

Ichishkiin, Numu and Kiksht Language Lessons

Merry Christmas  
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Merry Christmas &  
A Happy New Year

DEAD LANGUAGE DEBATE

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ALEXANDER STILLE

Over the last seven years, Jessie Little Doe Fermino, a member of the Mashpee tribe on Cape Cod, has been on a single-minded mission to revive the language of her ancestors, Wampanoag, the one that greeted the Pilgrims when they landed at Plymouth Rock and that gave the state of Massachusetts its name. But when she applied to the National Endowment of the Humanities for a grant to create a Wampanoag dictionary, she was turned down.

The apparent reasons: the Wampanoag language has not been used in about 100 years, the known descendants of the original speakers number only 2,500 and Ms. Fermino is trying to make a spoken language out of a language that until recently existed only in documents, many of them from the 17th century.

"We got great reviews from the specialists, but the panel of non-specialists hated it," Ms. Fermino said. Daryl Baldwin, who is reviving the language of the Miami Nation in Indiana and raising his children in it, said he had met with a similar mixture of encouragement and skepticism: "I've run into people who say, 'I'll give you an 'A' for effort, but you're never going to revive that language.'" The last native speaker died in 1962, leaving no audiotapes of his speech, so Mr. Baldwin had to go to graduate school in linguistics and work from documents to try to create a Miami grammar and recreate the spoken language.

In the face of doubts and many difficulties, the revival of indigenous languages is a growing movement among Native American groups from Hawaii to Cape Cod, and it is fast becoming a new subspecialty in the field of linguistics as well. "We no longer use the term 'dead' language ó we now speak of them as 'dormant,'" said Leanne Hinton, a professor of linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley, which recently sponsored its fourth annual "Breath of Life California Language Restoration Workshop." Participants in the workshop are busy preparing dictionaries, grammars and education programs. Similar initiatives have taken root at the Universities of Arizona and Oregon and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

There are 211 indigenous languages still extant throughout the United States and Canada, but only 20 of them are spoken by the youngest generation of their communities. The rest may well face oblivion in the next 50 years. Only one, Navajo, has more than 100,000 speakers, and it, too, is declining among the young. "All 211 are in danger of extinction," said Akira Yamamoto, a professor of linguistics at the University of Kansas who works each summer at the University of Arizona's language reclamation institute.

But even as the language revival movement is picking up steam, some scholars outside of linguistics are questioning whether people should try to save endangered languages at all. "Languages have died throughout human history ó our own language bears little resemblance to the English of the 15th century," said Michael Blake, a professor of philosophy at Harvard University, who recently published a broadside attack on the movement to protect endangered cultures in Civilization magazine. "It is not immediately clear to me why we should try to preserve them," he said in a telephone interview.

One reason, Mr. Yamamoto said, is aesthetic: languages, like animal species, contribute to the richness and diversity of the world: "If you speak English, you have one world; if you speak Navajo, you have another world." For example, Mr. Yamamoto points out, in the Algonquin family of languages, noun endings are divided into two basic categories: animate and inanimate.

So, while Romance languages separate nouns by gender, the Algonquin sees the world in terms of things that have spirit and things that do not. And, Mr. Yamamoto adds, "This is reflected in their culture."

Mr. Blake said it might be sad to lose languages but that sometimes it is a necessary price to pay for progress and freedom of choice in society: "I think we can acknowledge a sense of loss, but I think these are losses that we suffer as a free people, when we decide what norms to adopt and to leave behind. There are reasons that these languages are dying out, that members of these communities have decided to assimilate, and those reasons have to be respected, too."

But supporters of language revival respond that the idea of "freedom of choice" is highly problematic, especially in the case of American Indian languages, which were frequently aggressively suppressed. "As an Indian, to hear about languages 'dying' or becoming 'extinct' hits at our core," said Mr. Baldwin. "The federal government has always wanted Indian people either to become extinct or to assimilate."

The history of the Hawaiian language is an example. It was spoken almost universally in Hawaii until the islands were annexed by the United States in 1898. The Hawaiians had adapted their language to written form, used it as the language of government and begun translating much of world literature into it. But with annexation, Hawaiian was suppressed. It had dwindled to about 1,500 fluent native speakers by the 1980's, when a group of professors at the University of Hawaii at Hilo began a concerted effort to reclaim it. They set up a preschool in which elderly Hawaiian speakers taught the language to the children. Gradually, by adding a new grade each year, they succeeded in creating a preschool-to-high school system in which Hawaiian is the primary language of instruction.

But wouldn't it be more useful for young Hawaiians to learn languages like Spanish or French, which are spoken by millions of people, rather than a language used by only a few thousand? And are language revival programs holding youngsters back from acquiring the skills they need to succeed in mainstream society? Mr. Blake said that the children "are going to lose some of the opportunity that English education gives them."

Advocates answer that students in the Hawaiian program score slightly higher in standardized tests than native Hawaiian students from English-language schools. And the program's first graduates to enter college all passed their English composition tests. Diane Ravitch, a professor of education at New York University, is a frequent critic of progressive educational fads, but she has a strongly positive view of language revival. "I think cultural retrieval is an important thing that people need to go through, as long as it is voluntary and the children also learn English, which they need to go to college," she said. "The language sustains their culture and their link with the past, which is an important aspect of who we are."

Ms. Ravitch pointed out that her own grandchildren were attending a school where instruction is half Hebrew and half English. "The revival of Hebrew is one of the great stories of linguistics of modern times," she said, adding: "I find the argument that we should do nothing to preserve languages and culture toxic. Otherwise, we are just left with mass culture, pop culture and the whims of the marketplace."

Many thanks Myra for providing these excerpts.



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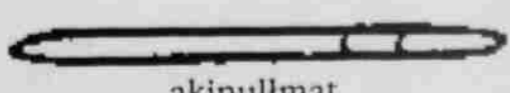
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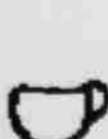
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