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Endangered Languages: Rescuing the World's Invisible Libraries

My grandmother speaks primarily in Shanghainese, a dialect that, to an ear trained in Mandarin, is all but unintelligible save a handful of similar sounds. She taught the language to my father, who then passed it to me. Though I spoke Shanghainese as a child, however, I lost it somewhere in the transition to adulthood. My grandmother fondly recalls the quirky little Shanghainese phrases that defined my childhood. "*Nai me*," she would say, mimicking me; "you'd always say *nai me*."

And I would remain silent, too afraid to admit that I have no idea what *nai me* means— that my speaking skills are so broken now that I am unable to respond even when I do understand the conversation.

Shanghainese, once the characteristic marker of being truly "from Shanghai," is fading. Parents no longer speak the language to their children; its existence has shrunken into increasingly confined circles. Many young people can hardly continue a conversation for longer than five minutes ("Linguists"), and the elderly, in an effort to accommodate, have begun to speak something of a pidgin Mandarin (Xu). The result is a seriously threatened language, lost even to those who proudly regard it as a form of identity.

Language death is not a phenomenon unique to Shanghai. Nor is it a phenomenon unique to China. Rather, it is a silent byproduct of globalization—as the world becomes increasingly interconnected via the Internet (on which most content is published in a few dominant languages)

and economically tied via multinational corporations, people have increasingly adopted lingua francas in the public sphere. The unintended consequence of favoring languages such as English or Mandarin, however, is that the process produces a hierarchy of speakers: in a world where Mandarin is the dominant business language, native speakers of Mandarin have a distinct advantage over native speakers of regional languages, who tend to speak with rather quaint accents. Thus, parents have chosen never to teach their children regional languages at all, favoring economic survival over preserving cultural traditions (Schiavenza).

But the price of such choices, though invisible, is hefty. The loss of minor languages results in a cultural disconnect—a corresponding loss in knowledge and even in frames of thought. And there is perhaps no greater shame than being asked by a relative to speak in Shanghainese and to respond, brokenly, *I cannot. I don't know how.* Such cultural divides will only widen in the coming decades. Even the most conservative estimates predict that half of the nearly 7,000 world languages will fall silent within the next century (Wilford). In Australia, "nearly all of the 231 spoken aboriginal tongues are endangered," and most of the 113 South American languages have faded with the rise of Spanish and Portuguese (Wilford). Language death, however, does not occur in a vacuum. Though it may seem that the last words of a dying language fall on society's deaf ears, the phenomenon occurs in the context of intricate power structures. Any effort to revitalize (that is, deliberately grow the speaker base) or even to study an endangered language treads on fragile boundaries: the government's role versus that of the native speaker; the researcher's biases and their effects on linguistic data; the broader choice to either record a language or to systematically revitalize it.

In a world of such dynamic questions, we cannot ignore the worrying trend of language death. Rather, we must recognize that we stand to lose entire systems of thought, and that the

death of cultures at the margins necessarily wounds society as a whole. However, though we should ultimately pursue revitalization over merely recording a dying language, each step is fundamentally political. Current practices of dealing with endangered languages—from centralized language planning in China to education programs in Mexico—conspicuously fail to account for the nuances of power structures. Both the birth and death of languages are in fact intimately tied to the power dynamics of governments, globalization, and traditional social norms. Indeed, language death is only a single representation of the role of authority in altering cultural practices, and any solution to the problem of dying linguistic diversity demands sensitivity to the power dynamics between external actors and native speakers.

LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND GLOBALIZATION

The first question one might ask about endangered languages is, "Why should we care?" Indeed, at first blush, the death of a language that had never been—even at its height—used by more than a few thousand individuals seems a rather futile concern. And while it's certainly important to ensure individuals' general right to speak any preferred language, "[I]t is not incumbent on anyone to listen to them, nor to provide resources for the preservation of either their language or their culture" (Malik). Language itself is merely one's chosen method of communication; given that speakers have elected to use dominant languages such as Mandarin and English, the value of revitalizing or even recording endangered languages is not immediately obvious. After all, why record the phonemes of a vocabulary that almost no one can understand?

One answer is that languages are far more complex than mere collections of vocabulary. This complexity is the very reason why many English words have simply been lifted unaltered from other languages—as *schadenfreude*, for example, has been—because the concepts simply

cannot be expressed so succinctly otherwise. However, *schadenfreude* is only one instance of language's general ability to package and repackage concepts. In other cases, languages split ideas into their component parts. In Kalam, a Papuan language, "to gather" (e.g. firewood or berries) is translated as "go hit come put," and "massage" is broken into nine subcomponents: *pk wyk d ap tan d ap yap g*, which means "strike rub hold come ascend hold come descend do" (Evans 57-8).

Both examples are evidence of a more general characteristic of language: its capacity to express unique frames of thought. Without Kalam as part of the world dialogue, one might not come to think of massage as the parts of striking, rubbing, and holding. Indeed, even more generally, it is the languages at the margins—languages for which there are only a handful of speakers left—that break the mold of assumptions that society often forms unknowingly. In his Theory of Universal Grammar, for instance, Noam Chomsky holds that nouns cannot be conjugated to express tense. But this is precisely what the language Kayardild does: As linguist Nicholas Evans explains, "Kayardild blithely disregards this supposed impossibility, and marks tense on nouns as well as verbs…Kayardild shows us how dangerous it is to talk about 'universals' of language on the basis of a narrow sample that ignores the true extent of the world's linguistic diversity" (xvi). Thus, far from merely expressing the same ideas through different media, endangered languages represent independent structures of thought that have significance far beyond the words' content.

These ideas have sometimes proven relevant in fields far beyond linguistics. The Aboriginal language of Kunwinjku, for instance, uses different verbs to describe the gait of various animals. That is, whereas English uses "hop" for both the kangaroo and the wallaby, Kunwinjku assigns distinct verbs for each animal: *kamawudme* means that the male antilopine

wallaby hops; *kadjalwahme* means "to hop" for the corresponding female. As it turns out, focusing on the nuances of the animals' gait enhanced computer vision technology. Computers are far more capable of identifying an animal by its motion than by its physical form—an insight unique to Kunwinjku's structures of thought (Evans 57).

Such structures originate from deep cultural roots. When languages first arose, individuals were incentivized to build unique languages within each hunter-gatherer group. Thus, "[i]n northern Australia the reigning ideology [was] that each clan should have its own distinct language variety…driving along a relentless diversification" (Evans 12-3). As a result, each unique language was not merely *related* to a group's culture; it was a unique marker of cultural identity. Indeed, the traditional custom in Oceania was to adapt one's language as one visited various groups, thus recognizing each group's independence and claim to the area. Epics—think Homer's *Odyssey*—would be relayed in multiple languages as the storyteller described the protagonist's travels (Evans 8). Language, therefore, is intimately tied both to one's right to belong and to systems of power; that is, language was, even at the beginning, a political tool with which to achieve unity.

With the rise of centralized states, however, governments sought the very unity that language once provided to small hunter-gatherer groups. Thus began the slow but sure process of homogenization: as a state exerted power over a region, it projected its influence over the languages spoken. And as regional languages died, cultures died alongside them—the custom of changing one's language as one traveled, for instance, relied upon an environment of many small but strong local languages.

Nowhere are the effects of centralized rule more evident than they are in China. Indeed, only 77 languages exist in China, whereas Laos, its much smaller neighbor, boasts several times

the number (Evans 17). Over the millennia, the migration of the Han Chinese led to relatively

quick homogenization of regional cultures (Bradley 53), and as a result, China became

linguistically unified, with far fewer local languages. China is an illustrative case of language

death as a deliberately political phenomenon. More broadly, however, homogenization occurs

with any form of power consolidation. As the world becomes increasingly tied through trade and

communication, the effects of centralization are magnified to a global scale. The multinational

corporation is the new centralizing authority; language death has become a more pressing issue

than ever.

Thus, to answer the question "Why should we care?," we must recognize that languages

lie at the intersection of politics, culture, and even individual thought. Language death is at once

a symptom of globalization's unintended consequences and an independent loss of identity. And

with the disappearance of once-flourishing cultures, our collective knowledge base diminishes.

As Evans explains, "[F]or certain riddles of humanity, just one language holds the key. But we

do not know in advance which language holds the answer to which question. And as the science

of linguistics becomes more sophisticated, the questions we seek answers to are multiplying"

(xvii). Thus, we must race against time to preserve our linguistic resources before they disappear

forever.

CHINA AND THE POLITICS OF TOP-DOWN REVITALIZATION EFFORTS

China is a particularly interesting case study given the intersecting roles of culture,

history, and politics. Because of China's history of centralization, the country is especially

relevant as an example of language's intersection with power—the Chinese language has

undergone repeated historical attempts at standardization, simplification, and other state-imposed

changes, but local languages and dialects have remained significant despite the prominence of Mandarin Chinese. As a result, the case of China is at once unique and suitable for extrapolation: though its history is unique, the sheer length of centralized rule in China makes it an effective illustration of government control in general.

Each Chinese dynasty had, "[f]or millennia, the political and economic goal…to consolidate and expand their control" (Bradley 62). As a result, minority groups found themselves pushed aside, lumped for the convenience of the central government's political purposes. They were given names that "were often rather pejorative," and group identities were systematically erased by "using Chinese as a lingua franca and medium of literacy, and ultimately by replacing the minority spoken languages with varieties of Chinese" (Bradley 62). The idea that a dominant language is the key to literacy and modernity remains prevalent today. It explains the phenomenon of individuals' forgoing education in traditional languages to maintain competitiveness in the job market. The risk of being economically behind is far too great—in regions geographically shielded by globalization, "the geography that helps preserve these languages comes with the cost of slower economic development for the people in those areas" (Parker qtd. in Schiavenza).

Thus, an attempt to revitalize dying languages encounters treads upon delicate questions—how do we reconcile the economic benefit of language loss with its roots in an involuntary assimilation? And though we can reemphasize the need to preserve their dying languages, "we cannot compel [minority groups] to do so" (Bradley 52). As we shall soon see, even the mechanism for reemphasizing can be difficult; education is, as it turns out, an equally political subject (though this should come as no surprise given the recent American election).

In China, minority language policy is administrated by a system of classifications, under which there are 55 official national minorities. The trouble, of course, is that the official 55 excludes a large number of unofficial, but nonetheless very real, minority groups. Many such groups have applied for recognition, but most were never recognized, and instead were placed in a broad "unclassified national minority" category (Bradley 50). Especially because so many groups remain unrecognized, attempts to promote the language of one minority come at the cost of ignoring the language of another. For instance, though the Chinese government has initiated media programs (e.g. local news) that broadcast in minority languages (Xinhua), the added exposure of one language also causes an imbalance of information. Who has the right, for instance, to choose one language over another when creating a news program? In the status quo, the decisions return to the very authority that once caused language death in the first place—a cruel irony for minority groups that have no voice in their own preservation.

Indeed, most efforts at revitalization have been top-down, initiated primarily in the form of government programs. Government-centered action is, in general, China's typical approach to resolving social issues. In the 1950's, when China undertook the project of simplifying Chinese characters, the entire State Commission of Language Work—to which the project was charged—consisted of only 18 members (Zhao 63). It is almost frightening to think that in only 18 people lay the fate of an entire language.

Another top-down revitalization approach is to create education programs. If children are no longer learning traditional dialects at home, why not teach them in schools? Simply reverse the loss with appropriate educational measures, and voila: problem solved. Again, solutions are not quite so simple. Teaching languages in public education, for instance, ignores the fact that regional languages are historically spoken in the private sphere—within homes, as an expression

of one's personal thoughts and identity. For instance, efforts in Mexico to teach students the indigenous language Mexicano failed when teachers found it difficult to translate the language into a formal classroom context. There was simply not "sufficient intimacy and solidarity between speakers to warrant more use of Mexicano" (Messing qtd. in Dorian 34).

Moreover, teaching a language in a formal setting requires a standardization of dialects that may never have been standard in the first place. The process of choosing the variants to teach as "correct" returns us to the same trouble that other top-down approaches encounter: who has the right to decide that a certain manner of speaking is standard? Indeed, in some extreme cases, the variant taught in schools does not remotely resemble the language spoken in communities. Even though children studied Quichua in schools, for example, Ecuadorian grandparents remained reluctant to speak the language to family members because they "did not want to converse in Quichua with grandchildren whose speech was full of unfamiliar lexicon" (Dorian 35). In these situations, education might prove counterproductive to the objective of preservation. Even more broadly, public education programs face resistance from communities themselves. Many groups see their languages as exclusive to a particular ethnicity or identity, and the right to learn their language must be appropriately earned. Thus, opening language programs for the general public might spark backlash from community members who feel that the school-taught version is inauthentic (Dorian 38-9).

The general problem with top-down approaches, then, is an inability to engage with the target communities. Like fighting fire with fire, top-down approaches attempt to resolve an issue caused by centralization by imposing more centralized decisions. Too often, they only further alienate the groups that they attempt to help. Top-down approaches crucially fail to recognize the fundamental link between language and power. The solution to language death is not to merely

cure the symptoms, but rather to initiate a shift in power. Involuntary assimilation is problematic

not because assimilation occurred, but because it was *involuntary*. Likewise, to force

revitalization down the throats of indigenous groups commits the same crime twice.

POWER DYNAMICS OF BOTTOM-UP APPROACHES

  Conversely, linguists might pursue bottom-up paths, which ostensibly focus on the rights

and needs of the speakers themselves. One example is to merely document dying languages

rather than attempting to institute forms of revitalization or reeducation. At face value, this seems

to be a rather innocuous solution: why not simply record the sounds and knowledge, thus

avoiding the political issues of organizing revitalization programs?

  Again, the reality is not quite so simple. Recording a language, too, involves a decision:

what is worth preserving? Languages, after all, are not like specimens of plants, which can be

kept without much consequence to other plants of the same species. Documenting language in its

natural context requires telling stories—stories that may not be appropriate for scientific

preservation. As one linguist writes of her field work experiences, "One of my best sources

produced relatively little that I could feel free to publish as text or to archive, even with time

restrictions on archive access. Her stories were full of life, but they frequently told, with gusto

and in rich detail, of alleged misbehavior on the part of fellow-villagers or other identifiable

figures" (Dorian 31). And because the memory of a village often lasts generations, archiving

such recordings would have engendered disastrous social consequences.

  Even more generally, recording languages begs the question of what to record in the first

place. And as researchers establish arbitrary standards for fluency and content, they can impose

harmful power structures. The goal to find a "perfect" subject is a good illustration of one such

power issue—linguists demand "the ideal of a speaker - an 'uncontaminated', pure…but ironically a bilingual one" (Farfán and Ramallo 3). In other words, when linguists judge one speaker to be "good enough" to record and another to be "not fluent enough," they establish power for themselves rather than for the native speakers. Indeed, in extreme cases, the subjects are considered merely objects, "depositories of data to…advance[e] in the interpretation of the typology of the world languages, demonstrating what is and what is not possible in terms of its diverse structures" (Farfán and Ramallo 3). Thus, power is a crucial consideration for both top-down and bottom-up approaches, and absent a deliberate focus on local populations, authority will too often be misallocated. When revitalization efforts serve only to empower central governments and linguists rather than those whose language is being lost, the efforts become counterproductive.

A related consideration is the intended purpose of preserving and revitalizing a language. Indeed, purpose frames power issues: if agents view a recording session as an extraction of information, then the act of documentation elevates the linguist above the source, who is no more powerful than a thumb drive of language sounds. If governments view education programs as a tool for paternalistically imposing cultural values, then the people are no more important than cattle to be factory farm-raised and force-fed language. Indeed, the question *why should we care* matters more than we at first believe: if we care for the wrong reasons, it may be better not to care at all.

Thus, we return to the reasons I enumerated earlier: that we should care about dying languages not merely because they are curious specimens of fading cultures, to be viewed and marveled at as if in a museum. Rather, we must care about their endangerment because they represent an intersection—of globalization's unintended consequences; of governmental power;

of history and culture. And when we lose languages, we lose the "deep interactions and synthetic insights that come up when we look at one language or culture through the prism of another" (Evans 19). The goal of revitalization and preservation efforts, then, must not be to tokenize the language, but rather to enable enduring conversations. If our entire knowledge of a culture were limited only to the fragments preserved within a museum, we could never have the genuine, spontaneous interactions that make the languages so meaningful in the first place.

A SPEAKER-CENTERED APPROACH

The objective of preserving endangered languages, then, must always be to shift power back to the hands of native speakers. Though such an approach may seem challenging given the difficulties detailed previously, we can alter the current distribution of power by re-evaluating each policy's intentions and consequences under a speaker-centered paradigm. In other words, rather than focusing solely on immediate, often oversimplified consequences ("Quichua is dying? Teach it in schools!"), policymakers should consider the nuanced needs of native communities. How would native speakers react, for instance, to the academic standardization of a once-informal language? How should educators present a "private sphere" language in a public setting? Moreover, individuals in authority positions, from government agents to linguists, should question whether the policy empowers or objectifies a language community. Language revitalization must emphasize dialogue (no pun intended) between community and external agents: empowering native speakers while engaging external actors.

A speaker-centered approach is a broad framework for a variety of programs that achieve the goal of balancing power between internal and external agents. A number of tools fall under the speaker-centered umbrella, from activism to machine translation. Each tool, implemented

alone or in conjunction, can reshape the effectiveness of our efforts to save endangered languages. One promising new approach is the idea of activist documentation. Rather than imposing change externally—for instance, requiring students to take courses in regional languages or documenting languages through outsiders foreign to the speaker community— activist documentation encourages the speakers' own investment in language preservation. In essence, it turns every previously-described example on its head: rather than making centralized decisions through the government (think of the 18-person board that made enormous linguistic decisions), an activist approach focuses on initiates generated by the speakers themselves.

Unlike a more centralized method, activist documentation may not result in a single, unified set of policies. But languages do not themselves have a unified set of needs. Because activist documentation, like all speaker-centered approaches, allows for "a more equal participation on the side of the speaker," it poses "a series of open questions" about the relationship between speakers and external agents (Farfán and Ramallo 6). No longer will linguists arbitrarily judge whether a speaker is sufficiently "qualified;" no longer will governments impose hierarchical classifications. Language activism corrects the failures of other revitalization attempts: rather than brushing aside questions of power, it builds itself around equalizing power relations between the speaker and the revitalizer. The approach is effective because it strengthens the voices of activists within the speaker community, encouraging "a more participatory" form of linguistics. A far cry from the paternalism of top-down approaches, speakers and external agents align their interests (Florey 124). Thus, activist documentation creates a check against imbalanced power, ensuring that preservation occurs "*by* speakers of the language community" rather than "*on* a language," "*for* the language community," or "*with* speakers of the language community" (Grinevald qtd. in Farfán and Ramallo 7).

Although the field of activist documentation is relatively new, a few small pilot programs have proven successful thus far. In Indonesia, a series of workshops produced a number of new documentation proposals and led one PhD student to discover important gaps in his previous research. Participants went on to teach new courses in linguistic research methods, raise awareness within speaker communities, and hold training sessions on using relevant recording software (Florey 130-1). These results are evidence of the myriad benefits of a single speaker-centered training program: the approach espouses a creative, dynamic dialogue, which manifests itself through independent projects, spinoffs, and a general culture of enthusiastic activism. The crucial element of activist documentation—and of speaker-centered approaches as a whole—is open-endedness. Unlike a top-down education program, there is no pressure to standardize a language or to make sense of the idiosyncrasies. Rather, the approach encourages agents to take advantage of the tools at their disposal: it encourages collaboration between insiders and outsiders, and even between humans and machines.

Indeed, one potential application of machine learning may be to record and eventually aid in teaching and translating dying languages. Although current research in language processing does not include minor languages (focusing instead on dominant languages such as English), trends in current technological advances may eventually be extrapolated in ways useful for language revitalizers. It is not difficult to imagine, for instance, a world in which computers could process the vast amounts of recorded visual and audio data and eventually learn to speak a dying language. Computational linguistics seems to be the next logical step in a field already enhanced by new recording technology. Whereas linguists once struggled with transcribing conversations by hand, which not only led to errors but also divorced a language from its unique body language and delivery style, digital video recordings gave field research a new vivacity.

Videos capture the facial expressions and hand motions that root a language within culture. Recordings are also useful as transcription aids, especially for complex events that involve multiple speakers (Ashmore 77). In a future world, these recordings may eventually be computer-processed and used to synthesize data for endangered languages. The technology may prove beneficial for engaging members of the community: computer tools may allow individuals to learn the language within the culture (think Rosetta Stone, but for Kayardild instead of Spanish). Access to technological tools, used within a speaker-centered paradigm, can also enable native speakers to devise their own forms of documentation.

These benefits, for the present, are merely theoretical. Though Natural Language Processing (NLP)—using machines to translate sentences and eventually process entire languages—has gained prominence in linguistics, the current state of the technology is not quite capable of an application to endangered languages. "A major limitation of NLP today is the fact that most NLP resources and systems are available only for high-resource languages (HRLs), such as English, French, Spanish, German, and Chinese" (Hirschberg and Manning); because there is so little written documentation in place for endangered languages, there is too little data available to develop natural language processing tools. But the systems nevertheless hold significant potential. Already NLP technology is advancing at a rapid rate, with translation accuracies higher than ever before. Indeed, new deep learning practices use "small dimensionality and dense vectors for words," which "allows us to model large contexts, leading to greatly improved language models" (Manning 703). Within the umbrella of speaker-centered approaches, then, tools such as activist documentation and NLP may be useful tools for government actors and linguists alike. Both help external actors to shift the power to local actors

rather than to themselves—they highlight the language's speaker-defined nature rather than superimposing an ideal (and thus erasing the uniqueness that makes it so valuable).

Of course, speaker-centered approaches are not an end-all solution to the challenges of revitalization. The lack of a definite solution is, indeed, part of the point—speaker-centered solutions rest on the assumption that languages are complex, and that native activists and external researchers alike benefit from shared resources, balanced power, and equal collaboration. On the other hand, not every speaker-centered approach will be equally successful. Some, if implemented poorly, can lead to worse outcomes. For instance, NLP done well might empower native communities with a tool to teach and preserve their own culture. NLP done poorly might lead to language extraction on steroids. The very problem with bottom-up documentation that Flores and Farfán describe—treating a native speaker like a "depository of data meant to be extracted" (5)—is exacerbated when researchers must now collect as much data as possible and can simply go home to crunch the numbers without actual concern for the language communities that they impact.

When implementing any language policy, then, agents must be extremely careful to pay more than mere lip service to a speaker-centered commitment. Preserving a language is a process just as complex as the language itself, and it involves a series of constant questions. At times, the questions will establish and re-establish boundaries; at other times, they will require both internal and external activists to compromise.

Compromise may necessitate an evolving standard of purity. In Shanghai, where 14 million people claim to speak Shanghainese, only two of thirteen recruitment websites found sufficiently "pure" speakers ("Shanghai"). For Shanghainese, then, native speakers must eventually realize that, for a language to expand—for people to learn—varying degrees of

brokenness will result. And rather than ridicule language learners and reinforce exclusivity (as in the case of newspaper editor Wang Jun, who "can't help but burst into laughter every time [his] son tries to speak Shanghai dialect" ("Linguists")), those who truly care about the Shanghainese culture should embrace a more fluid definition of Shanghainese. As Nancy Dorian writes, "the choice between accepting second-language speakers whose rendition of the language is 'inauthentic' in various ways…or accepting loss of the language altogether" is one that "has considerable potential significance for the continued oral survival of some form of the language" (39). Likewise, for the external researcher, taking the care to learn the language and affirm the culture's worth is crucial to bridging the cultural divides that will inevitably result. Efforts on both ends of the spectrum establish the dialogue and fluidity that makes revitalizing a language possible: for the researcher, learning the language revalorizes the culture as something worthwhile "even in the changing urbanizing world" (Terrill qtd. in Dorian 40). For members of the culture, various case studies demonstrate that it is possible to both allow a language to change and to renew interest in its original contexts. For instance, in the Solomon Islands, young people took part in traditional craft-making, through which they learned traditional vocabulary in a natural setting. In northern California, Tolowa programs produced a "widely shared though non-fluent knowledge of the ancestral language" (Dorian 38-9). Although the results were not necessarily perfect fluency, adopting a more fluid approach kept the Tolowa language alive.

After all, is fluidity not the very foundation of language? Fluidity—the ability to creatively change pronunciations—was at the heart of language's rise and initial diversification. The demand for purity killed diversity. And if our languages evolved with history—if dying languages are crucial precisely *because* they serve as dynamic cultural records—we must recognize that, at times, revitalization and evolution are hand in hand. In the process of saving a

language, we may also change it. New speakers, new contexts, and new vocabulary breathe life into dialects on the brink of extinction.

The point of a speaker-centered approach—indeed, the point of revitalization as a whole—is to reignite the inter-language dialogue that has gone silent. For too long, language has been something to be manipulated, pushed one way or another by the iron fist of authority: *speak English; you'll get rich! Speak Quichua; don't you know to save your own culture?* Current revitalization practices misunderstand the purpose of preserving a language; we do not preserve for the sake of tokenizing regional languages. We do not preserve for the sake of turning "thousands of particularistic small societies to become mutually isolated museum pieces, nor for a few cute local words to be lifted into a world language like English to form a sort of linguistic theme-park" (Evans 19). We preserve because we have an obligation to value cultural dialogue; because when languages die, so do collections of unique perspectives.

And it is precisely this erasure of uniqueness that makes this task so pressing. With each passing second, the echoes of languages such as Kayardild fade to leave only a hollow silence. We increasingly find ourselves alone in a monotonic, monolingual chasm, having lost the languages that could once have led us out. We have, therefore, a collective obligation to preserve these endangered languages—to discover the ways that Kayardild defies definition, or learn how the nuances of Seri (a language spoken only in a small region of Mexico) preserves detailed botanical knowledge in its ancient words. We must preserve these languages because each one is a library, a dynamic collection of sounds, history, and culture that contains within it the very meaning of humanity.

And when these libraries burn, so does a part of ourselves.

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