According to UNESCO, more than 2400 languages spoken today are endangered and will probably vanish by the end of the century. **Dr Mark Turin** explores just what that means for the speakers of Thangmi, a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in the Himalayas.

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The Language Collector

What does language death look – or rather – 'sound' like? In part, it's the sound of silence and the pain of imperfect communication, crystallised in the expression of my Dutch grandmother, trying so earnestly to explain to me, her English-speaking grandson, what it meant to be an onderduiker or 'person in hiding' during World War II in Amsterdam. It's also embodied in the look on the face of my wife's grandmother, a Yiddish journalist who spoke at least seven languages to some level of fluency, as she realised that she would have to write in English, her eighth language, in order to convey her knowledge to a wider audience.

How do you prevent a language from dying? Learning to speak it yourself is certainly a first step. I have been working in the Himalayas for the last 15 years, particularly in Nepal – a country of massive ethnic and linguistic diversity, home to over 100 languages from four different language families. Since 1996, I have lived for long periods with the Thangmi community who speak an endangered and until recently, almost entirely undescribed Tibeto-Burman language. For most of these years, I have worked in collaboration with my wife, Dr Sara Shneiderman, a research fellow in social anthropology at St Catharine's College, who has written about Thangmi religious traditions and cultural practices. Working with indigenous scholars, Sara and I have been documenting the unique Thangmi language and its associated cultural traditions.

Ever fewer ethnic Thangmi speak the Thangmi language. Many community members have taken to speaking Nepali, the national language taught in schools and spread through the media, and their competence in their ancestral language is rapidly declining. While growing fluency in any national language is of course to be encouraged, and is no small feat for an economically unstable country such as Nepal, this progress can be at the expense of unwritten speech forms. Within one family, it's quite common to find a monolingual Thangmi grandparent living in the same household as their middle-aged child who is bilingual in Thangmi and Nepali, alongside grandchildren enrolled in a government village school who speak only Nepali.

While this is not an unusual picture, as my own family history illustrates, such complete language shift in the space of two generations (grandparents and grandchildren sharing no common language) is nevertheless a massive rupture for a small ethnic group, and one which can have a profound impact on the transmission of cultural knowledge and history. Communities who may have been plurilingual a generation ago, speaking different languages in different social contexts (the home, the local bazaar and elsewhere in the region when trading), are increasingly schooled through the medium of a national language which firmly instils and reinforces monolinguistic identities. Even today, multilingualism is often tragically portrayed as an impediment to full citizenship and participation in a modern nation state.

I should confess that it took me the best part of three years to learn Thangmi to a level sophisticated enough to tell a joke, and another year to be able to tell a joke that was actually funny. This underscores the importance of culture in language: while I had become grammatically adult, culturally, I was still a child, with no real sense of what was locally relevant, resonant and meaningful.

Part of my struggle was that I was used to learning languages from books where someone else had taken the time to parse each word out and explain the rules of grammar. With Thangmi, I was faced with decoding a complex and unwritten language with no rulebook to refer to and with no obvious path in. Imagine hearing the phrase 'Qu'est-ce que c'est que ça?' for the first time, without knowing how the words fitted together because they had never before been written down, and you'll understand my problem.

Bilingual Thangmi-Nepali speakers were my first point of contact, and I spent my early months in the field using my existing Nepali language skills to ask increasingly complex questions on the lines of "In your language, how would you say 'that man over there is my mother's elder brother'?", to which I might receive the tired and slightly irritated reply, and then in Thangmi, "I told you already, he's not my mother's elder brother but my mother's elder sister's husband", often suffixed with a sotto voce "this light-haired kid learns really slowly".

My progress really was slow, every triumph eroded by another moment of confusion at the next, more complex, puzzle. The Thangmi verb 'to be', for example, has a range of different roots, each contingent on the perceived state of permanence of being and whether the speaker has seen the event with their own eyes and thus verified the occurrence. And motion verbs vary by angle of inclination, so that 'to come up a hill' is a completely different and unrelated verb stem from 'to come down the mountain'. The local mountainous topography is etched into the language and it is inconceivable that a native speaker would confuse the two.

The Thangmi lexicon is pretty compact, with just over 2000 'words', and not always ones that we would expect. For example, while there are no Thangmi terms for 'village',

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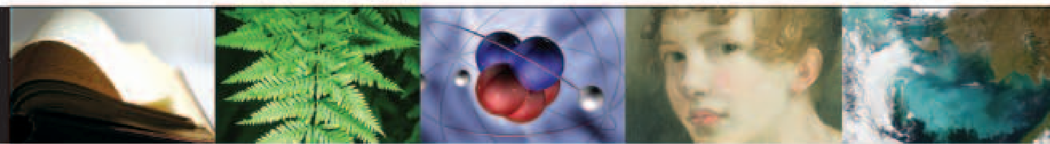

Imagine Cambridge in the 19th century ...

... **Professor Henslow** is reading extracts to the Philosophical Society from the *Beagle* letters of his student **Charles Darwin**. **Hort and Westcott** are re-editing the Greek New Testament from newly discovered ancient sources, and the intrepid **Smith sisters** are heading for Sinai to search for any manuscripts that the German scholar **Tischendorf** may have missed. **Bateson** has been reading the work of an Austrian monk on plant genetics that had been overlooked for 50 years, and **M.R. James** is reconstructing the holdings of medieval monasteries as he catalogues manuscripts in college libraries. **Sir Richard Jebb's** edition of Sophocles is setting new standards for the editing of classical texts, and **Lord Kelvin** and **Peter Guthrie Tait** are revolutionising the world of physics. Meanwhile the government of the day has appointed a commission to look into the finances and running of the ancient universities ...

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'table', 'left' or 'right', there are specific verbs to mean 'to be exhausted by sitting in the sun all day' and 'to be infested with lice', as well as precise nouns to describe the edible parts of certain leaves or particularly chewy meat that gets stuck in one's teeth. In other words, the lexical inventory of Thangmi reflects those things that are culturally salient and meaningful to its speakers.

The kinship system, which, after many complex diagrams, I thought I had finally mastered (eight different uncles and aunts depending on whether they are older or younger than parents, and differentiated between blood relatives and in-laws), actually makes a distinction for gender of speaker. I didn't realise this until I started working with a village woman who, as a 'feminine speaker', turned my whole understanding inside out.

Learning Thangmi felt like code-breaking at Bletchley Park, but all alone: a voyage of incredible excitement and intellectual stimulation, exploding my often narrow expectations of what a language could be. As these above examples show, languages are about so much more than words. Whole conceptual, social and ecological worlds open up when you learn to speak and come to understand languages vastly different from your own.

So what is to be done about language endangerment and its grave cultural effects, and by whom? I set up the World Oral Literature Project in 2009 to encourage collaborations between local communities and committed anthropologists and linguists, and to document and make accessible the voices of vanishing worlds before they disappear without record. Affiliated to the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, we provide supplemental grants for the field documentation of oral literature and publish archive collections online and in print. We also organise lectures and workshops to bring together ethnographers, linguists, archivists, librarians and indigenous scholars to discuss the best strategies for collecting, protecting and connecting research on these endangered narrative traditions.

To some ears, the term 'oral literature' seems a contradiction in terms. Is literature not by definition written? We are accustomed to the scholarly emphasis on languages with celebrated written traditions enshrined in Western universities, often to the exclusion of cultures whose traditions are still transmitted primarily by word of mouth. But we must not forget that while all natural human languages are spoken, only some have established written forms. While our European epics and classics are published and taught as literature, oral narratives rarely have that chance since, until relatively recently, few indigenous peoples have had a means to document their cultural knowledge in writing. Oral literature must be seen for what it is: complex, beautiful

> 'Thangmi has words for 'to be exhausted by sitting in the sun' and 'to be infested with lice' as well as precise nouns to describe 'particularly chewy meat that gets stuck in one's teeth'.'

and sophisticated, on a par with the writings of our great authors, but then often at risk or in decline. Such epics, songs, poems, legends and rituals are an invaluable part of a community's heritage and traditional knowledge that may be jettisoned in the name of modernity and progress, and not translated when a community makes the switch to a more dominant language.

Sadly, much of my scholarly work has remained largely inaccessible to my Thangmi friends, being written in a potent mixture of English and the jargon of modern anthropology and linguistics. However, Sara and I have both been involved in publications that are of more interest to the community. I co-authored a trilingual Thangmi-Nepali-English dictionary in the Devanagari (Nepali) script, providing the first written record of the language in a format that could be used in schools and non-formal education settings.

Our long-time co-researcher and friend, Bir Bahadur Thangmi, spent last summer in Cambridge working with us to transcribe, translate and annotate three major Thangmi ritual recitations as performed by shamans at weddings, funerals and annual festivals. The end product will be a book containing the recitations in the original Thangmi along with Nepali and English translations, accompanied by a DVD showing these events in practice, which we will publish in Nepal. This oral tradition has never before been textually documented, so this book will fill an important gap in the scholarship on the peoples of the Himalayas. In addition, many members of the Thangmi community view the production of such works as the kind of positive contribution that foreign scholars can make to support their own cultural and ethno-political agendas. In the past, Bir Bahadur might have been referred to as an 'informant', 'consultant' or 'assistant', but I find these terms problematic and insufficient. I prefer the term 'language teacher' and 'local researcher' to describe his invaluable and varied input into our understandings and our work, an appreciation which helps us to rebalance the relationship and reflect on the fact that we, as outside researchers, are working not 'on' his language and culture, but 'with' his community.

While only a pilot project at present, the World Oral Literature Project will, I hope, grow into a centre for the documentation and appreciation of endangered oral traditions from around the world, each as rich and unique as the Thangmi language which I have discussed here. We will only succeed, however, if the project is of use and interest to indigenous communities themselves. While Cambridge may be the location where materials are hosted and maintained, both physically and digitally, communities will require copies of the output so that future generations can access and understand the cultural knowledge and language of their ancestors.

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. The World Oral Literature Project can provide a way for the material that has been gathered to be preserved and to be disseminated in innovative ways, when that is ethically and culturally appropriate.

The 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 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 in print and online.

At present, there is no single place that offers researchers and communities from around the world a promise 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.

To find out more about the World Oral Literature Project, visit www.oralliterature.org.

You can catch Dr Turin's contribution to the Cambridge Ideas series at www.youtube.com/CambridgeUniversity from mid-April.