LEARNING TO REMEMBER  The Haida language has fewer than 65 speakers, who live in the Queen Charlotte Islands off British Columbia. In a classroom in Skidegate village there, an elder scribbled a Haida lesson on the board.

By MARY JO MURPHY
Published: September 23, 2007

IF you want to tell someone where to “go” in the dying language of the Monchak, you’d better have an intimate knowledge of the river currents in Mongolia, because that’s how the verb “go” is expressed in Monchak: upstream or downstream a bit or a bunch, never mind that there’s no stream in sight, or maybe there are a lot of streams going every which way. In Tofa, a dying Siberian language, that reptile you hope not to step on as you “go” is called a ground fish, not the slithering terror we know as a snake.

“Different languages force their speakers to pay attention to different things,” says K. David Harrison, a linguist at Swarthmore and author of “When Languages Die: The Extinction of the World’s Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge,” published this year by Oxford University Press.
Knowledge,” published this year by Oxford University Press.

Dr. Harrison and his colleagues on National Geographic’s Enduring Voices project identified five regions last week with the largest concentration of languages facing extinction. In addition to eastern Siberia, they are northern Australia, central South America, the upper Pacific coastal zone of North America, and Oklahoma and the Southwest United States.

“A dictionary is a monument to human genius,” says Dr. Harrison, and it is the erosion of that monument that is his chief lament when, about every two weeks, one of the world’s 7,000 or so languages falls out of use. It’s not that you can’t express any idea in any language, he says, but rather that the “information packaging” differs with each language. Certainly thinking of a snake as a fish out of water is unique packaging.

Dr. Harrison offers the following sampling from a vanishing world dictionary. MARY JO MURPHY

From Monchak, which has fewer than 1,000 speakers:

choktaar to go upstream or in a direction opposite the current in the nearest river

badaar to go downstream or in a direction that matches the direction of the current in the nearest river

kezer to cut, or to go in a direction that would be cross-stream, based on the nearest river

From Rotokas, a language of Papua New Guinea with about 4,300 speakers. Rotokas doubles parts of words to derive new meanings:

tapa to hit
tapatapa to hit repeatedly
kopikopi spotted
kavau to bear a child
kavakavau to bear many children

From Eleme, a language of Nigeria with 58,000 speakers. Eleme doubles part of a verb to negate it:

moro he saw you
momoro he did not see you
rekaju we are coming
rekakaju we are not coming

From Nivkh, a language of Siberia with fewer than 300 speakers. Nivkh uses different words for numbers depending on what is being counted:

men two, if counting people
**merakh** two, if counting thin, flat objects like leaves

**mirsh** two, if counting paired things like skis or mittens

**mer** two, if counting batches of dried fish

**mim** two, if counting boats

**mor** two, if counting animals

From the Marovo language of the Solomon Islands, with about 8,000 speakers. The Marovo people are especially keen observers of fish behavior:

**ukuka** the behavior of groups of fish when individuals drift, circle and float as if drunk

**udumu** a large school of fish so dense as to seem like a single object

**sakoto** quiet, almost motionless resting of schools of certain fish, which fishermen say look like a gathering of mourners

From the Pomo language of California, with fewer than 10 speakers. The Pomo excelled at basket weaving, hunting and fur trading, and count with sticks. Dr. Harrison quoted an anthropologist early in the 20th century who admired the Pomo ability to calculate large sums: “Their arithmetical faculties must have been highly developed.” Below 20, the Pomo had unique names for numbers:

**k’áli** one

For 20 and above, the Pomo combine number names with “stick” or “big stick.” For 61, the Pomo would say xómk’a-xày k’áli, combining xómk’a, meaning three, with xày, meaning stick, and k’áli. Some Pomo numbers:

**20** one stick

**61** three sticks and one

**100** five sticks

**400** one big stick

**500** one big stick and five sticks

**4,000** 10 big sticks

From Tofa, in Siberia, with fewer than 30 speakers. Tofa uses a 13-month lunar calendar with months named for hunter-gatherer activities:

**teshkileer ay** Roughly February, or hunting animals on skis month

**ytalaar ay** March, hunting with dogs month

**eki tozaar ay** April, good birch-bark-collecting month

**aynaar ay** August, digging edible lily bulbs month

**chary eter ay** October, rounding up castrated male reindeer month

As nomadic reindeer herders, the Tofa have quite a few words relating to reindeer:

**myndyzhak** a 2-year-old female reindeer that is ready for first mating

**chary** a 5-year-old male castrated reindeer that can be ridden