I think it’s fair to say that in the language industry we regard translation as the foundation stone of our business. With translation, we facilitate communication between sources and targets with a growing skillset of ancillary activities that are making extraordinary achievements in unifying our world. Imagine my complete astonishment when I recently learned about a project that is recording a language without any plans for translation into other languages. Furthermore, this project is working with a language that we would label endangered. And to top it all, this language uses no writing system: it is transmitted orally, depending on new blood to perpetuate its long history. My astonishment morphed into wonderment when I further discovered, after browsing the Aikuma Project website which is ultimately behind it, that speakers of orally-transmitted tongues eschew the idea of endangerment by adopting the term ‘treasure language.’ Treasure is, of course, precious and this term turned a key that opened a door to a fantastic new world based on the simple act of storytelling. The Bininj Kunwok, the Australian Aboriginal people who feature in what follows are still in the process of addressing their place along with other speakers of such languages as they work to embrace the notion of theirs being a ‘treasure language’ in preference to negative or patronizing or valorizing terms such as ‘endangered,’ ‘ethnic,’ ‘heritage language’ and so on.

I knew of Professor Steven Bird as a prominent contributor to computational linguistics and had connected with him by email and on LinkedIn. I also knew of his accomplishments from my husband’s enthusiastic praise for a book co-authored by Bird, “Natural Language Processing With Python.” In the book’s brief bio, Bird was listed as a professor at Melbourne University in his native Australia and at Berkeley in the Bay Area, California. I found a link to his website
while I was carrying out research on current work with endangered languages and on visiting it
found that it resonated strongly because of his unique take on the oral tradition. When I reached
out to discuss his work further, I was truly flabbergasted to learn that he had resigned from his
tenured professorship, relocated to Australia’s forbidding (to us) Northern Territory and was
conducting field work with the local aboriginal population. In fact, Bird is a volunteer in the local,
Aboriginal-run elementary school in order to establish legal residency in a protected region and
he has also recently accepted a professorship at Charles Darwin University. Talk about my
curiosity being piqued!

Treasure Languages

"Treasure Language" is a term coined by the Rama people of Nicaragua, but global in meaning. A visit to www.treasurelanguage.org, an Aikuma-supported project, set the context for the work Steven Bird is involved with. Their question “Have you spoken your treasure language today?” was a challenge that I had not anticipated. At various gatherings, stories are told in the original language and the audiences, whether fellow speakers or not, are engaged in a wonderfully fulfilling community experience of sharing. As a native Greek, I had some familiarity with the oral tradition and not just from its obvious importance to Homer and the earliest ancient Greek literature; one of my grandmothers still spoke Vlach, a language with a complex history, but little committed to written form. In fact, the bardic tradition across the whole region of the Balkans into Eastern Europe and Armenia has been the subject of fascinating academic study by the likes of Professor Milman Parry and his acolyte Albert B. Lord. I was also reminded of trips to the ancient theater at Epidaurus and their superb productions of ancient Greek dramas in the original, at which many in the audience were unable to follow the ancient language, but who managed to laugh and cry at the right places and to applaud at the catharsis. Steven Bird likens Treasure Language gatherings to audiences at the opera. When we witness such oral
transmissions, we respond to the cues of the language and the delivery of the speaker or singer and our emotions are engaged in collectively feeling the experience. In this wired world of the 21st century, we are still connected to a past that stretches back into antiquity and we must work on its survival. We know that oral cultures, such as found amongst the ancient Celts, lost vast bodies of law, literature, history and lore when its speakers were killed off. That’s how tenuous the spoken word is. It can vanish in the span of a single generation, but I realized that our oral traditions don’t just survive, they persist.

The Role of Technology for the Aboriginal Languages

Bird studied Computer Science at the University of Melbourne before completing a PhD in Computational Linguistics at the University of Edinburgh. His academic career spans universities located in the US, Europe and Australia and he has conducted fieldwork on endangered languages in West Africa, Amazonia, Central Asia, Melanesia, and Australia. At present, he is based in West Arnhem in Australia’s "Top End", working on the Bininj Kunwok language.

The subject of Aboriginal languages in Australia is complex. From an 18th century, precolonial maximum of around 250, the number of languages in present use numbers about 150 most of which are considered endangered, although to inject a positive note, some 12-15 Aboriginal languages are being taught to children as their first language. Languages in danger of extinction are not, of course, confined to Australia and there are many initiatives underway to preserve them and deservedly they have attracted plentiful resources, although not enough. But we tend to have a preoccupation with written language and as a result have lost the art of memory and listening. What is unique about this project is working with an unwritten language, avoiding the process of committing it to writing and being forced to stay in an oral space. At first Bird felt uncomfortable to be learning in this way, having to rely on speech for revision and learning,
trying to avoid the accustomed loop of learning through writing. He found he had to retrain his brain, a tough undertaking for anyone who has undergone the full program of academic training followed by a career based on research that is written up and published in line with a well-developed set of rules and standards. Even the oral presentations given in lecture halls and at conferences, even TED Talks, are supported by PowerPoint presentations, notes and so on. I'm sure we can all identify with his experience of an oral culture shock.

It seems that Bird also had to relearn, or at least re-evaluate, the technologies we surround ourselves with and what we can use them for. Bird elaborates: “People are trying to use technology in this location. Facebook is popular with younger people. They're feeling forced to use English in such contexts and so I'm hoping to show them how to write their language. Imagine that such technological presence helped with motivation to become literate in your mother tongue. Though the way facebook corrects my painstakingly entered Bininj Kunwok text is infuriating. It sends the subtle, persistent message that this language doesn't belong here.”

Perhaps our current approach to developing and deploying technology has resulted in us taking our eye off what it can enable us to do. We seem to have emphasized what tech can do to make life easy. Certainly there is no harm in that, but the human element may have been depreciated. Does that sound similar to the way many linguists feel these days? Language is common to all humanity, what projects like Aikuma are doing is fulfilling the need to celebrate our world’s heritage using the cloud, social media and the world wide web. The assistance Bird and other field workers like him in many communities are giving to people seeking a healthy, continued cultural existence is to leverage the right data for us to do with audio what image recognition and machine learning are doing with pictures. And we can add translation to an already ambitious set of goals.

The Importance of Fieldwork
While talking with Bird, I was reminded of Bruce Chatwin’s book ‘The Songlines,’ part travelogue, part romantic fiction, which recounts his experiences in the Australian Bush following the labyrinthine, sacred pathways that countless generations of Aborigines have trekked. The word ‘songlines’ still intrigues me. We’ve all heard stories about kids who learned English from listening to the Beatles and so on. There is indeed something about songs that facilitate language learning. Perhaps it’s rhythm or repetition or something simply about being human. I can’t say it’s a foolproof way of learning grammar, but it’s a start. And when songs and singing are an integral part of everyday communication, why not join in! For the Aborigines, however, singing means considerably more than belting out a few numbers, it connects them profoundly with the land. The experience of performance trumps hitting the target of meaning. If as Chatwin put it, the song and land are one, how do you record that and localize it?

After his efforts at creating a software application that would facilitate language study with oral languages failed to suggest a good workable solution, he concluded that he would have to undertake first-hand work in the field. Bird describes his current work as “conducting social and technological experiments in the future evolution of the world’s languages. Together with my students and colleagues, I am developing scalable methods for preserving disappearing words and world views for future generations of speakers and scholars. I am collaborating with speech communities in diasporas and ancestral homelands to design new approaches to language maintenance and revitalization.” He admits that the solitude that comes from being an outsider to a tight-knit community steeped in ancient traditions of belief and lore in a desperately harsh climate is a challenge. This is doubly so since the tech-enhanced life we all embrace simply does not integrate well in such conditions. The compensation, however, is the enlivening experience that comes from immersion in such a culture and the rewards of attaining proficiency in a completely foreign language is something we can all identify with.
Untranslatable

We assume that language is a tool to get ideas across and translation deals with the temporary frustration of not understanding a stream of articulated sound. We think of this barrier as a problem and we spend lots of time and money to overcome it. Bird’s experience challenges this assumption by introducing the concept of the untranslatable, as beautifully encapsulated at http://www.untranslatable.org/. Translation of a word is never just another word, there are layers of context spanning environment, intention and other frames of reference that must be accommodated. For example the word ‘dig’ is not just a simple verb; it is also digging for food, working upon the sacred land that offers its riches for human sustenance, and an act of tribal heritage. Until we place ourselves in situ we can only glimpse the depth of the spoken word in these circumstances. In turn, this implies why we need to help people to grow up speaking these languages. It’s important for our collective future to keep as many languages as possible by preserving the usage of words with their expression.

As for those indigenous communities who live using the Bininj Kunwok language, they continue their way of life. Land management, environmental and wildlife issues, women’s rights, arts, crafts and culture and more live on under the protection and care of a people committed to continuing their way of life. They may be one of the lesser known groups in our vast community and the pattern of their daily lives may seem incompatible with a wired world, but as referenced above and through the efforts of researchers like Bird, they can take advantage of connecting with us all - but under their terms! It only seems fitting to invite you to share in what I have found to be an inspiring experience by visiting the Bininj Kunwok website at http://bininjgunwok.org.au/. It only seems fitting to give the last word to them:

“We don’t want our Kunwinjku language to ever disappear. We want our children to grow up and then in turn teach it to the new generations so that our language will continue on forever.”
Or as the Bininj Kunwok people would actually say: