Children of the Gottsheerisch community, Slovenia, See the article in this issue.
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OGMIOS Newsletter 77
February 2024

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Waldbuatn c. 1938: a scene from Gottsheerisch life
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1. Editorial

The Foundation’s 28th annual conference is to be held in September this year in Islamabad, Pakistan. The theme is ‘Endangered Languages and Oral Traditions’ and the Call for Papers is set out below. It promises to be a thought-provoking exploration of diverse languages of the world that are the vehicles for spoken traditions which have resisted globalisation and standardisation. More about this conference, and on our annual Grants round and our publishing programme, under ‘Development of the Foundation’ below.

Chris Moseley

2. Development of the Foundation

FEL annual grants, 2024

The annual round of Grants has just been announced as Ogmios goes to press. As usual, we have a diverse field of promising projects from around the world that aim to sustain and promote threatened languages. The grant winners that we are congratulating this year are about to be announced.

FEL publishing partnership with Brill

Our Foundation’s partnership with Brill academic publishers is bearing fruit, with new volumes about to appear in our set of Yearbooks (formerly Proceedings). In this and future years, the outcomes of our prestigious conferences will be available through Brill’s international distribution network, from the following conferences: London (2019), Sydney (2020), Tirana (2021), Albuquerque (2022), Rabat (2023). There will be a Yearbook for Islamabad (2024), and the venues and themes for future conferences are still being planned.

FEL XXVIII, Islamabad: Call for papers

The Foundation for Endangered Languages (FEL) and Forum for Language Initiatives (FLI) in collaboration with Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad will hold the 28th Annual Conference - FEL XXVIII in Islamabad, Pakistan, 25 – 27 September 2024 on the theme:

Endangered Languages and Oral Traditions

Oral traditions and expressions come in a huge variety of spoken forms: folk songs, stories, riddles, tales, legends, myths, poems, epics, chants, charms, romances and other types of folk literature and dramatic performances. Certain types of oral traditions are highly specialized occupations, but they are commonly performed by lay members of the community who transmit their skills, the communal knowledge, and artistic values from generation to generation. Oral traditions are, however, highly fragile and their viability rests chiefly on this transmission. Languages live and prosper in oral traditions - folk songs and stories - and other forms of intangible cultural heritage. The protection and preservation of indigenous languages are, therefore, closely related to the transmission of oral traditions and expressions. When languages are threatened and become extinct, oral traditions and expressions are also permanently lost. Documenting and safeguarding oral traditions are, therefore, significant ways of protecting and preserving languages; they are important complements to such activities as writing dictionaries and creating grammars and databases. Recent research trends in documentary and descriptive linguistics have underscored the value of oral traditions and expressions and they encourage the use of methodologies which include recording, transcribing and translating oral traditions and expressions. This is compounded by an increasing global awareness of the alarming number of languages which continue to disappear, together with their oral literature and cultural lore, and the threat that their extinction may entail for the future of humankind.

The 28th conference of the Foundation of Endangered Languages (FELXXVIII) will provide a forum for the examination of the intricate relationship between endangered languages and oral traditions and expressions. The Conference will encourage scholarship on the role that vivid oral traditions/expressions may play in the preservation and revitalization of endangered languages and, similarly, on the impact that language revitalization may have on the maintenance, development and flourishing of oral traditions. The conference will explore sustainable ways of preserving and protecting oral traditions and expressions and ensuring their transmissions to future generations.

The main theme of FELXXVIII is: Endangered languages and Oral Traditions

Other sub themes and major topics include but are not limited to:

1. Endangered oral literatures: heritage preservation (music, poetry, mushaira, contests...)  
2. Oral cultures and traditional knowledge  
3. Documentation and digitalization of oral art and literature  
4. Language policy, planning, and oral art  
5. Oral art and mother tongue education  
6. Mother-tongue education policies: oral art and literature  
7. Rediscovering oral traditions and expressions  
8. Oral Traditions as vehicle for transmission of culture and language

The main focus of the conference will be on the dynamic relationship between language endangerment and the role of oral traditions and expressions in safeguarding them. While it has

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The main focus of the conference will be on the dynamic relationship between language endangerment and the role of oral traditions and expressions in safeguarding them. While it has
a universal scope, it specifically aims to highlight interesting
and creative oral traditions and expressions of the indigenous
communities of Pakistan and encourage scholarship and ac-
counts of community initiatives for preserving and promoting
them. Studies highlighting the oral traditions of indigenous
communities from anywhere are welcome.

The conference will take place from 25 to 27 September 2024
at:
Main Academic Complex
Allama Iqbal Open University
Sector H – 8/ 2, Islamabad-Pakistan

The conference will be in hybrid format and will also be
streamed online by video conferencing. A link will be pro-
vided to all those who register.

Registration will be
open in June 2024. Please check the conference website for
availability.

A One-day excursion will also be planned to an indigenous
community in Hazara Division of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and
will be available to those who attend physically.

Abstracts of 600 - 800 words are invited for submission on
EasyChair at this address:
https://easychair.org/conferences/?conf=felxxvii2024
by the deadline of 15 May 2024 at 23:59 GMT

Abstracts should be in English and must be submitted as PDF
files (filename ending in .pdf). Please note that abstracts cannot
be submitted as Microsoft Word documents (name ending in
.docx or .doc).

Authors whose abstracts are accepted will be notified by 21
June 2024 and will be required to submit a conference paper of
2000-3000 words on or before 31 July 2024.

The conference paper should provide a brief account of the
context, the issue(s) studied, the methodology used, and rele-
vant references, together with a mention of any major result(s),
conclusions and implications.

The conference papers will be compiled as a conference book
which will be made available to conference participants and
members of the Foundation for Endangered Languages.

Selected papers from the conference will be published as part
of FEL-Brill Endangered Languages Series by the leading inter-
national publisher Brill.

Important Dates
- 15 May 2024: Deadline for submission of abstract
- 21 June 2024: Selected applicants informed
- 31 July 2024: Deadline for extended version of accepted ab-
- 25-27 September 2024: Conference dates
- 28 September: Excursion to a local community

The 28th FEL conference is organized by Allama Iqbal Open
University Islamabad (AIU), the Forum for Language Initia-
tives (FLI) and the Foundation of Endangered Languages
(FEL).

AIU website: https://www.aiou.edu.pk/
FLI website: http://fli-online.org/site
FEL website: https://www.ogmios.org/index.php
Conference Website: https://fli-online.org/site/conference-of-
the-foundation-for-endangered-languages/

3. Endangered Languages in
the News

Cyclone-proofing Vanuatu’s endan-
erged language records
From Nick Thieberger, from 360info, 16 August 2023

Vanuatu’s rampaging cyclones are the latest extreme event to
threaten the country’s cultural records. A digitisation project
could be key to protecting them.

When cyclones ripped through Vanuatu’s Port Vila in March
2023, they left a trail of crumbled buildings, mud-stricken
roads and decimated power lines in their wake.

Among those affected was the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, the
country’s main storehouse for cultural records, which sus-
tained damage on its roof and entrance as well as losing com-
puter equipment.

Vanuatu is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the
world and, along with other low-lying coastal communities
across the Pacific, it will become more unviable as rising sea-
water damages garden crops.

As this happens, the risk of local languages being lost gets big-
ger and bigger.

Already, a number of the world’s 7,000 languages are no
longer spoken.

In the Pacific, where a quarter of the world’s languages are,
this erosion is happening in part because of increasing urbani-
sation.

Traditionally, people in the Pacific region lived in villages and
had little need to travel outside. They spoke or understood
neighbouring languages and passed their own onto their chil-
dren.

Speakers of Pacific languages represent two major language
families: Austronesian and Papuan.

Speakers of Papuan languages first settled in Papua New
Guinea and nearby islands around 40,000 years ago, while
Austronesians arrived over the past 5,000 years.

One way languages get lost is when speakers of many lan-
guages move and meet in cities and switch to national lan-
guages for ease of communication.

In the 18th century, initial contact with Europeans led to dis-
dease and depopulation that prompted many to abandon their
villages and move to larger settlements.
Today, the risk of climate change making parts of the Pacific uninhabitable may be what pushes people from their homes and into urban centres where languages are lost.

The region is prone to extreme events like cyclones, floods, earthquakes, and tsunamis.

For example, when the west coast of Aceh was hit by a tsunami in 2004, a number of villages were wiped out, and with them, a number of local languages.

As climate change leads to rising seawater, it makes it impossible to grow food in coastal communities. Coastal villages have to move inland, if possible, or find other islands to live on.

The IPCC’s 2022 report notes more than 20 million people per year since 2008 have been displaced by extreme weather events, many of which were exacerbated by climate change.

This all leads to the loss of languages as speakers move into multilingual locations and their children are exposed to new dominant languages.

While efforts are being made to support these communities, an additional consideration is the many records and recordings of these languages held in the region and their vulnerability to the effects of humidity and rain.

Since 2003, a consortium of Australian universities has run a project to locate and digitise records of these languages. The project, called the Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures or PARADISEC, includes audio, film, photographs and manuscripts.

The Pacific Manuscripts Bureau is a similar project which has been working for more than 50 years to copy at-risk manuscripts in the region.

PARADISEC works closely with cultural agencies to help digitise tapes and manuscripts, returning digital copies and keeping a safe copy to return in case of disaster.

This is a careful, delicate process. Tapes are increasingly difficult to play, there are no playback machines in many locations and tapes are fragile, needing special care.

Recorded heritage can provide the basis for relearning ancestral knowledge, and also links people today to their great-grandparents.

For some languages, these may be the only records that exist, making their survival so much more important.

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1 My word, no one else’s
2 Save by the Gottscheers themselves; see the Gottscheer Heritage and Genealogy Association
3 loosely translated as forest farmers
them, quickly assimilated and adapted to the western Euro-
pean-influenced cultures in which they found themselves, after
World War Two. As is not uncommon with a cultural exodus,
these immigrant Gottsheers kept their heritage and predomi-
nantly spoken language alive amongst their immediate and ex-
tended family cohort, however, subsequent generations, specifi-
cally second-and-third-generation descendants have lost (al-
most) all ability to speak and/or understand the native tongue
of their grandparents and great-grandparents.

There are a limited number of Gottsheer cultural organizations
still operating worldwide, of which the Gottsheer
Gedenkstätte in Graz-MariaTrost, Austria is the most robust
umbrella. A bi-monthly newsletter -- die Gottsheer Gedenkstätte
Zeitung -- written wholly in German, is circulated to 580
Gottscheers around the globe. Regrettably, those numbers are
rapidly and steadily decreasing, as “original” Gottsheers are
approaching their mid-eighties and early nineties. Moreover,
these surviving Gottsheers were young children, toddlers and
infants who, though born in Gottshee, were raised in the lan-
guage and culture of their parents in a new and fore-
gign land, and as such, have only scant, if any, memory of their place of
origin, which makes their unique cultural and linguistic Dasein
quite remarkable, albeit fleeting.

In North America, the first Gottsheer Treffen was held in 1964
to ensure that Gottsheers on both sides of the border between
Canada and the USA could meet to celebrate and reaffirm their
heritage. Most importantly, it enabled them to connect with dis-
persed family members, share stories and reminisce about the
beloved Hoimot (homeland) in Gottsheerisch. This annual event
takes place, on an alternating basis, between the two countries.
2024 marks the 60th Anniversary Gottsheer Treffen and will be
held in Kitchener, ON, Canada over the August long-weekend
(August 3-5). Though not easily admitted, this may be the last
Treffen attended by some of the few remaining original
Gottscheers, due to the cognitive and physical limitations that
advancing age imposes. As such, it offers a (closing) window of
opportunity for anyone interested in capturing the language for
historical record in an academic or official capacity. Should an-
other be interested in unpacking this opportunity further, I
would be happy to make myself available via email and/or vir-
tually, in order to discuss.

sincerely,
Christine A. Liebig
FIRST GENERATION CANADIAN OF GOTTSCHEER DE-
CENT (MATERNAL)
caliebig@gmail.com

For supplementary interest:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWBc0wji8-c
https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/saving-dy-
ing-disappearing-languages-wikitongues-culture
https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/attempt-keep-dy-
ing-gottschee-culture-very-much-alive-180955915/

India: Tsunami pushes language to the brink
By Vysakh R, from 360info, 16 August 2023

A devastating natural disaster 19 years ago has pushed the native
language of a tiny island in the Bay of Bengal into decline.

This could be a sign of things to come for many languages as
climate change gathers pace and such disasters become more
frequent.

The case of Teressa Island in the Nicobar group of the Anda-
man and Nicobar archipelago underscores the difficulty in pre-
dicting how climate change will affect the language landscape
in various regions.

Teressa and its smaller neighbour to the north, Chowra, had
their own distinct yet highly similar languages named Lurö
and Sanenyö, respectively.

After the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, Chowra’s inhabitants
were relocated to Teressa after all their coastal villages were
destroyed.

Nineteen years later, Sanenyö — the language of the displaced
community — is replacing Lurö, the language of the commu-
nity native to Teressa Island.

What makes this situation peculiar is the fact that Teressa and
Chowra, where the migrants came from, have been in contact
for centuries, and inter-island migration was a very common
practice.

Also, many of the refugees actually returned to Chowra after
three years, after they petitioned the government for the right
to go back.
In such a context where multilingualism was the norm, the tsunami not only altered the island’s geography but also significantly altered the social balance of the place and led to a situation of Luró becoming endangered.

Climate change affects linguistic communities in multiple ways.

Change in weather patterns can adversely affect small-scale seasonal farming communities that depend on rainfall for irrigation. This could lead to them migrating somewhere else in search of employment, mostly towards bigger towns and cities.

The local language of the community will gradually fall into disuse in such cases. Over time, the language risks becoming endangered because it is no longer being passed down from generation to generation.

Parents often discourage their children from learning and speaking their mother tongue in favour of becoming fluent in the dominant language.

The younger generation also faces such pressure from other institutions such as schools, colleges, government offices and the job market.

For displaced communities, learning the dominant language of their new space, often at the cost of their own language, becomes the only way to secure a living.

Language endangerment is a major social issue that predominantly affects Indigenous and other minority communities.

Scholars predict that up to almost 90 percent of the languages currently spoken around the world will go extinct in the coming 50 to 70 years.

There are multiple causes attributed to this, such as globalisation, social and economic oppression, lack of representation in education and entertainment, and pressure from dominant languages.

When communities are displaced from their original inhabited spaces, many of the words and usages in the language that refer to local geographical features and biodiversity will fall into disuse if these features and elements are not present in their resettlement area.

This will greatly compromise the richness of parts of the vocabulary such as spatial references.

It can even affect performative aspects of language such as its usage in rituals, storytelling and public speaking.

Stigma caused by lack of fluency in the regional language, which is often the medium of instruction in schools, can adversely affect the academic performance of children from these displaced communities.

In recent years, climate change has emerged as a major factor leading to language endangerment. This is most visible in the case of island communities that are becoming the first victims of rising sea levels.

The relationships between language and social structures are highly dynamic.

Climate-induced displacement can lead to unexpected outcomes, like in the case of Teressa where the dominant language spoken by the local community falls into disuse due to the migration of another community affected by the 2004 tsunami to the island.

Scholars have been considering solutions to endangered languages since the late 20th century.

There has been a push to consider linguistic rights as part of human rights and guarantee constitutional and legal protection to speakers of minority languages.

Linguistic rights include ensuring linguistic diversity through comprehensive documentation combined with sustained efforts at revitalising languages.

Several governmental and non-governmental bodies, such as UNESCO, Endangered Language Documentation Program and Summer Institute of Linguistics currently work with communities around the world to document and revitalise their threatened languages.

Scholars have also developed reliable revitalisation methods that cover curriculum planning, textbook development and content creation across mediums and genres.

The institutional support that the projects have garnered has proved vital in determining the effectiveness of these efforts.

Even as climate change continues to displace native communities, language activism in this direction can go a long way towards supporting endangered languages.

Vysakh R is a PhD scholar at the Indian Institute of Technology in Gandhinagar. He currently works in the field of linguistic anthropology. His research interests include multilingualism, language ideologies, linguistic identities, language endangerment and language ecology.

His research has been funded by a Wenner-Gren Foundation Dissertation Fieldwork Grant.

Originally published under Creative Commons by 360info™.
Grammar changes how we see, an Australian language shows

By Christine Kenneally, from Scientific American, 1 November 2023

In the early 20th century linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf thrilled his contemporaries by noting that the Hopi language, spoken by Native American people in what is now Arizona, had no words or grammatical elements to represent time. Whorf argued that this meant Hopi speakers had no concept of time and experienced what an English speaker might call “the passage of time” in a completely different way. This bold idea challenged the prevailing notion that there was a correct way to see the world—a way that lined up with the concepts already embedded in the languages of Western scholarship.

As it turns out, Hopi has quite a complex system for describing time, and those who speak it are perfectly capable of thinking about time in all kinds of ways, as indeed are all humans. In light of this realization, modern linguists assumed that even if the fundamental structures of language may differ—and even if languages specify things such as gender, number, direction and relative time in diverse ways—everyone must perceive the world in the same basic way.

Work on Australian Aboriginal languages has complicated that view, most recently in a groundbreaking study of Murrinhpatha. Spoken by most residents of Wadeye, a town of 2,500 people on Australia’s northwestern coast, the language has many fascinating characteristics. Action, participants, ownership and intention may be expressed with a single word. This quality, which linguists describe as “polysynthetic”, means that many affixes may attach to a verb—and with each additional affix another layer of story accrues. The meaning conveyed by such a word contains actors and acting entwined into a complex whole. For example, the single word mengan-kumayerlurungihekardi means “he was going through our bags stealing from us.”

Murrinhpatha also has free word order, which means subjects, verbs and objects can and do occur in any position in a sentence. In practice, this means the two-year-olds of Wadeye learn how to wield massively complex words that bear little relation to a typical English-language book of ABCs.

Recently Rachel Nordlinger, a linguist at the University of Melbourne who has studied Murrinhpatha for 18 years, and her colleagues conducted the first psycholinguistic experiment in the language. Significantly, they found that when people are putting their thoughts into words, their mental processes may be shaped by the structure of their language.

From the late nineteen-fifties onward one of the most important observations in modern linguistics was that any child can learn any language. It followed that all children must have the same mental equipment for acquiring language. In 2009 psycholinguist Anne Cutler observed that, in part because of this truism, researchers assumed the systems for adult language processing were also the same and would yield similar results across studies no matter what language they used to test them. Language-processing experiments were written up, replicated and discussed with no consideration of the fact that the different languages used may have had some effect on the findings. It wasn’t that language diversity was entirely invisible, Cutler noted, but that the research objective was to unearth a universal system that all humans used.

Over time that view became less tenable, in part because of Cutler’s contributions. One of her findings was that listeners segment a speech stream based on the cadence of their first language. French speakers segment a speech stream into syllables, whereas English speakers segment it by stress placement.

Field linguists, whose work brings them regularly into contact with the stunning diversity of the world’s languages, also have long doubted the idea that a person’s native language has no impact on their thought processes. And more recently, many researchers have been troubled by the fact that most work on universal properties of language and language processing has been carried out using English and a few other familiar languages—a group that probably represents less than 5 per cent of the world’s language diversity. “The focus was on finding universals and explaining away the differences,” says psycholinguist Evan Kidd, one of Nordlinger’s co-experimenters. “But the search for universals took place in only one corner of the language universe.”

Australian languages are among the least explored by psycholinguists—a major gap given the size of the language family. Just 200 years ago at least 300 languages were spoken by people in Australia. Of that enormous group of languages, most belonged to the Pama-Nyungan family, with dozens of branches that descended from a protolanguage probably spoken 6,000 years ago in the northeastern part of the continent. Since colonization began in 1788, the number of Aboriginal languages still spoken in Indigenous homes in the country has been roughly halved. Of those remaining, only 13 are learned as a first language by children. Murrinhpatha, part of the relatively small group of non-Pama-Nyungan languages, is one of these 13—forming an unbroken thread of dynamic cultural inheritance that extends back many thousands of years. The language’s survival is nothing short of astonishing.

Wadeye was first established as a mission in 1935, and many local Indigenous people there experienced forced assimilation. Children were taken from their families and incarcerated in a boarding school, where they were punished, sometimes sadistically, if they spoke their language. In many places where people experienced similar abuse, the local languages did not survive.

Moreover, the Wadeye mission brought together Indigenous Australians from 10 other language groups, but those languages did not survive in the same way. Now only a few elderly speakers who know them remain. But the children in
Wadeye, Nordlinger says, speak Murrinhpatha. She once asked an elder, her friend and language consultant, how it was that despite the cruelty of the missions and the punishment by the nuns, her people still spoke Murrinhpatha. “We just used to whisper,” the woman replied.

Margaret Perdjert, 61, and Stephen Bunduck, 41, elders and residents of Wadeye, learned Murrinhpatha from their elders and later learned English in school. As speakers of both languages, they find that two have different uses. English is good for talking to outsiders, and it helps kids in the community find good jobs. But their culture and their worldview are completely embedded inside Murrinhpatha, and, they add, the language is vital for their community. In fact, the number of Murrinhpatha speakers who learn it as a first language is growing. It has become the lingua franca of many local Indigenous groups, all with distinctly different language histories.

Nordlinger, who has been working with Murrinhpatha since 2005 but says she speaks it like a three-year-old, long suspected that the demands the language puts on its learners could open windows on human thought. As director of the University of Melbourne’s Research Unit for Indigenous Language, she leads the biggest team of researchers devoted to both studying Australian languages and supporting Indigenous speakers in their language goals. For Nordlinger, each language represents a unique expression of the human experience and contains irreplaceable knowledge about the planet and people, holding within it the traces of thousands of speakers past. Each language also presents an opportunity to explore the dynamic interplay between the speaker’s mind and the structures of language.

In 2015 Nordlinger and Kidd attended a talk about using eye-tracking technology in language experiments, presented by psycholinguist Stephen C. Levinson, now director emeritus of language and cognition at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in the Netherlands. The studies Levinson described demonstrated a clear relation between a participant’s language — specifically, the way words were ordered in it — and the way the person assessed a picture. For example, with a picture of a woman washing a child, English speakers, who perceived the woman as the subject, tended to look at the woman first. “The thinking,” Nordlinger says, “is that English speakers zoom in on the thing that they will express as their subject.” So English-speaking participants focused on the woman and started speaking. Then they looked at the rest of the picture and finished the sentence. “This all happens in milliseconds,” Nordlinger says.

Tseltal speakers did it differently. The grammar of Tseltal, spoken in Chiapas, Mexico, obliges speakers to produce a verb first. So when a group from Levinson’s laboratory used eye tracking to understand sentence planning and production in Tseltal, the researchers found that speakers viewed the woman and the child more evenly, looking back and forth between the two. Psycholinguists call this relational encoding. “It makes sense,” Nordlinger says. “If you have to produce the verb first, you have to look across the picture, work out what’s going on and assess it.”

At the talk Nordlinger asked Levinson what would happen if participants spoke a language with free word order. “We have no idea,” Levinson said. Kidd, who was sitting next to Nordlinger, whispered “We should do that!”

The obvious candidate was Murrinhpatha, which Nordlinger had been studying for a decade. But it took some planning to take a lab-based experimental method that closely tracks participants’ utterance and eye movements and apply it to a language that had never been studied in that way before.

Finding a quiet place in Wadete was step one. The first time Nordlinger ran the experiment she used a room in what is now a museum, although it was once a morgue. On other trips Nordlinger and Kidd used their rented lodgings in the town’s old nurses’ quarters — three units made from gray breeze-block, joined together. They used many of the same pictures as Levinson, adapting some to make more contextual sense: replacing deer with kangaroos, giving some people darker skin, and taking out anomalous objects such as a horse and carriage.

The researchers also worried about how the conditions of the experiment might affect the outcomes. Murrinhpatha has free word order, but Nordlinger and Kidd didn’t know whether certain situations — such as being asked to sit in a room and look at a series of pictures — might induce people to put the same elements in the same order. They kept their instructions minimal so as not to cue people to use one order over another, and they ran the study with 46 Murrinhpatha speakers.

The experimenters showed pictures of an event — a woman washing a child, a crocodile about to bite a man, a kangaroo punching a cow — on a laptop screen and asked the participants to describe what they saw. Before each picture appeared, the speakers were asked to look at a black dot that appeared randomly in the centre or to one side of the screen so they wouldn’t be inadvertently focused on any character. Then a short tone played, and the picture appeared. As participants assessed the scene and spoke, an infrared tracker that sat below the screen recorded their eye movements.

The results were stunning. The Murrinhpatha speakers did something completely new. It was like Tseltal, Nordlinger says, in that the speakers were looking evenly across both characters in a scene, but the Murrinhpatha speakers were doing it much faster and much earlier. It was very rapid relational encoding. “What’s amazing,” Nordlinger says, “is that they were doing so much in the first 600 milliseconds.”

In that initial window the Murrinhpatha speakers were looking evenly back and forth across both characters in the scene, getting a sense of the entire event. Then, once they had decided which word order they were going to use, they started to look primarily at the character they mentioned first. At that point a person who produced a sentence that started with, say,
the woman instead of the child spent more time looking at the woman. If instead they produced a sentence that started with the child, they spent more time looking at the child. Essentially, Nordlinger explains, “what a speaker looked at first in a sustained way after the 400-millisecond window was the thing that they looked at first.”

The outcome was not a matter of a speaker simply mentioning the first thing their eye fell on. Sometimes speakers first looked at one of the figures in the picture but then spent sustained time looking at the other figure – and it was the second figure who featured as the first element of their sentence.

The researchers also found that every individual Murrinhpatha speaker had, on average, more than five and a half different ways of ordering the subject, verb and object of a sentence. Nordlinger had always argued that many Australian languages had free word order, unlike other languages. German, she says, is often described as having free word order, but when the same experiment was run in German by another researcher, speakers used the same order more than 75 percent of the time. For the Murrinhpatha speakers, word order was truly free. Across the entire set of possible responses, the Murrinhpatha speakers produced 10 possible word orders. There was no preferred order.

For example, in response to a picture of a falling man whose outstretched leg projects toward the gaping jaws of a crocodile – a picture where, essentially, a crocodile is about to bit a man – Murrinhpatha speakers offered the following sentences:

- **Ku kanarntuturt**  
  - **balaledha**  
  - **kardu**  

  *Crocodile*  
  *might bite*  
  *person*

- **Ku kanarntuturt**  
  - **kardu one**  
  - **balele**  

  *Crocodile*  
  *one person*  
  *will bite*

- **Kardu nugarn**  
  - **ku kanarntuturt-re**  
  - **baleledha**  

  *One person*  
  *will bite*

- **Man**  
  - **crocodile**  
  - **might bite**

- **Kardu kigay**  
  - **bangamlele**  
  - **ku kanarntuturt-re**  

  *Young man*  
  *bit*  
  *crocodile*

- **Ku kanarntuturt**  
  - **balele**  

- **Crocodile**  
  - **bit**

Why did Murrinhpatha speakers bounce back and forth between subject and object faster than the speakers of any other language? Nordlinger and Kidd suspect that when someone speaks a language that has a truly free word order, they are under pressure to swiftly make decisions about the sentence they will say. “You have to get your head around the whole event much earlier so that you can decide how you want to express it,” Nordlinger says.

Did Murrinhpatha’s polysynthetic verb structure affect the pattern of language processing? To answer this question, Sasha Wilmoth, who was then one of Nordlinger’s Ph.D. students, ran the experiment with speakers of Pitjantjatjara. The language is spoken by people in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yukunytjatjara lands, where South Australia abuts the Northern Territory. Pitjantjatjara also has free word order, but unlike Murrinhpatha, the language is not polysynthetic. Excitingly, Wilmoth got the same results.

The Pitjantjatjara speakers spent the first 600 milliseconds rapidly shifting back and forth between the two characters in the depicted scene and then started to focus primarily on the character that became the first element in their sentence. And like the Murrinhpatha speakers, the Pitjantjatjara speakers used a range of word orders, with each individual speaker using multiple word orders across the collection of pictures and the entire group using all the possibilities.

All human brains are of course the same, Nordlinger emphasized. But when people are putting thoughts into words, their mental processes may be different, depending on the language they are using.

To be fair to Whorf, even if his claims about Hopi were incorrect, there was significant merit in the questions he posed. Nordlinger and her colleagues focused on the impact of free word order at a critical moment in forming a sentence. Yet sentence structure is only one aspect of the complex, multipart system that is language. The question of how much language may influence thought should in fact be many questions.

Gary Lupyan, a psychology professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, says that words can organise the way we think about the world and shape the way we perceive it. In a recent experiment, he and his colleagues measured how hard it was for English speakers to assign circles coloured in diverse ways to a random category (such as “A” or “B”) if the colours were easy to name (for instance, “red” or “blue”) or hard to name (“slightly neutral lavender” or “light dusty rose”). All the colours, regardless of how nameable they were in English, were equally easy to discriminate from one another. Even so, Lupyan and his colleagues found strong differences in participants’ ability to learn which circles went into the different categories based on how easily nameable the colours were.

The vocabularies of languages are “systems of categories,” Lupyan explains. “Language entrains us into these systems, one set of categories versus another.” For speakers of different languages, he says, “many of these categories then become entrenched as basic units of thought.” With Lera Boroditsky of the University of California, San Diego, a cognitive scientist who has long pursued these questions, Lupyan and others recently surveyed a large set of studies on the effects of language...
on visual perception. They found compelling evidence that language influences our ability to discriminate colours.

For Murrinhpatha, beyond the window that Nordlinger, Kidd and their colleagues have opened on how the language is produced, we cannot say without rigorous research how individual speakers’ perception might be further shaped by their language. Yet we can clearly see, Nordlinger says, that over time the culture has shaped the structure of the language. “Kinship has central importance in Murrinhpatha culture, and we see that encoded in the grammatical structure,” she explains. “When you’re talking about a group of people in Murrinhpatha you have to inflect the verb according to whether the people are related as siblings or not.”

Similarly, Murrinhpatha divides all nouns into 10 different classes. Nordlinger asks her students what 10 categories they would use if they were going to divide up all the objects in their language (English doesn’t have categories of nouns that are grammatically differentiated). The Murrinhpatha noun classes are: familiar humans; all other animate beings; vegetables and other plant-based foods; language and knowledge; water; place and time; spears (used for hunting and ceremonies); weapons; inanimate things; and fire. Things become grammatical, Nordlinger notes, when people talk about them a lot.

Culture shapes language because what matters to a culture often becomes embedded in its language, sometimes as words and sometimes codified in its grammar. Yet it is also true that in varying ways a language may shape the attention and thoughts of its speakers. Language and culture form a feedback loop, or rather they form many, many feedback loops.

At one level, of course, we already understand this reasoning. Over the minutes and days of our lives, we see how perception and judgment and words wind together and influence one another. But as Nordlinger, Lupyan and their colleagues show, some of those loops form tight millisecond whirls that tie together our instantaneous perception of the world and our habitual way of framing it in words. There are much larger interconnected loops, too, that bind speakers throughout history. The things distant generations discussed may shape the structure of a speaker’s language today, and that in turn may influence at the micro level how that speaker assesses the world and produces words to describe it.

To Perdjert, the language comes first – because that is how she and other elders pass on sacred knowledge to their young people. But language, culture and knowledge are actually forever entwined and integral to one another. Murrinhpatha, she and Bunduck explain to me, is translated as Murrinh, meaning “language”, and patha, meaning “good”: “good language.” “Strong language,” Perdjert says.

What’s clear now is that the more we ask empirical questions about language and its many loops in all the world’s languages, the more we will know about the diverse ways there are to think like a human.

Even as researchers devise ways to explore all the corners of the language universe, it is shrinking at a frightening rate. The Language Conservancy, a non-profit organisation founded by Indigenous educators and activists in the U.S., estimates that 61 percent of languages around the world that were spoken as a first language in 1795 “are doomed or extinct.” Early in Nordlinger’s career, when she worked with a community that spoke Wambaya, another non-Pama-Nyungan language used in the Barkly Tablelands of Australia’s Northern Territory, the elders requested that the work be done so younger generations would have a chance to learn the language of their ancestors. At the time there were eight or 10 fluent speakers remaining. All have since died.

A deeper understanding of Murrinhpatha may help here, too. As with other Australian language communities, there are many Indigenous-guided efforts to maintain the language. Linguists and educators, including Nordlinger, work with the people of Wadeye to support their learning goals and to contribute to a constantly evolving understanding of the language.

Scholars at the Research Unit for Indigenous Language have studied how children first acquire Murrinhpatha, with a view to informing how the language is taught in school. They have worked with Perdjert and other elders to run Murrinhpatha literacy programs in a Darwin prison and have explored how children tell stories in Murrinhpatha. They have tracked how the language has changed over three generations, finding that its grammar has not been influenced by English, although – as all languages do – it has changed in that time. The Literature Production Centre at the Wadeye community school works with locals to produce bilingual curriculum materials to support children’s Murrinhpatha literacy as much as their English literacy. Being able to read and write Murrinhpatha as well as speak it gives the children confidence, Perdjert says.

But even before the children get to school, Perdjert and Bunduck explain, elders take them out to the bush and sit with them around a fire to “teach them in language”. They describe the natural world and tell stories from the dreaming about the beings that created their world. Bunduck also teaches the songlines, stories in ceremonial song that include sacred sites and the routes ancient beings took across the land. When Bunduck learned the songlines from his grandparents, it was a gift they gave him, he says. Now he passes on the songlines to youths in the next generation, giving that gift to them.

Christine Kenneally is an award-winning journalist and author. Her most recent book is Ghosts of the Orphanage (PublicAffairs, 2023).
Road signs: a small victory for Livonian

From the Society of Friends of Livonian (Estonia), 23 December 2023, translated by the Editor

At the end of the Year of Livonian Heritage 2023, as a result of years of campaigning, bilingual Livonian-Latvian road signs have appeared in the villages of the Livonian cultural reserve in Kurzeme, Latvia. Increasing numbers of the signs have been erected throughout the year. See inside cover pictures.

4. New publications

Writing beyond writing

Tim Brookes: Writing beyond Writing. Published by The Endangered Alphabets Project, 2023

Tim Brookes is no stranger to readers of Ogmios: he will be known to you already for his researches into endangered alphabets, and his sensitive and exquisite work in carving examples of those scripts. Here, though, is something more marvellous still: a distillation of Tim’s thoughts on and experiences with scripts from across the world.

Modest and unassuming are adjectives that apply to Tim on his voyage of discovery. He knows that he is ploughing new territory, since so many scholars in the field of endangered languages assume the primacy of the spoken word. Tim is ever ready to learn from the masters of these scripts, and in this relatively unknown field he is unlikely to be contradicted by ‘experts’.

Tim senses that these ‘spoken-language’ linguists have a disdain for writing. I quote from p. 23:

“Writing is a means of using abstract visible symbols to represent the sounds of speech.” Was that it? Was that all? I could see how that definition might seem to make sense historically, as humans began speaking a long time before they began writing, but my travels among endangered alphabets had shown me over and over again that writing clearly represents more than merely the sounds of speech. If that were the case, then when a script is driven out of use, to be replaced by some other script, those ancestral written characters would surely be meaningless and useless.

In a modern multilingual world, where users of minor languages are also familiar with major ones, it may well be that they write their shopping lists and notes for the milkman in the customary major language, scrawling with a ball-point pen, but the messages they wish to pass on beyond the present time and generation in their traditional minority script. This may or may not be true, but Tim’s book leads one to this conclusion. What he has chosen to emulate and carve, exquisitely on wood, are not mere transitory messages: they are the embodiments of tradition, and therefore of unique wisdom: proverbs, religious texts, maxims. Tim Brookes has a great reverence for writing. Writing, it seems to me, consists of layer upon layer of identity and meaning, some of which is, in a sense, hidden in plain sight because we don’t think in those terms. Increasingly over the past decade I’ve been looking at writing from unusual angles, trying to catch sight of glimpses of its unnoticed and unconsidered power. This chapter, as non-linear as art itself, offers some of those glimpses. (p. 53) And indeed the whole book does that.

The chapters of the volume reflect Tim Brookes’ personal development and expanding awareness of the diversity of the world’s scripts.

While completing this review I have been in Java, whose own particular indigenous script seems to be a particular favourite of Tim’s. Today the Javanese script is still occasionally used in signage that can be seen in the urban jungle that is modern Java – a relic of a more gracious and refined era in the island’s history when individual calligraphy was given expression in the sinuous, harmonious strokes of its elegant script. While the Roman script is efficient at rendering the ubiquitous standardised Bahasa Indonesia, the flowing Javanese calligraphy, with its harmonious use of writing materials and natural surfaces, perfectly reflects the culture of this land of wood-carvers and etchers.

The chief joy of this book is the sheer variety of scripts represented in it. There are other books on the story of writing, chronological studies such as those by David Diringer, George Campbell, Florian Coulmas and others, but they don’t give the reader the same opportunity to see unexpected connections between scripts of widely diverse origins. Brookes casts his net wide, even covering the sand drawings of Vanuatu. Magic, ritual and religion in writing are subject of a special chapter.

True to Tim Brookes’ sensitivity to alphabet design, the book is set in the Artigo and Alegreya Sans typefaces, to offset its copious illustrations.

Chris Moseley

Oqaatsigut – The Language Song

On November 8th, 2023 a new, beautiful and unique song was released – ‘Oqaatsigut/The Language Song’. The song is a homage to the Greenlandic language, and likewise to all the indigenous or endangered languages in the world. The song was recorded by Sikki & TNA and can be experienced live at the release event at Nordanlantens Brygge in Copenhagen on the day of the release.

The aim with the song ‘Oqaatsigut/The Language Song’ is to highlight the indigenous languages, many of which are an ‘endangered species’, in a different and artistic way. The song is thus a homage not only to the Greenlandic language (Greenlandic: ‘kalaallisut’), but to indigenous, minority and native languages in general. ‘Oqaatsigut/The Language Song’ is performed by Sikki & TNA – behind this name we find the lead singer Sikkerninguaq Möller Sørensen, accompanied by the cellist Torbjørn Eika Jørgensen, the violinist Natalia Gordeyeva, as well as the pianist Andreas Flensted-Jensen. The song was written by Yair Sapir, Malik Chemnitz and Christine Tongue, and released in two versions – in Greenlandic and in English.

Except being a song writer, Yair Sapir is likewise a Swedish language lecturer and a PhD in Scandinavian linguistics. He is also the man behind the non-profit music project ‘Small Languages Rock’, whose aim is to strengthen and spread knowledge about...
minor languages out into the world. About a half of the world’s languages are considered endangered. It is in this context he took the initiative to this new song, this time with Greenlandic in focus.

“In the 1950’s the Greenlandic language began to become weakened. Danish became more commonplace at Greenlandic schools, some families decided to use Danish as a home language rather than Greenlandic, and Danish names became more common among Greenlanders. Thanks to increased consciousness about Greenlandic language and culture later on, Greenlandic became stronger, and in 2009 it was recognised as the only official language of Greenland. Although Greenlandic is not considered an endangered language, about half of the world’s languages are considered to be endangered. With this song, we would like to emphasize the importance of preserving the world heritage embodied in the indigenous languages and cultures, as well as of native tongues in general. We chose to do it in an artistic way, which can be a joy for all”, says Yair Sapir.

“It is fantastic that a small language like mine is recognized by other. This project has helped me develop not only my musical skills, but also my Greenlandic language skills. This has been an amazing experience”, says Sikki, the lead singer.

Greenlandic is spoken by around 60,000 people and is a part of a larger language family, also spoken in Canada and Alaska and which was also spoken in Siberia until recently. 2022 to 2032 has been declared as the International Decade of the Indigenous Languages by the UN.

The song “Oqaatsigut/The Language Song” was produced by the project Small Languages Rock with support from NAPA, The Greenlandic Culture Fund.

The Lexicon of Proto-Oceanic
Harold Koch: Historic book launch: The Lexicon of Proto Oceanic Tuesday 24 October saw the celebration of a historic event at the Australian National University. That was the launch, in the famous Coombs Tea Room, of the 6th and final volume of The lexicon of Proto Oceanic: The culture and environment of ancestral Oceanic society. This particular book, People: society, represents the culmination of a massive research product over the last 30 or more years by Andrew Pawley, Malcolm Ross and Meredith Osmond, of the (then) Linguistics Department in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies. This endeavour followed on from and complemented the Research School’s earlier interdisciplinary “Comparative Austronesian Project”, according to Professor James Fox, who launched the book. The project was “Andy’s brainchild” and reflects his lexicographical experience, according to Malcolm Ross, whose expertise was responsible for much of the phonological reconstruction of the cognates, according to Meredith Osmond, whose devoted participation in the project, which begun by “pure luck” changed and expanded her life during the next 30 years, she said. The six volumes together provide a vast repository of lexical comparisons from about 500 languages, making a massive contribution to an understanding of Pacific culture over the last 3000 years, according to Beth Evans. Nick Evans emphasised the “unparalleled” nature of this work: no such resource is available for any other language family of the world. I might add that a work such as this can also be viewed as a work of applied historical linguistics. The volumes are available at https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/106908. ALS Newsletter 23.11.2023

‘Relaunch’ of the Sicilian language
On 30 January 2024 the Accademia de la Lingua Siciliana held an online conference on ‘strategies for the relaunch of the Sicilian language’. Your editor was invited to participate in a discussion on those possible strategies, in my capacity as editor-in-chief of the UNESCO Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger. Also on the panel was Prof. Marco Tamburelli of the University of Bangor, Wales. Here is a transcript of your Editor’s question-and-answer session:

1. In Italy, some citizens believe regional and local languages are outdated, and believe that children, for example, should concentrate their efforts on learning widely circulated languages such as English or Chinese or Arabic... We know that instead UNESCO, in a diametrically opposite approach, has dedicated a lot of effort to the valorization of minority languages. Why? Why, in other words, should a language be protected even if it is spoken by few and is therefore "not very useful" (as a means of communication) in contemporary society?

The citizens of Italy who believe that regional and local languages are ‘outdated’ may generally also believe they know what languages children should learn. That view implies that they want those children to escape from poverty and a narrow view of the world. They may want ample opportunities for their children, which they imagine will come from international and wider regional languages. But the UNESCO view is that local and regional languages are repositories of tradition, and without those unique traditions, the world will be a poorer place, not economically, but culturally and intellectually. That is why a language should be protected.

2. You coordinated an immense UNESCO effort dedicated to cataloging languages at risk of extinction. What criteria did you use in general? With particular reference to Italy and Sicilian, what were the findings?

The findings were a little different for each part of the world. Firstly, I am not claiming, and UNESCO is not claiming, that Sicilian is at immediate risk of extinction. In fact Sicilian is listed in the UNESCO Atlas as ‘vulnerable’, which means, by the UNESCO definition, that “most, but not all, children or families of the community speak their parents’ language as their first language, but this may be restricted to specific social domains, such as the home,
where children interact with their parents and grandparents”. Vulnerable languages are included in the Atlas because UNESCO experts have found trends to indicate that the position of the language in those domains, those homes, is becoming weaker. If those trends continue, a vulnerable language might go to the next level or category, “definitely endangered”.

3. Italy, from a linguistic point of view, is characterized by a large number of languages (e.g. German in Alto Adige) and dialects (e.g. the Roman dialect spoken in the capital or the Tuscan dialect spoken in Florence). In many cases, however, it is not easy to establish whether an idiom is a dialect or a language. In Italy for example, the 1999 law which had the aim of identifying “historical linguistic minorities” considers Sardinian and Friulian as “languages” but not other very important realities (just look at the literature, the thousand-year history, and the number of speakers) like the Sicilian (which currently has no recognition). So, help us understand, is Sicilian a dialect or a language?

Oh, if only I were wise enough to do that. Before I try to answer that, let’s not forget that there are two so-called ‘endangered’ languages on the island of Sicily. Apart from Sicilian, there is also Gallo-Sicilian, which is already ‘vulnerable’; it has fewer speakers than Sicilian, it is not as widely spoken, and it is definitely losing speakers. But to try to answer the question you ask, there are no completely objective ways to distinguish a language from a dialect. You can try to measure the number of consistent grammatical differences, you can compare the phonology of the regional and the standard language, you can trace the history of vocabulary and its influences – all these are factors. I would say that institutional support makes a big difference, both subjectively, for the speakers, and objectively, for outsiders. Italy is an extreme case in Europe of a country with a wide range of regional linguistic differences. Yet the languages or dialects are all interrelated. That is both a strength and a weakness.

Government support for regional languages is really important, and the half-hearted implementation of Law 428/1999 in Italy is something that can make a difference if carried to its logical consequences. Let me give you a simple example of what I mean. I am speaking to you from England, a linguistically very powerful country. My colleague Marco Tamburelli is in Wales. When he writes me an e-mail from his office, in English, his unofficial message will have a long official addition, in Welsh, about the terms and conditions of communicating. I have to respect that. I do respect that. Legislation in Wales made that possible.

4. Italy, which is probably the European country with the greatest linguistic richness, has so far had a very timid approach and has not yet had the courage to implement effective linguistic policies to protect its exceptional linguistic heritage. If you were asked for a suggestion by national decision makers, what advice would you give?

Education is the key, surely. Languages like Sicilian are still safe in the home, but when a child goes to his or her local school, he or she is confronted with the standard language, even when talking about local issues – there is a conflict of loyalties in the child’s mind. The effect on the child might be to kill all interest in the local linguistic heritage – or it might be to stimulate curiosity about it. Children need to be assured and proud about their local heritage, even if one day they will move away and abandon it. What I am trying to say simply is that language must not ever be the reason why a child is ashamed of where he or she comes from. And the child needs to know that in the future there will be opportunities to study it further.

5. If you were asked for a suggestion by the Government or Parliament of the Sicilian Region, what advice would you give in order to relaunch the Sicilian language?

Relaunch? If you really mean ‘relaunch’, in a region where the language is already widely spoken, then the parliament must make is economically viable and socially possible for everyone to be immersed in the regional language in public life. That means: the mass media (I don’t know how social media are used in Sicilian), the law courts, broadcasting, and as I said before, education. Sicilian people must be encouraged to believe that the written language is just as viable, just as common, and just a legitimate as the spoken.

6. And what advice can you finally give to all Sicilians?

Be proud of your language! You are the only ones who have it. The rest of the world will just have to envy you!

How tourism can bring endangered languages back from the brink

By Chris Poole, from The Big Issue (UK), 30 October 2023

It’s July and I’m singing with strangers. I can’t speak the language. I can, at least, recognise some of the voices. The Bostonian who flew thousands of miles to be here, voice husky from
cigarette smoke. The German lady who fell in love with Ireland through its literature. The locals who have known this song since their youth. Together, they breathe new life not only into this ancient folk song, but also into a language facing disappearance – Irish, one of many minority languages under threat.

This is a normal evening at Oideas Gael, a cultural centre in Donegal, Ireland. Here, people come from around the world for intensive courses in the Irish language. By day they attend study sessions with expert tutors, in classes sorted by ability. By night students converge for cultural sessions, from live fiddle performances to film screenings. Tonight, the students sing ancient Irish folk songs, testing not only their pronunciation but the bonds they’ve forged in Oideas Gael’s classrooms.

Báidin Fheilimi, a song about a fisherman’s boat, is a fitting choice for two reasons. The first is its theme: Oideas Gael overlooks a quiet sandy beach, and the song rocks and sways like the ocean. The second is that the song is often taught to children in Irish schools. For some attendees, Báidin Fheilimi evokes memories of blackboard and chalk, rekindling their childhood enthusiasm. For others, this is their first taste of traditional song – one which the organisers hope will inspire lifelong passion.

When the song ends, the students disperse into the night. They walk to Glencolumbkille, a quiet, hilly village with two pubs and two churches. They return to holiday homes and hotel rooms, resting before tomorrow’s early start. Across the way, on the opposite cliff, an old watchtower overlooks the centre and the sea.

According to the 2022 Irish Census, 1,873,997 people in Ireland can speak Irish. Just 71,968 of them speak it daily outside of the education system – 2% fewer than the 2016 census. However, the overall number of people indicating an ability to speak Irish was up 6% over the same period.

Linguists have stated that half of the world’s languages could disappear by 2100, with Irish categorised as ‘definitely endangered’ by UNESCO. When languages are lost, swathes of history, culture and knowledge vanish with them. Across the globe, linguists and locals collaborate to save languages through educational programmes, written records, and a passing down of language from generation to generation.

The next morning, these apocalyptic visions are far from the minds of Oideas Gael’s students. One describes it as a holiday hotspot, returning each year to meet new people and have fun. Others share the sentiment, cherishing Glencolumbkille’s peaty mountain trails and chippy van.

Though some have familial links to Irish – one mother is learning so she can speak with her children who attend an Irish-language school – many have no such ties. Those with no Irish ancestry were drawn here by their love of Irish letters and lyrics. One student from Dublin summarises it aptly: “We don’t think of this as saving a dying language. We’re just here for the craic, like.”

Ronan O’Dochartaigh, the centre’s language director, shares this vision. “People do work hard in our classrooms, but we want them to have fun. We want them to go home associating the language with good times and positive feelings,” he says. “When people leave, we often point them to groups in their areas, so they can continue speaking Irish.”

He mentions how difficult it can be to practice speaking Irish, especially for international students. Over the course of a week, learners create communities that make practice easier. The centre hopes these communities will extend beyond its walls, carried across the sea and into on-line meet-ups. Though these are small groups, they can blossom into scattered enclaves of Irish culture.

Many of the centre’s students wince when asked about mandatory Irish study in school. They remember pressure, tedium and hefty piles of homework. Now, though, the language is a valued part of their hobbies, personal lives and holiday plans. At Oideas Gael, tourism becomes part of a national effort to conserve the past while making Irish appealing to the modern world.

Ronan describes a “gradual, positive shift” in attitudes towards Irish, in part thanks to the centre’s work. But could other endangered languages benefit from similar programmes? Historically, tourism has done more to undermine than protect indigenous cultures. In 2022, workers at a luxury hotel in Tulum, Mexico, protested when their bosses banned them from speaking Mayan. Elsewhere, hotels have banned staff from speaking Welsh and Tibetan. The relationship between tourism and minority languages is still developing, and it isn’t always as positive as at Oideas Gael.

We sing Báidin Fheilimi again on the final evening of the week. The singers are more confident and emotional after a week of study. Nerves have given way to excitement, and though this is a sort of farewell, it seems to point to a future of enthusiastic Irish study.

To wrap up the week, each class gives a group performance. Some sing songs. Others read poems. The last group stages a traditional wake. One man lies on a rickety desk, while a serene line of mourners pass, muttering tributes in impeccable grammar. He lies still for a long time after the mourners have gone. He gets a few laughs, shifting, as time passes, into bemused concern. Finally, he stands. He bows, thanking the group.

The students depart. Some drive to late flights; others gather in the pub. Though they won’t save the language on their own, they carry friendships, phrases and melodies that may help to keep it aflame. After all, Is fear Gaeilge bhriste ná Béarla cliste (Broken Irish beats clever English).

5. Forthcoming events

Apologies to readers that this is an announcement of an event that will have already taken place by the time you read it, but it relates to the review in the ‘New Publications’ section above.

World Endangered Writing Day

January 23rd 2024
A day of talks, discussions, activities, awards and games in support of the world’s minority and indigenous scripts and their communities.

The world has 300 writing systems, but 90% of them are threatened—not used for official purposes, not taught in schools, ignored or actively suppressed.

This crisis is almost universally ignored. There are no degree programs in writing systems or script loss, no government agencies dedicated to addressing the issue, no funding available for research or revival.

The mission of World Endangered Writing Day is to start changing all that.

Join people across the globe to celebrate and support efforts in preserving writing systems as part of humanity’s intangible cultural heritage.

Agenda
Running through the day we’ll be livestreaming a series of talks and discussions that will introduce the public to script endangerment and revival, from both scholars and community members, and in both live and video format. Our Atlas of Endangered Alphabets (endangeredalphabets.net) will relaunch with profiles of 100 more minority scripts. The day also marks the publication of Writing beyond Writing: Lessons from Endangered Alphabets, the first book ever to consider the world’s minority scripts and their importance to writing in general.

And our endangeredalphabets.com home site will host an awards ceremony to recognize some of the people and organizations working to revive their traditional scripts, plus quizzes, games, and interactive opportunities.

Talks/interviews/discussions
What Is Writing? The Sign and Symbol Research Group and Olgierd Uziemblo, University of Warsaw consider how Western definitions of writing exclude many of the world’s graphic meaning systems.

Learning to write. The people who study writing most thoroughly and perceptively are not linguists—they are type designers. Kajama Chakma, a graduate student in the world-renowned typography graduate program at the University of Reading, explains why she is studying Chakma history, geography and aesthetics in order to create a new and culturally-authentic Chakma font.

Writing beyond the alphabet. Sabine Hyland of the University of St. Andrews re-evaluates two media that extend our conception of writing: Inca khipu and the Andean Ritual Script.

What can extinct scripts teach us about script extinction—and script revival? A conversation with Pippa Steele, Cambridge University.

Teaching an endangered script—online. Jue Wang Silas of the University of Geneva introduces her work in co-creating and teaching a MOOC on the endangered Dongba pictographic script of China.

Where do you start? Maung Nyau discusses his work reviving traditional indigenous scripts, often facing significant opposition, in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.

How can digitization help script revival? Debbie Anderson and Anshuman Pandey of the Unicode Consortium discuss the importance (and limitations) of digitizing minority scripts.

A rare case study. Virtually the only academic researching and teaching minority scripts is Samar Sinha, head of the Department of Endangered Languages, University of Sikkim. And the state of Sikkim has more official scripts than any other government region in the world. What does the monoscriptual West have to learn from Sikkim?

Reports
We will also have video reports of revival activities in Bali, on pop-up calligraphy workshops on the streets of Kathmandu, and on performance art involving the Baybayin script of the Philippines.

The endangeredalphabets.com website will host a gallery of photos of indigenous/minority scripts in use, including the Mongolian Calligraphy Museum, plus several interactive activities and a quiz.

Second Wave Launch of the Atlas of Endangered Alphabets
We’ll reveal over a hundred new script profiles on our online Atlas of Endangered Alphabets, with images and links, more than doubling the reach of the current Atlas.

This unveiling will be accompanied by an interactive game involving puzzles that can be solved by reading the entries in the Atlas.

Book Launch
World Endangered Writing Day will see the launch of Writing Beyond Writing, the first book to examine the world’s fascinating minority scripts and ask what they have to tell mainstream culture about writing beyond the Latin alphabet, and even beyond standard Western definitions of writing.

Awards
We will be presenting certificate awards in several categories to people who are doing outstanding work to revive their scripts and cultures:

- Publishing
- Typography and Type Design
- Calligraphy
- Minority Script Ambassador
- Writing about Script Endangerment and Revival
- Work in New Script Creation
- Work in Traditional Script Revival
- Handwriting
- Creation of Educational Materials

Gallery
The EA.com website will have new pages featuring visual works from around the world, including the new Mongolian Calligraphy Museum, type design in traditional scripts of Indonesia by Aksara di Nusantera, and photos of indigenous/minority scripts in use.