Disappearing Languages

Professor K. David Harrison shared his experiences and lessons learned from traveling the globe to record and preserve languages facing extinction.

PROVO, Utah (Oct. 17, 2014)—On a campus where 55 languages are regularly taught and over 110 are spoken, there is a strong appreciation for language diversity and its cultural importance. But, of the more than 7,000 languages spoken worldwide, half are considered endangered and likely to go extinct within this century. Professor K. David Harrison of Swathmore College came to Brigham Young University to give his presentation, “Disappearing Languages,” and explain the reasons behind language extinction, why language preservation matters, and what steps are being taken.

“If you talk to a biologist, you will find that something like 80 percent of the plant and animal species that are thought to exist in the world have not yet been named or described within a Western scientific framework.” Harrison said. “They are essentially unknown to science.” Similarly,
Harrison explained, we have adequate descriptions for maybe 10 or 12 percent of the world’s languages.

This shortage of knowledge is not for a lack of trying, especially on Harrison’s part. As a linguist, author and activist for the documentation and preservation of endangered languages, Harrison contributed to over 100 online talking dictionaries. He’s done extensive work with the National Geographic Society, especially on their Enduring Voices project, and co-starred in the Emmy-nominated 2008 documentary The Linguists, produced by Ironbound Films. His work has taken him around the world to locations he referred to as “language hotspots.”

Harrison described language hotspots as possessing specific traits: (1) they have high language diversity, (2) high levels of language endangerment, and (3) low documentation of languages. Though Harrison identified 24 hotspots worldwide, his presentation focused on four in particular and the lessons he learned by working with the locals and languages of each.

He began with Tuva, located in south-central Siberia, and the Tuvan language spoken by nomads. During his time with the Tuva people, Harrison worked among them, performing menial tasks before being promoted to goat herder. As he worked, the nomads taught him their language, and he came to see strong ties between Tuvan and the nomadic lifestyle.

“They have many different words for the landscape,” he said, “features that I had never thought about. For example, they had a word ‘iy,’ which meant the ‘short side of the hill.’ Hills are always asymmetrical—there’s one side that’s shorter than the other. It’s steeper, therefore you want to avoid it when riding a horse.”

Summing up the lessons he learned studying Tuvan, Harrison said, “Language is more than we think. It’s not contained in the head, per se. It spills out of the head into landscapes, rivers, plants, metaphors, time and space.”

And as to why that language is on the decline, he said, “The human knowledge base is vast, with things that I didn’t even know were out there, like goat domestication technology, and yet it’s eroding rapidly.” As the Tuvan way of life becomes threatened, so too is their language.

Next, Harrison moved to another region of Siberia to discuss the Ös language, spoken by approximately seven people. Harrison worked with Anna and Aleskei Baydashev, the last living couple that speak Ös on a daily basis. In an interview, the two revealed that even they had lost much of their language; when asked to name the months of the Ös lunar calendar, the couple could only name five of the 13. Despite working with locals to create a story book in Ös, Harrison saw little hope for the language.

“Lessons I learned from Ös is that language extinction is a real thing happening to real people,” Harrison said. “And language revitalization can be a strategic voice made even at a very late stage..."
in the lifecycle of a language. And something like literacy, which never before existed for Ös, can emerge in the very terminal stage of the language’s existence.”

The lecture left Siberia and moved to Papua New Guinea and the language Panau (also known as Matukar). Panau has 600 speakers spread over two villages, and upon starting his project, Harrison and his team received a flood of support.

“They told us that they wanted to see their language on the internet,” Harrison said. “This was fascinating because, as far as we could tell, no one in this community had ever seen or used the Internet at that time in 2009. But they had heard about the Internet, and they had a sense that this was a very powerful medium that was global, and they wanted their language to have a place there.” The villagers finally saw the fruit on their labors in 2012, when the Internet came to their villages for the first time.

Summing the lessons he learned by working with Panau, Harrison said, “There are many small languages that are eager to cross the digital divide. They view technology not as a threat but as an opportunity. And by digging into a language, we can find hidden facts about human history.”

Next, Siletz recounted his experiences in Oregon, working with Bud Lane, the last fluent speaker of Siletz, an American-Indian language. With Lane’s help, Harrison and his team recorded 14,000 words in Siletz and created an online talking dictionary. At the request of community leaders, the dictionary was initially password protected and only available to tribe members. Five years later, they requested that the dictionary be made available to the public. This led to a surge in interest from other Native American tribes, who have since sent Harrison requests for help documenting their languages.

For Harrison, the experience proved that even with one speaker, a language can still be revitalized. It also reemphasized the reality of linguistic ownership and the right of speakers to share their language at their own discretion.

Last, Harrison shared his experiences in northeast India, where he and his team encountered Koro, a hidden language formerly not recognized by Western linguistics. The language is only found in eight villages, five of which are protected by extreme isolation. It was only by happy accident that Harrison and his team came across Koro, as they were in the area studying Aka at the time. This served as vivid example of how many hidden languages there still are, unknown to the larger
Regardless, the village communities are still undergoing language shift, as the rising generation are learning and using languages other than Koro as they grow and receive educations.

That last point was driven home by Anthony Degio, a young Indian Koro-Aka speaker who helped Harrison’s team documenting efforts. Harrison closed his presentation with a quote from the young man, who said, "Loss of culture is loss of identity, so we must continue our Koro language”.

For more information on upcoming lectures and events, visit the Humanities Center website.

—Samuel Wright (B.A. English ’15)