

Endangered languages threaten to disappear, researcher says

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Endangered animal and plant species regularly make the news, but another type of endangered species is often overlooked: human languages. A University of Missouri-Columbia researcher has dedicated much of her career to studying and preserving some of these languages, including indigenous languages spoken in the U.S. and Mexico.

"In the next 100 years, probably half of the world's languages will disappear unless vigorous measures are taken now," said N. Louanna Furbee, professor emerita of anthropology in MU's College of Arts and Science. "This is as significant as the loss of animal and plant species. These are vastly different languages with vastly different ways of solving problems. If we lose them, we lose unique perspectives on the world, unique logics and unique ways of encoding the world for understanding."

Furbee's research focuses primarily on the study and preservation of Tojolab'al, a Mayan language spoken in the Chiapas region of Mexico, and Chiwere, a Siouan language spoken by the Otoe-Missouria and Iowa Tribes in the U.S. Both languages are rapidly becoming extinct as elderly speakers die without passing the language on to younger generations. Furbee has worked closely with members of the tribes who speak these languages to develop an understanding of the languages' grammars, to archive and translate materials in the languages, and to train native speakers in language documentation so that they can carry on the study of the languages and develop courses and materials to teach others. She also has written a grammar (a description of the language's grammatical structure), a dictionary and a concordance of texts for Tojolab'al.

"Losing languages is a loss of local knowledge but also a loss of general human knowledge," she said. "In Tojolab'al, for example, there are about 50 grammatically integrated ways for persons to signal how true they believe information to be when they speak. These include words or parts of words that indicate that the speaker knows the truthfulness first hand – that the speaker saw the event happen or has the information on reliable authority. Similar linguistic markers signal a range of doubt up to a level that indicates that the speaker considers the information a rumor, or even believes it to be completely false. In English, we can make these same discriminations in speaking, but doing so requires us to use circumlocutions and many extra words."

Furbee recently received the Victoria R. Fromkin Lifetime Service Award from the Linguistic Society of America (LSA) for her contributions to the field of linguistics. In addition to her own studies, she has been a leader in preserving other endangered languages by organizing an LSA series called "Conversations" about the appropriate roles for the LSA to take in the archiving of endangered languages. She also organized a related conference on language documentation and co-edited a book deriving from the conference. She has been LSA archivist since 1998 and was co-archivist for two years prior to that. Furbee also served in various roles within the Society for Linguistic Anthropology, the American Anthropological Association, and the Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americans, for which she served as president in 1988. She has her doctorate in linguistics from The University of Chicago and has been at MU since 1974.

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia

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