See the interview with an exile from Chin state in this issue.
OGMIOS Newsletter 76
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1. Editorial

This year FEL is returning for a second visit to a country we have visited before for a conference, namely Morocco. We were there in September 2001, in Agadir, just a few days after the man-made disaster of the Twin Towers collapse. Which meant that many North American visitors felt unable to attend. Agadir had itself been the victim of an earthquake in 1960, and city was rebuilt. Now, just before our second conference in that country, a natural disaster has struck, the earthquake in the Atlas Mountains in September 2023. Fortunately for us, there is no need for us to alter our plans for the conference, but we as an organisation feel great sympathy for the inhabitants of the region that was the host to our wonderful excursion after the Agadir conference. For details of our 27th conference are set out below.

Chris Moseley

2. Development of the Foundation

Foundation for Endangered Languages conference XVII, Rabat, Morocco

Organised by The Foundation for Endangered Languages and The Moroccan Institute for Advanced Studies in collaboration with the Faculty of Science of Education

Theme: Endangered Languages and Cultural Diversity

The focus of the conference will be on the relationship between language endangerment/extinction and the threat to cultural diversity. While it has a universal scope, it aims to also encourage scholarship and accounts of community initiatives from the African continent as well as those relating to African situations.

Language loss, it is now understood, is a loss for all humankind. As language is both a vehicle of culture and an integral part of culture, the extinction of a language very often means the extinction of a culture, and the extinction of one culture severely impacts all other cultures. Language loss seriously affects cultural diversity and therefore threatens the future and viability of Mankind.

Recent research and study of endangered languages have increased global awareness of the extent and rate of the problem, drawing attention to the growing number of disappearing languages and the speed at which they disappear, but they have also uncovered the serious consequences that extinction of languages may have on the future of humankind.

The loss of cultural practices and traditions, as well as ancestral or indigenous knowledge, experience and worldview, impacts not only specific linguistic communities but also affects all the human community. Just like the disappearance of one animal species (such as the bee) can threaten the entire balance, or even all life, on the planet, the extinction of one single language diminishes our planet’s cultural diversity and therefore reduces the survival chances of mankind.

The threat to one language can signify danger to many others, and language extinction may entail the disappearance of significant amounts of cultural knowledge of vital importance for the human species. Socio-economic pressures, and political disorder can, and often do, provoke dramatic changes with often terrible consequences for linguistic and cultural diversity. Communities everywhere are faced with the challenge of embracing progress and development while fighting to preserve their traditions, cultural practices and languages. As human culture is created and nurtured by particular communities before it spreads to and is adopted by others when a community disappears, its culture and knowledge die with it, and it does not benefit other communities.

This conference aims to bring a multidisciplinary light on endangered languages and the impact of language extinction on linguistic and cultural diversity. It will encourage study of indigenous and minority languages and cultures and their role in enhancing our general knowledge of the animal, vegetal and mineral world, as well as the links and harmony between the cultural and the natural world.

Topics to be examined and questions that may be asked include, but are not limited to:

- Endangered languages as vehicles of ancestral knowledge and repositories of the common human cultural heritage (examples include current biological, cosmological, agricultural, animal behaviour, cultural histories, and medical knowledge including traditional pharmacopeia from specific communities; how these have been passed on to the outside world and how the risk of extinction of some languages threatens cultural diversity and potentially deprives mankind of ancestral knowledge)
- The contribution of endangered languages to world knowledge (examples include knowledge which historically or currently, has proved beneficial, helped save lives, offered new wisdom, presented alternative behaviour)
- New threats to cultural diversity (includes deliberate political measures targeting specific languages, the spread of more dominant languages through political alignment, identity (re)definition, technological factors)
- The effect(s) of the increasing loss of linguistic and cultural diversity in the world (new threats to cultural diversity increase the threat to language or languages - including political and ideological measures)
- Defending cultural diversity (communities’ initiatives, language revitalisation with wider impact, increased awareness).
The focus of the conference will be on the relationship between language endangerment/extinction and the threat to cultural diversity. While it has a universal scope, it aims to also encourage scholarship and accounts of community initiatives from the African continent as well as those relating to African situations.

Call for participation

The organising and sponsoring institutions:

- Foundation for Endangered Languages (FEL)
- The Moroccan Institute for Advanced Studies (IMEA)
- The Faculty of Science of Education (FSE)

have the pleasure to invite everybody interested in the themes of the conference to come to Rabat and attend the event.

Registration (see below) is now open for presenters and listeners, both in person and on-line.

The recent earthquake in Morocco

- The Foundation for Endangered Languages is deeply saddened by the disaster that has hit Marrakesh and a vast region of the High Atlas, taking some 3000 lives and destroying entire villages, leaving scores of people homeless and bereaved.

- The Foundation for Endangered Languages is scheduled to hold its 27th annual conference (FEL XXVII 2023) in Rabat, the capital of Morocco, on 23-25 November. FEL is returning to Morocco and the African continent after 22 years and had hoped this event would be a celebratory visit (Covid prevented a 20th anniversary conference – 20 years since our 2001 Agadir conference – FEL V) as well as both a commemoration and a joyful pilgrimage.

- Rabat is at a significant distance from the earthquake zone and the organisation of the conference is therefore not affected, FEL is, however, overwhelmed by the devastation and the suffering of the communities in the disaster zone.

- In 2001 FEL’s local colleagues and friends organised excursions to Marrakesh and visits to communities in the High Atlas, the very city and region which are now left wounded and bereft. FEL was treated to sumptuous hospitality, which included generous samplings of culinary, musical and other cultural treasures.

- The High Atlas is one of the principle regions of Morocco where Tamazight (and the local variety Tashelhit) is spoken and it is also home to a rich cultural heritage. Part of the tangible heritage, including 12th century edifices, have now been destroyed, and numerous jewels of traditional architecture have been reduced to rubble. Many lives have been changed forever, as a consequence of the loss of loved ones, property and community identity.

- The sad news of the events in the Atlas Mountains only underscores the fragility of cultures and languages throughout the world. Communities are indissociable from their culture and identity. We are reminded that in Morocco and in other countries, the threat to cultural diversity is real and it needs our attention. FEL hopes that its members and friends will join together in a big show of support by attending the conference, preferably with physical presence. Together with our heartfelt compassion, we want to express our commitment to the cause of Endangered Languages and to that of Cultural diversity.

- FEL strongly encourages its members and others who feel committed to the preservation and revitalisation of endangered languages to support the affected communities in any way they can. On its website the British Red Cross offers a page that offers a description of the situation in the earthquake zone, and also appeals for support and provides donation link to support the communities who suffered from the natural disaster. The link is: https://www.redcross.org.uk/stories/disasters-and-emergencies/world/morocco-earthquake-2023-latest-news-and-updates

Registration is now open on https://www.von-weber.nl/fel/registration_form.html

Registration fees (in GB pounds) for members of the Foundation for Endangered Languages (abbreviated FEL)

- FEL members participating on-line: GBP 25
- Concession, Community or Solidarity FEL members participating in person: GBP 80
- All other FEL members participating in person: GBP 160

Registration fee for those who are not a member of FEL

- Fee for all non-members: GBP 320

For more information about the Foundation for Endangered Languages see https://www.ogmios.org

For more information about membership of the Foundation for Endangered Languages see https://www.ogmios.org/membership

Venue

Faculté des Sciences de l’Education, Mohammed V University in Rabat, Morocco.

More information

- Email: felconf2023_morocco@ogmios.org
- Website: https://www.ogmios.org/conferences/2023
• Working language: The working language of the conference is English

Important dates

• 29 August 2023: Selected applicants informed
  All notifications have been sent out on 29 August 16:00 UK and Morocco time
• 31 August 2023: Registration is open
• 29 September 2023: Deadline for Reception of Final Version of Accepted Abstracts (see instructions in acceptance notification)
• 23-24 November 2023: Conference dates
• 25 November: Excursion to a local community

How to get there

• Option 1: Fly to « Mohammed V International Airport » in Casablanca THEN take the train or private transfer to get to accommodation in Rabat.
• Option 2: Fly to « Rabat-Salé Airport » in Rabat THEN take a taxi or private transfer to accommodation in Rabat.

Visa requirements

• Here is a list of the countries whose citizens are exempted from entry visa to Morocco
  https://www.consulat.ma/en/list-countries-whose-citizens-are-exempted-entry-visa-morocco
• Here are the requirements for citizens that are not from the countries exempted from entry visa to Morocco
  https://www.consulat.ma/en/ordinary-visas (see conference section)
• Please contact the organisers at felconf2023_morocco@ogmios.org if you need an invitation in order to obtain your visa

Covid 19 measures

No Covid 19 restrictions / measures have been announced since 30/09/2022

Conference chairs

• Yamina El Kirat El Allame (IMEA)
• Salem Mezhoud (FEL)

FEL Organising Committee

• Salem Mezhoud (Chair)
• Nicholas Ostler
• Steven Krauwer
• Hakim Elnazarov
• Christopher Moseley

• Eda Derhermi
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Local Organising Committee

• Yamina El Kirat El Allame (Chair)
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• Abdekarim Chebbaki
• Yassine Akheyyat
• Adil Azhar
• Hasbiya Taifi Bernoussi
• Othmane Zakaria
• Mouna Al Andaloussi
• Rania Lougmiri

3. Endangered Languages in the News

Exile from Chin State, Burma
By Chris Moseley

Mr. Salai Cho Mana Thang wrote to our FEL Chairman in April 2023 requesting help from us for the documentation and preservation of his native language. He is originally from Kanpetlet in Chin State in Burma, but since 2010 he and his family (his wife and young son) have been living in a refugee community in Malaysia. Your editor requested an interview with him, which he gladly agreed to, conducted by Zoom a couple of months later. As his English is not fluent, we used his wife as our interpreter. What was apparent from our interview, though, was Salai Cho Mana’s obvious enthusiasm for his own language, and his sense of urgency about getting it recorded and transcribed for future generations of his own people.

Curiously, Salai Cho Mana never once mentioned the name of his language in all our exchanges. So let’s begin this interview article with a little background information about the languages of Chin State, and in the process I hope to pinpoint the language he speaks, coming from Kanpetlet.

My background information here draws heavily on an article published on ResearchGate in November 2020, ‘How many languages should be taught in Government schools? Ongoing developments and structural changes of language education policy in China state’ by Nicolas Salem-Gervais and Salai Van Cung Lyon.

Burma (officially known as Myanmar) is home to over 54.8 million people, consisting of over a hundred ethnolinguistic groups with distinct linguistic, cultural and historical backgrounds. Since the country gained independence from Britain (1948), education has been used as a tool for promoting ‘Bamar’ (Burmese) national cultural and the national language. Chin state is a particularly diverse region of the country linguistically, and the cultural traditions of its ethnic groups are deliberately neglected. This is not a new phenomenon under the current repressive military regime, then; they are merely reinforcing a policy that has been in place for over seventy years.
The Kuki-Chin languages are a branch of the Tibeto-Burman family which stretches across western Burma, northeastern India and western Bangladesh. Classifications by various scholars, such as VanBik (2009), DeLancey (2015) and Peterson (2015) propose slightly different overarching categories within Kuki-Chin, such as ‘Northern’, ‘Southern’, ‘Central’ and ‘Maraic’, though some speakers of languages not generally accepted within these groupings self-identify as ‘Chin’ also. Even for a more benevolent government than Burma’s, the strain on the national education system impose by so many local languages within one state would be considerable. With the added motivation of homogenising a diverse state and imposing a centralised ideology, there is arises the question of the curriculum.

In 2019-2020, 64 languages were taught in government schools throughout the country, a few periods every week, as subjects. This was a relatively liberal dispensation, part of a general shift toward decentralisation and democratisation which allowed some local content in the teaching. Whether this trend has been reversed since the current junta’s counter-coup in February 2021, my guest is unable to say from experience.

The issue of language versus dialect is particularly acute in multilingual Chin state, where a number of non-linguistic factors, such as religious faith allegiance, come into play in deciding the pecking order in the hierarchy. Written versus unwritten status is obviously also vital from the educational point of view, as my interviewee is acutely aware.

Burma’s/Myanmar’s national education law of 2014/2015 did not prescribe mother-tongue education; hence the ethnic languages, if taught at all, are taught as subjects. The government is aware of the shortcomings in minority language education. Specific difficulties faced by children whose mother tongue is not Burmese have been explicitly acknowledged by the ministry of education in its National Education Strategic Policy 2016-2021, which states that “The language barrier is also a significant factor for children from national groups that contributes to their dropping out of school.”

Oral traditions are strong in Chin State. But the creation of a written language, which has been applied to many Chin languages, usually by foreign missionaries, since the mid-nineteenth century, ensures a secure place for a language in the hierarchy of educational opportunity. The list of such languages is long, but not long relative to the number of Kuki-China languages, and Salai’s own language has not been favoured in this way; thus he feels that his people are suffering from what others have called ‘the curse of Babel’. This is something he wishes to rectify.

[See the map on the cover: Distribution of students learning languages spoken in Myanmar in Government schools of Chin State, 2019-2020, showing Kanpetlet township in the extreme southeast of the state with a pie-chart of languages]

CM: Could you introduce yourself and tell us how you came to be living in a refugee camp in Malaysia?
I am Salai Cho Mana Thang, and I live in an exiled community of refugees from Chin State in Malaysia, where my family and I have been living since 2010. There are also refugee camps in Thailand.
CM: Could you describe your own language?
It is one of the Chin languages of Chin state.

CM: Chin State is a state of many different languages. At the moment, what opportunities are there for teaching and learning the languages in schools?
In many schools in the state, several languages are used in teaching.
CM: How does this work in practice? Are there enough qualified teachers and enough teaching materials?
Teaching in several languages in the same school is something that is done all over Burma.
CM: How does the current Burmese military government run its education policy? Is there the same curriculum for all schools in all languages?
At least in Chin state, the standard curriculum is disrupted by a campaign against the military which has continued for sixty or seventy years.
CM: How do teachers speak with children, in and out of school?
In Burma, because the native language is not a teaching medium.
CM: According to what I’ve read, just 5 languages of Chin state have been chosen as ‘major’ languages for use in education. Is this true and how does it work?
I don’t know – maybe in some schools. Mother tongue teaching is given for one hour a day – I don’t know the present situation, but probably for one hour a day.
CM: Does the government have a language policy that actually prevents education?
In effect, yes.
CM: When you lived in your home town, how many different languages did you speak and hear in a single day?
Four or five.
CM: What are your hopes for yourself, your family, your state and your country?
We always seek to go back, but there is no hope at present, no possibility of returning to Burma. For myself and my family, we have had good treatment in Malaysia, but it is very difficult for us, as we don’t speak Malay. It is difficult to get to see a doctor. Our son goes to school – not a Malay public school, but a community one for refugees.
CM: Do you have any message for readers of this journal?
We belong to a clan of about fifty thousand people. Among the young people, 99% don’t know how to write the language. I worry that without a chance to teach, it might become extinct.
I want to share more information about our language. The political situation is bad for education. But we are using social media for teaching, and I would like to make the language written. I am collecting materials to use in teaching. Our traditional songs can be recorded on social media. We need support for this project. I can read and write it and I want to promote it to others.
I would like to share some of songs for my son to learn.
CM: Thank you so much for this interview. Please let us know how our Foundation can help you.

The endangered languages that are fighting back

In June 2023 the BBC, in conjunction with the Open University, released a film entitled ‘The endangered languages that are fighting back’. Made by Preston Street Films, it was released on
20 June 2023, and told of several languages which are experiencing a revival in recent times. It was made available on the BBC website.

The rising ocean will extinguish more than land. It will kill entire languages.

By Anastasia Riehl, from The Guardian (UK), 28 June 2023

Rising sea levels already pose an existential threat to the populations of Tuvalu, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands and other low-lying Pacific atolls. In these places, however, it is not just homes, crops and community cohesiveness that are at risk: it is Tuvaluan, Kiribati and Marshallese – the languages native to these islands.

The impact of the climate crisis on languages may be new, but the relationship between language and climate is old. As humans populated the Earth, climate and geography were enormous factors in where they settled and flourished. The equatorial region, with its consistent temperatures, predictable rainfall and abundant agricultural opportunities, was particularly agreeable.

Humans thrived in these areas – inhabiting a valley here, an islet there – giving rise to thousands of different communities, and with them thousands of different languages. Today, vastly more of the world’s languages are spoken in the tropics than at higher latitudes.

It is not just humans and languages that have prospered in nurturing climates but species of all kinds. Research on biocultural diversity finds striking parallels between the evolution of species and languages. Where a new species rooted and blossomed, so did a language. Of the roughly 7,000 languages spoken today, 70% are concentrated in only 25% of the Earth’s land area – precisely in those areas with the highest biodiversity. Unfortunately, this shared fate binds them in birth as well as death, with both species and languages facing extinction crises.

If the story of climate and language has long been one of harmony, the climate crisis is the plot twist. In a tragic reversal, it is precisely those areas of the Earth that were the most hospitable to people and languages, to species of all kinds, that are now becoming the least hospitable. The climate called us in, and now the climate is casting us out.

But how can the climate hurt a language? The sea will not suddenly swallow an entire linguistic community in one gulp, dying words left bobbing upon the waves. The speakers will leave their islands before that happens. In fact, a changing climate, whether through rising seas, drought or catastrophic storms, will probably never be the sole culprit in a language’s death.

Rather, the threat of the climate emergency is the threat of forced migration. As a population is compelled to abandon its lands and move into a new community – a neighbouring village, a refugee camp, an urban centre – its Indigenous language becomes harder to sustain.

To make matters worse, a crisis of language loss was well under way even before global temperatures began to rise. More than half of the world’s languages are already endangered, with the most pessimistic estimates putting the figure at 90%.

There are many contributors to this dire statistic – the imposition of national languages; government persecution of linguistic minorities; the ascendance of international languages in the era of globalisation; and a lack of media and resources for education in minority languages.

Languages do not expire suddenly, they wither gradually. As a community begins to adopt different languages for use in different contexts, intergenerational transmission of their Indigenous language may decrease, until ultimately it is no longer spoken at all. The climate crisis, which will greatly exacerbate the threats to languages, is poised to be a leading accelerator of such loss.

On a precarious planet, should languages be a major concern? While access to food, water, shelter and safety may be the most immediate human needs, linguistic diversity is far from trivial. Languages are intricately woven into culture and identity. They encode histories, they catalogue plants and perspectives, they define peoples. Languages are vast databases of information about human cognition. If they die, this information is lost to science. So, too, is our opportunity to learn more about ourselves.

But this story is not over. The gradual nature of language loss affords an opportunity to intervene and to redirect the narrative. Already, Indigenous communities and linguists are working together to document hundreds of languages, and revitalisation efforts are breathing new life into languages that were once on the decline. Even tiny Tuvaluan, as it migrates from its islands, finds hope in New Zealand, where the expatriate community prioritises the teaching of language and culture to the youth.

Last December, UNESCO launched the Indigenous Languages Decade to draw attention to the crisis of our languages and to mobilise resources to confront it. Awareness of the threats to languages is growing; concern over the climate emergency is also increasing. Perhaps by linking these two existential threats, our efforts to address one problem will help to alleviate the other.

The climate crisis is a force of destruction but can also be a force of unification. If languages and species live and die together, surely we can save them – together.

Anastasia Riehl is director of the Strathy Language Unit, Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario

Push to bring New South Wales languages back from brink of extinction

By Tamsin Rose, from the Guardian (UK), 24 July 2023
Some of the last surviving Aboriginal languages left in New South Wales are at risk of extinction unless governments maintain funding and support to preserve them, the state’s Aboriginal Languages Trust says. The trust’s executive director, Clare McHugh, says it is hard to know exactly how many languages existed before colonisation but about 35 of them remain in NSW.

McHugh, a Gamilaroi and Dhungutti woman, says without support some of these languages and dialects could die out and this cultural heritage would be lost forever.

She says this highlights the “really important work” of protecting them, including NSW’s first Aboriginal languages week, to be held in October.

“The risk of not having steady, dedicated and ongoing commitment from governments to support communities in this work is you would see a number of languages become extinct,” she said.

McHugh said the Aboriginal languages week is an Australian first and comes as governments and advocates around the world are pushing to “stop further language loss”.

The week, which will kick off with a free public festival in Sydney, will run every year during the week of 24 October to mark the date the Aboriginal Languages Act became law in NSW in 2017.

The NSW Aboriginal affairs minister, David Harris, said the week will focus on teaching languages that remain across the state, particularly to children and young people.

Harris on Monday [24 July] visited the Gujaga preschool and La Perouse public school, where students have been learning Dharawal.

“It’s really important to accentuate the value of teaching and learning language across the community, particularly connecting young kids back to their culture,” he said.

Harris hoped the week would raise awareness and increase support for the revitalisation and reclamation of Aboriginal languages.

“Losing any language is a terrible shame. We’ve got the opportunity to not just rediscover some of these languages but to actually grow their usage.”

People or organisations wishing to host an event or activity can apply for grants of up to $5,000 from a $250,000 pool to be administered by the Aboriginal Languages Trust. Applications are open now until 23 August for the October events.

New laws for Welsh

From The Linguist (UK), Summer 2023

In its efforts to promote Welsh and reach its ambitious target of having one million Welsh speakers by 2050, the Welsh government has proposed a new law to help all pupils in Wales become confident Welsh speakers. The aim is to increase Welsh language provision within English-medium schools and to increase the number of Welsh-medium schools, along with other policies requiring local authorities to promote Welsh-medium education. The public consultation on the plans closed on 16 June.

The target of one million Welsh speakers was set out in 2016, after an analysis of the 2011 census identified the workplace, family, schools and the planning process as priority areas. Worriedly, the 2021 census showed a decline in the number of Welsh speakers from 562,000 (19% of the population) in 2011 to 538,000 (17.8%). There were particularly sharp drops in traditional strongholds for Welsh, while urban areas, such as Cardiff, showed slight increase.

It is undeniable that the Welsh government is making a concerted effort to promote Welsh, putting the necessary means at its disposal. And the UK government is joining the action, proposing legislation that would make TV channel S4C’s Welsh-language content available throughout the UK. S4C’s CEO Siân Doyle said: “The new framework will make the UK’s indigenous languages, including Welsh, part of the new public service remit for television in the UK.”

This is significant because it moves media in the UK’s indigenous languages out of their geographical straitjacket and into a national arena. Echoing this shift, S4C’s highly acclaimed 2022 series Dal y Mellt has become the first Wels-language drama to be streamed on Netflix, under the title Rough Cut. S4C will also develop a Welsh feature film every year. Interestingly, Welsh was listed as the 45th most influential language in the world (out of more than 600 languages) in the 2022 edition of the French government’s World Language Barometer study. The factors enabling it to score so highly include the life expectancy, education and high level of GDP of its speakers, but also – crucially – its presence on Wikipedia and wider translation parameters “showing that speakers of Welsh are active and Welsh educated”.

This is where we see the power of the Welsh-medium policies pursued by the Welsh government. The renowned linguist and CIOL* vice-president David Crystal described Welsh as “one of the success stories of the 20th century in terms of the revitalisation process”. That success seems set to continue through the 21st century too.

*CIOL = Chartered Institute of Linguists

‘Our language is dying’

By Andrew Higgins, from the New York Times 4 October 2023

The struggle to save Gagauz, a Turkic tongue used by dwindling numbers of people in an ethnic enclave of Moldova, reflects the emotional power of language loyalties across the former Soviet Union.

He has published collections of poetry, written more than 20 books, as well as plays, translated works by foreign literary giants like Moliere and is rated as a master of his native language.
His prodigious output, however, is not matched by the size of his readership. His children can’t understand a word he has written.

Todur Zanet writes in Gagauz, an obscure Turkic tongue used by so few people that, the writer worries, the main value of his literary output probably lies with future scholars interested in dead languages. “At least they will have something interesting to study,” he said.

“Our language is dying and within two or three generations it will be dead,” Mr. Zanet, 65, said in an interview in Comrat, the capital of his home region of Gagauzia, an autonomous ethnic enclave in the former Soviet republic of Moldova.

Others are less pessimistic and note that while used routinely at home and work by only a few thousand people, Gagauz is similar to Turkish and several other Turkic languages widely used in parts of the former Soviet Union like Azerbaijan and Central Asia.

The Gagauz language might be small and shrinking, said Gullu Karanfil, a linguist and poet who teaches Gagauz and Turkish at Comrat State University, but, “it is part of a big linguistic family” with more than 300 million people, more than the number of Russian speakers worldwide. “It will not die,” she insisted.

Turkey, Russia and the United States each fund small centers at the university to promote their own tongues and by extension influence, a rivalry rooted in post-Soviet language politics, a particularly pernicious legacy of Moscow’s previous rule.

Since Moscow’s empire began to unravel in the late 1980s, heated arguments and even wars have broken out over languages.

The conflict over Nagorno Karabakh, an ethnic Armenian enclave inside Azerbaijan that again erupted in violence two weeks ago, began in 1988 after Armenian writers complained that the region had no textbooks or broadcasting in their language. That grievance quickly fueled wider demands for cultural and political self-determination.

President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia sent his military into Ukraine in February last year after claiming that Russian-speakers there needed to be protected from Ukrainians intent on creating a mono-linguistic Ukrainian-speaking “Nazi” state.

That was not true but it reflected the emotional power of language loyalties across vast expanses of territory that, in the Soviet era, had been bound together, from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean, by the hegemonic sway of Russian.

Ignat Cazmali, a former Soviet military officer and historian from Gagauzia, founded a museum in his home village of Avdarma, east of Comrat, to try and untangle the settlement’s often painful journey through periods of Russian, Romanian, Soviet and now Moldovan rule, each of which had its own dominant language.

Soviet communism, he said, “was never about internationalism but an ethnocracy,” a system designed to ensure the dominance of ethnic Russians and their language while playing a multitude of smaller ethnic groups and languages off against each other.

The result was a matryoshka nesting doll of mutually reinforcing linguistic and ethnic grievances. The Soviet Union contained 15 different ethnically based republics, the biggest of which was Russia. When it broke apart, smaller dolls inside like Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia — and the minorities they in turn contained, like the Gagauz — spilled out and clamored for the primacy of their own languages.

Under pressure from huge street protests asserting the identity of Moldova’s Romanian-speaking majority, the Soviet republic’s mostly Russian-speaking communist legislature in 1989 declared “Moldovan” — meaning Romanian — the “state language” and relegated Russian to a “language of interethnic communication.” Two years later Moldova declared independence.

The rise of Moldovan nationalism alarmed minority groups like the Gagauz, which mostly spoke Russian and feared falling victim to the identity politics of Moldova’s Romanian-speaking majority. Ethnic Russians in Ukraine had similar fears about losing out to newly empowered Ukrainian speakers.

Few Gagauz people by this time spoke their own native tongue. It had been taught in local schools for a brief period starting in 1958, but was then dropped as Moscow accelerated a drive to impose Russian. But fear of rising nationalism among the Moldovan majority set off a parallel push by Gagauz intellectuals to revive and assert their own language.

Todur Marinoglu, a Gagauz language activist in the 1980s, recalled that this immediately attracted the attention of the K.G.B., which infiltrated the movement to sideline activists genuinely interested in the local language and promote others mostly interested in keeping Moldova within the Soviet Union.

Mr. Marinoglu was placed under surveillance and taken in for questioning on suspicion of being a “pan-Turkic” militant in cahoots with Turkey, a member of NATO. He insisted that his only real concern was reviving his native tongue.

Realizing that the Soviet Union was falling apart, local communist elites in Gagauzia jumped on the Gagauz language revival bandwagon, at least briefly, though many did not speak it. They supported the establishment in 1988 of Ana Sozu, which translates loosely as Mother Tongue, the region’s first newspaper entirely in Gagauz. Mr. Zanet, the writer, became its editor.

A year later, they declared Gagauzia an independent state, ostensibly to protect the Gagauz language but mainly to protect
their own position against Romanian-speaking Moldovan nationalists.

The breakaway state folded in 1994 after Moldova agreed to grant the region autonomy. This entity has been dominated since by politicians who all speak Russian and have little or no knowledge of either Gagauz or Romanian, despite a legal requirement that all officials in the autonomous government know the local Turkic tongue.

“There were never any official documents written in Gagauz,” Mr. Marinoglu, the former activist said, “so nothing changed. Everything is in Russian. This is the tomb of our own language.”

Of the 45 secondary schools in the region, 42 teach in Russian, two in Romanian and one in both. They offer classes in Gagauz as a second language but many parents want their children to focus on mastering Russian, a marker of education and social status.

Natalia Cristeva, the head of the regional education department, said she was working to promote Gagauz; in 2021 she started a program of trilingual kindergartens, with children required to speak Russian, Romanian and Gagauz on different days.

She said it had come as a big shock when the United Nations in 2010 declared Gagauz an endangered language — one of more than 2,600 languages, out of a total of 6,700 spoken worldwide, now classified as being at risk of extinction.

As a child, Ms. Cristeva spoke Gagauz at home with her father but, after going to school in Russian and working entirely in Russian throughout her career, she now struggles to speak her native tongue fluently.

Efforts to keep the language alive secured what should have been a big boost in 2018 when, after months of heated debate, the regional parliament passed a new law to “widen the sphere of the use of Gagauz,” which included the requirement that officials know how to speak it.

Elena Karamit, a co-sponsor of the legislation and the director of Mr. Cazmali’s museum in Avdarma, said the new rules have been patchily enforced.

“A if people on top spoke Gagauz and started using it in public they would give an example. But they all speak Russian,” she said in an interview, conducted in Russian.

Irina Konstantinova, the Gagauz-speaking director of a local branch of the Moldovan Academy of Sciences, said the requirement had at least helped lift a stigma attached to Gagauz since Soviet times.

Her office has developed a dozen textbooks for civil servants who want to learn the language, children’s books and a series of Russian-Gagauz dictionaries covering specialist vocabularies for fields like medicine and trade.

Mr. Zanet, the writer and newspaper editor, has kept his tiny-circulation journal alive thanks to support from Turkey’s overseas development agency but is still gloomy about the survival of his native tongue.

“There is no future for small languages,” he said. “The future belongs to big languages — English, Russian, Chinese and Turkish.”

4. New publications

The Languages and Linguistics of Indigenous North America
A Comprehensive Guide, Vol. 1
Series Title: The World of Linguistics:
Editors: Carmen Dagostino, Marianne Mithun, Keren Rice
Publisher: De Gruyter Mouton, 2023


This handbook provides broad coverage of the languages indigenous to North America, with special focus on typologically interesting features and areal characteristics, surveys of current work, and topics of particular importance to communities. The volume is divided into two major parts: subfields of linguistics and family sketches. The subfields include those that are customarily addressed in discussions of North American languages (sounds and sound structure, words, sentences), as well as many that have received somewhat less attention until recently (tone, prosody, sociolinguistic variation, directives, information structure, discourse, meaning, language over space and time, conversation structure, evidentiality, pragmatics, verbal art, first and second language acquisition, archives, evolving notions of fieldwork). Family sketches cover major language families and isolates and highlight topics of special value to communities engaged in work on language maintenance, documentation, and revitalization.

(From the Linguist List 28.9.2023)

5. Forthcoming events

International Conference on Indigenous Language Documentation, Education and Revitalization
Language Documentation and Revitalization in the Decade of Indigenous Languages
October 12-14, 2023, IU Biddle Hotel and Conference Center, Bloomington, Indiana.
Hosted by the Council of Indigenous Language Organizations (CILO), ICILDER is bringing together Indigenous communities, educators, linguists, and scholars from around the world to share their knowledge and experiences, and in turn inspire future language revitalization efforts.
Members of Indigenous communities and our Indigenous Partners are invited to attend ICILDER without a registration fee. The invitation was issued on-line by the Language Conservancy. To register or find out more information:
https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/FMfcgZctwMgkDGJvK5GHVVMmHGp1Lzh

Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas

The Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas (SSILA) is planning to hold its next annual winter meeting jointly with the Linguistic Society of America (LSA) in New York City, NY on January 4-7, 2024. The conference will be held in person at the Sheraton New York Times Square. SSILA meetings encourage scholars to present on a wide range of topics centered on any aspect of Indigenous American languages,

Date: 4 January – 7 January 2024
Location: New York, NY, USA
Contact: Martin Kohlberger
Contact Email: conferences@ssila.org
Meeting URL: https://www.ssila.org/

Linguistic Field(s): Anthropological Linguistics; General Linguistics; Language Documentation; Typology

Call for papers (extended deadline):

SSILA welcomes abstracts for papers that present original research focusing on the linguistic study of the Indigenous languages of the Americas. Presenters must be members of SSILA in order to present.
Salai Cho Mana Thang with his son in exile from Chin state, Burma, in Malaysia. See interview in this issue.

A  ng'pai(1)ဆြဲက ဒါကို(၃)
Ng’theinak(1)
k’o ng’lung(A tan)-ဆာပုံကိုကိုကို(မိုရိုး)
e· i· o· u· ä· aw
k’o ng’lung(a k’däm)-ဆာပုံကိုကိုကို(မိုရိုးမိုရိုး)
A-E · I· O· U· Ä· Ŭ· AW
ng’theinak(2)
m’ni m’lei cua ng’lung he(a tan)-ဆာပုံကိုကိုကို(မိုရိုး)
b· c· d· f· g· h· k· l· m· n· p· r· s· t· v· y
m’ni m’lei cua ng’lung he (a k’däm)-ဆာပုံကိုကိုကို(မိုရိုးမိုရိုး)
B· C· D· F· G· H· K· L· M· N· P· R· S· T· V· Y

Part of Salai Cho Mana Thang’s transcription system of Romanisation from Burmese script