Researchers are attempting to document thousands of endangered languages—before we lose them for ever.

Lucy Tobin

You'll never again hear anyone speaking Laghu, and anyone wanting to communicate in Old Kentoish Sign Language is out of luck; it, too, has gone the way of the dovec. But there's still a chance to talk down a conversation in Gamilarayu, or Southern Pomo—if you're prepared to trek to visit one of the few native Americans still speaking it in California. Of the 6,500 living languages currently being used around the world, around half are expected to be extinct by the end of this century.

It was concern about the cultural and historical losses that result from a language disappearing that inspired the World Oral Literature Project, an online collection of some of the 3,500-plus "endangered languages" struggling for survival in the world.

Wealth of knowledge

The heart of the project, run by Cambridge University, is a large database listing thousands of languages along with details such as where they are spoken and by whom, plus audio clips. On the site, visitors can discover that Laghu was a language spoken in the Solomon Islands until it disappeared in 1984, Old Kentoish Sign Language was a precursor to the modern day version, and Gamilarayu is still used by the Kamilaroi tribe of New South Wales.

The project is the brainchild of Mark Turin, a research associate at Cambridge University's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. He grew up in London speaking English and had claimed to study linguistics at university, but on a gap year in Nepal he realised he was interested in "what language unlocked, satisfied our curiosity, and switched to anthropology. He is best known for the Bay Gypsies of his field, having travelled all over the world for his cause.

"We know very little about most of the 6,500 languages, and an incredible amount about the histories and changes of a handful of western European languages," Turin explains. And he has devoted his academic career to trying to compile and write down languages. "Most endangered languages are primarily oral, and are vehicles for the transmission of a great deal of culture," he says. "That's at risk of being lost when speakers abandon their languages in favour of regional, national or international tongues."

So the World Oral Literature Project aims to document vanishing languages — and everything about the culture and society they convey — before they disappear. Its database uses these major sources to collect the information about the disappearing languages, including Thebes's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger. About 150 of its listed languages are in an "extremely critical" condition, where the number of known living speakers has slipped to single figures, or even just one.

"As soon as a Dough scholar declares a language extinct, you get a phone call from someone who says 'my mother speaks it'," Turin adds. "I think the number of languages that might otherwise be lost is vast. The vast majority of tapes are lost in dusty boxes, but to put them on our database will digitise and hopefully future-grove them," he adds. "All manner of people have been getting in touch to give us their collections, including missionaries, retired scholars and community activists."

An early donor was Reverend John Whitehead, a former missionary and Cambodian linguist who lived with an indigenous community in Taiwan in the 1950s. "When he came back to England, he walked into Cambridge's Museum of Anthropology and said, 'I've got books, tapes and tape recordings, are you interested?' The museum took it all apart from the recordings because they didn't know what to do with them," Turin explains. "He went home and stored the collection around the house in carrier bags, where they stayed until he walked into my office with the bags under his arm and asked, 'Do you want them now?' The tapes are brilliant, with songs and interviews and linguistic information that might otherwise have disappeared."

The database is currently updated exclusively by academics (through user encouraged to send in contributions), but Turin hopes that it will ultimately become a Wikipedia-style web 2.0 project that "people want to contribute to", with user uploads, recordings and discussion to help keep languages alive. To that aim, Turin organise lectures and workshops for linguists, librarians, academics and members of the public to discuss the best strategies for collecting and protecting languages and their research.

Overlooked

But Turin is used to hearing sceptics dismiss the research. "I get a lot of people saying that they think this work is pointless as all minority languages that have no utility are better off dying off anyway — a kind of ‘social Darwinism’ they say," he says. "But usually ask them whether they feel the same about all the old churches and buildings that Heritage Lottery money is helping to restore — or the plight of species of the planet. Our work matters we’re helping not only endangered languages to survive but also the culture and history that they denote."

www.mediavillage.org/database.html

Video: See Mark Turin's work at www.guardian.co.uk/education

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