect’ with a lot of people living in a good portion of Northern Italy and Switzerland, and even abroad! They discover that their ‘home dialect’ is one of the local varieties of the Lombard language.

They discover that they have another language, and that nobody had told them before!

We thought that this is a great chance that we have: we can carry on speaking Lombard from the nearest and the furthest corners of our region and of the world. This is why we organize each Sunday those free online Lombard talks open to anyone who is happy to join and
try. It is a good exercise to listen, speak, learn and have fun in Lombard!

Judeo-Spanish in Istanbul

Ioana Aminian Jazi has completed a documentation project on the survival of the Judeo-Spanish language in Brazil, under the auspices of the Commission for Vanishing Languages and Cultural Heritage at the Austrian Academy of Sciences. You can view it here: https://www.oeaw.ac.at/vlach/collections/judeo-spanish/judeo-spanish-in-istanbul

One Year On:
the devastating effects of Covid-19 on indigenous minorities, and what this means for the fate of their languages

Ben Griffiths
In June 2020, six months into the Covid-19 pandemic, the FEL in issue 67 of Ogmios produced two articles on the subject: Covid-19 and Health Warnings in Minority Languages and Peru: Can indigenous languages survive Covid-19?. A link to an article entitled Spokane spoken here, which analysed the impact of the virus on North American indigenous communities, was also included. Six more months have since passed, and whilst vaccines offer hope for an eventual return to a (new) normal, the pandemic continues to rage across the world.

An article in the New York Times, entitled Tribal Elders are Dying from the Pandemic, Causing a Cultural Crisis for American Indians, published on 12th January 2021, makes clear that the worst fears for indigenous North Americans have been realised. The article details the premature deaths of indigenous elders from coronavirus and emphasises the resulting massive loss of cultural and linguistic knowledge, particularly where only a few hundred or fewer speakers of the language remain. Deep-rooted structural inequalities, such as lack of beds and equipment, and the often large geographical distances between vaccination centres and the remote locations where many elders reside, mean that the death rate of elderly American Indians is estimated to be at nearly twice that of white people. Distrust of the federal government is particularly prevalent among North American indigenous people due to the many historical injustices which they have suffered, with the Los Angeles Times reporting that around half of those in the Navajo nation, the largest indigenous nation in the US, would not be willing to receive a Covid-19 vaccination. This distrust is particularly strong amongst the elderly who may have had first or second-hand experience of said mistreatment.

Looking to South America, the New Internationalist (20th December 2020) reported how Peru, despite introducing one of the most restrictive early lockdowns in Latin America, has failed to contain the spread of Covid-19, particularly in indigenous communities. The reasons are similar to North America: a lack of investment in healthcare and large distances to hospitals and vaccination centres, but also intentional marginalisation of these minorities over decades - in the case of Peru, through contamination from oil exploration and illegal gold mining, a lack of safe drinking water and distracting battles against already existing diseases, but also cultural mistranslations and misunderstandings. This is not only due to problems translating information about the disease into indigenous languages; the gap between government messaging and indigenous reception of said messaging can also be problematic, particularly given that the indigenous conception of healthcare is often significantly different. Indeed, South America has been one of the hardest-hit regions of the world by Covid-19, and a worrying new development has emerged: two variants detected in Manaus, Brazil, one currently thought not to be of great concern, but another which may be more transmissible than the original, and with restrictions still not imposed by the Brazilian government, it is likely that this variant will spread widely, further threatening indigenous South Americans, and, by extension, their languages and culture.

In India, the world’s largest vaccination drive has now begun, with the BBC stating that the Indian government is reporting early signs of success. However, in indigenous Indian communities, it is clear that there are significant problems with both coronavirus information and disinformation due to lack of Internet and mobile phone
signal access, yet another example of where marginalisation is the root cause of the problem. Not even the remote Andamanese islands, one of the most linguistically diverse areas of the world, have been spared from the virus, with NBC News reporting that even though Covid-19, unlike diseases which decimated the populations of the Andamanese in the 19th century, is not thought to be disproportionately dangerous in itself to indigenous people, it is the socioeconomic conditions in which these people live which provide the virus the opportunity to strike them harder.

The FT reports that Africa, which was far less severely affected than other continents in the early stages of the pandemic, is now increasingly under threat, according to the FT. One of the most-cited reasons for Africa’s resilience to Covid-19 was the relative youth of its population, but, as more recently in Brazil, a new variant has now been detected in South Africa which is more transmissible than the original. Land borders have been closed until 15th February, and, according to Forbes, tribal populations such as the Maasai in Kenya, but also more widely across Africa, are adapting their cultural practices, such as closing livestock markets, in order to reduce the spread of the disease. This is just another way in which Covid-19 is affecting the practices of indigenous populations of the world, though in this case, the action has been proactive rather than reactive.

It is therefore clear that since June 2020 the situation regarding Covid-19 and minorities who are speakers of endangered languages, and particularly indigenous minorities, has generally worsened across much of the world. One of the core problems, as well as structural inequalities, is translation of information about the disease into minority and endangered languages, as detailed by a 31st May 2020 article in Wired magazine - but also ensuring the information is communicated cross-culturally with accuracy and understanding. This can create a trail of destruction: a lack of understanding of the world’s most endangered languages and the cultures which accompany them hampers translation attempts, and the resulting increased spread of Covid-19 impacts most severely upon the elderly, who are sometimes amongst the last speakers of their languages. Covid-19 has unexpectedly accelerated the already rapid demise of the world’s endangered languages, and has simultaneously halted almost all fieldwork by those organisations who would attempt to describe, document and revitalise them. Vaccines offer a way out, but by the time these are implemented to an extent where they really begin to have an impact, we may find that the task of minority and indigenous communities who wish to safeguard their languages and that of the linguists who support them is all the more challenging.

https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/12/us/tribal-elders-native-americans-coronavirus.html?reflink=slideshow&nlid=1wAR3ZrBtRQN-IikPFh0sT9yKFm2tWSSAd-kCg3LQ_Kpm4Ypu962QH093RusvxE

https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-12-20/native-american-coronavirus-vaccine

https://newint.org/features/2020/10/06/feature-peru-amazon-indigenous-covid

https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-55632782


https://www.ft.com/content/3d000093-87a3-48f3-8bb5-4ad9a8316aa1

https://www.ft.com/content/3d000093-87a3-48f3-8bb5-4ad9a8316aa1


https://www.wired.com/story/covid-language-translation-problem/
was described in details in my PhD “Phonology of the Rromani varieties and graphic diatsystem of the Rromani language” while my Habilitation was devoted to the issue: “From ‘Gypsylorism’ to ‘romology’: studies in language, literature, culture and society of the Rromani people in France and in the world”.

Marcel Courthiade has been responsible over 25 years for the Rromani section at the INALCO / Paris-City / Sorbonne International Rromani Union for language & linguistic justice

Editor’s Note: As we went to press we were sad to learn of the sudden death, in Tirana, Albania, of Marcel Courthiade. A fuller appreciation will be given in the next issue of Ogmios.

1. Contact and field work with speakers of Moeso-Romanian

Contempt and rejection may result in ethnic confusion between populations basically different but amalgamated erroneously by outsiders, especially those with scarce direct contact with them. This was the case of several marginalized minor populations in Europe who were mistaken for Rroms (under the obsolete and inappropriate name of “gypsies”), although they share with Rroms only some fake clichés forged from outside. It was in the early nineties, while attempting to scientifically identify the ethno-historical profile of the Rroms, that we first came in contact with speakers of a Romance idiom, close to Daco-Romanian, yet differing, as if it were a diasporic form of it. Later on we had more and more contacts with this population and its atypical Romanian-like idiom, mainly in Hungary and Northern Croatia. As a speaker of Romanian in both literary and rural Vojvodinian varieties, I was more and more strengthened in the view that the dialects of this population are closer to the local Romanian of Southern Serbia, as I had heard it in the seventies, that to “regular” Romanian. I had already been then amazed by the fact that the sub-Danubian Romance population was omitted in practically all studies devoted to Yugoslav Romanians, who lived supposedly only to the North of the Danube – and enjoyed there real minority rights. In addition, sub-Danubian Romanians used to self-identify in conversation as Serbs, although their mother tongue was not Serbian. Their grounds for this surprising ethnicity was that “we go to the Serbian church, so we are Serbs and our home language has nothing to do with this”. It is appropriate at this point to recall that the Ottoman conception of nation (millet) relied on people’s denomination, not on their language.

Later on I extended my contacts with other persons of this population in various areas, namely Attica (Greece, village of Zefyri), where I was taken by the Greek Helsinki Watch Association. The inhabitants of this isolated settlement were convinced that they speak a language totally unknown elsewhere in the world and were stunned when I began to speak rural Banatian Romanian with them. In fact they had been in contact with Romanian tourists, but they had not identified their language as common to theirs because in communist times only the highest social classes could spend their holidays in Greece, classes whose language was closer to Italian than to rural Romanian and anyway used to speak English in Greece. These people were orthodox and referred to themselves as Gurbetzi (< tk. gurbet “expatriate”). My further research brought me to Beás families of Somogy and Pécs counties (Southern Hungary), where I could hear again this Romance idiom close to Romanian. I even had the opportunity to teach in Nagyatád in a two week summer school a group of Beás youngsters, who rejoiced emotionally to hear such “serious subjects” as history taught in their idiom. In the meantime (1994) I had witnessed the astonishment of a political leader from Čakovec in Međimurje (Croatia), who had been sent as a “Rrom” to a conference in Budapest and discovered, when he began uttering his speech in his native Romance tongue, that nobody among the Rroms understood him. In fact his community had had no contact with genuine Rroms (all had been exterminated during WWII in the area) and he had no idea what Rromani looked like. On the other side, the label “Cigani (gypsies)” given to them by old Croatian generations on the ground of their alleged laziness, filthiness, poverty, backwardness etc. had been replaced administratively (undifferentiatedly) by “Romi” under Tito’s rule. The correct naming should have been Bajaš (a word cognate to Beás), as they are called locally.

During a trip and conference in Portorož (Slovenia) with three young Croatian Bajaši, there was a long discussion about an adaptation of the Romanian alphabet to their tongue, to break up with the Croatian script and a proposal was issued at the end of the travel. Upon their request, I adapted to this “new” alphabet the Beás translation of János vítéz (by Petőfi) and this comparatively long text (more than 1400 verses) was circulated as grey literature. It was a period when I began to collect publications in their language, practically all from Hungary, and in Magyar script. In this country they are still mistaken by politicians as Rroms (for political reasons beyond the scope of this paper), whereas rural populations are very
well aware of the difference between these two minorities. It is a pity that the BULAC (Paris) where I deposited the 32 volumes about them lost the whole collection. I also collected early publications devoted to them, among others a study by Gustav Weigang (1860-1930) about this population in Bosnia.

Unfortunately I did not collect linguistic material from these people due to several reasons:

- lack of time;
- lack of specific methodology, which could have been elaborated only on the basis of a substantial preliminary research;
- and most of all the conviction that a real study of this language (and culture) deserves full time research and that it belongs to the members of this community to care about their own heritage.

I tried for years to convince authorities outside former Yugoslavia, Hungary and Rumania to help, by way of scholarships, a few young people of this community to study Romance philology and general linguistics, but this was in vain, despite the real interest of some talented youngsters among them. I was reluctant to address authorities of the three afore mentioned countries because of the heavy nationalistic ideology which could have biased the training of these young (and probably naive) people. In order to satisfy their interest, I accepted to explore the verbal morphology of two varieties of their language (Loncarevo and Darda, both in Croatia), as an example of field work in view of drafting a grammatical description.

In the past decade I entered in contact with members of this community from Serbia living in Vienna, where in the context of emigration they had understood “that they are not Serbs like all others” and had set up their association called Oameni nostri “Our people” (there are thousands of them, living in Vienna – note that they say nostri and not noștri as in Romanian). They also organized a seminar on 4-5.4.2015 in Vienna "Roots – Auf den Spuren der Banjasch Minderheit" and are now conducting linguistic and ethnological research among elders with Austrian funds – Austria, or more exactly the City of Vienna, is the only country which is considering to recognize them as a specific minority – hence this project aimed at giving a scientific ground to such a decision.

2. Linguistic specificity of Moeso-Romanian versus other Balkan Romance languages

More than twenty five years of sporadic practice of this language, referred to by native speakers as švătcală/limba de băieși, as well as more concrete descriptions of it, inclines me to consider that these people are a diaspora of sub-Danubian Romanian – incidentally called “Romanians of Timok” by Romanian authorities, who “discovered them” after the collapse of socialism and lapsing of overt and secret agreements between Romania and Yugoslavia. However it is necessary now to confirm this link by scientific methods – still wanting to be elaborated. For the time being, one may consider that Moeso-Romanian (called after the ancient Roman province of Moesia, where it is spoken) is closer to Daco-Romanian than to Arumanian or Meglenoromanian, but there are many differences from the former. The mutation of the two alveolar affricates to soft fricatives is common with Banatian dialect, but differs in quality from the similar Moldavian evolution. There are also differences in vowels, especially centralized sounds. The verbal system is noticeably reduced as compared with Daco-Romanian and even Aromanian. There are also specificities in the nominal system, although these are not consistent for all varieties of Moeso-Romanian. The syntax is globally the same as in other Balkan languages and the Latin element of the lexicon is closer to prototypical Balkan Romance than Romanian itself, not due to a lack of evolution in Moeso-Romanian but on the contrary as a result of the massive re-Latinisation of standard (literary) Romanian, especially in the 19th century. On the other side, there are numerous Serbisms in Moeso-Romanian as spoken in situ, and it would be of high interest to track potential Serbisms in the varieties of the diaspora. The strong Hungarian influence on the Magyar soil is no wonder.

Just to give some examples, let us quote the following: lotru “thief” (old Slavic) instead of hoţ, ostenit “tired” instead of oboși, mis “I am” instead of sunt, ro “very” instead of foarte, mă culc “I sleep” instead of dorm (this root is totally absent) etc.

The language is very rich in idioms of all kinds, apparently even more in Hungary and Croatia, but this could be due to a lack of familiarity on my part with other varieties. One could take in parallel texts in Moeso-Romanian and their Daco-Romanian translations in order to establish a typology of differences. This method would be more reliable than mere intuition.
A lot could be said about Moeso-Romanian of Romania, now extinct but preserved in some books, mainly in Calota’s collection of ethno-texts.

Be it as it may, the over-simple explanation that Moeso-Romanians are allegedly Roms who were “forbidden” to speak their Rromani mother tongue does not withstand scrutiny and close examination. It cannot be substantiated linguistically (Banatean features are found in all varieties of Moeso-Romanian) and it is anachronistic in historical terms, because there was never anything like banning the use in Rromani: Rromani slaves were treated as cattle and nobody cared how they speak. If these were Rromani slaves locally acculturated to Romanian, there is no way to explain how their speech contains Banatean elements, even far from Banat. In fact, various elements point to the hypothesis that not only Roms were enslaved in Romania, but also, albeit to a lesser extend, Romanian populations from South Serbia, who migrated to the Danubian principalities and preferred slavery in a comparatively opulent country to the even worse conditions of life in Moesia. Mentions of this population appear sporadically, in very short phrases or allusions, in Romanian books, including historical studies and it would be of the utmost interest to gather and analyze them to reach a more objective image of the past of this population. We know from Latin sources that Moesia was one of the earliest Latinized areas in the Balkans (around 70 before our era) and this population could be initially the heir of autochthonous Latinized Moesians. In other terms they could be one of the oldest ethnicities in the Balkans.

The observation of Moeso-Romanian in South Serbia prompts one to consider that it arose from a South-Western (sub-Danubian) dialect of Daco-Romanian, which remained outside the frontiers not only of the Romanian State but also out of reach of the Renaissance movement which led to the constitution of modern Romanian. In this respect it is a typical example of collateral language, a notion developed by Dawson (University of Lille). The Beas and Bajaș idioms (also called Rudar, Ludar, Lingurar, Koritar, Gurbetz, Metsikariđes, Teknős cigányok, and Kopanar) can be considered simply as diasporatic forms of this collateral language. They all call Roms “Lăcătari”.

3. Current spread of Moeso-Romanian in the Balkan and in the world today

If all the forms mentioned so far all belong, as it is probable, to a Moeso-Romanian entity and its diaspora, one may say that it is still very vivid in Serbia (with dozens of compact villages) and in the recent diaspora (mainly Austria and Germany). Scattered Moesian hamlets might still exist in Bosnia-Herzegovina but the language is most likely extinct there. Only a few settlements on the Bulgarian Riviera (near Varna and Burgas) have preserved the ancestral language, and the last one in Greece, Zefýri, has been ruined a few years ago as a result of violence after an unsolved murder. Beas and Bajaș are well preserved in Hungary and Croatia respectively, despite efforts of both governments to eliminate them and teach their children Rromani instead. The language disappeared after WWII in Romania and today’s Băieși, deprived of their own mother tongue, are erroneously labelled “Roms”, mainly because Romanians refuse any kinship with a population who has been enslaved by their ancestors in the past and prefer continuing to consider them as “gypsies” (a term meaning “slave” in medieval Romanian). Băieși are afflicted by this situation. Their number could amount some 100,000 to 200,000 in all the country but all speak only (rural) Romanian, in the wake of an assimilation made easier by the similarity of both languages. Not only in Romania but also all over former Austro-Hungary (including Bosnia), they are renowned for their skills in carving wooden instruments for the household (spoons, distafis, bowls, tubs, laundry vats [hence the name of Teknős cigányi Hung. and Kopanar Sl.] and the like).

Outside Europe there are some 4000 Moesians in Colombia, where an ethnological survey in the eighties collected some 40 proverbs in their language. Communities have also been observed in Mexico, Chile and Argentina; the language is there also in danger – in addition, local authorities have taken over the European confusion of these people with Roms and call then “gitanos”. This discourages self-esteem and hastens the fading of the mother tongue.

One may wonder if it was still possible, by the end of the 20th century, to discover in Europe a “new” language, used by some 100,000 speakers and which had escaped the radars of researchers in linguistics. We hope we have given an answer to this question.

The case of Moeso-Romanian is of the utmost interest in terms of sociolinguistic studies and language policy because its very existence has been hidden – despite its number of speakers - due to mainstream attitudes inspired first by the Ottoman approach regarding nationalities and later by superficial categorizations in the Socialist regimes of former Yugoslavia and the Eastern bloc - in a different way, albeit leading to similar results. Furthermore, the attitude of various European institutions and
foundations have continued the Socialist attitude of denial and consolidated a detrimental treatment of this language under some inappropriate principles, aimed theoretically at combating ethnic discrimination – but resulting in undermining the language under scrutiny. My conclusion would be to incite students to consider seriously the riches of the Moeso-Romanian linguistic and cultural heritage and devote a well inspired strategy of research to this subject, while avoiding the many ideological and nationalistic influences, unfortunately rampant in the domain.

Roman provinces, showing ancient Moesia

Dying languages / Ieithoedd yn maru — a proposal to ICOM

UN/UNESCO has defined International Mother Language Day, 21 February 2021, and the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, 2022-2032

Ian Jones (ianhjones27@gmail.com), sets the scene:

ICOM, the International Council of Museums, represents museums and those who work in them world-wide. Its activities go well beyond the four walls of the museum and include action to prevent the illegal trafficking of cultural artefacts, disaster relief and action to protect of human rights in war and peace. It is active in the work of the Blue Shield. It encourages sustainable development, and draws attention to our intangible heritage, that which give us our sense of identity, from our social practices to the languages we speak. It is independent of governments and has close relations with UNESCO.

Every two weeks, one of the world’s languages disappears, and with it goes part of our human history and cultural heritage.

Audrey Azoulay, UNESCO Director-General, International Mother Language Day, 21 February 2018

Languages, with their complex implications for identity, cultural diversity, spirituality, communication, social integration, education and development, are of crucial importance for people and the planet. People not only embed in languages their history, traditions, memory, traditional knowledge, unique modes of thinking, meaning and expression, but more importantly they also construct their future through them.

From the UN Economic and Social Council Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

Languages matter during the COVID-19 pandemic, as they are an intrinsic part of human rights and fundamental freedoms of their users, including access to accurate lifesaving information and healthcare.

Statement by UNESCO 2020

Those three quotes say it all. Our great artefacts, the ones that make us human, are disappearing relentlessly. Does it matter? Who cares that some Amerindian language spoken by a handful is on the way out? How many would care in Afghanistan or Yemen? After all, some
people have more immediate and pressing concerns. Then there’s the pandemic, which doesn’t care whether a language is alive or dead.

Yet, does that mean we stand by and do nothing? I think not, and lest we forget, the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, begins in 2022. The UN’s General Assembly on December 18 2019 resolved “to draw attention to the critical loss of Indigenous languages and the urgent need to preserve, revitalize, and promote Indigenous language” and to “take urgent steps at the national and international levels.”

But what can ICOM do? After all it’s about museums, not languages. In fact, it can do a lot. II II have therefore made some simple proposals for action.
1. Work with UNESCO, the lead organisation in the preservation of languages;
2. Raise awareness;
3. Create a Red List for endangered languages.

But first the scenario and the rationale for these proposals.

1. The case for saving a language from death

1.1 The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is over 70 years old. It has been translated into over 500 languages, many of which are critically endangered, if not extinct. One right is the freedom to speak your language, whatever language that might be. The Declaration has been ignored, even ridiculed, but it is still there as a declaration of human rights and human possibilities.

Languages define us as human beings. Each of us has a different way of saying, a different way of looking at the world, the ultimate expression, we could argue, of human diversity. Take the English word snow. The Russians have cнег, the Finns lumи, the Welsh eira. All quite different words, each with its own flavour to describe something familiar. Imagine a world where we only used that word snow and think of what we would lose. To so many of us whose maternal language is Welsh, snow will never have the magic of eira, because it’s the word we learned as children to describe one of the wonders of nature. We may have left our maternal language to speak the great global language day in day out, but some words never leave us. Eira or lumи are not better words than snow. They are just different, and difference matters.

1.2 Languages disappear at a distressing rate. Imagine the world reaction if Rio’s Copacabana was bulldozed to the ground - outrage. UNESCO classifies Venetian as vulnerable, Crimean Tatar seems on the way out, so too Cherokee in North Carolina. There are around 6,000 speakers of Yanomani left in Brazil – probably fewer by the end of today. Corsican, Napoleon’s native language, is down to around 160,000. How many Cholon speakers in Peru? All gone. What’s left of Nafusi in Libya? Not much. Welsh, spoken in Wales and Patagonia, was one of the 55 languages representing Earth on the NASA Voyager programme in 1977. Too bad that its future is far from certain. Why do they disappear? More than one reason but, above all, the dominance of the ‘official’ language, which can crush minority languages around it. Unless you can speak Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Arabic, French, English…you are not going to get on in life so easily. Then there’s migration: a family of Arrernte speakers moves from Alice Springs to Sydney; a family of Xavante speakers moves to Rio; a young Chuvash speaker emigrates to Russian speaking Moscow and then to English speaking London. Occasionally a language is officially banned, though that at least today is fairly rare: usually unofficial discouragement is enough. One deplorable recent exception is Belarus. On the other hand, on 16 January it was announced in Ukraine that restaurants, cafes, sports clubs, hairdressers…should henceforth use Ukrainian in preference to Russian – one way of asserting national independence from a dominating power.

1.3 The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union prohibits discrimination on grounds of language and there is an obligation to respect linguistic diversity (Article 22). Regrettably, that is not always observed in Europe, and definitely not in the rest of the world. If it were, a language would not disappear every two weeks, and when a language goes another one does not miraculously appear to replace it.

1.4 We can record an endangered language for posterity and put the record in a museum. But when the language has finally gone the record is no more than that. It no longer has the colour of everyday speech. It’s not alive, it’s now just of antiquarian interest. That does not mean that it should not be preserved like an artefact in a glass case, but how infinitely better to stop it dying in the first place. A language exists to be spoken and written. We can admire the Great Wall of China or a Greek statue in a museum even if the context has long gone. Not so a dead language. You might as well admire a corpse.

1.5 “The increasing mobility of people, goods, and information has driven a powerful trend toward cultural uniformity and the extinction of local languages. But lan-
guages that have young people, business, and government on their side are alive and thriving.” Eric Garland in The Futurist, Bethesda USA 2006

Eric Garland has a point. One language is not better than another. You might as well say that yellow is better than blue. The world is dominated by a small handful of languages, but that has more to do with politics, power and the number of speakers, not any inherent merit in the language. English is now more or less the world’s universal language, for a string of reasons, but that does not make it superior. Different, yes, but not better.

An aboriginal language in Australia fades away, the last speaker of a native American language dies. Does it matter? Yes. Another small part of humanity has gone.

1.6 Languages, big and small, change, they import words from other languages and convert them into their own. They are never static, they are continually replenished. Languages have dialects and a variety of accents and they are sadly being diminished under the impact of the media and as the world is increasingly globalised. That’s not easy to prevent, but it’s insufficient reason for letting a whole language fall away. Languages remain distinctive, they represent a group, a society, a country, an identity, a way of thinking, however much they may change, however many dialects and accents get absorbed. Why do we do so little to protect them?

1.7 Preserving the cultural heritage of the world is at the heart of the work of UNESCO and ICOM. Both bear witness and bearing witness is the first step to action. Just consider UNESCO’s own outstanding Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger. It bears witness and invites action.

2. What can ICOM do?

2.1 It is almost offensive even to ask the question. There are organisations and individuals across the world which devote their waking hours to saving languages. There are governments which have taken action. And yes, there are even one or two museums: Rio’s Museu do Indio has digital language archives, so at least we can know what a dead language sounded like. In Belém, in the Amazon basin, there is the Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi. It has a linguistics section studying native languages. There or one or two other language museum scattered across the world – we mention them further on. Yet languages keep on dying. UNESCO, and, yes, the UN are not indifferent.

Far from it, yet how many national governments were aware of the 2019 Year of Indigenous Languages? Not many and if they were, action was limited at best. If the fate of languages in danger is not taken seriously then they will continue to disappear.

2.2 Just before the allied landings at Anzio to liberate Italy in the second world war, General Dwight Eisenhower made a statement which included these words: Today we are fighting in a country…rich in monuments which by their creation helped and now in their old age illustrate the growth of the civilization which is ours. We are bound to respect those monuments so far as war allows. That is a pretty extraordinary statement to make at a critical moment in a world war. It helped set the tone for the work of UNESCO, and ICOM in preserving artefacts in the conflict areas of the world. The two organisations bear witness, they raise awareness, which leads to action. Stolen artefacts are found, damaged artefacts are restored.

2.3 Language is the best artefact we’ve got: it makes all the others possible. Yet, languages have never been high on the ICOM agenda. It’s a pity. After all, an artefact is an artefact what ever form it takes. Of course, it can be argued that languages are not ICOM’s concern. ICOM is about museums. Not at all. You just have to look at the ICOM web site to realise the sheer range ICOM interests. To quote, ICOM “is committed to the “promotion and protection of natural and cultural heritage present and future, tangible and intangible.” Languages therefore are well within its remit.

3. A universal challenge

3.1 The protection of endangered – dying may be a better word – languages is a universal challenge. It is inconceivable that there is no-one in, say, Japan fighting to protect Ainu, or Chinese pressing for the preservation of Chinese dialects, or any number of Nigerians aiming to preserve Gura, or Bolivians Reysano. There are some 7,000 languages spoken in the world. Around 2680 are in danger (UNESCO 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages). The Japanese, the Chinese, Nigerians and Bolivians and so many others are not giving up.

3.2 All this is written in English, now more or less the world’s language of communication. That fact has some unwanted consequences: [English] is inescapable: the language of global business, the internet, science, diplomacy, stellar navigation, avian pathology. And everywhere it goes, it leaves behind a trail of dead: dialects crushed, languages forgotten, literatures mangled….Every day English spreads, the world becomes a little more homogenous and a little more bland. Jacob Mikanska, The Guardian, London 27 July 2018

3.3 It should not be like this. Let’s fight back.
4. Action: ICOM and what it can do

4.1 ICOM to work closely on endangered languages with UNESCO. Our two organisations have so much in common and we can explore ways of working together towards a common objective. After all, UNESCO will be the lead agency, in collaboration with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the UN Secretariat, for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages which starts in 2022. It simply cannot stand aside, so let’s see how UNESCO and ICOM can work together to achieve a specific goal and make a measurable difference.

4.2 Raise awareness Raising awareness and getting the message across is essential. It’s the first step to effective action. There are so many questions our members and our national committees can ask those in authority to make them aware of languages at risk. As for ICOM itself, it carries weight. Some examples: of what can be done. On its web site ICOM can highlight the next Mother Language Day on 21 February 2021 and the upcoming Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022 – 2032). Covid-19 sets limits as to what we can do, but at least we can provide some background information and brief, simple proposals as to what can be done. There should also be a regular item in the Journal of Intangible Heritage. There are indeed occasional articles on minority and endangered languages which appear from time to time, but we need many more. Again, one cannot expect the ICOM Secretariat to be involved. It has a heavy workload. On the other hand, a small group of interested people could be a simple solution – agree the principle, then we can work out the details.

4.3 Create a Red List of Languages at Risk, as a permanent item on the ICOM web site ICOM has created the Red List of Cultural Objects at Risk, at risk of being traded illegally or stolen. They are objects we can see before our eyes. They are given status and their fate matters to us. A bronze head from Benin may appear on one of our Red Lists, but what about the language of its creator? Thoughts, ideas, feelings behind that object which ICOM 5 aims to save were expressed in a language. Where is it now? Disappeared? How many of us care? A Red List of languages at risk could perhaps take a different form. A list of these languages is set out in UNESCO’s Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger, from which a selection can be made following consultation with UNESCO – more than consultation perhaps, simply working with them. Let’s start, as a joint enterprise, by listing, say, five in the course of a month. There would be an example of the language as it is written and spoken, with a translation. There would also be a brief account of the current status of the language.

4.4 But what then? This is why ICOM needs a clear, detailed plan of action, not least because it’s an initiative that should involve UNESCO, (and the UN) as partners and, above all, our close on 50,000 members in countries across the world where at least one language is in danger of extinction. It’s labour intensive, but among the vast ICOM membership world-wide there must be speakers of endangered languages who would be happy to be involved. If ICOM can agree the broad principles then it can work out the most effective way forward. It may not work, but at least we can try. These are relatively minor proposals, but they are better than doing nothing. 2019 was UNESCO’s year of indigenous languages. Was it successful? How many languages were saved, or revived? We shall see. In any event UNESCO did something. So should ICOM.

5. The background

Without knowledge action is meaningless. There is a vast number of publications, agencies, interested parties and individuals in the field, and we can have a pretty good idea as to what is happening to languages across the world.

5.1 Publications Above all, there is UNESCO’s The Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger (UNESCO Paris 2010). It is the standard guide to a depressing subject. The introduction by Christopher Moseley, the editor in chief, is essential reading to gain an understanding of the state of the world’s languages. It is a work of great scholarship with a wealth of information, including an almost definitive bibliography. No serious discussion on endangered languages can take place without it. Importantly, it has an online section which gives up to date information on language status: www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/ The Atlas classifies languages in this way:

- Definitely endangered
- Severely endangered
- Critically endangered
- Extinct; and thankfully:
- R = Revitalised

unique cultural, historical, and ecological knowledge. Each language is a unique expression of the human experience of the world.”

A standard work covering just about every aspect of language is The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Language by David Crystal (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010). It includes a list of 1,000 languages which are the first language of at least 100,000 people. The pages on endangered languages are essential reading.

The Oxford Handbook of Endangered Languages (Kenneth L Rehg and Lyle Campbell eds., Blackwell, Oxford September 2018) is a vast and comprehensive overview of the state of endangered languages.

There is the remarkable on-line Ethnologue: Languages of the World http://www.ethnologue.com It provides a regular update and digest of the world’s languages. It includes current status, dialects, typology, language development, language resources. It is another indispensable work of scholarship. There is so much else: countless books, endless doctoral dissertations and articles. Just two examples among a vast number: Las lenguas indígenas de la Argentina: un mirada actual, (M. Censabella, EUDEBA, Buenos Aires 1999). Unimportant? Not at all. Without such publications the world would be poorer. Then, Linguistic Policies and the Survival of Regional Languages in France and Britain, (Palgrave Studies in Minority Languages, Anne Judge, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2007). Recherché? Hardly, there are minority languages struggling for survival to varying degrees across Europe, let alone the rest of the world, and we need to know. Take Basque/Euskara, a language which crosses national boundaries. It’s not related to any other language in Europe. It’s unique. That alone should make it worth preserving. There is a regular column in The New European, a British newspaper, by Peter Trudgill about languages and all their peculiarities, similarities and differences. Note: ICOM’s International Journal of Intangible Heritage has regrettably few articles on languages, endangered or otherwise.

5.2 Recording dying languages There are many attempts to record a language before it dies. This is a recording of the native American language, Cherokee: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sasSISQwIwg The American National Science Foundation has done work in the field, as have so many others. They may not bring a language back to life, but at least the language is preserved for posterity, if only as a museum artefact. It will have lost its context, but then so too the many millions of artefacts in museums across the world. Yet, some attempts seem promising and could lead to the saving of a language. The commentary to this Australian venture to save the native Miriwoong language provides a clear rationale for not giving up on native languages. When the first car came to Australia the Miriwoong people called it a goorroorij, from the sound it made. Rather better than the Welsh for car, which is simply car (or occasionally modur, as in motor) a direct borrowing from the English, just pronounced differently. Yes, identity matters: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZwSXFvDDjYE&t=99s

Organisations in the field

6.1 The UN The UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFI), established in 2002, deals with a wide range of matters relating to indigenous people. It provides a context for efforts to save indigenous, minority languages. The UN and UNESCO also organise the Mother Language Day which has been running since 2000. “On International Mother Language Day the UN’s Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and UN agencies participate in events that promote linguistic and cultural diversity. They also encourage people to maintain their knowledge of their mother language while learning and using more than one language. Governments and nongovernmental organizations may use the day to announce policies to encourage language learning and support.” The next Mother Language Day is 21 February 2021

6.2 UNESCO This is the pre-eminent organisation in the field. As it says about itself: “UNESCO’s duty remains to reaffirm the humanist missions of education, science and culture”. The Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger is a tribute to its mission. Plus: The upcoming Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022 – 2032) which will focus on indigenous language users’ human rights. “Building on the lessons learnt during the International Year of Indigenous Languages (2019), the [Los Pinos] Declaration recognizes the importance of indigenous languages to social cohesion and inclusion, cultural rights, health and justice and highlights their relevance to sustainable development and the preservation of biodiversity as they maintain ancient and traditional knowledge that binds humanity with nature.’ It’s hard to improve on that.

6.3 ICOM To quote from our Strategic Plan 2016-2022: “ICOM has a long tradition of forging alliances with international agencies such as UNESCO, ICOMOS,IC-CROM, IFLA, ICA and the Vulnerable Blue Shield, and with governments worldwide.” I believe we also have a consultative status with the UN Economic
and Social Council. So, we’re on the world stage, we have influence. Here’s another quote: ICOM “is committed to the “promotion and protection of natural and cultural heritage present and future, tangible and intangible”. So, if UNESCO and the UN are active in helping to save languages, our intangible heritage, why not us? After all, it’s our remit.

6.4 Other organisations and projects Then there is the sheer number of organisations and groups working to preserve endangered languages, or simply bearing witness to the erosion of our greatest intangible cultural artefact. Not all are active and some web sites are not kept up to date. Even so, these are some examples: The Linguapax Institute, Barcelona http://www.linguapax.org “Linguapax protects and promotes the revitalisation of world linguistic diversity to contribute to dialogue and peace.” It has consultative status with UNESCO. “Languages can be unique links to the identity of individuals and communities. Defending multilingualism helps preserve the different realities, knowledges and visions of the world and life.” “Without her [Maja-Liisa Otthuis, winner of the 2020 Linguapax International Award], Inari’s Sami language would have no children or adult speakers within a few decades. There are currently dozens of children who speak Inari’s Sami as their first or second language, and 450 is the total number of speakers of that language. Progressively, a process of awareness-raising on the importance of revitalising the language is emerging. Inari is now living a process of complete transformation.” You see? Never give up.

The African Academy of Languages
https://www.acalan-au.org “The African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) fosters Africa’s integration and development through the development and promotion of the use of African languages in all domains of life in Africa.”

Native Languages of the Americas: Preserving and Promoting American Indian Languages www.native-languages.org “Actually, Native American languages do not belong to a single Amerindian family, but 25-30 small ones; they are usually discussed together because of the small numbers of natives speaking most of these languages and how little is known about many of them. There are around 25 million native speakers of the more than 800 surviving Amerindian languages. The vast majority of these speakers live in Central and South America, where language use is vigorous. In Canada and the United States, only about half a million native speakers of an Amerindian tongue remain. ”

The Foundation for Endangered Languages www.ogmios.org “While we cannot stop the global forces which cause language decline and loss, we can work to combat their effects, to strengthen languages against them, and to highlight all that is lost when a language vanishes. We can work to lessen the damage: *by recording and documenting languages which are in terminal decline *by promoting literacy and language maintenance programmes to increase language proficiency and morale within endangered language communities *by encouraging support for language and cultural maintenance through use of media and communication technologies *by emphasizing the value and benefits of language diversity” That’s a pretty good prescription for the way forward. Their journal, Ogmios, is a mine of information. How many of us know that Belarusian, a national language of Belarus, is in danger? What do we know about the Dongba writing system of the Naxi in Yunnan, China? It’s all in the journal.

There are also linguistic societies and circles across for world. Too many to mention.

The Mercator European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning www.mercator-research.eu

The Endangered Languages Documentation Programme https://www.eldp.net/en “The goal of the Endangered Language Documentation Programme (ELDP) is to preserve endangered languages globally. To this end we give grants worldwide to individuals to document endangered languages. We provide funding for documentation projects led by individuals such as linguists, linguistic anthropologists and community members with skills in linguistic documentation...”

SOAS World Languages Institute, London
https://www.soas.ac.uk/world-languages-institute/ “It has the largest concentration in Europe of academic staff concerned with Africa, Asia and the Middle East, and unparalleled expertise in a wide range of non-European languages... The Endangered Language Archive (ELAR) housed at the SOAS library has been at the forefront in making endangered language collections digitally available.”

The Vigdis International Centre for Multilingualism and Intercultural Understanding, Reykjavik, Iceland.
https://vigdis.hi.is/en/vimiuc/about-vimiuc/ Its aims include, to quote: “Indigenous languages and languages in limited geographic areas with small numbers of native
speakers, in connection with the International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022-2032 (IDIL 2022-2032) in collaboration with UNESCO. The literature, language and culture of the Romani/Gypsy peoples around the world in connection with the research network Roma in the Centre. An exhibition, The Living Language Lab, to be opened in 2021, in which the public will have the opportunity to become acquainted with a wide variety of the world’s languages and to learn about their histories.”

Mundolingua, based in Paris. https://www.mundolingua.org “…you will travel the length and breadth of the languages of the world: their origins, evolution (birth to extinction), their roles, their stories … From their personalities and myths, to ethnolinguistics in one short trip! Put contemporary languages under the microscope! “

Planetword, Washington D.C. https://www.planetword-museum.org “Planet Word is an immersive language experience located at the historic Franklin School in Washington, D.C. Ideal for all ages, Planet Word is a voice-activated museum (the world’s first!), and our interactive galleries and exhibits bring words and language to life in all sorts of fun ways.” Covid-19 has forced its closure for the time being.

Discovering a world of languages https://www.cam.ac.uk/worldoflanguages

You can only truly see the world through other people’s eyes and how other cultures work, if you know their language. More people in the world are bilingual than are not, and the idea that learning languages is too difficult or elitist is just ‘cultural baggage’ which needs to be shaken off....”

Wendy Ayres-Bennett, Project leader University of Cambridge, England.

And that’s a small fraction of activity world-wide.

A much more complete list can be found on UNESCO’s own web site.

So, let’s do something:

London 12 February 2021

Or, in a vulnerable language,

Llundain 12 Chwefror 2021

Living-Language-Land

creative engagement with minority and endangered languages

“In our language, they left all of the lessons for us”

Jessie ‘Little Doe’ Baird, Wampanoag Nation

With the international climate talks (COP26) taking place in Glasgow in November 2021, the British Council is supporting a series of projects that engage different audiences with the unfolding crises of climate change and biodiversity loss. One of these projects - Living-Language-Land - deals directly with the connections between language and relationship to land and nature, and there is a warm invitation to members of the FEL community to help guide and shape this project with their endangered language expertise.

The project's instigators - UK-based artist Neville Gabie and creative producer Philippa Bayley - explain the focus and purpose of the project:

“The languages we speak shape how we understand the world around us, including our connections to land and nature. But as fast as we’re losing species from our planet, so we’re losing languages that offer different ways of seeing. What connections, ideas and wisdom are we losing as those languages are lost? What powerful strategies for sustainable living might they offer, to help us look afresh at the climate crisis?”
Part of the stimulus for the project was Neville and Joan Gabie’s engagement with the Wampanoag Nation of Mashpee, Massachusetts. They were led there by a 1663 printing of the Bible, translated into Wampanoag, which preceded a near extermination of the people and language. Efforts to reclaim the language have been led by Jessie ‘Little Doe’ Baird and other members of the Nation, as reflected in the short films Neville and Joan made. It was Jessie’s articulation of the importance of re-claiming the language and its messages of how to live that resonated with us. As Jessie says, “In our language, they left all of the lessons for us”.

**Living-Language-Land** is a creative project that invites people to see beyond the confines of their own language as we journey through minority and endangered languages that reveal different ways of relating to our planet.

The project will share 26 words from different minority and endangered languages – and the stories behind them – in the weeks leading up to COP26. Contributors from across the world will share, in their own voices, what the words mean to them and their communities. And they will explain how climate change is challenging the deep bonds with land and nature that their words express.

The project will take place online, using social media to engage a wide audience with these illuminating words. A dedicated website will share the stories behind the words and artistic and creative responses to the concepts that are shared. The project also hopes to have a presence at the COP26 conference itself, to engage directly with policymakers, researchers and NGOs.

Together the words will form the beginnings of a rich word bank that offers a fresh, evocative perspective on our environmental crisis – one that’s beyond the scope of the Western-dominated conversation.

**Living-Language-Land** is already working with Colum-bian organisation Pedagogías Ancestrales and Muisca linguist Facundo Saravia on contributions from the Muisca language. The project is also working with linguist Matthias Brenzinger (University of the Free State) on a contribution from the Khwe of Northern Namibia, and with artist Virginia MacKenny (University of Cape Town) on wider engagement in Southern Africa. We are exploring connections in Australia, India, Bhutan, Canada, USA and Russia, among others. We would welcome any other ideas or connections for the project to follow up.

Please contact Philippa Bayley (pipbayley@gmail.com) or Neville Gabie (Nevillegabie@gmail.com) with your ideas and suggestions.

https://www.nevillegabie.com/works/the-edge-of-things/
https://www.wlrp.org/project-history
MANIFESTO

At this point in human history, most human languages are spoken by exceedingly few people. And that majority, the majority of languages, is about to vanish. The most authoritative source on the languages of the world (Ethnologue, Gordon 2005) lists just over 6,900 living languages. Population figures are available for just over 6,600 of them (or 94.5%). Of these 6,600, it may be noted that 56% are spoken by fewer than 10,000 people; 28% by fewer than 1,000; and 83% are restricted to single countries, and so particularly exposed to the policies of a single government. At the other end of the scale, 10 major languages, each spoken by over 100 mill. people, are mother tongues of almost half (49%) of the world’s population. More important than this snapshot of proportions and populations is the outlook for survival of the languages we have. Hard comparable data here are scarce or absent, often because of the sheer variety of the human condition: a small community, isolated or bilingual, may continue for centuries to speak a unique language, while in another place a populous language may for social or political reasons die out in little more than a generation. Another reason is that the period in which records have been kept is too short to document a trend: e.g. the Ethnologue has been issued only since 1951. However, it is difficult to imagine many communities sustaining serious daily use of a language for even a generation with fewer than 100 speakers: yet at least 10% of the world’s living languages are now in this position. Some of the forces which make for language loss are clear: the impacts of urbanization, Westernization and global communications grow daily, all serving to diminish the self-sufficiency and self-confidence of small and traditional communities. Discriminatory policies, and population movements also take their toll of languages. In our era, the preponderance of tiny language communities means most of the world’s languages face not just decline but extinction. There is agreement among linguists who have considered the situation that over half of the world’s languages are moribund, i.e. not effectively being passed on to the next generation. We and our children, then, are living at the point in human history where, within perhaps two generations, most languages in the world will die out. This mass extinction of languages may not appear immediately life-threatening. Some will feel that a reduction in numbers of languages will ease communication, and perhaps help build nations, even global solidarity. But it has been well pointed out that the success of humanity in colonizing the planet has been due to our ability to develop cultures suited for survival in a variety of environments. These cultures have everywhere been transmitted by languages, in oral traditions and latterly in written literatures. So when language transmission itself breaks down, especially before the advent of literacy in a culture, there is always a large loss of inherited knowledge. Valued or not, that knowledge is lost, and humanity is the poorer. Along with it may go a large part of the pride and self-identity of the community of former speakers. And there is another kind of loss, of a different type of knowledge. As each language dies, science, in linguistics, anthropology, prehistory and psychology, loses one more precious source of data, one more of the diverse and unique ways that the human mind can express itself through a language’s structure and vocabulary. We cannot now assess the full effect of the massive simplification of the world’s linguistic diversity now occurring. But language loss, when it occurs, is sheer loss, irreversible and not in itself creative. Speakers of an endangered language may well resist the extinction of their traditions, and of their linguistic identity. They have every right to do so. And we, as scientists, or concerned human beings, will applaud them in trying to preserve part of the diversity which is one of our greatest strengths and treasures. The Need for an Organization We cannot stem the global forces causing language decline and loss. But we can work to lessen the ignorance which sees language loss as inevitable when it is not, and does not properly value all that will go when a language itself vanishes. We can work to see technological developments, such as computing and telecommunications, used to support small communities and their traditions rather than to supplant them. And we can work to lessen the damage:

- by recording as much as possible of the languages of communities which seem to be in terminal decline;
- by emphasizing particular benefits of the diversity still remaining; and
- by promoting literacy and language maintenance programmes, to increase the strength and morale of the users of languages in danger.

In order to further these aims, there is a need for an autonomous international organization which is not constrained or influenced by matters of race, politics, gender or religion. This organization will recognise in language issues the principles of self-determination, and group and individual rights. It will pay due regard to economic, social, cultural, community and humanitarian considerations. Although it may work with any international, regional or local Authority, it will retain its independence throughout. Membership will be open to those in all walks of life.

Aims and Objectives

The Foundation for Endangered Languages exists to support, enable and assist the documentation, protection and promotion of endangered languages. In order to do this, it aims:

- To raise awareness of endangered languages, both inside and outside the communities where they are spoken, through all media;
- To support the use of endangered languages in all contexts: at home, in education, in the media, and in social, cultural and economic life;
- To monitor linguistic policies and practices, and to seek to influence the appropriate authorities where necessary;
- To support the documentation of endangered languages, by offering financial assistance, training, or facilities for publication of results;
- To collect together and make available information of use in the preservation of endangered languages;
- To disseminate information on all of the above activities as widely as possible.

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More from our cover story: The Canadian Language Museum:

‘Beyond Words’ exhibition, Markham

‘Language in Toronto’ exhibition

Reception at the Museum