Editor's Column

The Fragility of Languages

In memory of Patricia (Patsy) Yaeger, *PMLA* editor 2006–11

A FEW YEARS AGO, SEDUCED BY THE BRAVE NEW WORLD PROMISED by the Internet and digital libraries, I started collecting, or, more precisely, mining, data on dead, disappearing, and threatened languages. What I found was overwhelming and frightening. I'm not sure what came first—the sense of being overwhelmed or the fear—nor was the source of either response clear. Was I overwhelmed and frightened by discovering that so many languages were disappearing at an alarming rate or by the weight of the data? For someone trained in a field defined by *poiēsis* and *aisthēsis*, mining data is one thing; reading them is another proposition altogether. Seeking to understand the fragility of languages at the turn of the millennium, I would sit in front of massive databases, facing the evidence of the devastation wrought on the world linguistic map and trying to interpret my feelings.

The UNESCO *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* confronted me with the bleak reality of language endangerment measured in maps, graphs, and data sets (figs. 1 and 2). The facts are not hard to fathom. Sifting the data, I discovered that at least forty-three percent of the estimated 6,000 languages spoken in the world after 1950 are endangered, that 576 are critically endangered, that 528 are severely endangered, and that 231 are extinct. This information is confirmed by other sources. *Ethnologue*, one of the most authoritative publications on world languages, reports that since it started publication in 1950, 373 languages have died, a "rate of loss amounting to 6 languages per year" ("Endangered Languages"). David Crystal, the eminent linguist, estimates that half of all languages

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will be extinct by the end of the twenty-first century, which means "there is a language dying out somewhere in the world every two weeks or so." In an article published in the science journal *Nature* in 2003, the ecologist William Sutherland concludes, after applying "internationally agreed criteria for classifying species," that "languages are more threatened than birds and mammals" (277).

And because languages are dying across all continents and regions of the world, a journey through UNESCO's long spreadsheet on endangered languages feels like tracking a virus as it circulates: the list begins with South Italian, with 7,500,000 speakers left, and ends with ‖Xegwi, a language once spoken in southern Africa but now considered extinct. From the heartland of Europe (lower Saxony) to Vanuatu, in the South Pacific, the world seems littered with dying or dead languages. Language death sits in front of us in solid factum. Why, then, do I come out of the mine shafts of data overwhelmed and uncertain? Why do I feel that the graphs, charts, and spreadsheets do not tell us much about what is at stake in the endangerment of languages?

Nothing but the Facts

I have to thank the new world of the digital humanities for making all this information available. Heavy data mining helps to overcome the doubts of those who might consider the loss of languages minor in comparison with the other threats the world faces, such as global warming, infectious disease, and dying species. Work of this sort makes those of us pushing for a digital humanities drool. Data, data, everywhere, and many things to do with them. Moreover, the great databases and atlases of language loss allow for the kind of interactivity that makes the study of dying languages sexy.

And yet I constantly ask myself whether such archiving will halt the virus that is killing off languages. In moments of doubt and despair, I even find myself questioning the motives behind the documentation of endangered languages. Are some of us jumping onto this bandwagon only because it is technologically sexy and gives the humanities a veneer of empirical weight and functionality, or is this truly a new way of making scholars of language matter? I keep my doubts private because I don't want to appear to be looking a gift horse in the mouth. Like many of my colleagues, I'm gratified to see the work of preserving languages drawing funding from such prestigious institutions as UNESCO and the National Science Foundation. For people in the humanities, this kind of serious funding is a recognition that what we do might, after all, have value in the real world. Still, I often wonder what work documentation, conceived as an act of preservation, performs when it comes to the lives of the people whose languages are condemned to die.

The more languages are reduced to data, the more they lose an element of their linguisticity, just as the digitalization of ancient manuscripts makes them lose their aura. Where speakers have disappeared and the statistic has become their supplement, as it were, data seem just another tomb, a reminder of the absent one. The data present clear evidence of the crisis of language
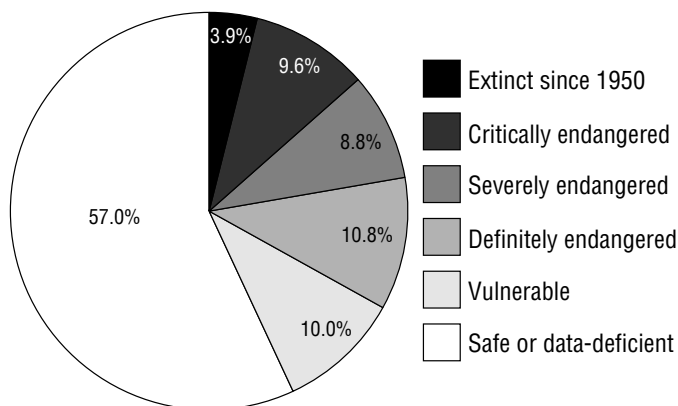

Fɪɢ. 1

The status of the world's six thousand languages.

Pie chart values:
- 3.9% Extinct since 1950
- 9.6% Critically endangered
- 8.8% Severely endangered
- 10.8% Definitely endangered
- 10.0% Vulnerable
- 57.0% Safe or data-deficient

loss, but they don't arouse the kind of feeling that makes us march in the streets to save tigers, to oppose the extraction of shale gas in our states, or to reverse climate change. Perhaps the story of dying languages is best told through their diminishing speakers rather than through the mere documentation of their disappearance. In thinking about the people who speak a language, we can bring the data to life, put a subject behind them. In 2011 only two people spoke Ter Sami, in the Kola Peninsula (Russia); only four spoke Lengilu; the chief of the Mabire in Oulek, Chad, was the only speaker of Mabire left in his village; and Tehuelche, once spoken by hunters in Patagonia, had been reduced to four speakers. The Ayapaneco language, spoken in Tabasco, Mexico, for centuries, has been reduced to two speakers, but they "refuse to talk to each other" (Tuckman). In Australia twenty-eight Aboriginal languages have only one speaker each left.
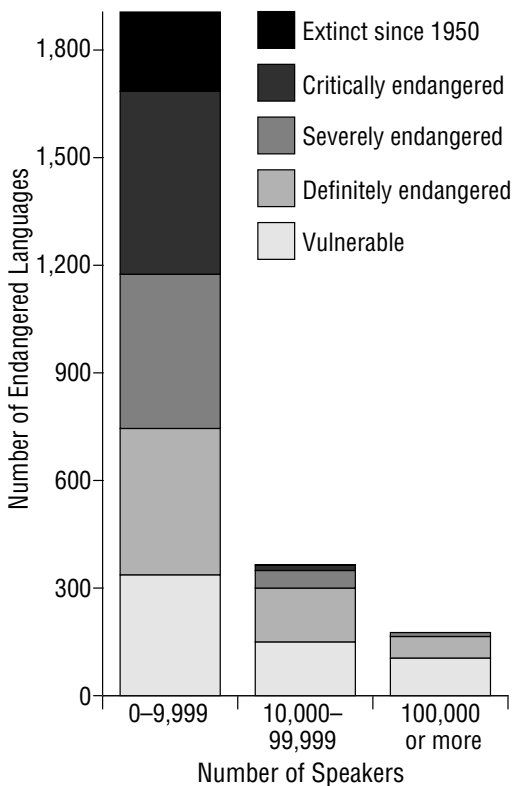
Who are those people? What is their sense of being in the world? What happens to the last speakers of a language when they talk and all they hear is the echo of their own voices? What is the status of an address without an addressee? What does it mean for a language to die? Can the death of a language be dissociated from that of the last person who speaks it? *Ethnologue* defines extinct languages as the ones that "have fallen completely out of (even symbolic) use, since no one retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language" ("Endangered Languages"). More than ethnic identity, however, the death of a language is closely associated with the deaths of speakers because, as Crystal aptly puts it, "once a language has lost its last native speaker, resurrecting it is difficult." I enjoy reading stories of heroic linguists and anthropologists rushing to remote areas to save an endangered language through documentation, but I'm touched most by narratives of people who hold on to their languages until their last breath because such accounts are a reminder that what remains in our archives after documentation is not the language itself but its diminished afterlife.

Before dying at the age of eighty-five, Boa Sr, the last speaker of the Bo language in the Andaman Islands, left behind her recorded voice. Her songs and stories are a touching testament to a linguistic universe that thrived in the Indian Ocean islands, but they are also a reminder of the loss of a person, a culture, and perhaps a way of life (Shariatmadari). Given the technologies now available, leading linguists seem confident that documentation can enable the revival of a language even after the deaths of its speakers. Dolly Pentrath, the last speaker of Cornish, died in 1777, but the language could be recuperated through extant writing in it. Some scholars believe that codification—"a long and traceable written history" (Moseley 6)—can enable language revival. Still, the Cornish sustained by its guardians through great effort is not the

Fig. 2

Degrees of endangerment by size of speaker group.

same as the one that lived in the eighteenth century. I have traveled through Cornwall many times, and the absence of any speakers of Cornish makes it a place unlike its neighbor Wales, where Welsh and Welshness survive, sometimes in unlikely places, such as among Somali immigrants.

Heroic stories of language preservation conceal the complexity of language loss, its causes and consequences. A language is endangered when its native speakers feel powerless in the face of encroaching languages or think that their language is a shameful mark of backwardness. Many native languages in the Americas did not survive Spanish conquest or European expansionism, and those that did have been on the defensive ever since. For example, Quechua survived in Bolivia and Peru, but for years it has fought to emerge out of its colonial association with the primitive and archaic and to resist the postcolonial elites' desire to contain or repress native rights in the Andes. Languages are sometimes repressed or prohibited by a powerful state, as Catalan was under the Franco dictatorship in Spain. Banned from educational institutions after the civil war, Catalan quickly eroded; with it went the cultural life of Catalonia. Only with the restoration of democracy in Spain in the 1970s was a new system of language immersion developed to ensure the survival of the language and its culture—yet Catalonians like the author Quim Monzó continue to worry that, given the language's long history of prohibition and marginalization, Catalan speakers will "end up believing that they are to blame for their own maltreatment and humiliation."

Killing Them Softly

Narratives of language death tend to focus on the relentless aggression of the languages of the powerful against the linguistic interests of the powerless. The primary enemy of threatened languages, what Joshua A. Fishman calls the source of "new dangers" to

them, is assumed to be globalization, seen as an unrelenting force: "Whereas heretofore their dangers derived from the superior armed might, wealth and numbers of immediate neighbours, today's dangers are more ubiquitous. Today, the worldwide process of globalization of the economy, communication and entertainment media, not to mention modernization-based consumerism as a way of life have threatened to sweep away everything locally authentic and different that may stand in their way" ("Reversing" xiii). A recurring reality of all efforts to reverse language loss is what Fishman calls "the ethnolinguistic omnipresence of a Big Brother" ("Why" 9). The big brother may be a language of empire, regional languages that have come to occupy the position left vacant by European languages, or languages that have become identified with new spaces of social expression in a globalized world.

And yet languages may die without notice by much of the world. What appears to be a linguistic gift might confer a debt that signals the inevitable death of a language. Some languages are endangered by well-intentioned projects of standardization. On one hand, a standardized language acquires an orthography that may enable it to thrive and even become hegemonic. Yoruba provides an example. It prospered after being standardized in the second half of the nineteenth century, largely through the work of Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the first African bishop of the Niger. Crowther's translation of the Bible into Yoruba was a landmark in the history of the language, setting a standard for writing and other communication, serving as a model for language primers, novels, plays, and other kinds of texts, and laying the groundwork for a robust film and video industry in the second half of the twentieth century. On the other hand, the standardization of a language may lead to the slow deaths of related and contiguous languages, reduced to dialects. As Yoruba was standardized, its usage and prestige increased;

at the same time, the lives of languages associated with it were shortened. The establishment of a standard Yoruba meant the exclusion of forms of expression that could not be fitted into the new linguistic order of things.

The march of Yoruba in the twenty-first century, like that of other hegemonic languages in Africa, has been driven by the creativity opened up by technologies of writing and by the electronic media—but the good fortunes of the authorized and standardized language have masked the adverse effects it has had on less fortunate tongues in western Nigeria. Today many Oko people in Kogi, a state in Nigeria, speak or understand Yoruba although there is no Yoruba community in their "immediate neighborhood," E. Adegbija notes. "It is sometimes considered a thing of pride for an Oko person to be able to speak Yoruba because it is one of Nigeria's three major functionally and officially recognized languages" (289). Having entered the Oko tent by its nose, Yoruba seeks, like the proverbial camel, to take the whole cultural space. How does one respond to this situation? Part of me feels that we cannot just sit back and watch a language die, but another part tries to see the matter from the perspective of those who give up their languages for the future they imagine. I bemoan the alienation that the loss of Oko entails and fear for the threat that it faces, but who am I to tell the young Oko not to watch Yoruba soap operas on satellite television or not to have fantasies of modernity that are only available to them in the authorized languages?

When a Language Dies

Should literary scholars be invested in the cause of preserving languages, or is this a business better left to linguists and ethnographers? This question is complicated by the emergence of what appears to be an unspoken rift between language and literature, but that is a subject for another column. What is easy to recognize is that if language is the key to literary expression and if literature enhances the life and fate of language, then this might be the time for a linguistic turn in our field: a greater preoccupation with the intimate relation between language and literature. It is significant that almost all attempts to preserve endangered languages are pegged to speech. According to Mark Turin, the World Oral Literature Project is "an urgent global initiative to document and disseminate endangered oral literatures before they disappear without record." When a language is unwritten, as most vulnerable languages are, we can experience what it is or was to its people through their oral literature. A dead language can survive in writing, as Latin has, but it becomes a fossil without the exchange of its sounds in a speech community. It is in the sound of a language that one is most likely to discover the essence of its being and of its fragility.

A poem by the anthropologist Miguel León-Portilla captures what happens when a language dies:

> Cuando muere una lengua
> las cosas divinas,
> estrellas, sol y luna;
> las cosas humanas,
> pensar y sentir,
> no se reflejan ya
> en ese espejo.
>
> When a language dies
> the divine things,
> stars, sun and moon;
> the human things,
> thinking and feeling,
> are no longer reflected
> in that mirror.   (my trans.)

I think now about the beauty and fragility of language as I recall the life of Patricia (Patsy) Yaeger, friend, colleague, and my predecessor as editor of *PMLA*. Many years ago, when she was acting chair of the English department at the University of Michigan, Patsy used to open every meeting not with a prayer or pledge but with the reading of a poem. I

recall coming a few minutes late to one such meeting when she was in the middle of reading William Wordsworth's "We Are Seven." I caught the last three verses of the poem, the fragile yet stubborn words of a "little Maid" using her mastery of words to have her will in a perilous world:

> "And when the ground was white with snow,
> And I could run and slide,
> My brother John was forced to go,
> And he lies by her side."
>
> "How many are you, then," said I,
> "If they two are in heaven?"
> Quick was the little Maid's reply,
> "O Master! we are seven."
>
> "But they are dead; those two are dead!
> Their spirits are in heaven!"
> 'Twas throwing words away; for still
> The little Maid would have her will,
> And said, "Nay, we are seven!"

Letting a language die is an injustice, a denial of will to those who speak it.

Simon Gikandi

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