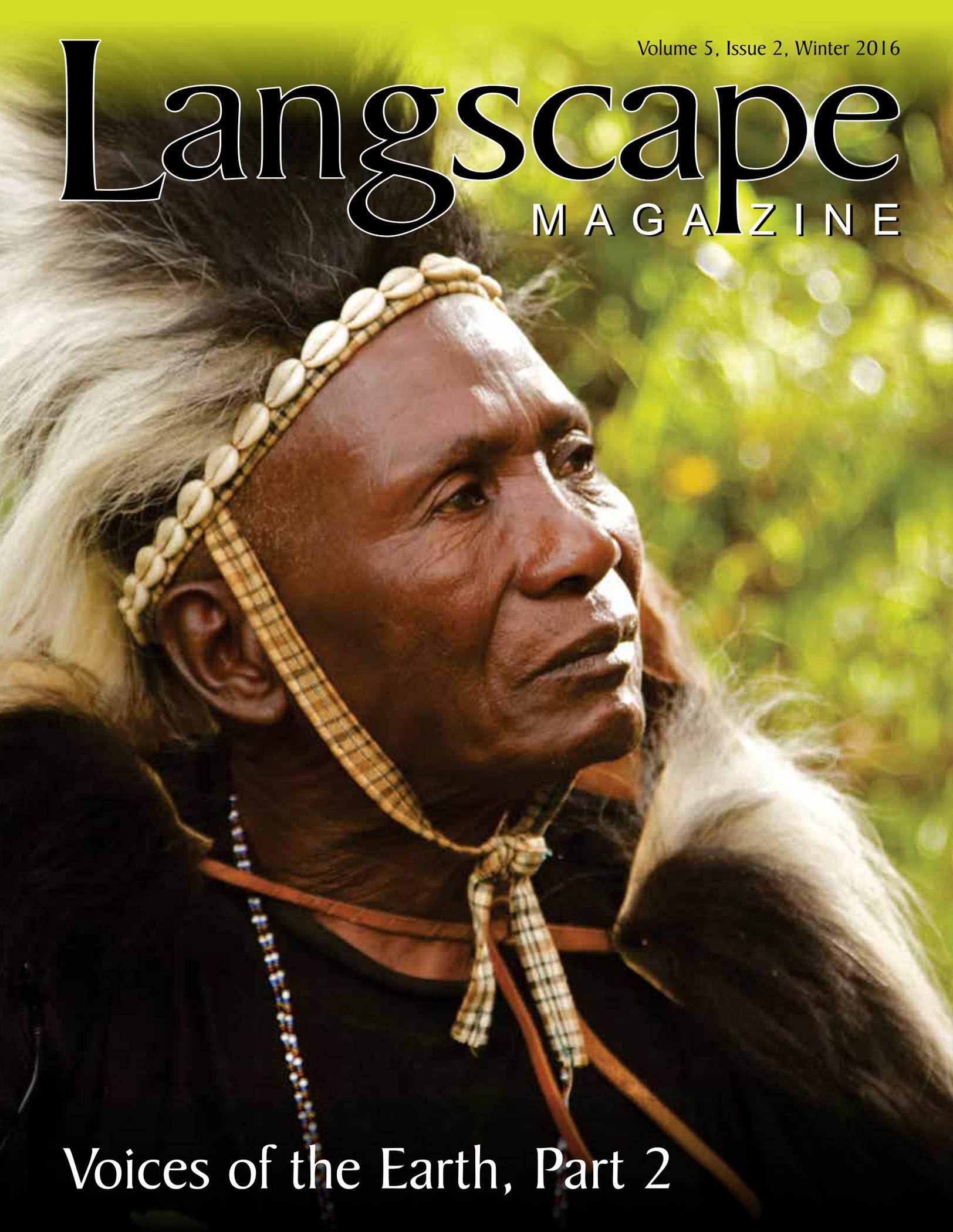


Volume 5, Issue 2, Winter 2016

Langscape

MAGAZINE



Voices of the Earth, Part 2

Langscape Magazine is an extension of the voice of Terralingua. It supports our mission by educating the minds and hearts about the importance and value of biocultural diversity.

We aim to promote a paradigm shift by illustrating biocultural diversity through scientific and traditional knowledge, within an appealing sensory context of articles, stories, and art.

ABOUT THE COVER PHOTOS

Front: Dr. Rimberia Mwangi, Sacred Site Custodian, Meru, Kenya.

Photo: Jess Phillimore/The Gaia Foundation, 2012

Back: Two fishermen on Lake George, Western Uganda.

Photo: Hal Rhoades/The Gaia Foundation, 2016

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Clint Carroll is an enrolled citizen of the Cherokee Nation and an assistant professor in the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder. His work with Cherokee communities in Oklahoma focuses on tribal environmental governance, health sovereignty, and the revitalization of traditional ecological knowledge and practices.

The Cherokee Nation Medicine Keepers

The Cherokee Nation Medicine Keepers are a group of Oklahoma Cherokee elders who have incorporated to perpetuate Cherokee ethnobiological knowledge for future generations. As fluent Cherokee speakers conversant with the ties between language, knowledge, and the environment, they seek to strengthen these connections by promoting tribally led land education and conservation.

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Ajuawak Kapashesit

Ajuawak Kapashesit, of Cree and Ojibwe heritage, is a non-profit communications consultant, freelance writer, and researcher. He graduated from Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minnesota, USA, with a degree in Linguistics focusing primarily on endangered languages, and has been working in this field ever since.

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Katherine Dominique Lind

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Hēmi is a research fellow in Te Pua Wānanga ki te Ao at the University of Waikato, Aotearoa/New Zealand. He has worked as a project leader and researcher on a range of projects centered on the revitalization and protection of Māori language and knowledge. He affiliates to Ngāti Kahungunu and Ngāi Tahu.

Ken Wilson

Dr. Ken Wilson grew up absorbed by both the cultural diversity and biological diversity of Central Africa, and committed to integrate them despite an excess of English education. He enjoyed trying that at Oxford, the Ford Foundation, and The Christensen Fund. Retiring to Borneo in 2015, he remains involved with the African villages of his youth.

Like . Growing Flowers

*The Work of Saving
Endangered Languages*

Ajuawak Kapashesit

Language endangerment is a growing issue around the globe. Of the less than 7,000 languages spoken today, many are not expected to survive into the next century. Because of this growing threat to our planet’s linguistic diversity—something that should be cherished as much as our biological diversity—many language activists and linguists have taken on the important task of documenting and reinvigorating these vanishing voices. What steps can be taken to save languages around the world? Through case studies and by reviewing the literature from experts in the field, we can better understand how to combat language endangerment in every community facing it.

The first question is: What is an endangered language? According to UNESCO, “A language is endangered when its speakers cease to use it, use it in fewer and fewer domains, use fewer of its registers and speaking styles, and/or stop passing it on to the next generation.” Let’s dissect this definition. “When its speakers cease to use it” is a direct reference to two potential scenarios: a) all of the speakers of a given language pass away; or b) speakers of a language decide to stop using that language and shift to using another language. The next part of the definition references “domains.” Domains are areas of use for

the language such as the household, the office, schools, and spiritual gatherings. The expression “registers and speaking styles” describes the use of different vocabulary for different social groups or settings. For example, the way you speak to your family may be different from the way you speak to your friends and is quite likely to be different from how you speak to your boss. Finally, “stop passing it on to the next generation” references the natural transmission of languages from one generation to the next.

UNESCO’s definition can help determine whether a language is endangered or not. But how do we define exactly how endangered a particular language is? For example, a language that is no longer being used in government though is still strong in the community is in a different position from a language with only a few elderly speakers remaining, even though both fit our definition of an endangered language.

Much as in the plant and animal kingdoms, there is a spectrum of endangerment for languages.

Above: Elder Melda Lambert shares her art and hymns translated into her first language, Arikara, a Native American language spoken in North Dakota. Photo: Ajuawak Kapashesit, 2016. Reproduced with permission

Levels of Language Endangerment

Level	Description
<i>Unsafe</i>	<i>The language is used by all children in limited domains.</i>
<i>Definitively Endangered</i>	<i>The language is used mostly by the parental generation and up, but not the children.</i>
<i>Severely Endangered</i>	<i>The language is used mostly by the grandparent generation and up; parents and children do not use the language.</i>
<i>Critically Endangered</i>	<i>The language is used by very few elderly speakers, typically of the great-grandparental generation.</i>
<i>Extinct</i>	<i>There are no remaining first language speakers of the language and the language is considered ‘dead,’ ‘sleeping,’ or ‘dormant.’</i>

**adapted from UNESCO’s scale of language vitality*

Organizations like UNESCO and the Summer Institute of Linguistics have created guidelines to guide a classification of endangered languages. In a nutshell, the guidelines break endangered languages down into five categories, based on the work of renowned linguist Joshua Fishman, as summarized in the following table.

We can see in this table that there are a lot of different stages of language endangerment. Because of this variation, different languages will need different kinds of support to be revitalized. That is why it is crucial to assess each language’s status as accurately as possible to create the most effective plan to revitalize it. In defining the state of a language, it is important to consider other variables, such as speaker population and the language’s status in society. Based on the state of the language, the appropriate revitalization methods must be identified. Different revitalization methods can be implemented for languages at different levels of endangerment, working backwards from the most extreme to the least extreme level.

The process of reviving an extinct, or dormant, language is trickier than others. The most important step is to locate any and all information on the language. Things like grammar texts, letters, recordings, interviews, linguistic notes, and archives often make up the backbone of the resources for

understanding these languages. Some languages are highly documented whereas others are less so; the more documentation you can find, the better.

It is also highly important to learn about related languages, or sister languages, that stem from the same original language (e.g., Italian and Spanish are sister languages coming from Latin). Through sister languages, one can learn about how the languages have changed over time to find patterns of change that can be replicated across the language. It is also possible to find words missing from your language by comparing the related languages’ words for objects and concepts.

It was through this method that the Wampanoag people in Massachusetts, USA, have been able to revitalize their language, not spoken in over a hundred years, based on the tireless efforts of the staff of the Wampanoag Language Reclamation Project. Through their work, which included collecting old letters and books in the Wampanoag language and comparing them to sister Algonquian languages, there are now many learners of the language, including the first native speaker in over a century.

Critically endangered languages, as you may recall, are the languages with very few speakers who are of the great-grandparent generation. These languages are in a dire position, and the

work of documenting and revitalizing them can be the most pressing of all to prevent more cases of language extinction. A method for helping to revitalize these languages that has grown in popularity around the world is the Master–Apprentice training method. This method takes an elderly speaker of the language and partners them one on one with a younger learner of the language for extended periods of time. During this time, the elder speaker (Master) will use only the target language to communicate with the student (Apprentice) as they learn to navigate everyday situations. It’s like how Yoda trains Luke in the Star Wars original trilogy. This process, first launched in California, has proven to have some success in language revitalization if both Master and Apprentice are faithful to the system.

A shared aspect between definitively and severely endangered languages is the idea of a language being moribund. Moribund means that the speakers of the language are adults; children do not use the language. This was the situation of Māori in New Zealand. In the 1970s, most of the fluent Māori speakers were forty or older, which worried many about the language’s future. Because of this, there was a movement in the Māori community to reinforce Māori language and culture. One of the things that came out of this movement was the creation of *Te Kohanga Reo*, which translates as “the Language Nest.” The nests are designed for children ranging in ages from one to six. These children are put in a daycare-like setting with speakers who are not tasked with



Above: Arikara elder Melda Lambert records narratives about her life and experiences for her family to have. Photo: Ajuawak Kapashesit, 2016. Reproduced with permission

“teaching” the language, only with using it as one normally would. After all, your parents never gave you formal lessons in your first language, you just picked it up. The goal of these language nests has been to recreate this natural learning situation with the target language of Māori. These nests have been shown to be quite successful in the work of getting youth to use the language.

“Much as in the plant and animal kingdoms, there is a spectrum of endangerment for languages.”

An important aspect of this system is the cultural reinforcement that occurs concurrently with language learning. Māori culture includes an aspect of a kinship community, known as *whanau*, which is important both for cultural practices and language nests. The speakers and staff who work in the nest are the *whanau* of the children involved. It is because of these ties that the language nest model works to become self-sufficient as speakers and staff work together to ensure the success of the nests. The program became wildly successful in the country, leading to further education through the medium of Māori that has created many more young speakers of the language.

Unsafe languages are used by children and adults alike, but are not used in every language domain; thus, there is a level of erosion of the language. One language facing this level of endangerment is the Irish language. The Irish people have had great success in recent decades with revitalizing their language through making it an official language of Ireland as well as making it mandatory in school. Though not all Irish people consider themselves fluent speakers of the language, most are familiar with it. The work of several Irish radio stations has been dedicated to creating a space for a language community outside of established speaking communities.

One of the main tasks that come with this tremendous work has been the creation of new vocabulary for the Irish language. As a news-distributing structure, Irish radio needs to be able to discuss many of today’s most pressing issues. Economic development, political campaigns, and military actions are just some of the concepts often discussed today; few endangered languages have terms to discuss these—let alone for more

common words such as computer, cell phone, or Facebook! Creating words for these is an important aspect of any revitalization plan, in order to expand domains and make it easier and easier for speakers to continue using the language to reference aspects of their everyday lives. Further, it is important for both Māori and Irish to work to ensure that the revitalized language is not just the language of the school. To guarantee its survival, children need to use it on the playground as well as in the classroom. It is up to adults to show youth that the target language is appropriate in all domains, not just the required ones.

So now that we’ve defined endangered languages and learned about how some communities have revitalized them, what are some of the most important things to save a language in your community? First, learn and collect everything you can about it: dictionaries, grammars, recordings, and any information on current speakers of the language. These are the resources you will need to learn to best understand the language. Second, understand and define as thoroughly as possible what is lacking for the level of language vitality you want to help attain, and define some reasonable goals you can work towards. Examples of this can be getting kids to learn some of the language or growing the domains that it is used in. Each language will be different. Then, create a plan to reach those goals. Read examples of language communities that faced similar issues and how

they overcame them. There are plenty of useful resources that can help you on this journey (see some examples in Further Reading).

Remember that this work is slow. Nobody learns a language overnight, and no community will either. Like flowers, only with constant care and the right environment will these languages grow. Much as it is the case with our plant and animal relatives, it is up to all of us to save our world’s linguistic diversity.

Further Reading

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Two generations of Hidatsa and Arikara speakers remember their childhoods and their languages. From left: Victoria Elk, Melda Lambert, Shirley Grady, Eleanor Hale Sorenson, Martha Birdbear, Mary Elk, Mary Gachupin. Photo: Ajuawak Kapashesit, 2016. Reproduced with permission

"Stories are like ecosystems, with a community of meanings, interpretations, and systems interacting with their physical, cultural, and spiritual environments. As Indigenous Peoples have realized, all parts of the story matter."

– Hēmi Whaanga and Priscilla Wehi

