PRESERVING THE PAST - THE REVIVAL OF DYING LANGUAGES

In an ever evolving world, is our species set to become monolingual, or is there still hope for endangered languages?

By Gabriella Payne

With the death of languages we stand to not only lose words, but ultimately the loss of entire cultures and ways of life. According to UNESCO, over the past century alone, approximately 400 languages have become extinct and most linguists estimate that at least 50% of the world's remaining 6,500 languages will be gone by the end of this century.
Yes, culture is dynamic and for centuries languages have become extinct, but the rate at which this is happening in the 21st century is unprecedented. With the odd exception, language loss is happening on a global scale with almost every country in the world home to marginalised communities, struggling to keep their languages alive. But over history, the death of a tongue has not necessarily marked its end.

Hebrew became extinct as a spoken language over 1,000 years ago, but thanks to cultural activists and extensive literature, it was revived in the 19th century. Now, once again, Hebrew is the native tongue of nearly half the world's Jewish population. Another such language is Manx. Declared extinct by UNESCO in 2009, the language of the Isle of Man, located in the Irish Sea, has been brought back to life in recent years through the dedicated work of passionate enthusiasts. Manx, a Goidelic language (closely related to Irish and Scottish Gaelic), was increasingly overshadowed by English during the 19th century and many Islanders stopped teaching their children the language altogether. The old Manx speakers had a saying;

"*Cha jean oo cosney ping lesh y Ghailck*," meaning:
"*You will not earn a penny with Manx."*

However, with the help of new technologies, the language has seen a resurgence and today, there are approximately 1,800 speakers. Floyd Kermode, my neighbour, is one of them.
Floyd is a warm-hearted man with a self-proclaimed 'eccentric' personality. Having ancestors from the Island originally sparked his curiosity and so about nine years ago, he began learning Manx.

"Well, I've given this a lot of thought because people often ask why... I think partly it's a nice feeling of heritage, it's a bit intangible and you could say 'well that's garbage, if you'd grown up being told you were Scottish or Cornish you'd feel a yearning for that' but, you know, I think it's kind of the spirit of the age, people get interested in going back to their roots..."

As Floyd speaks animatedly, I can feel his enthusiasm seeping into every word.

"...the other thing is, I speak big languages already… so it feels like something different learning a little language. It feels a bit like keeping a baby quoll in your backyard or something like that, something endangered."

Being one of the only Manx speakers in Australia, there is no community with which Floyd can practice speaking face-to-face, so most of the learning he does is online. Tools such as books, CD's, podcasts, internet forums, smartphone apps, radio programs and music in the language have all been helpful in his long-distance learning.

Floyd: "We travel through life and we learn telephone numbers and passwords, song lyrics, things like that, but I think especially in monolingual countries like Australia and as English speakers, we get this impression that learning a foreign language is an especially esoteric and difficult thing to do."

Myself: “So would you recommend learning a language like Manx to others?”

Floyd: “...I would recommend it from the point of view that I think it’s good for the brain and it feels nice to be keeping a minority language alive.”

At the beginning of this year, Floyd made his first trip over to the Isle of Man and is planning to go back again soon. He met with Adrian Caine, the Manx Language Development Officer on his trip and visited Bunscoill Ghaelgagh, a Primary School that teaches almost entirely in Manx and was paramount in the language’s revival. The school has a total of 70 pupils and apart from one weekly English class, the curriculum is entirely taught in Manx.
Floyd fondly remembers the welcoming nature of other Manx speakers on his trip to the Island and the pride they have for their language. The inspiring comeback story of Manx is down to the hard work of the dedicated community, who embraced new technologies and enabled their native tongue to rise from the ashes. Floyd leaves me with a saying from the Island:

“Gaelg jea, Gaelg jiu, Gaelg mairagh”
“Manx yesterday, Manx today, Manx tomorrow”

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Today, the top ten languages in the world claim approximately half of the global population. Over history, factors such as political persecution, globalisation and a lack of preservation can all be held accountable for the situation we find ourselves in. In Australia, we have certainly not lead by example in terms of language preservation. The arrival of European settlers had a detrimental effect on Aboriginal culture. Since 1788, approximately 100 of our initial 300 Indigenous languages have become extinct, with experts regarding 95% of the ones remaining to be on their last legs. So what, if anything, can be done to save them? Is there any hope in revitalising our Indigenous languages?

Professor Gillian (Jill) Wigglesworth, a highly respected linguist at the University of Melbourne, has been working with Indigenous children in remote communities of Australia for years. Her research focuses on the native languages these children learn and their interaction with English once they attend school. With an extensive background in bilingualism, Jill believes we should be teaching and preserving Indigenous languages, having seen first-hand how important they are to these cultures and communities.

> *“...we should be encouraging them to continue to speak their languages, rather than just seeing them (which I think there’s a tendency to do at the moment) as something that gets in the way of them learning English.”*

For the past few years, Jill has been working with a school in Arnhem Land, the Northern Territory, to help develop an Indigenous language program for the children. Often the schools in these remote communities are very small, with a limited amount of resources and staff. They are a long way from any English speaking communities, however most of the schools have an ‘English only’ curriculum.
Jill tells me there are a few bilingual schools in the Northern Territory, but not many. It’s seen as being too expensive, too difficult and too challenging to instate. She believes that in other parts of Australia, such as Victoria, there is more awareness and greater numbers of schools teaching Indigenous languages. Jill hopes that, together with the community, they can create a program that provides a more balanced education for these children, to improve their schooling and strengthen the survival of their Indigenous heritage.

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“Wominjeka Wurundjeri balluk yearmenn koondee bik"
"Welcome to the land of the Wurundjeri people"

As I walk up to the Namalaata building, tucked away on a Northcote side street, the bold colours of the Indigenous flag immediately catch my eye, sitting pride of place atop the office. I'm here to meet with Tina Sahin, the Wurreker Programs Officer at VAEAI, the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated. First established in 1976, VAEAI is a leading Koorie community organisation, responsible for and passionate about Indigenous education and training statewide.
Above the front desk as I step inside hangs a beautifully intricate dot painting. Its swirling lines and colours run like veins through the artwork, connecting all elements to its central heart. I'm instantly filled with a feeling of unity and togetherness; it's only later that I discover its title and meaning, '*The Wurreker' (Message Carriers*).
Tina is a bright, friendly faced woman who greets me in the foyer with a smile. She is young and radiant with long dark hair and deep, knowing eyes. I follow her through to a modern meeting room, where we sit down at some couches and begin talking about her work with Indigenous languages. I ask if she speaks any herself;

> "*No, I am trying to learn. So my language is Kurnai, so East Gippsland. My language speaker in my family was my grandfather, who actually passed away eight years ago..*"

Kurnai (also spelt Gunai) is one of the more than 40 dialects of Koorie language that were spoken across Victoria pre-European settlement. With the arrival of the settlers in Australia came their government, who for much of the 19th and 20th centuries imposed the English language on Indigenous communities nationwide.

> *"It's crazy just to think how much was lost or forgotten.."* says Tina, as she looks out the window. *"Language is connection to culture. It's connection to knowledge and it's such a vital part of culture that, you know, it's our identity. So to keep that going, it's extremely important."*

Education is key to the revival of these languages, and the team at VAEAI are working passionately to expand their community. There are currently more than 1,000 students in the state learning an Aboriginal language through school-run

programs, with a total of 11 schools and soon to be 22 kindergartens. Thornbury Primary School was one of the first in Victoria to implement an Indigenous language program, teaching Woiwurrung, the native tongue of the Wurundjeri people. In the six years it's been running at Thornbury, the language program has gone from strength to strength, rapidly growing with the support from community.

Tina also tells me that a new initiative for tertiary students will be rolled out across the state within the next year. This program will consist of a Certificate III in learning an endangered Aboriginal language, and a Certificate IV in teaching that language. VAEAI have already selected 20 Indigenous applicants for the program, who will learn to speak their own languages and eventually be able to do the Certificate IV in teaching. The idea is that this will create a pool of Indigenous language speakers, that will then be able to share their knowledge with their regions and schools. With passionate organisations like VAEAI leading the way in Indigenous education, our cultural and linguistic diversity in Victoria is well on the path to preservation.

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In most cases, a language will reach the point of crisis after being displaced by a socially, politically and economically stronger one. In the case of Australia, the vast majority of today's population speak English, so to be able to access jobs, education and other opportunities it is paramount to learn the language. The many Indigenous communities in this country faced persecution throughout the past two centuries, with the government enforcing assimilation and pressuring these people to abandon their cultures. Things have begun to change nowadays, with an increasing push towards recognition of Indigenous languages, but is it too little too late?
According to the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, a third of the world's languages have fewer than 1,000 speakers remaining and every two weeks, a language dies with its last speaker. Yes, globalisation has had a detrimental effect on endangered languages worldwide, but as the Manx people have shown, the wonders of modern technology can also be used to their benefit.

One organisation has proven this with an ambitious plan; to record and archive every language remaining on the planet. In 2014, Daniel Bogre Udell and Frederico Andrade launched their project, Wikitongues. Their aim was to save our linguistic diversity globally and to empower community activists from around the world to share their cultural heritage. Since then, the not-for-profit has documented more than 350 languages (which they track online) and aims to have more than 1,000 within the next few years. Their home page reads:

> *"In the next eighty years, 3,000 languages are expected to disappear. We won't let that happen."*

Anyone, from anywhere, is able to submit a video to Wikitongues, in their hopes to build the world's largest publicly accessible oral archive before it's too late. The invention of the internet has certainly aided our ability to preserve and connect with rare language speakers and researchers across the globe, but that is not simply the answer. Without passionate, hard-working communities, be they Manx, Kurnai, Wurundjeri or any other people, this would merely be a fight without a cause. Thanks to dedicated individuals from all walks of life, it seems our endangered languages still have life left within them.