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ENDANGERED LANGUAGES

ENDANGERED THOUGHT

the UNESCO Courier

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Detail of poster for International Mother Language Day.

ENDANGERED LANGUAGES, ENDANGERED THOUGHT

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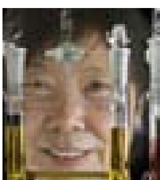

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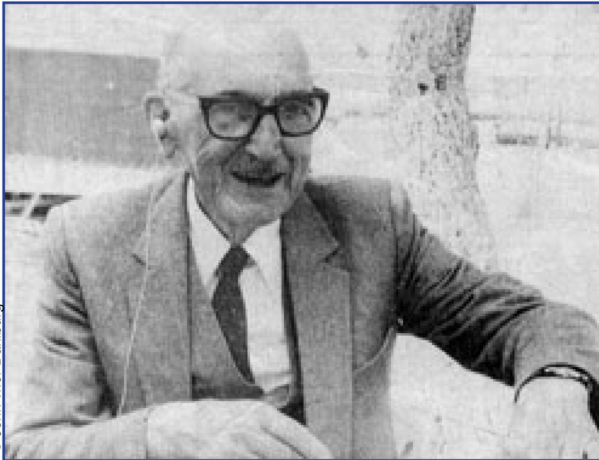
L'ORÉAL-UNESCO AWARDS FOR WOMEN IN SCIENCE

Beatriz Barbuy (Brasil), Athene M.Donald (United Kingdom), Akiko Kobayashi (Japan), Eugenia Kumacheva (Russia/Canada) et Tebello Nyokong (South Africa) are the Laureates of the L'ORÉAL-UNESCO Awards For Women in Science 2009. P 18


© John-Thor Dahlburg

Tevfik Esenç in 1982. Last speaker of the Oubykh language (Turkey), he died in 1992.

A SUBTLE INTERPLAY OF FORCES

With the death of Marie Smith Jones, the Eyak language of Alaska (United States) died out last year and Ubykh (Turkey) vanished in 1992 with the demise of Tevfik Esenç. Some 200 languages have become extinct in the last three generations, according to the new edition of the "UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger".

The interactive digital version of the Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger provides updated data about approximately 2,500 endangered languages around the world and can be continually supplemented, corrected and updated, thanks to contributions from its users.

It enables searches according to several criteria, and ranks the endangered languages that are listed according to five different levels of vitality: unsafe, definitely endangered, severely endangered, critically endangered and extinct.

Some of the data are especially worrying: out of the approximately 6,000 existing languages in the world, more than 200 have become extinct during the last three generations, 538 are critically endangered, 502 severely endangered, 632 definitely endangered and 607 unsafe.

For example, the Atlas states that 199 languages have fewer than ten speakers and 178 others have 10 to 50. Among the languages that have recently become extinct, it mentions Manx (Isle of Man), which died out in 1974 when Ned Maddrell fell forever silent, Aasax (Tanzania), which disappeared in 1976, Ubykh (Turkey) in 1992 with the demise of Tevfik Esenç, and Eyak (Alaska, United States of America), in 2008 with the death of Marie Smith Jones.

As UNESCO Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura stressed, "The death of a language leads to the disappearance of many forms of intangible cultural heritage, especially the invaluable heritage of traditions and oral expressions of the community that spoke it – from poems and legends to proverbs and jokes. The loss of languages is also detrimental to humanity's grasp of biodiversity, as they transmit much knowledge about the nature and the universe."

The work carried out by the more than 30 linguists who worked together on the Atlas, financed by Norway, shows that the phenomenon of disappearing languages appears in every region and in very variable economic conditions. In Sub-Saharan Africa, where approximately 2,000 languages are spoken (nearly one third of the world total), it is very probable that at least 10 % of them will disappear in the next hundred years. The Atlas furthermore establishes that India, the United States, Brazil, Indonesia and Mexico, countries that have great linguistic diversity, are also those which have the greatest number of endangered languages.

© UNESCO/Rocky Roe

Papua New Guinea boasts more than 800 languages and allows children to start their schooling in their mother language.

However, the situation is not universally alarming. Thus, Papua New Guinea, the country which has the greatest linguistic diversity on the planet (more than 800 languages are believed to be spoken there), also has relatively few endangered languages (88). Certain languages that are shown as extinct in the Atlas are being actively revitalized, like Cornish (Cornwall) and Sîshëë (New Caledonia), and it is possible that they will become living languages again.

Furthermore, thanks to favourable linguistic policies, there has been an increase in the number of speakers of several indigenous languages. It is the case for Central Aymara and Quechua in Peru, Maori in New Zealand, Guarani in Paraguay and several languages in Canada, the United States and Mexico.

The Atlas also shows that due to economic factors, different linguistic policies and sociological phenomena, a given language may have varying degrees of vitality in different countries.

For Christopher Moseley, an Australian linguist and editor-in-chief of the Atlas, "It would be naïve and oversimplifying to say that the big ex-colonial languages, English, or French or Spanish, are the killers, and all smaller languages are the victims. It is not like that; there is a subtle interplay of forces, and this Atlas will help ordinary people to understand those forces better."

Lucía Iglesias Kuntz, UNESCO

EACH LANGUAGE IS A UNIQUE WORLD OF THOUGHT

© UNESCO/Michel Ravassard

Christopher Moseley, editor in chief of the UNESCO "Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger", at the launch on 19 February at Paris headquarters.

Australian linguist Christopher Moseley explains the crucial importance of preserving languages and presents the main innovations of the just-released third edition of the UNESCO "Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger".

Interview by Lucía Iglesias Kuntz (UNESCO).

© Alexander Turnbull Library

A "language nest" in which the Maori language is transmitted to children (New Zealand).

Why should we care about language preservation?

We as human beings should care about this in the same way we should care about the loss of the world's variety of plants and animals, its biodiversity. What is unique about present-day language revival movements, which didn't exist before, is that linguists are for the first time aware of just how many languages there are in the world, and are coming to a better understanding of the forces that are attacking them and exterminating them, and of ways to control those forces. It's very difficult and complex, and it would be naïve and oversimplifying to say that the big ex-colonial languages, English or French or Spanish, are the killers, and all smaller languages are the victims. It is not like that; there is a subtle interplay of forces, and this Atlas will help ordinary people to understand those forces better.

But to answer in one sentence: why do we have to care? Because each language is a uniquely structured world of thought, with its own associations, metaphors, ways of thinking, vocabulary, sound system and grammar – all working together in a marvellous architectural structure, which is so fragile that it could easily be lost forever.

Can you tell us a few projects or initiatives you know that have helped to safeguard a language?

Projects and initiatives exist at all levels – from local gras roots campaigns from the bottom up to get people to read in their own language and thus pass it on to younger generations, up to big state–supported plans.

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In Australia, for instance, there are active and successful campaigns to revive the use of languages that were regarded as dead for generations, but turned out to be only 'sleeping'. In New Zealand, the Maori language has been rescued from near oblivion through the scheme of 'language nests' – nurseries where the language is passed on to young children.

But the biggest success stories are the ones that are operated with state support and infrastructure, such as the reclaiming of Welsh in Wales or Catalan in Catalonia – two regions of Europe that have seen success in our own lifetimes – or, of course, the revival of Hebrew as a national language in Israel.

What is new in this edition of the Atlas?

This third edition of the Atlas is new in at least three important ways. Firstly and most obviously, it is being published in two different formats: an on-line version as well as a printed version. The on-line version is an important new development, and is based on Google Earth maps, with the location of each endangered language, no matter how small, pinpointed as exactly as possible on the maps, which can be filtered to any desired scale and level of detail.

Secondly, for the first time we are giving a comprehensive coverage of the whole world. The previous two editions gave only a sample from some continents of the state of threatened languages, but this time we have been careful to cover every language, and, as before, to show the level of endangerment, from "Unsafe" down to "Moribund" with a system of colour coding.

And thirdly, we are making the Atlas available in three languages: English, French and Spanish, with possibly more translations to come later.

You are the general editor of the Atlas. Can you explain how the work for this Atlas was done?

It was a worldwide collaborative effort by a team of linguists, all of them experts in the field of endangered languages and linguistics. As in the previous editions (published in 1996 and 2001), we had Regional Editors in charge of collecting data for each continent, writing the regional essays for the Atlas, and entering the language points in the maps.

For some areas, local knowledge of the situation came from specialists in several countries. Of course the contributors needed help and guidance from technical experts at the Section for Intangible Heritage of UNESCO as well. The Web Editor from UNESCO provided help and guidance for the editors at every step of the way while the on-line version was being created, because this was a pioneering experiment for all of us; and meanwhile the commissioning editors and myself as general editor were overseeing the preparation of the texts. The whole project has been done to a tight schedule, in just under a year from start to finish.

© Jennilou & Jeff Grace

Amazonia (Brazil): indigenous languages are today threatened with extinction, although Tupi, for one, was spoken as much as the official Portuguese until the mid-18th century.

Stone is petrified speech, water is language laughing, the sown seed, a promised word: every element of reality is an integral part of Toro Tegu, currently spoken by some 5000 Dogons in the north of Mali.

THE MONKEYS, THE SCORPION AND THE SNAKE

UNESCO/Yves Bergeret

According to tradition, the cobra is the guardian of the Toro Tegu language spoken in Dogon country, in Mali.

This is the twentieth time I have come to work with the Dogon painters of Koyo, high up on their table mountain in the north of Mali. In the black of night, we all stretch out on mats outside the mud house set aside for me, in the centre of the village. The farmer-painters and I are exhausted, but happy with the poem-paintings that we have just made on cloth, under the burning sun. The youngest of the painters is making tea. Our conversation turns to the ancestors.

Suddenly there is a sharp pain in my left hand. I grab my torch. A white scorpion has just stung me. I kill it. I panic at first and imagine that it will all be over for me in an hour. Then I think that I have thirty minutes of – relative – peace before the convulsions start. So I ask the head of the village if he has any traditional antidote to the venom. "No," he replies, "just wait. You will see." The conversation starts again. My hand then my arm feel as though they are on fire. But, two hours later, the pain has stopped. I fall into a deep sleep, with the head of the village staying to sleep beside me. A mystery.

Three days later, all eight of us – the six painters, the chief and myself – reach the foot of the cliff at the top of the mountain, ten kilometres from the village, where each monsoon storm turns into a massive waterfall. This place, where the water thunders, chants and sings almost all summer, is the source of many a legend. Caves protected by initiations bear ancient pictorial signs. But I know that they are also home to awesome cobras. I ask the painters if they have any medicine against their venom. "No. Sit down and we'll explain."

All of reality is speech

I will try to put together here what was passed on to me that morning, and so many times before, using the signs and symbols that the painters draw when, in our poem-paintings, we tell of the profound life of this place.

All of reality is speech; it is made and mellowed on the plateau at the top of the mountains. The beautiful round or flat stones are petrified, dense speech. Water is language laughing; the sky is its distant foreshadowing, the clouds its gestation and rain its joyful roar. The sown seed is a promised word: and, if the farmer sings, it increases its

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© UNESCO/Yves Bergeret

For Koyo villagers, the top of the mountain embodies the power of the word. Coming down the mountain, the word becomes weaker.

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fertile strength. Here, the crops are farmed with the hoe and a song.

The language of my companions, after all, is called Toro Tegu, "word of the mountain" and is one of the fifteen Dogon languages, with about 5000 native speakers. The Dogon from this ethnic group call themselves Toro Nomu, "people of the mountain".

The speciality of the Koyo village community, about 500 individuals, is to energize the fertility of the word through farming practices and rites. The community is broken down into small groups of six to eight individuals, who are linked forever and share at least one meal a day together. There is the group responsible for the collective grain stores, which are "reservoirs of the word", the group responsible for rainmaking rites, the group responsible for maintaining cliff paths, etc. Each group, of course, has its reference ancestor and only acts for the benefit of the community as a whole.

The dynamic harmony of reality is regularly recast through nocturnal singing and dancing by a specialized group of "women elders". The choreography includes a regular, wide, horizontal sweep with the right arm, which signifies sowing the word as if it were a seed.

The word at work

Since 2002, the painters, the head of the village and I – the poet of the written word – have formed a support group. We spread cloth or paper onto the flat rocks, like the fine loam of the market gardens, then I lay the "seeds" of the poem, while they lay the "seeds" of pictorial signs. These textiles and sheets of paper are then exhibited all over the world, bringing income, a "harvest" that feeds the village. We have been able to build a school, five reservoirs, which have doubled the area under cultivation, three "Painters' Houses" which can be visited, etc., as part of a development project for the village [see 'Koyo, a place for dialogue between two cultures', *UNESCO Courier* , n° 4, 2008].

Our group has two reference ancestors, because it soon spawned other groups, responsible for maintaining the school, the "Painters' Houses" and other fruits of our development project. "We have decided that you have become Dogon," the painters tell me, "and you must add the names of these two ancestors to yours. The last time a foreigner was allowed to join us was five centuries ago. He is the one who painted the symbols in one of the caves near to the great waterfall. He is one of our two reference ancestors. But now he is the last but one foreigner to be accepted, because you are the last."

According to Toro Nomu, everything on the mountaintop is the word at work and in harmony with itself. Animals are also elements of this. But, in contrast, everything that is beneath these high plateaux – like a ravine, a gorge or even a 42 kilometre-wide plain, separating the two plateaux – bears the generic name of pondo: here the word is weak, shapeless, undulating, shifting. Above all, it is the word of the nomadic herders, who have held feudal rule over the plain for centuries

"Our hordes of monkeys shake the word into confusion", the painters continue, "but the scorpions and cobras are creatures that the word uses to protect itself. If they come across a stranger, they kill him. But they never attack us".

"Ah, that is why the scorpion stung me the other evening!"

"No, no, you still haven't understood. Make an effort! You speak Toro Tegu. You have become Dogon. The scorpion made a mistake when he stung you. Who is dead, him or you?"

Yves Bergeret, French poet

© UNESCO/Yves Bergeret

The "Painters' House" in the Dogon village of Boni. At right, the snake motif.

© Pathé Distribution

Poster for the film “Bienvenue chez les ch'tis“ (“Welcome to the Land of Ch'tis”).

The French film “Welcome to the Land of Ch'tis” has been making us laugh recently. But the reality is not so funny: Ch'ti, which is a variation of the Picard language spoken in northern France, has become a social stigma, or at best a quaint museum piece.

SERIOUSLY SPEAKING : WHAT IS CH'TI?

“Ch'timi is the cousin of the Picard language,” explains the French actor and director Dany Boon, in his film “Bienvenue chez les ch'tis” (Welcome to the Land of Ch'tis), which has sold over 20 million tickets in France in the last year, enabling the general public to rediscover a language defined by UNESCO as seriously endangered.

Ch'timi – or Ch'ti – is one of many local variations of the Picard language. “The Picard language covers the widest linguistic area of any regional language in France – five departments in Northern France and part of Belgium – so there are considerable variations from one zone to another,” explains Fernand Carton, a linguist specialising in Picard and author of the “Picard Linguistic and Ethnographic Atlas”. Depending on the region, people will speak to you in Ch'ti or Picard but, as Carton adds, “it is still the same language, with the same phonetic features, the same grammar, and some common vocabulary”.

In any case Ch'ti is a much more interesting language than the film suggests. The film reduces it to a kind of pronounced lisp and the odd phrase punctuated with “huh?” In reality, while close to French, since it has its roots in Latin, it is incomprehensible to the uninitiated. “Speaking Ch'ti is not simply a matter of sprinkling French with a few dialect words, like putting salt on your chips,” says Carton.

Even so, the film does give a picture of the state of Ch'ti today. “Young people use expressions that they've heard their parents or grandparents use, but don't try to speak the language,” explains Alain Dawson, a language specialist who helped translate the Asterix comic book into Picard. The first book sold over 101,000 copies, outselling all other translations into regional languages, according to its publisher, Albert René.

“It was surprisingly successful, but paradoxically so,” says Alain Dawson, “because it reveals to what degree the language is dying out. When we talked to readers, we realised that they were pleased to have a copy of the book, and had leafed through it to find words they knew, but only a few had read it from cover to cover.” The same is true for his guidebooks, “Pocket Ch'timi” and “The Pocket Picard”, published by Assimil – very good sales, but no increase in the prevalence of the language. “We're involved in saving part of our heritage, not in promoting the use of a living language.”

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© Uderzo

“Asterix” comic book cover in Picard: Obelix and Asterix converse in six regional languages.

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A language at the bottom of the social ladder

It is difficult to determine exactly how many people speak Picard today. The only available figures come from a 1999 census. According to Jean-Michel Eloy, professor of linguistics at the Jules Verne University of Picardy, across the five French departments, 12% of the population, or about 500,000 people, say they continue to speak it. By extrapolation, across the entire linguistic area, there may be as many as two million Picard speakers.

"The problem is that, in France, even languages that were recently spoken by a large number of people, like Breton, have almost disappeared from daily use by the younger generation," explains Tapani Salminen, regional coordinator of the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger and an ethno-linguist at the Academy of Finland. "Even though the Picard language seems still to have pockets of vitality along the Franco-Belgian border, where it is a language of the community, it is not really any better off than Breton."

In Belgium, the language remains a strong cultural element, setting itself apart from Flemish, but in France it is losing influence at the same rate that the cultures of the workers, miners and farmers, to which it is linked, are also disappearing.

"It was a class language that was spoken at the mill or down the mine," explains Dawson. Many Polish, Italian and Flemish immigrants learned Ch'timi at the factory before French. "Today it has become a language that stigmatises the speaker, and is an obstacle to climbing the social ladder." Which partly explains why it has not been passed on within families.

"The language suffers from a lack of legitimacy," laments Olivier Engelaere, Director of the Agency for the Picard Language in Amiens (the regional capital of Picardy, in northern France). And this is because of the social stigma, as well as its similarity to French. "For many people, speaking Picard is like speaking bad French. When you speak it, people look appalled, or don't take you seriously."

Keeping a language alive does not mean turning it into folklore

Defenders of the Picard language feel that it has poorer prospects for survival than Breton or Basque, because it is not in the public eye. It does not appear in newspapers or on television news and there are no bilingual signs in towns. And, although the Ministry of Culture has recognised it as a "language of France", the Ministry of Education has not included it on its list of regional languages taught in schools. "People are suspicious of the Picard language," says Fernand Carton. "They believe that learning it is detrimental to one's French. But studies show the opposite, that it stimulates interest in languages."

In Picardy, it is nonetheless seen as part of the regional identity. "We bring it into schools using theatre, puppet shows and storytelling," explains Olivier Engelaere. "There is considerable interest in rediscovering this part of our cultural heritage. Even in areas where it was hardly spoken."

Performances and readings in Picard always play to a full house. A novel-writing competition can attract hundreds of entries. And, in the wake of the film by Dany Boon, T-shirts with slogans in dialect are in fashion and there is a poem in Picard by Lucien Suel on YouTube. But "if it is not taught in schools and has no public presence," warns the director of the Agency for the Picard Language, "it will become part of folklore, and not a living language."

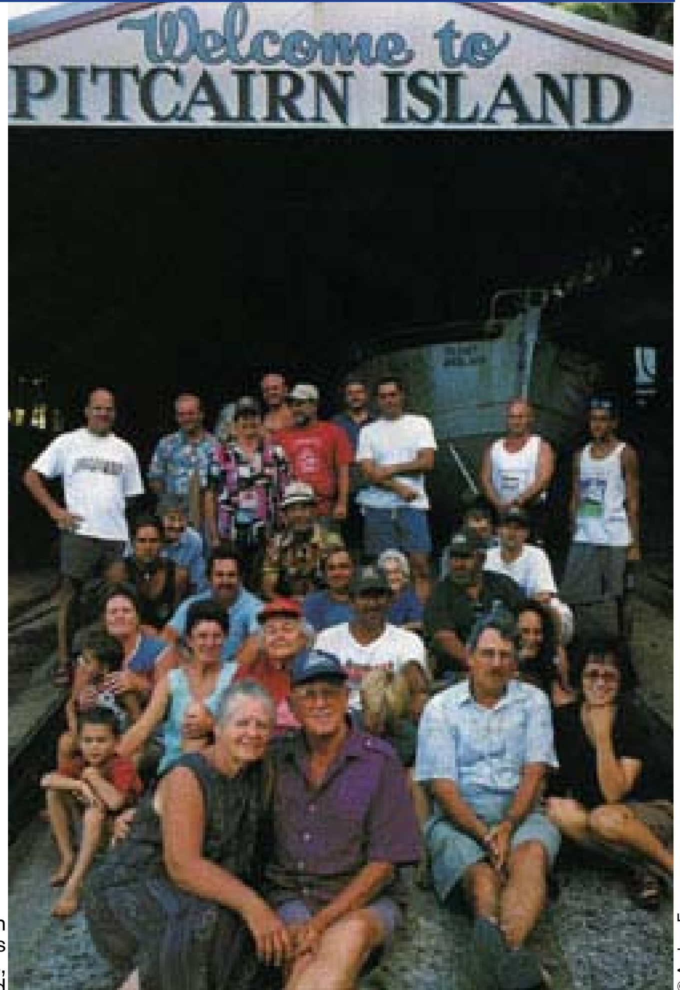
Isabelle Duriez, French journalist

© Thomas Roland

Jean-Marie François champions the Picard language. He passes on legends of the Picardie region through his poems, novels and plays.

The same language is spoken on the islands of Norfolk and Pitcairn (Pacific), yet it has developed differently in the two places, separated by 3,907 miles. A native Norfolk islander tells the curious story of this language, which came into being in the late 18th century and split into two 70 years later.

WUTHING WE GWEN TULL ?



Few of the locals in one of the world's least inhabited places, Pitcairn Island

© Andres Escovar

«What shall we say?», must have been one of the first thoughts of Captain William Bligh and the crew of His Majesty's Armed Vessel Bounty when they sailed into Matavaii Bay (Tahiti) on 26 October 1788.

When the British lost the American colonies, feeding the slaves on the sugar plantations in the West Indies became a problem, until early explorers in the Pacific came back from their voyages telling of "bread growing on trees"!

Collecting these breadfruit trees and then transporting them to the West Indies was the sole reason for the Bounty's voyage. The complication was that the ship was obliged to remain in Tahiti for 5 months. During this time, it was inevitable that the sailors of the Bounty, most from the West Counties of England, soon learned 'wuthing f'tull' (what to say) as they worked collecting the breadfruit plants, mingling with the people of Tahiti and, in some instances, forming romantic liaisons.

Irrespective of that, the learning of "wuthing f'tull gwen wun nether" (what to say to one another) would have been the foundation of the Pitcairn/Norfolk languages that are still spoken on these two islands.

A mutiny changed history. The story of the Bounty's eventual destruction and the establishment of the settlement on Pitcairn Island by Fletcher Christian, leader of the mutiny, and his 8 shipmates together with 12 Tahitian women and three Polynesian men, is well recorded. They also discovered three male stowaways and it is quite possible that the later tragedies on Pitcairn – which were caused partly by the lack of women – could have been avoided if Christian had put them ashore.

In 1831, due to the scarcity of water and other resources, the British government moved the entire community back to Tahiti. The move was unsuccessful: illness and deaths ensued and within months the bereaved families had returned to their homeland.

© Ard Hesselink

The only goal of the Bounty's expedition was to gather breadfruit and transport it to the West Indies.

In the late 1840s, the British Government decided to close the penal settlement on Norfolk Island and on 8 May 1856, the whole community of Pitcairn Island - 193 persons - complete with their own laws and language, embarked on the Morayshire for Norfolk Island where they landed on 8 June 1856.

Split language

Thus commenced another phase in the history of settlement (and language), determining the patterns of Pitcairn and Norfolk's existence for the next 153 years.

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In spite of all that their new home offered them, 16 returned to Pitcairn in 1858 and a further party of 27 sailed for Pitcairn in February 1864.

And there you have it – two isolated communities sharing the same cultural roots and speaking amongst themselves a common language that had evolved over some 76 years.

While the Pitcairn branch of the language was relatively "safe" from change, the Norfolk Island branch was coming more and more under the influence of outside pressures.

First came the arrival of the Melanesian Mission in October 1866 with its own church, homes for the missionaries and pupils, workshops, printing house and store. The mission remained separate from the community but nevertheless, some islanders did join the mission, while others were employed there.

Change to the education system was the next threat. Ever since 14 July 1856, when 70 children attended the first school, education was seen as a must for island children. Locally born teachers, assisted by others, taught them and there was still a wide-spread use of the Norfolk language.

School can kill a language or revive it

The Norfolk Island Public School came under the jurisdiction of the New South Wales Department of Education in 1897 and it was recommended that a trained and experienced teacher should be sent from Sydney to take up the position of Headmaster.

One of the things that most concerned headmasters in those early years was the prevalence of the Norfolk language. It was always the first choice for conversation in every home, the playground and all social occasions. While English was not a "foreign" language, it was second to "Norfolk" in terms of popularity and general use. Consequently, successive headmasters made it their business to try to eradicate the Norfolk language and replace it with the "King's English".

Courtesy Gae Evans.

A Norfolk language class around a plaque commemorating the founding of the colony in 1788.

The headmaster of 1915 was bold enough to predict "I feel confident that it is only a matter of a few generations when the island jargon will disappear altogether".

Fortunately, this did not occur, despite the school rule banning the use of the language during school hours. Its use has certainly declined over the years, yet since 1987 "Norfolk" is actually taught within the school, using phonetics, so it is preserved for future generations.

This work is being done by a group of passionate "Norfolk" lovers, who conduct language camps, and encourage their own children and grandchildren, as well as others to use "Norfolk". Two books - "Speak Norfolk Today" by Alice Inez Buffett and "A Dictionary of Norfolk Words and Usages" compiled by Beryl Nobbs Palmer and published by the Norfolk Island Sunshine Club - aid their efforts. Professor Peter Mulhauser of the Adelaide University School of Linguistics is also a great champion of the language.

While it may be endangered I feel sure that "Norfolk" lovers - all 658 of us - will never let it die out.

Tom Lloyd,
Australian journalist
born on Norfolk Island

Nursery rhyme compiled by Norfolk lover Professor Archie Bigg:

Baa baa blaek shiip
Yu gat eni wul?
En waa brada,
Thrii saek ful
Wan f' daa gehl
En wan f' daa mien
En wan f' dem letl salan

Some languages are spoken by very few people but are still very much alive, while others have been preserved by the isolation of their speakers. Marleen Haboud from Ecuador explains these apparently paradoxical phenomena.

AN EPIDEMIC IS THREATENING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

Marleen Haboud,
a specialist in Andean languages,
talks to Lucía Iglesias Kuntz
(UNESCO).

© Marleen Haboud

Community of Quichua speakers in Cotopaxi (Ecuador).

What is the status of Central Andean languages, in terms of their viability?

In the Central Andes (Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia) the estimate is that one hundred indigenous languages are still alive. Determining exactly just how alive they are is not easy. This varies not only from one language to another, but also within a given language, depending on where it is spoken, the age of the speaker, their vocation, gender, level of education, etc.

For example, in Ecuador, Quechua is widely spoken in certain regions of the country, while it is rapidly disappearing from others. In this heterogeneous context, and even if certain languages continue to be used by the new generations, the general trend for all languages in the region is constant regression.

How do you explain this situation?

Several factors are involved, such as the living conditions of native speakers, whether or not they receive institutional and social aid, the extent to which the language continues to function in all modern communication contexts, and indeed, the interest and pride of the people who speak it.

In terms of viability, the number of native speakers can be a relative concept. Some languages are spoken by a small number of people but are very much alive, such as A'i cofán in Ecuadorian Amazonia. And, on the contrary, the number of speakers of some trans-national languages, such as Quechua, is dwindling every day.

Some indigenous languages maintain their vitality because of the isolation of native speakers, who find they have around them all they need to live comfortably. But isolation should not be a condition for the survival of one of these languages; the ideal situation would be that they cohabit with the predominant languages and societies and that they gain in strength, despite the homogenizing trends of globalization.

Why do languages disappear?

Over the last decades, a complex set of circumstances has accelerated the disappearance of indigenous languages, including contacts with other peoples, the death of native speakers, radical changes in their way of life, loss of land, massive migrations, and so on.

Only joint actions integrated with global society can curb this kind of epidemic, which is making indigenous languages and their speakers vulnerable. This presupposes that, first of all, society as a whole gets to know these languages and their speakers, and learns to respect and help keep them alive, so that we achieve the ideal of a truly multicultural society.

Another very important factor for keeping a language alive is the

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image that both its speakers and non-speakers have of it. A person who is proud of his or her language will be more likely to keep it going.

Could you give examples of some national or regional initiatives that have helped to revitalize languages in the region?

There have been several initiatives in our countries to help maintain minority languages. On one hand there have been government initiatives. In Andean countries, constitutional reforms have given indigenous languages an official status. The linguistic and educational policies of these countries are quite well defined and, even if they are still not always widely applied, their aim is to preserve the languages, culture and identity of their speakers, as well as respect and equality between peoples.

At the same time there are the efforts being made by speakers themselves, both collectively and individually. For example, thanks to the creation of specific family and community-based educational programmes, families are trying to regain or consolidate their languages. Indigenous movements in Latin America have turned a corner in their campaign for the rights of indigenous peoples, with the creation of new bilingual, intercultural educational programmes at all levels of formal education, specific health programmes and the creation of official services for speakers of certain languages.

In some countries more than others, the media have also taken initiatives to encourage the public use of certain languages, especially those with the greatest number of speakers. Bolivia is a prime example of this.

Throughout history, new languages have been born while others have died out, why should we be concerned about the disappearance of languages?

Just like humans themselves, languages are born and die, but we have never before seen them die at such a rapid rate as during the past decades. This means not just the loss of words and expressions, but also a store of knowledge and ways of understanding the world and communicating with others, of constructing history, of exchanging with other human beings, with elders and younger generations, and of conceptualising time, space, the living world, life and death. Each language is a universe. And, every time a word dies, unique and irreplaceable stories disappear with it.

© Marleen Haboud

Marleen Haboud from Ecuador is an Andean language specialist.

“ I speak my favourite language
because
that's who I am.

We teach our children our favourite language,
because
we want them to know who they are.

(Christine Johnson, Tohono O'odham elder,
American Indian Language Development Institute, June 2002).

© Marleen Haboud

For a language to survive it must be passed on to the next generation.

Clea Koff:

Bones never lie

© Sam Brown

Clea Koff, forensic anthropologist.

Forensic anthropologist Clea Koff wrote "The Bone Woman" in 2004, to chronicle her experiences during seven UN missions to unearth the mass graves of Rwanda, Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo. Her grueling investigations helped bring some of the perpetrators to justice.

To mark International Women's Day on 8 March, an interview by Shiraz Sidhva, Indian journalist based in the United States, with a special interest in human rights.

You have chronicled some of the world's worst massacres. What sparked your interest in forensic anthropology and how were you able to forge a link between that science and human rights?

Forensic anthropology was a young science in the late 1980s. I was drawn to bones even as a child and by the time I went to university to study archaeology and anthropology, I knew I was really interested in the human skeleton. Then I went on an archaeological dig in Greece, and realized I didn't want to exhume ancient graveyards for research purposes.

One of the books my father had given me to read that summer was "Witnesses from the Grave: The Stories Bones Tell". Written by Eric Stover and Christopher Joyce, the book chronicles the creation of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology team, which tried to identify the remains of Argentines "disappeared" during the military junta of the 1970s and 1980s.

That was my introduction to forensic anthropology. I loved the fact that forensics could not only help restore someone's identity, but could actually play a role in achieving justice.

Your book is a hard-hitting and honest account of what you went through on your UN missions. You've described the odors permeating your clothes, the hard physical labor, and yet talked about the inordinate satisfaction you felt as you excavated bodies. How did you manage to override the sadness and get the job done?

As time passes from when I was involved in the work as intensely as I was, it's actually harder to find that balance. From the moment we'd start clearing away the soil and finding clothing and human remains, I felt a true sense of happiness because we were uncovering not only something clandestine, but people who should have never been in that grave in the first place. I knew that we were undoing as much as could be undone about the crime.

When I think about the work from a greater distance, and when I'm not actually at the site, I feel inadequate putting into words what we

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as forensic scientists should do. By our very definition, we arrive after the crime has been committed, and the strange evolution I went through was that though I was a scientist, I wish we could have just brought people back to life. Because we could see these people didn't have to die. This was not a natural disaster, a tsunami or an earthquake, beyond our control. There were clear signs that these were planned executions, that policies had enabled these things to happen, that this was preventable. And you wish you could reverse the deaths – it's a completely unscientific emotion, and yet, that's the distilled emotion I have after all this time. Obviously I had to turn that around, to find something that I could do to feel useful, otherwise I wouldn't be able to get out of bed every day. That's why I've come to focus on the prevention of these types of crimes - how forensic evidence and the bodies of the victims themselves play a role in the truth that they bring forward, and help prevent these crimes in the future.

You've talked about bones speaking, that you could actually tell stories from them later, and that they never lie. Is what we can dig up after it's all over rather limited, especially when there is an effort to cover up evidence?

The wonderful thing about the human skeleton is that it's recording something of our lives every day. The bones are able to tell intrinsic details, such as a person's sex, age, height, ancestry and pathology. We are able to interpret marks and changes on the bone to discern diseases or trauma they suffered during life and at the moment of death. We are able to make that distinction, and also determine the cause of death. Teeth are a particular interest of mine – they tell us a lot.

You've said that people are essentially the same everywhere, and how the bodies unearthed from supposedly different conflicts on two continents tell a single, very similar story. Could you explain the real issues of sustainability and power that you say are at the root of organized violence?

This perspective of mine came about because of the particular sites where I had worked. There was a perception that Rwanda and countries of the former Yugoslavia experienced spontaneous outbursts of violence, brought about by old hatreds, ethnicity, tribes, and religion. But I don't believe these were the real issues. Evidence from within the graves definitely suggests that the violence was not at all spontaneous. As we went to different countries, or different areas in the same country, we noticed similarities between the graves, and similar kinds of behavior on the part of the killers.

We started asking what was to be gained from civilians being killed, what was worth violating the Geneva Convention or other humanitarian laws for, and who was benefiting? I did not believe that the states and the apparatus they were using to carry out these killings were deeply moved by ancient battles or religious issues, because ultimately that's not how the economy of a state works.

That was when I began to see the majority of the graves were located in sites of strategic value – a river bank, a port, treasured agricultural land, or any place where trade was to be done. I realized that people were often eliminated from areas in order to gain control of them. I remain open-minded about other reasons for the killings, but for me, this has remained the most powerful reason, which seems to crop up in areas of conflict, whether in Rwanda, Serbia, Darfur, Iraq or Chechnya. Ancient hatreds are not passed along genetically. Power can use peoples' sense of discrimination as a proxy agent of violence.

I believe the main reason these graves were hidden was because the killers knew just how dangerous it is for people at large to find out that this wasn't about spontaneous violence, but an organized killing to eliminate a particular group from a particular region.

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© Sonya Koshuta

Evidence of the genocide in Rwanda.

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Do you believe that international tribunals act as a deterrent to those who may commit crimes against humanity and are you happy with the outcome of the tribunals your work contributed to?

Yes, the tribunals certainly had a huge impact in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. Mass killings had taken place in other parts of the world prior to these crimes that caused the tribunals to be established, and it had taken a long time for details of these crimes to emerge. There had been no attempts at accountability, and therefore it was easier for the perpetrators to present a distorted version of what had happened. The establishment of a criminal tribunal is an important step, quite apart from people's estimation of the value of these two tribunals. The fact that the killers attempted to hide the evidence showed some awareness of what forensic evidence within a prosecution setting could actually do. The bodies could tell stories, which could be used in a witness stand.

For instance, when the Serbian police were getting bodies out of Kosovo in trucks and trying to hide them behind police stations, there are physical traces that these are not legitimate targets during a legal war, but people who should have been protected by law. There will always be the risk of killings in different places, but what changes is that people are less likely to agree to be co-opted into mass killings, making it more difficult for them to be carried out successfully. That is the main impact of the tribunals, to act as deterrents for future crimes.

I am very proud of having been a part of these trials, which have mostly used the forensic evidence we provided to corroborate the surviving witness testimonies.

Clea Koff was born in 1972 of a Tanzanian mother and an American father, both documentary filmmakers focused on human rights issues, and spent her childhood in England, Kenya, Tanzania, Somalia and the United States. Fascinated by bones from an early age, Koff earned a bachelor's degree in anthropology from Stanford University and went on to study forensic anthropology at the University of Arizona.

Between 1996 and 2000, she worked as a forensic expert for the United Nations International Criminal Tribunals for Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. During those seven missions, Koff meticulously kept a diary because, as she explains, she had things to say about how she was feeling, which she couldn't say out loud as a forensic scientist. Those memoirs formed the basis of her bestseller, "The Bone Woman", first published in 2004 and now available in nine languages in more than 14 countries.

In 2006, Koff worked with the United Nations Committee on Missing Persons in Cyprus, on behalf of the Equipo Argentino de Antropologia Forense. She is now based in Los Angeles, where she founded the non-profit Missing Persons Identification Resource Center (MPID) to help identify the enormous backlog of bodies in US coroners' offices – an estimated 40,000 nationwide.

Koff believes that "a disappearance is a disappearance, whether it occurs in peace or wartime." Her experiences with the living people related to the bodies she exhumed in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia inspired her to help families of missing persons in the United States.

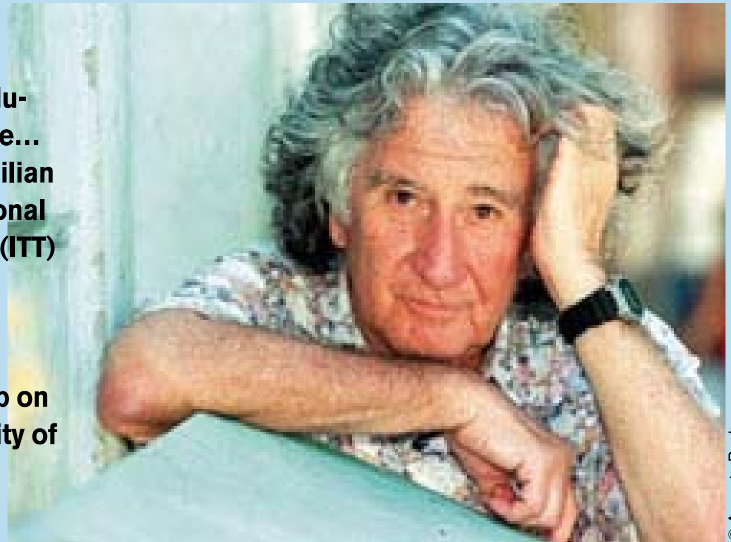
© Sam Walker

Bosnia-Herzegovina: a family visiting the Potocari memorial, where victims of the 1995 Srebenica massacres are buried.

We are all actors

Popular theatre, radical theatre, interactive theatre, educational theatre, legislative theatre, therapeutic theatre… in other words, Augusto Boal. This world-famous Brazilian theatre director is the author this year of the international message issued by the International Theatre Institute (ITT) for World Theatre Day on 27 March.

The inventor of "Theatre of the Oppressed" and that special character, the "spect-actor", invites us to get up on life's stage and create a world that abolishes the duality of oppressor-oppressed.



© Augusto Boal

Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal is known internationally as the founder of the Theatre of the Oppressed.

Theatre is not just an event; it is a way of life! Even if one is unaware of it, human relationships are structured in a theatrical way. The use of space, body language, choice of words and voice modulation, the confrontation of ideas and passions, everything that we demonstrate on the stage, we live in our lives. We are theatre!

Weddings and funerals are "spectacles", but so, also, are daily rituals so familiar that we are not conscious of this. Occasions of pomp and circumstance, but also the morning coffee, the exchanged good-mornings, timid love and storms of passion, a senate session or a diplomatic meeting - all is theatre.

One of the main functions of our art is to make people sensitive to the "spectacles" of daily life in which the actors are their own spectators, performances in which the stage and the stalls coincide. We are all artists. By doing theatre, we learn to see what is obvious but what we usually can't see because we are only used to looking at it. What is familiar to us becomes unseen: doing theatre throws light on the stage of daily life.

Theatre is the Hidden Truth

Last September, we were surprised by a theatrical revelation: we, who thought that we were living in a safe world, despite wars, genocide, slaughter and torture which certainly exist, but far from us in remote and wild places. We, who were living in security with our money invested in some respectable bank or in some honest trader's hands in the stock exchange were told that this money did not exist, that it was virtual, a fictitious invention by some economists who were not fictitious at all and neither reliable nor respectable. Everything was just bad theatre, a dark plot in which a few people won a lot and many people lost all. Some politicians from rich countries held secret meetings in which they found some magic solutions. And we, the victims of their decisions, have remained spectators in the last row of the balcony.

Twenty years ago, I staged Racine's Phèdre in Rio de Janeiro. The stage setting was poor: cow skins on the ground, bamboos around. Before each presentation, I used to say to my actors: "The fiction we created day by day is over. When you cross those bamboos, none of you will have the right to lie. Theatre is the Hidden Truth".

When we look beyond appearances, we see oppressors and oppressed people, in all societies, ethnic groups, genders, social classes and castes; we see an unfair and cruel world. We have to create another world because we know it is possible. But it is up to us to build this other world with our hands and by acting on the stage and in our own life.

We are all actors: being a citizen is not living in society, it is changing it.

Augusto Boal

ZOOM

L'ORÉAL-UNESCO AWARDS FOR WOMEN IN SCIENCE

Beatriz Barbuy (Brasil), Athene M.Donald (United Kingdom), Akiko Kobayashi (Japan), Eugenia Kumacheva (Russia/Canada) et Tebello Nyokong (South Africa) are the Laureates of the 2009 L'ORÉAL-UNESCO Awards.

For over ten years, awards of US $ 100 000 each, reward annually five outstanding women scientists from different regions of the world. They alternate yearly between life sciences and physical sciences, recognizing work that addresses major challenges in modern science. This year's awards in physical sciences bring to 57 the number of women recognized to date.

The 2009 International Jury, presided by Ahmed Zewail, 1999 laureate of the Nobel Prize in Chemistry, numbers 17 leading members of the international scientific community. Professor Christian de Duve, laureate of the 1974 Nobel Prize in Medicine, is the Founding President of the Awards and Koïchiro Matsuura, Director General of UNESCO, is Honorary President.

The L'Oréal-UNESCO partnership also includes a Fellowship programme allowing post-doctoral students to pursue research in a host laboratory outside their country of origin. The L'ORÉAL-UNESCO For Women in Science programme has to date granted 120 International Fellowships and 340 National Fellowships to female doctoral and postdoctoral students. Worth up to US$40,000 over two years, they are attributed to 15 young women, three from each of the following parts of the world: Africa & the Arab States; Asia-Pacific; North America; Europe; and Latin America.

Photos © Micheline Pelletier/Abacapress

Tabello Nyokong, South Africa

Akiko Kobayashi, Japan

Athene M. Donald, United Kingdom

Beatriz Barbuy, Brasil

Eugenia Kumacheva, Russia/Canada

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