The world’s first known museum was multilingual, founded by Babylonian princess Ennigaldi-Nanna in approximately 530 BC, and devoted to Mesopotamian antiquities. It was uncovered in 1925 by archaeologist Leonard Woolley, who excavated the world’s earliest known museum label there. He found clay cylinders in the chamber, each with text written in three different languages, including the language of ancient Sumerian and the more modern (for the period) late Semitic language.

The eventual result of these records and other artifacts was the preservation of a vibrant culture. They serve to show us just how important languages have always been to our vastly diverse global community. Attending museums is a vital part of being a tourist in the world’s great cities. Imagine a trip to New York, Paris or Cairo without a museum visit or two — it’s unthinkable.

I recall many trips to museums in London, and especially my first visit to the British Museum — crowding around the Rosetta Stone which, with my education in Classical Greek, I could actually read. Everyone must have noticed multilingualism like this in major museums at some point or another. Language is always a vital part of the historical past. But what about museums devoted to language itself?

The possibility of a museum dedicated to language had never occurred to me until recently, when I happened upon the work of Ottar Grepstad at the Ivar Aasen Centre of Norwegian Language and Literature. My curiosity about a previously unexplored aspect of the language community was piqued.

Grepstad has his own Wikipedia page, and from it I learned that he is a celebrated writer who was at one time the director of the Nyorsk Kultursentrum. I learned that Nyorsk is in fact one of the two written standards of the Norwegian language — the other being Bokmal. Filing this away for future exploration, I discovered that Wikipedia has, among many linguistics articles, a page on museums of language, proving yet again that our community represents one of the richest heritages on earth. The multiplicity of the historical past.
of languages — as many as 7,000 globally — suggests this by definition, but how rarely do we have the time to stop, enjoy and learn about them? Cue a visit to the nearest language museum or, if that’s not an option, surfing Jimmy Wales’s encyclopedic treasure trove.

Grepstad is now general director of the Centre for Norwegian Language and Literature, but he clearly possesses a global sensibility of the critical importance of multilingualism. The list of museums he has compiled is comprehensive. There seem to be 90 or so such institutions around the world, added to which are many more in the world of the internet. It is impossible to do justice to how comprehensive and diverse this work is in as short a piece as this one. However, I would like to hone in on the United States’ contribution to memorializing the languages of the world by looking closer at the National Museum of Language (NML) in College Park, Maryland.

The constant need of the intelligenc community for trained translators and interpreters is no secret, and it seems the NML owes its origin to Puzzle Palace linguists who staged an exhibition called “Language, Its Infinite Variety” back in the early 1970s. In the almost 50 years since, the NML has evolved to bridge academic, government, business and other communities, and provide a public forum for the celebration of “the magic and beauty of language.” But the NML offers a lot more than a bunch of interactive exhibits to keep the kids occupied on a rainy afternoon. They host events involving advocacy of all manner of social and linguistic issues. They host language of the month exhibits, recently featuring Cantonese, Navajo and Piscataway. And they publish a blog with a truly diverse range of topics, from popular culture to academic research, governmental issues and so on.

Of all the different angles that we can use to examine language, the one that currently stands out for me involves indigenous languages, especially the preservation of dying languages and writing systems. The arguments for preserving underserved languages are well known to the localization community, and, thanks to some truly heroic efforts of advocacy, have been brought to the notice of a wider public audience. These efforts are saving numerous cultures from certain extinction.

But language museum settings, properly designed, can provide intimate contact with languages and those who speak and write them. The real bonus is that it may inspire actual language users to contribute back to their communities. In this way, kids at school and at home can gain a deeper understanding of their cultural roots. For example, a couple of professors in Kenya, in the context of 2019 being the International Year of Indigenous Languages, convinced me how much passion there is among locals to emphasize African languages as vital to their communities’ cultural health.

I recall translating content for indigenous Indian communities in a project that recognized that many people, women in particular, were unaware of various health issues because they could not understand English or the approved Indian dialects. Museums, as places where local languages are celebrated, feed directly back to the communities that house them. There, history is not dead and buried in glass cases, but alive and kicking.

Unfortunately there is a rather unsavory aspect to the interest that colonialist language cultures take in indigenous languages, and language museums are the perfect antidote to this. I’m referring specifically to the data sharks who circle relatively unknown languages and their users, expecting to feast off them. They have no interest in language and languages as such, but are out to exploit them on the pretext of globalist expansionism. Old colonial habits die hard, it seems.

But insight provided by Abram de Swaan, a pioneering sociologist of language, tempers fears of this destruction. Researchers have often been astounded at the survival rate of languages subjected to hegemonic pressures. Why do they survive and even thrive under adverse conditions? While it is true that imported, colonialist languages can transform business markets and result in educational bias in curricula, the population of native users often far exceeds that of incomers. Everyday usage persists. Linguists know this and champion their cause beyond the simple value equation for language use that the “developed” world imposes. As de Swaan puts it in his book Words of the World, “Linguists are to language what ecologists are to nature.”

As UNESCO’s International Year of Indigenous Languages progresses towards its culmination in Paris this December, we all have an opportunity to educate the world about our rich heritage of languages and their speakers. This is of course a business opportunity, but for once that can take a backseat to the real stars of the show — the several billion people who, as de Swaan says, “...are illiterate and know only their local languages” and who “would dearly love to understand the pleas made so eloquently on their behalf.” With this in mind, if you are so disposed, try searching out your local museum of language and see what they have to offer. While the global community is one vast language museum, it’s important to witness our collective history in a condensed form like a formal exhibit. [M]