SCIENCE

The Quest to Save Endangered Languages

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An Effort to Save Endangered Languages

Every day, indigenous languages in Latin America are slipping away.

Conducting field research in southern Bolivia, linguist Susan Kalt hikes roughly two hours to reach the communities where she studies Quechua.

The people are still subsistence farmers, who grow potatoes, grains and herd livestock. Yet, even in these isolated Andean communities, outside forces threaten the indigenous language.

Both here and in Peru, where Kalt also researches, the governments have committed to teaching native languages, yet they often lack resources to introduce the curriculums, she says.
"So what really happens is kids get to school and they're told: your language doesn't exist," says Kalt.

Every day, indigenous languages in Latin America are slipping away: blame Spanish-only schooling, or general prejudice against local tongues or transactions that usually require Spanish. Every community faces its own circumstances.
Working against the tides, the Documenting Endangered Languages (DEL) program awarded over $3.9 million in varying grants and fellowships earlier this month to researchers, like Kalt, seeking to study threatened indigenous tongues. The Washington D.C.-based National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the Virginia-based National Science Foundation (NSF) run the grant program, which was established in 2005.

The funds support projects all over the world, including many in Latin America, where Spanish is clearly altering or replacing local native tongues. According to UNESCO, if nothing to done, about half of the 6,000 languages spoken today will disappear by the end of the century.

Working Against the Tide
In Latin America, once Spanish has a local foothold parents often avoid speaking the indigenous tongue to their children. They might think, *what's the point? It's not going to help them in school or if they need to leave the community for work.* Very quickly, towns can drift from 100 percent indigenous language fluency to 50 percent fluency. Eventually, fluency can dwindle down to 50 or 20 speakers – and then, as those people pass away, the language dies.
To preserve native tongues, linguists often create educational materials for local communities. At the very least, they seek to record the language in a way that will be accessible to future generations of indigenous people.

Kalt, a professor at Roxbury Community College in Massachusetts, will document children's Quechua in four communities. Part of her research involves creating Quechua educational materials for rural schools. She also collaborates with local partners from universities, education ministries and non-governmental organizations in both countries.

“They’ve committed their lives to indigenous education,” she says.

An Effort to Preserve Dying Languages

Jonathan Amith, a three-time DEL recipient, has spent his career studying Nahuatl languages in Mexico. Working with an indigenous business collective in Puebla, he has written a dictionary, worked on an ethno-botanical field guide and begun a 50 chapter-documentation of their language’s grammar.

As part of his DEL work, he has also produced and co-directed a documentary, “Silvestre Pantaleón,” now making the rounds to various film festivals. The film focuses on and is named after an elderly man from the town where Amith has often conducted research.

“He’s sort of my teacher,” says Amith, who says he was amazed by Pantaleón’s ability to make his own natural rope and line, techniques from a bygone era. “He would be a professor of botany anywhere else. So at a certain point – he’s 80 years old – I wanted to basically film what he knew.”

Overall, communities often have a complicated relationship with their native languages: internally, they retain cachet, but outside, they’re looked down upon.

This situation is more familiar than it sounds, says Juan Bueno Holle, another DEL recipient from the University of Chicago. It even happens in the United States, he said.

“There’s a certain prestige of how well you speak southern English when you’re in the south,” he says, and yet in the broader world, southern or African-American dialects or slang often face judgment and mockery.

Bueno Holle says “the same phenomenon happens” where he works in Juchitán, Mexico, home to the Isthmus Zapotec language. Despite facing prejudice, speakers are very proud of their native tongue.

“There are definitely other circles where it’s very prestigious to speak, and to speak it well, and not mix Spanish,” he says, adding on later “Everyone that I’ve been in touch with has been very eager to share.”

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