

The Case of the Disappearing Words

Saving the World's Endangered Languages

Alice Andre-Clark

BACKGROUND

You already know about endangered animals and plants, living things that are at risk of disappearing from Earth. Alice Andre-Clark believes that many languages are also endangered. But are languages living things? Decide for yourself as you read.

- 1 **D**uring World War II, American Navajo speakers worked with the United States military to create a secret code in their language that the Germans couldn't crack. Now Navajo children are unlikely to grow up speaking the language **fluently**. The Taa language of southern Africa is one of the most complex in the world, combining five distinct clicks of the tongue with other sounds to produce between 80 and 120 different consonants. Today, this unique language has only a few thousand speakers

READ TO UNLOCK MEANING

1. First read the text for comprehension and enjoyment. Use the **Reading Strategy** and **Comprehension Check** questions to support your first read.
2. Go back and respond to the Close Read note.
3. Identify other details in the text you find interesting. Ask and answer your own questions.

fluently (FLOO uhnt lee) *adv.*
easily and smoothly



Breton is a Celtic language spoken in the Brittany region of France, where parents were once forbidden from giving children Breton names.

linguists (LIHN gwihsts) n.
people who study how
languages work

MAKE PREDICTIONS

Mark the word *Why* in the heading. What type of text structure might this word signal?

left. Earth is home to around 7,000 languages, but **linguists** are rushing to catalog them because around half are expected to disappear by 2100.

Why They Disappear

- 2 Languages tend to become endangered when a dominant culture swallows up a smaller culture. Sometimes younger generations stop learning a language because parents want children to fit in and get jobs in the majority culture. Sometimes societies force minorities to give up language and traditions. Many Native American children of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were required to attend boarding schools where educators forbade them from speaking their native

languages. In China today, the government limits the time teachers may speak the language Uighur. Many Uighur language speakers feel their culture may be at risk.

Categories of Danger

- 3 The United Nations regularly releases lists of endangered languages, placing each in one of five categories. A “vulnerable” language is one that many children speak at home, but few speak outside of their homes. Zuni, spoken by 9,000 of New Mexico’s Pueblo peoples, is vulnerable. A “definitely endangered” language is one that older generations speak, but children no longer learn in the home. Dakota, a language of the Great Plains with 675 speakers, is definitely endangered.
- 4 A “severely endangered” language is one that parents may understand but don’t speak much. Grandparents are the primary speakers. Oklahoma’s Chickasaw, with 600 speakers, mostly age 50 or older, is one example. A “critically endangered” language is one that few people younger than grandparents speak, and grandparents don’t speak it often. New York’s and Canada’s Onondaga, with about 50 speakers, is critically endangered. An “extinct” language has no living native speakers—the last native speaker of Alaska’s Eyak language died in 2008.

Why Save Them?

- 5 You could ask the same question of an endangered species of animal. Why should we save it? The answer is that having a variety of species benefits our environment. In the same way that different species create biodiversity, languages contribute to cultural diversity. Learning about and protecting endangered languages benefits our understanding of other cultures. A language’s vocabulary paints a fascinating picture of a society’s way of life. We know a little more about India’s Gta’ speakers when we learn that they have words like *nosor* (noh SAWR), meaning “to free someone from a tiger,” *bno* (buh NOH), “a ladder made from a single bamboo tree,” and *gotae* (goh TA), “to bring something from a hard-to-reach place with a long stick.”
- 6 Languages can show how a society looks at the world and what it values. In Apache culture, a sense of place is so important that storytellers use descriptive names for land features, such as “White Rocks Lie Above in a Compact Cluster.” Facing setbacks with laughter is important in the Jewish tradition, so it may not be surprising that the Jewish language Yiddish has words to describe two kinds of fools. A *schlemiel* is the kind who spills soup on other people, and the unlucky *schlimazel* is the one on whom soup always gets spilled.

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE In paragraph 5, mark words from another language and their definitions.

QUESTION Why does the author call attention to these particular words and definitions?

COMPREHENSION CHECK

What is the difference between a “vulnerable language” and a “definitely endangered language”?

term (TUHRM) *n.* word or expression that has a specific meaning

lecture (LEHK chuhr) *v.* talk in a critical way that seems unfair

- 7 A language may contain hidden knowledge that the rest of the world has not yet discovered. The **term** for eelgrass in Mexico's Seri language alerted scientists that eelgrass, unlike most sea grasses, is a nutritious food. The Seri word *moosni hant cooit* (mohs nee ahnt koh eet), meaning "green turtle that descends," revealed something no one else knew—that green turtles hibernate, or overwinter, on the sea floor.
- 8 A language may describe something in a way that is funny, sharp, or beautifully poetic. In Welsh, it rains not cats and dogs, but old wives and walking sticks. If a Basque speaker tells you, "Don't take the beans out of your lap," you're being asked not to get on your high horse and **lecture** (which would probably be hard to do with a lap full of beans). The elegant Seri term for a car muffler means "into which the breathing descends."
- 9 Sometimes a language provides the exact right way to describe something that always needed a great word. The Cherokee word *ukvhisdi* (oh kuh huhs dee) is what you say to a cute baby



Garifuna is the last living remnant of languages once spoken by native peoples in the Caribbean islands. Now it's spoken mainly in Belize, Honduras, and Guatemala.

or kitten. If your neighbor pops in every day, you might be dealing with what the Ojibway call *mawadishiweshkiwin*, the habit of making visits too often. The Cheyenne capture a hilariously embarrassing moment with *mémestátamao'ó*, to laugh so hard you fart.

How to Save a Language

10 Linguists at projects like the Endangered Language Alliance are working to learn from speakers of disappearing languages, **recording** them singing songs, telling stories, **pronouncing** common words like the names of the colors, and explaining vocabulary that is important in their culture, such as the words that describe traditional arts or native plants.

11 Yet many speakers of endangered languages aren't content just to preserve scraps of their native languages in a digital museum. They hope that new generations will learn them, and that they will again become living languages. Different cultures have come up with different

ways of bringing their languages back to life. Cherokee speakers can use an app that lets them text in their native alphabet. Yiddish speakers can enjoy weekly radio shows. In Wales, a community of writers is producing new science fiction (they had to come up with a Welsh word for "alien"), and young people in Chile are performing Huilliche-language hip-hop songs.

12 If an endangered language is going to make a real comeback, it'll probably get its start in schools. From 1896 to 1986, public schools in Hawaii did not teach the Hawaiian language. Then educators began opening "language nests," preschools where kids speak nothing but Hawaiian. Now there are elementary schools where kids not only take most classes in Hawaiian, but also learn about native traditions like gardening with Hawaiian plants and extending hospitality. Students can keep learning in Hawaiian into college and beyond—the University of Hawaii offers a Ph.D. in the Hawaiian language.



Me'phaa is a language of Guerrero, Mexico, where Spanish dominates.

recording (rih KAWR dihng) v. storing sounds in a form, such as a digital file, so that they can be heard again in the future

pronouncing (pruh NOWN sihng) v. speaking words correctly

The Language That Came Back to Life

- 13 Can a language with zero native speakers come back to life? At least one did. In 1881, a Jewish newspaper editor and linguist named Eliezer Ben-Yehuda immigrated to Jerusalem. Ben-Yehuda imagined the founding of a Jewish nation, and he thought that nation needed a language of its own. Back then, people learned Hebrew mostly just to read religious texts, but it was no one's native language. He and his wife decided to raise their family to speak nothing but Hebrew.
- 14 Ben-Yehuda realized that the 3,000-year-old language needed two kinds of help. First, it had to have young speakers. He persuaded teachers and rabbis to hold all their classes in Hebrew. Second, Hebrew needed lots of new words. He wrote a dictionary that added new words to this ancient language for modern things like dolls, omelets, ice cream, and bicycles. Hebrew grew from 8,000 words to 50,000. Today it is one of the official languages of Israel, with over 4 million speakers. 🇮🇱

COMPREHENSION CHECK

What are some ways people are trying to save endangered languages?



Gurung is a Tibeto-Burman language from the Himalayas in Nepal.