

Vanishing Languages Identified

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Oklahoma Is Among Places Where Tongues Are Disappearing

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Wednesday, September 19, 2007; A12

Oklahoma has earned the dubious distinction of being one of the five worst "language-loss hotspots" in the world -- places where native languages are going extinct the fastest -- according to an analysis released yesterday.

The Sooner State's inclusion in the global top five is a reminder, researchers said, that the United States has a long history of linguistic diversity and that the problem of language extinctions is not limited to distant lands.

Of the approximately 7,000 languages spoken, about half are expected to disappear in this century, said K. David Harrison, a Swarthmore College linguist and co-director of the Enduring Voices project. That collaboration between the [National Geographic Society](#) and the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages of [Salem](#), Ore., assembled the latest statistics on global language loss.

While previous analyses have focused on individual languages that have just one or a few surviving speakers, [Harrison](#) and his colleagues took a geographic approach, identifying where in the world languages are disappearing fastest. [Oklahoma](#) and nearby areas of the American Southwest, it turns out, have an extremely rich linguistic fabric because of the many Native American tribes that were corralled there in the 1800s.

Today those languages are disappearing by the month, and with them a treasure trove of ecological insights, culinary and medicinal secrets and complex cultural histories, including mythologies that can teach a lot about universal human fears and aspirations, Harrison said.

"It may seem frivolous, but mythological traditions are attempts to make sense of the universe, and the different ways that the human mind has tried to grapple with the unknown and the unknowable are of scientific interest," he said.

Following in the footsteps of early colonialists, but carrying high-quality digital video and audio equipment instead of guns and trinkets, the Enduring Voices project has launched a number of expeditions to document dying languages, about half of which have no written form. Where there is interest in preserving those tongues, it has helped create teaching materials for use in local classrooms.

The venture's analysis, based in part on scholarly research and presented in a telephone news conference yesterday, took three factors into account in identifying the "hotspots": The diversity of languages spoken, the number of living speakers and how old they are, and the extent to which the languages have been documented.

Among those on the brink of extinction in Oklahoma is Yuchi, a language native to the same-named tribe from [Tennessee](#) and believed to be unrelated to any other in the world. It is spoken by just a handful of elders because youngsters in government boarding schools were punished if they veered from English. Yuchi tales tell of Earth's creation from water with the help of a crawfish and the

emergence of the tribe's forebears from a drop of menstrual blood in the sky.

The other four hotspots are:

¿ Northern [Australia](#), where project members recorded the last known speaker of Amurdag -- a man who remembers about 100 words that he last heard spoken by his now-deceased father.

¿ Central [South America](#), where the Kallawaya of [Bolivia](#) have for at least 400 years maintained a secret language about medicinal plants.

¿ The Northwest Pacific Plateau, where there is but a single woman who can still speak Siletz Dee-ni, the last of 27 languages once spoken on [Oregon](#)'s Siletz reservation.

¿ [Eastern Siberia](#), where a high proportion of the 23 known tongues are unrelated to any other languages in the world.

Language can reveal a lot about how a culture organizes information. In the Paraguayan Lengua language, for example, the word "11" means literally "arrived at the foot, one," meaning "counted 10 fingers plus one toe." The word for "20" means "finished the feet."

In Siberia's Nivkh language, each number can be said 26 ways, depending on what is being counted.

About 80 percent of the world's people speak 83 languages, while about 3,500 languages are spoken by just 0.2 percent of the world's population. Attempts to commune with those minorities can turn unintentionally comedic, said Gregory Anderson, co-director of the Enduring Voices project.

Talking to a woman who is one of the 20 remaining Bardi speakers in Australia, Anderson once mispronounced an "r," which resulted in him asking, "What kangaroo are you from?" instead of "What country are you from?"

No interpreter was needed to understand the Bardi laughter that followed.

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