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Tongue-Tied

Linguists and Native Speakers Fight to Preserve Dying Languages

By Michael S. James

April 8 — Geneva Woomayoyah Navarro, 76, grew up translating English for her Comanche grandparents after their forcible relocation to Oklahoma, 5 miles from their nearest Comanche neighbor.

"My grandmother couldn't speak English or understand it," she explained. "So at mealtime she preferred that we would all speak [Comanche] so she could understand."

Like many in her English-speaking generation, Navarro later moved away from home in pursuit of education and jobs, marrying a non-Comanche in the process.

Now she is stunned to find that the language of her youth is dying. Fewer than 900 people, most of them elderly, are believed to speak Comanche.

That leaves Navarro with a deep sense of loss.

"Our language is our culture," she said. "It holds our culture together. It tells us where we are where we come from."

The Comanche story is not uncommon.

Half of approximately 6,000 languages currently spoken worldwide are endangered to some degree or dying out, according to a recent report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

In the United States, fewer than 150 Native American languages out of hundreds that once existed remain, according to UNESCO. And every single one is in some jeopardy, as are hundreds of other native languages in Canada, Mexico, and Central and South America. The same is true for languages in locations as far-flung as Africa, Scandinavia, Siberia and Taiwan.

In Australia, for example, the Jiwarli language's last native speaker died in 1976, according to Peter K. Austin, a professor at the University of Melbourne. In fact, after decades of government suppression into the 1970s, dozens of Australian Aboriginal languages are just about finished, according to UNESCO.

"Many of the languages are becoming extinct during our lifetimes," said G. Aaron Broadwell, a linguist at the State University of New York at Albany, and chairman of the Linguistic Society of America's Committee for Endangered Languages and Their Preservation. "The last speakers are dying now."

Globalization Speeds Disappearance

"All the evidence that we have seems to suggest that the rate of language extinction is accelerating," said Broadwell, who blames globalization. "All the people who were living in the corners of the world sort of isolated from the nation-states are now in contact with the rest of the world."

As contact increases, it becomes harder for people to get along without learning and dealing extensively in the language and economy of the dominant culture. Eventually, younger generations might see less use in learning or teaching the native language, or leave traditional areas in pursuit of jobs.

In that way, without a concerted effort to preserve it, a vibrant language can become endangered in a few generations.

"The speakers themselves don't really notice their kids aren't speaking their language anymore," said Douglas Whalen, president of the Endangered Language Fund at Yale University. "What's really sad is when they don't notice they're making that decision."

Sometimes language extinction is accelerated by government policy or repression, or laws requiring the dominant language for education or public business.

"It can be a very sad thing," said Broadwell, who has studied minority languages in the United States and Mexico. "Often, the last speakers can feel isolated. They have no one to speak to in their native tongue and the stories and the oral histories they tell in their native tongue they know will die with them."

Added Steven Bird, a computational linguist at the University of Pennsylvania: "Imagine you are the last surviving speaker of English in a hostile world that has no interest in English. That's what it must feel like."

Is There Scientific Value to Saving Language?

John J. Miller of *The National Review*, writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, recently declared that the increasing pace of language death is "a trend that is arguably worth celebrating [because] age-old obstacles to communication are collapsing" and primitive societies are being brought into the modern world.

But proponents of recording or saving the languages say language extinction means knowledge lost to humanity and science. For instance, language diversity often exists in locations with biological diversity, they say. Natives have knowledge about plants and animals and special words to describe them — information that drug companies or scientists might one day find valuable.

Languages also can be "a window on the brain," revealing patterns of human thought, said Bird — who studied the Dschang language of Cameroon, a language in which subtle changes of tone can differentiate between 10 different verb tenses.

Nevertheless, documenting endangered languages is "an extremely time-consuming process" and not always the most popular field for linguists, said Helen Aristar Dry, a linguistics professor at the University of Eastern Michigan and co-moderator of The Linguist List, a Web-based linguistics research hub. Some languages die undocumented.

Sometimes it is native speakers, rather than linguists, who are at the forefront of language revival.

"Since about 10 years ago, there has been a very fervent movement" among Native American groups, said Inee Yang Slaughter, executive director of the Indigenous Language Institute in Santa Fe, N.M. "The people are taking into their hands and into their responsibility the efforts to take back their languages."

Navarro, now a resident of Santa Fe, is among them — teaching classes in Comanche to a younger generation in Santa Fe and Albuquerque.

"A lot of us elders are trying to help teach it and help revive it and we're trying to preserve it," Navarro said. "We want to know who we are."