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Endangered Languages
By Jeannette Stewart

The Manx language lives! Declared dead in 2009, its revival is the ultimate story of survival against the odds. Manx is the language of the Isle of Man, which lies in the Irish Sea between Ireland and Great Britain. Its population is around 85,000. Its history reaches back thousands of years. Its future looks healthy. Its culture is thriving. Key to the success is an elementary school that teaches almost entirely in the Manx language. In 2009 seventy young pupils wrote to Unesco’s Atlas of the World Languages in Danger asking: “If our language is extinct then what language are we writing in?” Unesco changed the classification to “critically endangered” and today there are over 1,800 people who can speak, read and write in Manx.

Endangered languages are an issue of urgent concern these days, involving efforts by academia, corporate business and countless individuals across the globe. When we look at the staggering number of results returned on almost any search argument containing the words ‘language,’ ‘culture’ or ‘communication,’ it is clear just how important these aspects of life are to humanity. While conflict and destruction still make headline-grabbing news, our interest in life outside the confines of our own borders is vigorous. Technology now offers unprecedented capabilities to connect with our fellow beings far and wide. Languages that are endangered inspire action. Together these elements result in a boundless enthusiasm for preserving a common heritage.

If you Google ‘endangered languages,’ a list of close to a million hits is returned. A quick survey of the top results reveals a number of organizations involved in this conservation movement. A second glance reveals that while these bodies share some common characteristics, there is also some impressive diversity among them. UNESCO offers a rich body of information on endangered languages including an atlas. The Linguistic Society of America is a science-oriented organization founded in 1924 to advance the scientific study of language and among many other topics is concerned with endangered languages. ELCat, Endangered Language Catalogue, is an online collaborative effort to protect global linguistic diversity. The Ethnologue is the most extensive list of the world’s languages. The Endangered Languages Project, supported by Google amongst others, is a humanitarian, global enterprise providing vast resources to all endangered languages. At the other end of the scale, we find sites dedicated to assuring the survival of individual native languages such as Lakota, Sioux and Cherokee. We even find an organization, thriving it seems, dedicated to the revival of Latin. A note-worthy, non-profit organization driven by academics and linguists is Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages. Its mission is to promote the documentation, maintenance, preservation, and revitalization of endangered languages worldwide through linguist-aided, community-driven multimedia language-documentation projects. With this approach, they are able to bring together linguistic expertise, technological savvy and community involvement resulting in a most impressive impact in achieving their aims. Since 2005, Living Tongues Institute has reached more than 100 endangered language communities in 15 countries. Their researchers have collaborated with
endangered language speakers to create over 100 Talking Dictionaries now representing 43 'genetic units' or language families.

Living Tongues provides educational, archival and other media resources that help spread the word of the invaluable work they are doing. They are funded by donors’ generosity and are helped in their efforts by volunteers. Their “Adopt a Language” Campaign allows donations to go to specific projects and field-work. The Living Tongues Institute was founded by Dr. Gregory D.S. Anderson, who is the current Director and President of the organization while Swarthmore College Linguistics professor Dr. K. David Harrison is Vice-president and Director of Research. In Anderson’s own words, “Our goal is to help as many minority language communities as possible maintain their voices into the future, and to assist them in crossing the digital divide and in overcoming the disenfranchisement and denigration that have led to ethnic shame and abandonment of their heritage identities.”

As we might expect from a company whose aim is to disseminate technology throughout all levels of the global community, Google’s support in the Endangered Languages Project is yielding impressive results. I was fortunate enough to secure some precious time from Craig Cornelius’s packed schedule to discuss his role in preserving endangered languages. Cornelius’ work focuses on internationalization and localization of Google’s software products by adding new languages, such as launching Gmail in the Cherokee language. He is on the Advisory Committee of the Australian Research Council's Center of Excellence on the Dynamics of Language, an organization that investigates how languages vary, how we learn them, how we process them and how they evolve. He has held academic and industry positions over a varied career, has a PhD in Chemistry and degrees in Mathematics and Computer Science.

On a warm, fall afternoon, we sat in the leafy shade of his team’s building in the Googleplex and spoke about what brings a person of his long list of achievements that reflect a relentless curiosity in all things to an involvement with endangered languages. In his characteristically affable manner, Cornelius explained that he felt, “very privileged to work with passionate people whose enthusiasm is infectious.”

Now infected himself, he sees more clearly how people understand themselves and their communities through their languages. It also gives them a better understanding of how complicated language is and how different factors can influence language transmission. A good example of this is how the usage of the Cherokee language declined when well-intentioned government housing policies resulted in the separation of different generations co-inhabiting. The diminished contact between grandparents and younger members of family interfered with the nuanced transmission of cultural and language knowledge that was encoded in discourse conducted under former domestic arrangements.

Another organization that Cornelius got involved with through Google is the First Peoples’ Cultural Council, a community-focused governmental organization that provides funding, training and resources for Indigenous language, arts and culture revitalization in the province of British Columbia. As part of a Google 20% project, Cornelius processed university sound files of endangered languages and uploaded them to YouTube. This work was part of an initiative by Google and the First Peoples’ Cultural Council to help the Endangered Languages Project,
which Cornelius and Shaylene Boechler, Endangered Languages Project Manager, presented at The International Multilingual User Group (IMUG) event in Silicon Valley in February 2015. The Endangered Languages Project is an online resource to record, access, and share samples of and research about endangered languages, as well as to provide advice and best practices for those working to document or strengthen Indigenous languages. Google oversaw the technology development and launch of this project with the long-term goal for it to be led by true experts in the field of language preservation. As such, oversight of the project has transitioned to First Peoples’ Cultural Council and Eastern Michigan University in coordination with a Governance Council consisting of language experts from around the world.

This project would not be possible without the collaboration of groups around the world who have contributed to its launch. As part of the Endangered Languages Project, the Alliance for Linguistic Diversity has been created. The mission of the Alliance for Linguistic Diversity is to accelerate, strengthen and catalyze efforts around endangered language documentation, to support communities engaged in protecting and revitalizing their languages, and to raise awareness about ways to address threats to endangered languages. Many existing organizations are already part of the newly formed Alliance for Linguistic Diversity.

While researching this article many people I spoke to recommended that I interview Manuela Noske as a leading light in the quest to save endangered languages. Luckily our paths crossed at the LocWorld conference in Silicon Valley last October and she was eager to share her passion and to speak about her work.

Manuela Noske is a Senior Program Manager at Microsoft, holds a Ph.D in Linguistics and was a visiting Assistant Professor at UC Davis. In her role at Microsoft she has an advising function on what languages to adopt and localize the family of Windows products and services. An expert in African languages, she is highly-qualified to evaluate the feasibility of including languages from emerging markets and this also involves working with languages that are deemed to be endangered. The task of striking a balance between cultural benefit and corporate investment is one she tackles with passion.

Her enthusiasm is infectious. She finds learning about other cultures fun and this spurs her on to use her experience to its best effect. She is currently Chair of the Technical Advisory Committee of the Indigenous Language Institute, a position that gives her invaluable appreciation of the direct impact initiatives to preserve endangered languages can have.

The Indigenous Language Institute’s mission is to provide vital language related services to native communities so that their individual identities, traditional wisdom and values are passed on to future generations in their original languages. Its guiding philosophy is to “help create speakers” through researching, teaching and sharing information and tools to help communities create their own Native language materials to develop textbooks, teaching aids, films, digital stories, as well as flyers, brochures, posters, toys, and signage.

Noske shared with me that going forward she would like to explore new areas where technology can be used to effectively strengthen existing language programs and thus support Native American nations in their goal to revitalize and strengthen native language use in their communities. There are new and interesting applications of speech technology that can possibly be employed in communities that transmit their languages orally. In Noske’s own words: “What I am ultimately hoping to achieve is to bring a “coolness” factor to Native American language
learning. Can the acquisition of these languages be made fun and engaging through the use of technology? Once native language is fully integrated into the users’ tech ecosystem, they operate in a complete immersive environment that supports their language learning without them even being aware of that happening.”

Work with endangered languages really does seem to ignite passions in a very diverse group of people. It’s illuminating to observe an activist approach being used in conjunction with scientific investigation. The normally dispassionate approach of scientists, schooled in the use of facts and methods, counterbalances such qualities as the feel-good factor, cultural pride, history and so on. It’s also very gratifying to discover how important institutional and corporate support are as well as individual support in this endeavor. There is an unmistakable sense of will in communities of remaining speakers to survive and revive and revitalize languages. I wonder if we are even encroaching on the territory of human rights here? Endangered languages certainly bring out the best in those who become involved in the cause. With scientific endeavor, cultural imperatives and technical savvy all being harnessed, this surely stresses the benefit of communicating globally.

On the complete opposite spectrum of extinct languages are those few which may not be spoken today but are extensively studied and researched by scholars and academics, like Latin, Ancient Greek, Sanskrit, Old and Middle English. These languages survived and are still thriving because all the writings are representative of an extremely rich heritage still relevant today. We still laugh at Aristophanes’ comedies, even though they are translated. We are still fascinated by Arthur’s knights and tales of dragons. Beowulf’s adventures and its terrorizing monster still frightens us. We still search for the hidden truths and timeless wisdom in the Bhagavat-Gita. Unlike these well-documented treasures of our culture, all the smaller communities need urgent help in documenting and preserving their epic tales, wisdom sayings and cultural heritage.

All things must pass, but the instinct for survival reminds us that putting up a fight for the survival of our languages is what makes us human, all too human.