NICHOLAS EVANS

Dying Words

Endangered Languages and
What They Have To Tell Us

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Dying Words

Endangered Languages and What They Have to Tell Us

Nicholas Evans

for my parents and children, by blood and by teaching

Acknowledgments

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Prologue

No volverá tu voz a lo que el persa

Dijo en su lengua de aves y de rosas,

Cuando al ocaso, ante la luz dispersa,

Quieras decir inolvidables cosas

You will never recapture what the Persian

Said in his language woven with birds and roses,

When, in the sunset, before the light disperses,

You wish to give words to unforgettable things

 (Borges 1972:116–17)[1]

Un vieillard qui meurt est une bibliothèque qui brûle.

An old person dying is a library burning.

 (Amadou Hampaté Bâ, address to UNESCO, 1960)

Pat Gabori, *Kabararrjingathi bulthuku*,[2] is, at the time I write these words, one of eight remaining speakers of Kayardild, the Aboriginal language of Bentinck Island, Queensland, Australia. For this old man, blind for the last four decades, the wider world entered his life late enough that he never saw how you should sit in a car. He sits cross-legged on the car seat facing backwards, as if in a dinghy. Perhaps his blindness has helped him keep more vividly alive the world he grew up in. He loves to talk for hours about sacred places on Bentinck Island, feats of hunting, intricate tribal genealogies, and feuds over women. Sometimes he interrupts his narrative to break into song. His deep knowledge of tribal law made him a key witness in a recent legal challenge to the Australian government, to obtain recognition of traditional sea rights. But fewer and fewer people can understand his stories.

  Kayardild was never a large language. At its peak it probably counted no more than 150 speakers, and by the

time I was introduced to Pat in 1982 there were fewer than 40 left, all middle-aged or older.

   The fate of the language was sealed in the 1940s when missionaries evacuated the entire population of Bentinck Islanders from their ancestral territories, relocating them to the mission on Mornington Island, some 50 km to the northwest. At the time of their relocation the whole population were monolingual Kayardild speakers, but from that day on no new child would master the tribal language. The sibling link, by which one child passes on their language to another, was broken during the first years after the relocation, a dark decade from which no baby survived. A dormitory policy separated children from their parents for most of the day, and punished any child heard speaking an Aboriginal language.

Figure 0.1 Pat Gabori, *Kabararrjingathi bulthuku* (photo: Nicholas Evans)

   Kayardild, which we shall learn more about in this book, challenges many tenets about what a possible human

language is. A famous article on the evolution of language by psycholinguists Steve Pinker and Paul Bloom, for example, claimed that "no language uses noun affixes to express tense"[3] (grammatical time). This putative restriction is in line with Noam Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar, which sees a prior restriction on possible human languages as an essential aid to the language- learning child in narrowing down the set of hypotheses she needs to deduce the grammar underlying her parents' speech.

Well, Kayardild blithely disregards this supposed impossibility, and marks tense on nouns as well as verbs. If you say "he saw (the) turtle," for example, you say *niya kurrijarra bangana*. You mark the past tense on the verb *kurrij* "to see," as *-arra*, but also on the object-noun *banga* "turtle," as *-na*. Putting this into the future, to "he will see (the) turtle," you say *niya kurriju bangawu*, marking futurity on both verb (−*u*) and noun (−*wu*). (Pronounce *a*, *i*, and *u* with their Spanish or Italian values, the *rr* as a trill, the *ng* as in *singer*, and the *j* as in *jump*.)[4]

Kayardild shows us how dangerous it is to talk about "universals" of language on the basis of a narrow sample that ignores the true extent of the world's linguistic diversity.[5] Thinking about it objectively, the Kayardild system isn't so crazy. Tense locates the whole event in time – the participants, as well as the action depicted by the verb. The tense logics developed by logicians in the twentieth century plug whole propositions into their tense operators, including the bits denoted by both verbs and nouns in English. Spreading around the tense-marking, Kayardild-style, shows the "propositional scope" of tense.

But learning Kayardild is not just a matter of mastering a grammar that no human language is supposed to have. It also requires you to think quite differently about the world.

Try moving *the eastern page of this book* a bit further *north on your lap*. Probably you will need to do a bit of unfamiliar thinking before you can follow this instruction. But if you spoke Kayardild, most sentences you uttered would refer to the compass points in this way, and you would respond instantly and accurately to this request.

Pat Gabori is in his eighties, and the youngest fluent speakers are in their sixties. So it seems impossible that a single speaker will remain alive when, in 2042, a hundred years will mark the removal of the Kaiadilt people from Bentinck Island. In the space of a lifetime a unique and fascinating tongue will have gone from being the only language of its people, to a silent figment of the past.

Traveling five hundred miles to the northwest we reach Croker Island in Australia's Northern Territory. There, in 2003, I attended the funeral of Charlie Wardaga, my teacher, friend, and classificatory elder brother. It was a chaotic affair. Weeks had passed between his death and the arrival of mourners, songmen, and dancers from many surrounding tribes. All this time his body lay in a wooden European-style coffin, attracting a growing number of flies in the late dry-season heat, under a traditional Aboriginal bough-shade decked with red pennants in a tradition borrowed from those wide-ranging Indonesian seafarers, the Macassans. His bereaved wife waited under the bough-shade while we all came to pay our last respects, grasping a knife lying on the coffin and slashing our heads with it to allay our grief.

Figure 0.2 Charlie Wardaga (photo: Nicholas Evans)

   Later, as the men silently dug Charlie's grave pit, the old women had to be restrained from leaping in. Then the searing, daggering traditional music gave way to Christian hymns more conducive to contemplation and acceptance. With this old man's burial we were not just burying a tribal elder pivotal in the life and struggles of this small community. The book and volume of his brain had been the last to hold several languages of the region: Ilgar, which is the language of his own Mangalara clan, but also Garig, Manangkardi, and Marrku, as well as more widely known languages like Iwaidja and Kunwinjku. Although we had managed to transfer a small fraction of this knowledge into a more durable form before he died, as recordings and fieldnotes, our work had begun too late. When I first met him in 1994 he was already an old man suffering from increasing deafness and physical immobility, so that the job had barely begun, and the Manangkardi language, for instance, had been too far down the queue to get much attention.

   For his children and other clan members, the loss of such a knowledgeable senior relative took away their last chance of learning their own language and the full tribal knowledge that it communicated: place-names that identify each stretch of beach, formulae for coaxing turtle to the surface, and the evocative lines of the Seagull song cycle, which Charlie himself had sung at other people's funerals. For me,

as a linguist, it left a host of unanswered questions. Some of these questions can still be answered for Iwaidja and Mawng, relatively "large" related languages with around two hundred speakers each. But others were crucially dependent on Ilgar or Marrku data.

My sense of despair at what gets lost when such magnificent languages fall silent – both to their own small communities and to the wider world of scholarship – prompted me to write this book. Although my own first-hand experience has mainly been with fragile languages in Aboriginal Australia, similar tragedies are devastating small speech communities right around the world. Language death has occurred throughout human history, but among the world's six thousand or more modern tongues the pace of extinction is quickening, and we are likely to witness the loss of half of the world's six thousand languages by the end of this century.[6] On best current estimates, every two weeks, somewhere in the world, the last speaker of a fading language dies. No one's mind will again travel the thought-paths that its ancestral speakers once blazed. No one will hear its sounds again except from a recording, and no one can go back to check a translation, or ask a new question about how the language works.

Each language has a different story to tell us. Indeed, if we record it properly, each will have its own library shelf loaded with grammars, dictionaries, botanical and zoological encyclopedias, and collections of songs and stories. But language leads a double life, shuttling between "out there" in the community of speakers and "in there" in individual minds that need to know it all in order to use and teach it. So there come moments of history when the whole accumulated edifice of an oral culture rests, invisible and inaudible, in the memory of its last living witness. This book is about everything that is lost when we bury such a person, and about what we can do to bring out as much of their

knowledge as possible into a durable form that can be passed on to future generations.

Such is the distinctiveness of many of these languages that, for certain riddles of humanity, just one language holds the key. But we do not know in advance which language holds the answer to which question. And as the science of linguistics becomes more sophisticated, the questions we seek answers to are multiplying.

The task of recording the knowledge hanging on in the minds of Pat Gabori and his counterparts around the world is a formidable one. For each language, the complexity of information we need to map is comparable to that of the human genome. But, unlike the human genome, or the concrete products of human endeavor that archaeologists study, languages perish without physical trace except in the rare cases where a writing system has been developed. As discernible structures, they only exist as fleeting sounds or movements. The classic goal of a descriptive linguist is to distil this knowledge, by a combination of systematic questioning and the recording and transcribing of whatever stories the speaker wishes to tell, into at least a trilogy of grammar, texts, and a dictionary. Increasingly this is supplemented by sound and video recordings that add information about intonation, gesture, and context. Though documentary linguists now go beyond what most investigators aspired to do a hundred years ago, we can still capture just a fraction of the knowledge that any one speaker holds in their heads, and which – once the speaker population dwindles – is at risk of never coming to light because no one thinks to ask about it.

This book is about the full gamut of what we lose when languages die, about why it matters, and about what questions and techniques best shape our response to this looming collapse of human ways of knowing. These questions, I believe, can only be addressed properly if we

give the study of fragile languages its rightful place in the grand narrative of human ideas and the forgotten histories of peoples who walked lightly through the world, without consigning their words to stone or parchment. And because we can only meet this challenge through a concerted effort by linguists, the communities themselves, and the lay public, I have tried to write this book in a way that speaks to all these types of reader.

Revolutions in digital technology mean that linguists can now record and analyze more than they ever could, in exquisitely accurate sound and video, and archive these in ways that were unthinkable a generation ago. At the same time, the history of the field shows us that good linguistic description depends as much on the big questions that linguists are asking as it does on the techniques that they bring to their field site.

Tweaking an old axiom, you only hear what you listen for, and you only listen for what you are wondering about. The goal of this book is to take stock of what we should be wondering about as we listen to the dying words of the thousands of languages falling silent around us, across the totality of what Mike Krauss has christened the "logosphere": just as the "biosphere" is the totality of all species of life and all ecological links on earth, the logosphere is the whole vast realm of the world's words, the languages that they build, and the links between them.

Further Reading

Important books covering the topic of language death include Grenoble and Whaley (1998), Crystal (2000), Nettle and Romaine (2000), Dalby (2003), and Harrison (2007); for a French view, see Hagège (2000).

The difficult challenge of what small communities can do to maintain their languages is a topic I decided not to tackle