

# Liaison

Magazine

Issue 6 : March 2011

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Patricia Ashby

**teaching:**

Helping students  
get published

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Linguistics in the  
21st century

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# Collect, protect, connect: documenting the voices of vanishing worlds

Mark Turin tells us about the World Oral Literature Project, an urgent global initiative to document and make accessible endangered oral literatures before they disappear without record.

## Language death

The *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* released by UNESCO (2009) claims that more than 2,400 of over 6,500 languages spoken around the globe today are in danger of disappearing. Many of these speech forms will cease to be used as communicative vernaculars by the next generation of speakers. As most are oral and have no established written form, these languages risk vanishing without trace.

Linguists around the world are responding to this threat by documenting endangered languages, training a new generation of field linguists and partnering with members of speech communities who are preserving and revitalising their threatened tongues. Even theoretical linguists, such as Noam Chomsky, have become vocal backers of language documentation projects, realising that the wealth of linguistic forms on which their theories rely risk disappearing unrecorded. The urgency of the task has also captured the imagination of a public beyond the academy, with regular media coverage along the lines of “one language lost every week” or “last speaker of X dies”.

## And what about 'culture'?

But the death of a language is not just about words, syntax and grammar, nor does it affect only small, 'traditional' and largely oral cultures. Languages convey unique forms of cultural knowledge and speech forms encode oral traditions. When elders die and livelihoods are disrupted, these creative expressions become threatened. A well-intentioned and important national education programme in Mandarin Chinese or English, for example, may have the side-effect of undermining local traditions and weakening regional languages. And for many communities around the world, the transmission of oral literature and performative traditions from generation to generation lies at the heart of cultural practice. As languages die, established systems of learning and knowledge exchange can break down. And for all of the apparent benefits, globalisation and rapid socio-economic change also exert particularly complex pressures on smaller communities, often eroding expressive diversity and transforming local culture through assimilation to more dominant ways of life.

## The response

What is to be done about language endangerment and its grave cultural effects? Linguists have been galvanised by funding and a renewed sense of urgency, exploring innovative ways to collaborate with people who were previously only referred to as informants or consultants. The anthropological response has been more piecemeal, however, with a handful of regional projects that have not as yet linked up to provide an integrated response to the challenge of time-sensitive and responsible cultural documentation. Yet ethnographers are so often the ones to have the long-term relationships with places and people that add richness and texture to linguistic descriptions.

I set up the World Oral Literature Project to encourage collaborations between local communities, anthropologists and linguists. Established in 2009 at Cambridge, we provide supplemental grants for the field documentation of oral literature, publish and archive heritage collections online and in print, and organise lectures and workshops to bring together fieldworkers, archivists, librarians and indigenous scholars to discuss the best strategies for promoting research on endangered narrative traditions.

## What's 'oral' about 'literature'?

To some ears, the term 'oral literature' is a contradiction in terms. Is literature not by definition written? It is easy to forget that while all natural, human languages are spoken or signed, only some have established written forms. While our European classics are published and taught as literature in schools, oral narratives rarely have that chance since, until relatively recently, few indigenous peoples have had a means to document their cultural knowledge in writing. Songs, poems and legends can be an invaluable part of a community's heritage that may be jettisoned in the



Photo by Marion Wettstein

name of modernity and progress, and not translated when people switch to using a more dominant language.

#### Technology and sustainability

I hope that the World Oral Literature Project will grow into a centre for the documentation and appreciation of endangered oral traditions from around the world. We will only

## “Linguists have been galvanised by funding and a renewed sense of urgency”

succeed, however, if the project is of interest to indigenous communities themselves. While materials can be hosted and maintained in Cambridge, communities will need copies of the output so that future generations can access the cultural knowledge and language of their ancestors. Multi-hosting and web distribution are now so commonplace that many of my students find it hard to imagine an era when collections had only one tangible copy, locked away for posterity and protection in a Western archive. Combining the ease of digital reproduction with the open vision that lies behind organisations like Creative

Commons has led me to envisage our project as providing a platform and conduit for the wider dissemination of cultural content, with the copyright and intellectual property remaining firmly in the hands of the depositor, performer or community.

Generations of anthropologists have had the privilege of working with

indigenous communities and have recorded volumes of oral literature while in the field, but many of our colleagues have not known what to do with these recordings once they finish analysing them. We can now offer a way for the material that has been gathered to be digitised, catalogued, preserved and disseminated in ethically and culturally appropriate ways.

#### Collect, protect, connect

The impressive New Zealand Film Archive has a mission to collect, protect and connect New Zealanders with their moving image heritage. These three verbs also summarise our own aims. *Collection* is the gathering

and documentation of oral literature in the field, not in an extractive or acquisitive manner, but in a way that is responsible, collaborative and predicated on trust. *Protection* is its archiving and curation – doing the best we can to ensure that these unique cultural materials are maintained, migrated and refreshed as new technologies become available. The *connection* is made when collections are returned to source communities and when they reach a wider public.

At present, there is no single place that offers researchers and communities from around the world a pledge that both historical and contemporary collections of oral literature will be responsibly managed, archived and stewarded into the future. With sustained funding, this is what we hope to provide.

[www.oralliterature.org](http://www.oralliterature.org)

Dr Mark Turin is a Research Associate at the University of Cambridge and Director of the World Oral Literature Project.

