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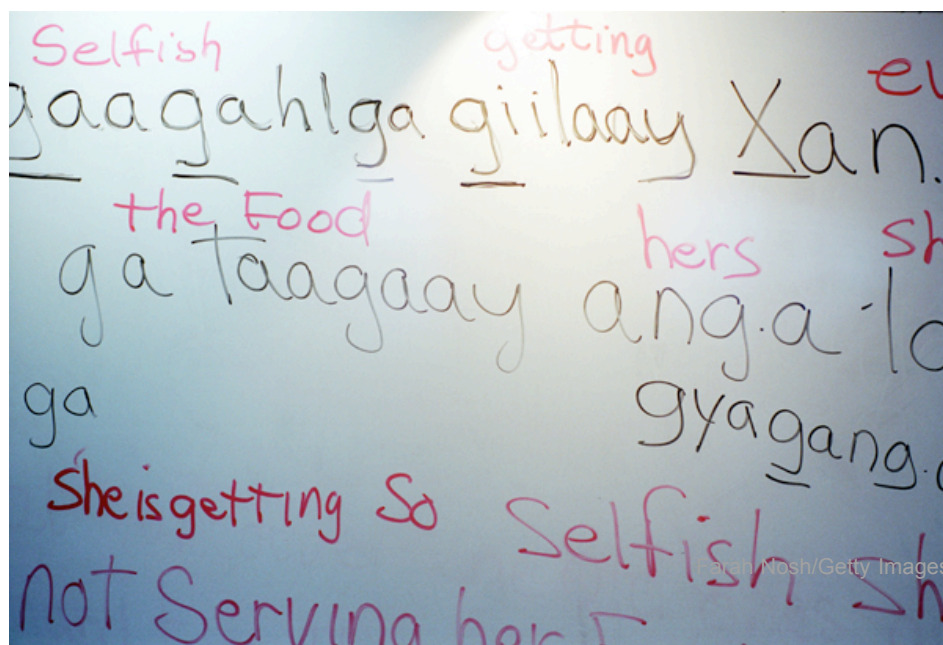
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Vigil for the Vanishing Tongue



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**

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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.

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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**

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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

kopi a dot

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

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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