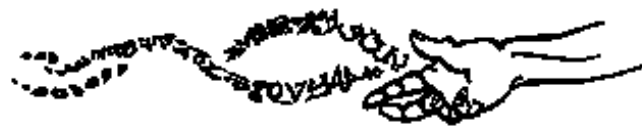
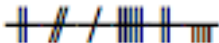


# FOUNDATION FOR ENDANGERED LANGUAGES



(UK Registered Charity No 1070616)

# OGMIOS

A graphic element below the word OGMIOS, consisting of a horizontal line with several vertical bars of different heights and colors (blue, orange, green) interspersed along it.

**OGMIOS Newsletter 81: — June 2025**

ISSN 1471-0382    Editor: Christopher Moseley



*Vitoria-Gasteiz, seat of the University of the Basque Country, venue of the 2025 FEL conference*

**OGMIOS Newsletter 81**  
**June 2025**

*Contact the Editor at:*  
Christopher Moseley,  
9 Westdene Crescent,  
Caversham Heights,  
Reading RG4 7HD, England  
chrmos50 at gmail.com

**Assistant Editor:** Eda Derhemi  
**Contributing Editors:** Nicholas Ostler, Serena d'Agostino  
**OGMIOS**

appears three times a year, and is the journal of the Foundation for Endangered Languages, available to members either on-line or in hard copy. Contributions are welcome, and can be sent to the Editor, Chris Moseley, at [chrmos50@gmail.com](mailto:chrmos50@gmail.com). Subscription details can be found on the Foundation's web-site. [www.ogmios.org](http://www.ogmios.org).

## Table of Contents

|                                     |    |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| OGMIOS                              | 1  |
| 1. Editorial                        | 3  |
| 2. Development of the Foundation    | 3  |
| 3. Endangered Languages in the News | 3  |
| 4. New publications                 | 12 |
| 5. Events                           | 12 |

## 1. Editorial

I can't make an apology that *Ogmios* is turning into a bit of a *Reader's Digest* for linguists. I wish it weren't so, but we don't commission many original articles from our membership, or even outside our membership. The membership of FEL, I always like to think, has a vast range of expertise, either academic knowledge or indigenous knowledge, that you who are reading this must stop and think: Maybe I could contribute something to these pages? If so, don't delay! Get in touch with your Editor at the e-mail address given above, and offer an article for *Ogmios* on a subject about which only you might be the expert! Meanwhile FEL is preparing for its 29<sup>th</sup> annual conference, this year paying a visit to the Basque Country, enjoying the collaboration of the University of the Basque Country. For more details, see below.

Chris Moseley

## 2. Development of the Foundation

### FEL XXIX: Endangered Languages and Sustainable Development

The Foundation for Endangered Languages and the UNESCO Chair of World Language Heritage, The University of the Basque Country, invite you to the 29th annual conference of the Foundation at Vitoria-Gasteiz, the Basque Country, Spain, 22 – 25 October 2025, on the theme: The Missing Sustainable Development Goal: Endangered Languages and Sustainable Development

#### A note on the purpose of the conference

The purpose of the conference is to show, demonstrate, prove, that language – in its widest definition – is linked to and, to a large extent, is a condition, of the success of sustainable development in its political (including social, economic, etc.) incarnation.

We start from a widely recognised and adopted programme, the United Nations' plan (Agenda 2030) towards reaching sustainable development for all nations (ie member states) which takes the form of 17 practical goals (SDGs) and we wish to inform the UN, its member states and any other states, institutions, communities and entities, that

- 1) Language is linked to, and interrelated with, both the whole and its components (SD Agenda)
- 2) Without taking into account language and the language dimension of human development, the Agenda for Sustainable Development will not, or will not fully, succeed (by 2030).
- 3) The 17 specific goals defined by the international community to help achieve the objective are well thought out, detailed, and address crucial aspects of sustainable development, yet:
- 4) Not one of these 17 goals deals with language and cultural diversity in a satisfactory way.
- 5) The absence of the language dimension is a permanent handicap / impediment and must be addressed in the form of a fully dedicated mechanism (according to UN jargon), an 18th

SDG which integrates entirely and comprehensively the language dimension and makes full use of it to contribute to the success of the agenda.

In other words, we may have 17 specific and, perhaps, even well designed goals, but without the 18th, perhaps the most crucial, the process is flawed. It is the role of linguists, or any other experts and advocates who deal with language, to explain and convince, to inspire and instill enthusiasm and, even, to excite creativity, with the ultimate objective of conceptualising an 18th Goal for the Sustainable Agenda.

In a departure from other FEL conferences, the thrust of FEL XXIX will not be on threats and sources of threat (endangerment) to language (and ways to prevent and stop them) but on language itself as a potential source of both threat – if it is ignored – and solace (to sustainable development) – if it is taken into account.

Consequently, the role of the conference is to inform and warn about the earlier, and to provide material for the latter. Such material would be somewhat like supplying the ingredients for a recipe, and, in this case, the content of an 18th SDG, with concrete and achievable targets – all related to language and all strengthening sustainable development.

## 3. Endangered Languages in the News

### Letter from India: Hold your tongue

By Samanth Subramanian, from the *New Yorker*, 25 November 2024

In some Indian languages, the word for 'language' is *bhasha* – the vowels long and warm, as in 'car' or 'tar'. It has a formal weight and a refined spirit. It comes to us from the classical heights of Sanskrit, and it evokes a language with a script and a literature, with newspapers and codified grammar and chauvinists and textbooks. But there is another word, *boli*. It, too, refers to language, but its more accurate meaning is 'that which is spoken'. In its sense of the oral, it hints at colloquialisms, hybridity, and a demotic that belongs to the streets. The insinuation is that a *bhasha* is grander and more sophisticated than a *boli*. The language of language infects how we think about language.

For more than forty years, the distance between these two words has preoccupied the literary scholar Ganesh Devy. He knows precisely when it all began. In 1979, when he was completing his Ph.D. in English literature at Shivaji University, in the Indian city of Kolhapur, he found in the library a commentary on India's censuses. The 1961 census had identified sixteen hundred and fifty-two 'mother tongues', many of them, like Bethuli or Khawathlang, with speakers numbering in the single digits. But the 1971 census listed only a hundred and eight; the hundred-and-ninth entry was 'all others'. That made Devy wonder: what had happened to the other fifteen-hundred-odd languages, the various *boli* deemed too unimportant to name? "The 'all others' intrigued me, then it bothered me, and then I got obsessed with it," Devy said. "Literature is a product of language, so at some point I thought, When I know that so many other languages have been masked, do I not have any responsibility toward them?"

Too often, India's riotous profusion of languages is conveyed through metaphor, adage, or anecdote. You may compare India to Babel, or quote the Hindi aphorism that roughly runs, "Every two miles, the taste of water changes, / And every eight miles, the language." (My own anecdotal offering: My grandmother, who never finished high school, spoke five languages fluently.) Five of the world's major language families are present here – but beyond that quantification has proved elusive. After 1961, the Indian census did not count languages with any rigor; it mainly published the names of all the languages that people *said* they spoke. The last one, from 2011, registered around nineteen thousand "mother tongues" – a plain absurdity. In the world's most populous country, no one knows how many languages are living, or how many have died.

Devy, who is seventy-four, is a mild-mannered man – his voice and his shoulders rounded, as if from a lifetime spent hunched over books in sepulchral libraries. One of his oldest friends, the political theorist Jyotirmaya Sharma, affectionately described Devy's accent as *ghaati* – a Hindi word meaning 'rustic'. Which is to say, Sharma told me, that, while Devy's former English department colleagues at the Maharaja Sayajirao University, in the western India city of Vadodara, spoke "as if they were eating sandwiches in Manchester", Devy discussed Milton and Coleridge in the same homegrown tones that he used for the Mahabharata and the Bengali philosopher Aurobindo Ghose. Like many of Devy's acquaintances, Sharma mentions his wicked sense of humor. Once, as the two men were returning on Devy's scooter from a printing press where they'd just put a journal to bed, they saw a truck bearing down on them. "The scooter only occasionally had brakes," Sharma told me. He feared the worst. Then, in his recollection, Devy said drily, "Jyotirmaya, put down your legs with all your might to create some friction, and I will change gears. Then perhaps the future of good literature might be saved."

Over the years, Devy has taught literature, won the Sahitya Akademi award – perhaps India's highest literary honor – for a work of literary criticism, crusaded for the rights of India's indigenous communities, and founded a tribal academy in a forest two hours outside Vadodara. But the capstone of his career is the People's Linguistic Survey of India (P.L.S.I.) in which has enlisted more than three thousand volunteers to map India's motley splurge of languages for the first time in a century. The exercise began in 2010, and the results have been published in state-specific volumes bearing olive-green dust-jackets, with names like 'The Languages of Tripura Part 1' and 'The Languages of Kerala and Lakshadweep'. In April, Devy, the chief editor of the project, will submit the manuscripts for five additional volumes before beginning the last book of the series: his diagnosis of the health of India's languages.

Sometimes a language withers because of customs we consider normal, and even desirable: intermarriage, migration, participation in the global economy. But Devy believes that any progress incapable of giving people the means to keep their language is no progress at all. Everywhere, the effacement of some languages by others – Nahuatl by Spanish, Aleut by Russian, Uyghur by Mandarin Chinese – is really a result of how power and wealth behave. English is so widely known, for instance, not thanks to any inherent syntactic or grammatical felicity but because it is an artifact of the British Empire and the American

twentieth century. In India, the politics of language have always been especially overt: in the constitution's aversion to designating a national language; in the north's leverage over the south; in the demarcation of states along linguistic lines. Invariably, Devy said, the people who speak many of the languages grouped under 'all others' in the 1971 census also live on India's economic margins. In 2010, the death of Boa Sr, a woman in her eighties who was the last known speaker of Bo, a language of the Andaman Islands, marked the extinction of a tribe that had been forcibly resettled around the archipelago and subjugated by the mainland. Bo might have been outlived by another Great Andamanese language, which in turn may feel menaced by Bengali, which itself feels the encroachment of Hindi – languages turning turtle all the way down.

Since 2014, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (B.J.P.) came to power, it has made the future of Indian languages even more uncertain. In addition to its well-known Hindu fanaticism, the B.J.P. wishes to foist Hindi on the nation, a synthetic marriage that would clothe India in a monolingual monoculture. Across northern and central India, roughly three hundred million people speak as their first language, the standardized Hindi that the B.J.P. holds dear – but, this being India, that leaves more than a billion who don't. Even so, the government tried to make Hindi a mandatory language in schools until fierce opposition forced a rollback. The country's Department of Official Language, which promotes the use of Hindi, has had its budget nearly tripled in the past decade, to about fifteen million dollars. A parliamentary committee recently urged that Hindi be made a prerequisite for government employment, raising the possibility that such jobs might become the preserve of people from the B.J.P.'s Hindi-speaking heartland. Three years ago, India's Home Minister called Hindi the 'foundation of our cultural consciousness and national unity' – a message that he put out in a tweet written only in Hindi.

In India, where language scaffolds culture and identity, this pressure affects daily life. On social media, people routinely bristle at encountering Hindi in their non-Hindi-speaking states – on bank documents, income-tax forms, railway signboards, cooking-gas cylinders, or the milestones on national highways. Two years ago, a man set himself on fire in Tamil Nadu to protest the imposition of Hindi. In Karnataka, the state where he lives, Devy sees a simmering resentment of Hindi-speaking arrivals from the north.

The B.J.P. believes that India can cohere only if its identity is fashioned around a single language. For Devy, India's identity is, in fact, its polyglot nature. In ancient and medieval sources, he finds earnest embraces of this abundance: the Mahabharata as a treasury of tales from many languages; the Buddhist king Ashoka's edicts etched in stone across the land in four scripts; the lingua francas of the Deccan sultanates. The coexistence of languages, he thinks, has long allowed Indians to 'accept many gods, many worlds' – an indispensable trait for a country so sprawling and kaleidoscopic. Preserving languages, protecting them from being bullied out of existence, is thus a matter of national importance, Devy said. He designed the P.L.S.I. to insure "that the languages that were off the record are now on the record."

Devy and his wife, Surekha, a retired chemistry professor, live in the town of Dharwad, in a small, neat house surrounded by

guava and coconut trees. Their shelves are lined with books that have survived repeated cullings of their library. Devy now holds an academic post at a Mumbai university, and he lectures constantly around India; when he's home, his living room hosts impromptu symposia. One afternoon, some friends dropped in for a chat: an archaeologist, a lawyer, a literary scholar, and activist, a college principal. Each took or declined a cup of tea, then waited for the talk to ebb before speaking up, like a pedestrian dashing through a break in traffic. I counted four languages: Hindi, Kannada, English, and Marathi. Devy is in his element in these conversations – so immersed that, on occasion, he will talk over others saying their piece. "I still work four or five hours a day on the P.L.S.I.," Devy told me. "The rest of the day, I philander in this way."

Among the books on Devy's shelves are the maroon volumes of the original Linguistic Survey of India, conducted by an Irishman named George Grierson between 1896 and 1928. Grierson held a string of roles in the British Raj, but he'd long been an ardent linguist, so coming to India must have felt like being a botanist who was dropped into the Amazon. With the help of district officials and schoolteachers, Grierson collected 'specimens' of each language: a standard list of two hundred and forty-one words and test sentences, a passage of text, and a translation of the Biblical passage about the prodigal son. In all, Grierson identified a hundred and seventy-nine languages and five hundred and forty-four dialects – the distinction between language and dialect being entirely his own. The experience moved him. At journey's end, he wrote breathlessly: "I have been granted a vision of a magnificent literature enshrining the thoughts of great men from generation to generation through three thousand years."

The survey was an imperfect enterprise. Grierson gathered plenty of material in northern India, where people speak languages from the Indo-European family, and from the east's Sino-Tibetan tongues. But he got almost nothing in the south, so Dravidian languages barely figure in the survey. For several languages, he never received a complete set of specimens. Nevertheless, Ayesha Kidwai, a linguist at New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University, admires Grierson's work for its openness to linguistic variations (or 'shades', as he calls them), its grammatical scrutiny, and its care in laying a base for further scholarship – on how Indian languages ought to be grouped into families, or how linguistic traits have diffused and converged across these families. (Indians, for example, share a fondness for 'echo words', such as *puli-gili*, in Tamil, where *puli* refers to tigers and *gili* is a rhyming nonsense term meaning 'and the like'. This quirk occurs in South Asian languages from at least three families but perhaps in no other language anywhere in the world – a discovery that Grierson's specimens helped make possible.) Since Grierson, though, there has been no similar linguistic survey in India – or indeed, Kidwai says, in comparably polyglot countries like Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, and Indonesia. Around 2005, the Indian government briefly proposed an update to Grierson, but then lost interest. At which point Devy thought, Why wait for the government to initiate the survey? Why should ordinary Indians not step in instead?

In 2010, Devy began holding workshops in every state, inviting professors, writers, folklorists, activists, and anyone else who might assist with the project. They would put together a rough

list of a state's languages: then a native speaker, ideally, would furnish an entry for each one. Devy tried to compensate writers and translators, paying between forty and sixty dollars apiece – "a pittance," he acknowledges. Many refused their fee. He'd raised roughly a hundred thousand dollars from a corporate philanthropy to fund the project, but he also paid for some of it himself.

Very few of Devy's contributors were trained linguists. In the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand, a sculptor took on Runglo, a Sino-Tibetan language; in Sikkim, in the northeast, a woman who ran a typesetting shop helped assemble the entry on Thangmi, a language also spoken over the border in Nepal. So there were more workshops still, in which Devy explained what the survey aspired to collect, and how to collect it. He didn't want to discriminate between language and dialect, and he particularly didn't want any language to be excluded because it had no script of its own. If seventy percent of a language's word stock was unique, it was fit to be in the survey. Devy asked his writers to set down whatever they knew of their language's history, in addition to a few songs, poems, and stories. He asked for linguistic features – how tenses operated, or whether nouns were gendered. He'd read that, in near-extinct languages, words for colors are the final embers to die out, so he suggested contributors collect those as well. He asked for kinship terms, which he described to me as "the sauciest material for any anthropologist. Society is a structure of kinship, after all, as Claude Lévi-Strauss said." And he wanted lists of words for the most common aspects of life: farming implements in an agrarian community, say, or words for the desert in Rajasthan. In the state of Himachal Pradesh, up in the Himalayas, the P.L.S.I.'s writers complied an Indian twist on Franz Boas's old cliché about Inuit languages: scores of terms for snow, across several languages, including those which describe 'flakes falling on water', or 'snow falling when the moon is up.' Devy's project has its critics, both mild and severe. Since neither he nor many of his surveyors are professional linguists, the entries aren't academically rigorous, as those in Grierson's survey were. "I wouldn't necessarily make this criticism," Peter Austin, the former director of the endangered languages program at London's School of Oriental and African Studies, told me. "But some people might say, 'This is just a bunch of waffle about this language, and that's a bunch of waffle about that. We can't compare the two.'" Kidwai finds the collections of lore and songs, and also the grammars, inconsistent, and sometimes entirely absent. But she also thinks that the very idea of the classic linguistic survey is defunct. In India and other developing countries, she said, there are few monolingual speakers: "No language lives alone in a person." Equally, she added, every language exists on a spectrum; Hindi comes in several flavors, a variation the P.L.S.I. fails to capture.

Devy acknowledges these shortcomings. He describes the survey as "more ethnographic than scientific," arguing that it reveals not so much the structure of language as the structure of Indian society. And it gives hope to communities worried about the future of their language. "If they want to lead a movement to preserve it, they have something to start with now," he said. Since 2010, the P.L.S.I. has consumed him. "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" he asked, quoting the final line of a W.B. Yeats poem. "It became like that with me and the survey."

To know me is to know the P.L.S.I., and to know the P.L.S.I. is to know me."

Like many Indians, Devy grew up effortlessly multilingual. He spent his childhood in Bhore, a small town a few hours south-east of Mumbai, where his father serially set up and bank-rupted businesses: a grocery store, a milk co-op, a timber depot. At home, the family spoke Gujarati, the language of their ancestors. On the streets and in school, Devy spoke Marathi, the language of the state in which Bhore lies. A mile away from his house was a small library, holding abridged Western classics in Marathi translation. Devy would check out a book – 'Tarzan', or Charles and Mary Lamb's 'Tales from Shakespeare' – finish it by the time he reached home, and return for another. When his family moved to Sangli, a bigger town nearby, he picked up Hindi in movie theatres, and in his early teens he heard English frequently for the first time, words like 'city bus' and 'milk booth'. In school, he learned not only Sanskrit but also, from his classmates, the dialect spoken by a community of stonemasons called Wadars. "These children were so full of colorful words of abuse – it was the greatest fun," Devy told me. "It unfolded a vast cosmos before me of how the human body's intimate spaces could be described."

By the time Devy was born, Indian leaders had begun to regard language as an existential dilemma. This was a fresh, unstable country, already rent by strife between Hindus and Muslims; to mismanage the linguistic question would be to risk splintering India altogether. Mahatma Gandhi, fearing India wouldn't hold without a national language, proposed that it be Hindustani, which encompasses both Hindi and the very similar Urdu of many Indian Muslims. (In the history of new nations, Gandhi's concern is not an uncommon one. Both Mao Zedong and Giuseppe Mazzini desired a standardized language to bridge the dialects of China and Italy, respectively.) The framers of the Indian constitution, though, declared Hindi and English to be only 'official languages', for use in the business of federal governance. State bureaucracies could use their own official languages. In a quirk, English – the colonizer's legacy – became an emblem of autonomy; as the native language of no Indian, it could be the neutral language for all Indians. When, in the nineteen sixties, it seemed as if the government would drop English as an official language, rioters in southern India destroyed trains and self-immolated in protest. These ructions were so violent that not only was English retained as an official language but also built into the Three-Language Formula, a 1968 policy enjoining schools to teach Hindi, English, and another major Indian language of their choosing. (States weren't forced to follow the formula – something the B.J.P. wishes it could change.) Devy admires the policy's pragmatism but not its principle. He'd prefer that children be able to learn, and learn in, any of their region's languages, however meagrely spoken. "That's not unmanageable," he told me. "Even so-called small languages in India are large in numbers. Most of them have tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of speakers."

When Devy was thirteen, his father abandoned the family. They moved to a shack with a tin roof, and Devy occasionally worked after school, as a street vendor or a furniture porter. Twice he started undergraduate studies but left after a year; the second time, he moved to Goa, working in a bauxite mine by day and then cycling to a library to read English books with a

dictionary by his side. He felt that English met his curiosity about the world in a way that Marathi literature did not. "I thought English was condition of modernity – of having a social condition beyond caste and religion," he said. Language could liberate, but it could also disintegrate, as Devy witnessed throughout his youth. In 1952, a man named Potti Sreeramulu began a hunger strike to demand a separate state for Telugu speakers; after his death, eight weeks later, the Indian government acquiesced. Nativists who spoke Gujarati and Marathi, Devy's first languages, carved out their won states from the greater territory of Bombay. In 1971, Bangladesh, toe India's east, wrenched itself free from Pakistan, partly for linguistic freedom. And in Sri Lanka guerrilla groups commended a decades-long civil war in a quest to claim the island's north and east as a Tamil nation. It must have been hard not to view these uprisings as post-colonial ailments, or to wonder if the subcontinent actually comprised dozens of nations that had been only artificially glued together by imperial authority. For Devy, the third time around, university stuck; he got a B.A. in English literature, then went to Kolhapur for a Ph.D. He resolved to burn through the Western canon at the rate of three hundred pages daily, often spending entire nights in the library. One day, he spotted a young woman studying and went up to talk to her. "Before I even knew her name, I'd asked her to marry me," Devy said. Surekha remembers the episode the same way, but she noted, with a laugh, "I'd studied Marathi and wasn't very conversant with English. When he started speaking in English, I probably didn't understand what he said." Kolhapur was just an hour north of where Surekha had grown up, but her version of Marathi was so different from Devy's that when he first visited her family, he told me, "I made them laugh. They'd look at my lips when they moved!" The papaya has a feminine gender in Devy's Marathi and a masculine gender in Surekha's. "Even today, when we go to the market to buy fruit, we try to correct each other," he said. Devy has a very sure grasp of the arc of his life – of how cause turned into effect, how impulses matured into intellectual pursuits. In his narrative, the eighties were a decade of both disillusionment and discovery. When he began teaching at Maharaja Sayajirao University, in Vadodara, in 1979, he was still wedded to Western literature. Jyotirmaya Sharma, who studied under Devy, recalled the professor assigning him one-page summaries of a few hundred books, beginning with Kafka's 'The Castle'. ("That was my real education," Sharma said.) But in time Devy's syllabi came to include English translations of Indian literature. "It was unusual in an English department in India at the time," Sachin Ketkar, a former student who now teaches at Maharaja Sayajirao, told me. "There were people who thought this ideology of nativism was too parochial."

Throughout the decade, Devy felt energized by a stream of new books in other languages and by writers of the kind who had never previously made it into textbooks, like the firecracker poet Namdeo Dhasal, a Dait who wrote in Marathi. Devy founded a journal for translated literature. He made frequent excursions into the countryside around Vadodara, a habit that had started during a drought-relief campaign. On his infamous scooter, and later in his first car, Devy visited the villages of tribal communities – called Adivasis, or original inhabitants –

and came to believe, as he wrote later, that “culture has no expression but language. The two are one and the same.” Devy was also growing impatient with English’s hold over the Indian imagination. The purpose of the colonial imposition of English, he wrote in his 1992 book, ‘After Amnesia’, was not so much “to civilize India as to institutionalize the British view that India was uncivilized.” ‘After Amnesia’ positions Indian languages like Gujarati, Marathi and Kannada against not only the engulfing influence of English – a common villain of post-colonial thought – but also that of Sanskrit before it. Sharma calls ‘After Amnesia’ the “methodological signpost of Devy’s enterprise.” To bring about true democracy, Sharma said, “you must know the country – you must know its past, and therefore its languages.” Following the book’s publication, Devy quit his job at the university, and stopped reading voraciously in English. “I was getting a little sick of books,” he told me, adding that turning away from literature allowed him to think more like the Adivasis he encountered.

What do we lose when we lose a language? For Devy, it’s a world-view – the disappearance not only of many words for snow but also a way of life and thought intimately bound to cold weather. Not everyone agrees. Peter Austin suggests that Devy’s stance – that the way we see the world is determined by the language we speak – is a case of faulty essentialism. Austin thinks the losses are of bodies of knowledge: “The history that goes along with a language, the poetry, the music, the oral culture, the storytelling.”

Like Devy, Austin believes that the modern erasure of languages is not an organic, irreversible process. He has witnessed resurrections – of Gamilaray, for example, an Australian Aboriginal language that he researched in the seventies. Gamilaray was on such a parlous state, he said, “that the most any individual would know was about two hundred words – very common words like ‘hand’ and ‘meat’ and ‘shit’.” Today, the language is taught in schools and universities, thanks to Austin’s success in documenting it, in addition to remarkable grassroots organizing. It’s the kind of comeback that Devy hopes the P.L.S.I. will facilitate. “For a long time, I thought this was literary and cultural work,” Devy said. After a conversation with a sociologist friend, he realized that he “was saying things with great political implications – that to talk culture and challenge culture is deep politics.”

Devy would never have left Vadodara had it not been for the murder of a writer nine years ago. On a quiet Dharwad street, populated mostly by the solemn houses of university professors, two men rode up on a motorcycle, walked through the gate of M.M.Kalburgi’s bungalow, and asked for him at the door. When Kalburgi emerged, one of the men grabbed his sweater, put a pistol between his eyes, and fired. Then the killers fled, their motorcycle roaring.

Kalburgi was a feisty writer; in Dharwad, where they speak a Kannada flecked with Marathi, people noted his *bhandtana*, or stubbornness. His work habitually castigated the orthodoxies of Hinduism: its paralyzing caste hierarchies, its rituals, its idolatry. The Sanatan Sanstha, a Hindu-nationalist outfit believed to have ordered the hit on Kalburgi, was already suspected of assassinating two other writers who criticized Hinduism’s most regressive aspects. (Alleged members of the Sanatan Sanstha have been convicted for one of these murders and are on trial

for the other two.) “The killing upset me profoundly, and it made me so restless,” Devy said. He’d met Kalburgi just once, but he and Surekha decided to move to Dharwad – to help Kalburgi’s family seek justice, to show solidarity, and to make some noise. When the Devys found a house to rent, they discovered that the local headquarters of the Sanatan Sanstha was right next door.

Weeks after Kalburgi’s murder, Devy returned his Sahitya Akademi award. Kalburgi had won the same prize, and yet the Akademi committee, nominally independent but funded by the Indian government, hadn’t raised a murmur of condemnation about the killing, Devy said. Dozens of other writers gave back their state awards as well, protesting the right-wing violence that had swelled in the years since the B.J.P. came to power. After arriving in Dharwad, Devy organized student protests and conferences drawing hundreds of writers. He enlisted a lawyer to petition India’s Supreme Court to combine Kalburgi’s murder trial with those of the other two assassinated writers. (The court rejected this plea.) Twice, Devy visited Karnataka’s Chief Minister to urge the prosecution to proceed more quickly. The second time, he ran into the journalist Gauri Lankesh, who was there for the same purpose. Days later, Lankesh was shot dead outside her house; the man suspected of driving the getaway vehicle also stands accused of Kalburgi’s murder. For all this, the Kalburgi trial has inched along; the case is being heard one day a month in a Dharwad court. As of September, only twelve out of a hundred and thirty-eight witnesses had been examined. “Because of Ganesh Devy,” Umadevi Kalburgi, the writer’s wife, told me, “we were able to muster our courage and pursue the case.”

During his time in Vadodara, Devy had seen, up close, the rise of an ugly, intolerant Hindu fundamentalism. One the street one night, he encountered a Hindu mob hunting for Muslims to harm; he sent them in the wrong direction. When the famed playwright Habib Tanvir came to the city, invited by the university’s theatre department, landlords refused to rent him an apartment because he was Muslim. In 2002, a Hindu-led pogrom against Muslims ripped through Vadodara and other cities in the state of Gujarat, leaving more than a thousand people dead. The state’s B.J.P. government, run by its Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, didn’t stop the savagery for weeks; subsequently, Modi and his party were accused of abetting the Hindu rioters. Surekha started a relief camp for Muslims who had been driven out of their homes, but after a week city officials forced her to shut it down, claiming that she was stirring unrest.

Throughout that period, Devy lay in his bed at night but found himself too distraught to sleep. “I became more openly political,” he told me. “Previously, I’d had a naïve faith in the state. After 2002, my view changed. In 2014, Modi became India’s Prime Minister, a role he has held ever since. “What we began to see in India after 2014 had already happened in Gujarat,” Devy told me. “Violence had been built in the atmosphere.”

Devy’s vocal opposition to the B.J.P.’s virulence has not left him unscathed. Surekha’s career at Maharaja Sayajirao, which is a public university, foundered because her research and travel grants dried up, she told me. Just before Modi and the B.J.P. came to power, Devy had secured a three-year government

grant of nearly two million dollars to support his work on Adivasi languages. The funds were to be channelled through the university, which received the first tranche just as Modi became Prime Minister. Devy never got his money. A former university official, who asked to remain anonymous, told me that his colleagues became reluctant to displease Modi, the B.J.P., and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (R.S.S.), a paramilitary organization that is the B.J.P.'s ideological parent. The R.S.S. and Gujarat's education minister also leaned heavily on the university to refrain from disbursing the grant, he said. Local R.S.S. members told him that Devy's mission to preserve Adivasi languages and culture contradicted its own doctrine that everyone native to India ought to be Hindu – even tribes with beliefs that don't map neatly onto the narrow, upper-caste, puritanical Hinduism that the R.S.S. promotes. Devy's return of his Sahitya Akademi award was the final straw, the former university official said – proof, for the B.J.P., that he'd "joined the anti-Modi intellectual gang."

In a way, the B.J.P. and Devy are two sides of a single coin. The B.J.P.'s political project is also a decolonizing one: an attempt to shake off the traumas of subjugation, and to revive an older, singular Indian spirit. But the B.J.P. sees that spirit as uniformly Hindu. By corollary, it regards India's linguistic heritage as a product of Sanskrit, an ancestor of Hindi and the language of Hinduism's liturgy. Ayesha Kidwai told me that the government has stopped funding several institutes of endangered languages in public universities. The Central Institute of Indian Languages, part of India's Ministry of Education, has been tasked with theorizing an 'Indian macrofamily' of languages, to 'unify' differences between Sanskrit-based tongues and those of other language families. "There's a sudden emphasis on how many Sanskrit borrowings are in Malayalam, say," Kidwai told me. "I'm very perturbed about this."

Jyotirmaya Sharma believes that the B.J.P.'s imposition of a single linguistic sensibility on India will, if anything, be even harder to achieve than the imposition of a single faith. "This monolingual project will bring about their downfall," Sharma said. It reminded me of an observation by the nineteenth-century philologist Friedrich Max Müller. "It is said that blood is thicker than water," he noted in an Oxford lecture, "but it may be said with even greater truth that language is thicker than blood."

One afternoon, the Devys and I drove from Vadodara to the village of Tejgadh, where Devy founded his Adivasi Academy, in 1999. The campus's red brick buildings – including a library, a clinic, and a residential multilingual school for Adivasi children – lie in a forest clearing at the foot of a hill. The Adivasis around Tejgadh speak a language called Rathwi, whose P.L.S.I. entry was co-authored by Naran Rathwa and Vikesh Rathwa, two unrelated farmers from the community, now in their forties. Until they met Devy, they hadn't properly registered their culture's slow erosion during the past quarter century, as more temples to unfamiliar Hindu gods sprouted up, d.j.s played Bollywood songs at weddings, and Rathwi yielded to Gujarati and Hindi. "Our parents don't speak either language very well," Naran Rathwa said. "But if my father wants my son to bring him sugar, he'll have to use the Gujarati word *khand* and not the Rathwi word *mures*." In the space of two generations,

songs and stories have been lost, and mutual comprehension has broken down.

For more than a year, the two men interviewed, and sometimes struggled to understand, the elders in Tejgadh and nearby villages. They noted, for instance, how the "d" sound in Gujarati often transformed into "l" in Rathwi, so that *gadū*, or "bullock cart", became *galu*. They recorded the story of Pithora, their chief deity, who was raised by his mother on milk and dried tree leaves. They wrote down the specific words for the pre-dawn hour of 4 a.m., the hour between 2 p.m. and 3 p.m., and the dark and bright halves of each lunar month. There were a number of peculiarities relating to farming, such as *ponyeta*, meaning "to use three or four bullocks for a task." Since Rathwi doesn't have a script of its own, they wrestled it into the Gujarati script – an awkward process, akin to forcing a round rug into a triangular room. And they felt saddened that not a word of Rathwi was taught in schools.

To needle them, I asked, Why did that matter? Surely scores of languages have died in the past three hundred years, but no one has run out of songs to sing or stories to tell. Aren't the conveniences of modern life – mobile telephones, widespread schools, the other appurtenances rubbing out *bolis* and *bhashas* – worth keeping?

Of course they are, Vikesh Rathwa said. But if we accept them too unthinkingly, and if we keep losing languages by not tending to them, "the world becomes just a machine."

The P.L.S.I. has identified seven hundred and eighty languages in India, in every conceivable state of health. (Devy thinks he may have missed a hundred or so.) Nandkumar More, a professor of Marathi, wrote about Chandgadhi, which he spoke while growing up, in a village near Maharashtra's border with Goa. Chandgadhi is shaped by Konkani and Kannada, but dusted with English and Portuguese, vestiges of the community's mercantile past. In the language, More found imprints of the local geography there was a tool called the *hendor*, forged to break up the region's sedimentary rocks, and another called the *gorab*, a bamboo-leaf umbrella that shelters women while they work in the fields during the monsoon. These words were old, and the implements had fallen out of use, but many people still hauled them out of their houses to tell More about them.

In the northeastern state of Sikkim, on the other hand, the social linguist Balaram Pandey had to help write about Majhi, a language he didn't know, because he could find only one living speaker – an old man who once ferried boats for a living, and who died soon after Pandey interviewed him. "He told me, 'Nobody understands my language so I go down to the river and speak to the stones,'" Pandey said. Another of Sikkim's sixteen languages, Bhujel, was once thought nearly extinct, but in the past decade scholars have developed a script, a dictionary, a digital font, and textbooks for it. In 2022, the Sikkim government added Bhujel to the list of the state's official languages – a triumph that Pandey ascribes to its inclusion in the P.L.S.I. Every resuscitated language is a victory, Devy says: "If it's possible for people to make their livelihoods in their own languages, that's all that matters. Everything else becomes academic. Linguistic plurality, by itself, is no guarantor of peace or prosperity – at it may even devolve into a fetish for numbers, Sharma said. But he reads Devy's enterprise as a democratic one – as a way to steel the spines of people who endeavour to



resist. When many languages thrive, Sharma told me, there is the possibility that “the smallest language, the most innocuous dialect, might contain the potential of saying that all-important word: ‘No.’”

## Save the languages of Brazil

By Bruno Meyerfeld, from *Le Monde* (France), 14 April 2025

*Nda'evei celular jaiporu nhanhembo'ea py.* » Written in capital letters on a red and white sign, the instruction is clearly visible, accompanied by a drawing of a smartphone and the “forbidden” symbol. The message is clear: in this prefabricated school, located in the rural area of Marica, 30 kilometres east of Rio de Janeiro, cell phones are prohibited. Curiously, no Portuguese translation is available. This is also the case in *Ka'Aguy Hovy Pora*, the village of “the pretty green forest” in Guarani: the 250 inhabitants speak only this indigenous language.

“In my head, everything is in Guarani... Even in my dreams!” confirms Julia, a 17-year-old teenager, who greets us with a “*Javy ju!*” (“hello”). Like the other children in the area, Julia studied at the village’s Portuguese-Guarani bilingual school, where students are welcomed from kindergarten to the end of primary school. “*They are literate in Guarani, they study math or geography in Guarani!*” summarizes Amarildo Vera Yapua, 34, one of the six leaders of the small community. And if some words are not easy, like “*yy*” for “water,” pronounced like a very closed *i*, almost an *ü*, “*you learn very quickly!*” he continues.

A vector of culture, memory, and spirituality, ancestral languages are, along with the defense of the land and the environment, at the heart of the indigenous struggle in Brazil. “*For us, language is a weapon. It's our bow, our arrows!*” insists Amarildo Vera Yapua. The theme is omnipresent at the Free Land Camp, the largest indigenous gathering in Brazil, held from April 7 to 11 in Brasilia, attended by 8,000 indigenous people from across the country, according to the organizers.

A good number of Brazil's 150 to 180 indigenous languages resonated in the aisles. Heavyweights such as Ticuna, Guarani, and Kaingang, with tens of thousands of speakers, but also the astonishing whistled language of the Ikolen hunters, the Ka'apor sign language of Maranhao (Nordeste), and Piraha, spoken by a handful of people in the southern Amazon.

### The last speakers die

With its 213 million inhabitants in 2024, Brazil may remain one of the ten richest countries on the planet in terms of languages, but these languages are disappearing as quickly as certain sectors of the rainforest: between a third and half of them are threatened with extinction, as the last speakers die out. Some even die before being documented. For example, in 2022, the Tanaru Indian, a man who remained isolated for decades in a preserved section of jungle near the Bolivian border, died without his language having been studied.

It's difficult to combat such a massacre, which began a long time ago. According to Brazilian anthropologist José Ribamar Bessa Freire, a specialist in indigenous languages, a “*glotocide*,” or “*the deliberate action of making one or more languages disappear*,” has been at work for five centuries in Brazil, where 80% to 90% of the 1,500 languages spoken before the arrival of Portuguese colonists have disappeared. “*A veritable campaign of extermination*,” he insists.

In 1758, the Marquis of Pombal, Secretary of State for Internal Affairs of the Kingdom of Portugal, in other words head of government, imposed Portuguese as the sole language of administration, education and public life in the colony. Tupi, the indigenous pidgin used by Jesuit missionaries, was banned. Literacy among the “Indians” would henceforth be taught in the language of the *Lusiads*, by Luis de Camões. This would continue for more than two centuries, until the Brazilian Constitution of 1988, adopted at the end of the military dictatorship.

The text fully recognizes indigenous languages and grants the peoples concerned the right to be taught literacy in their mother tongue through “*specific learning methods*.” This is a deliberately vague orientation. “*The system is flexible: each people can invent the instruction format that suits them, even if it was necessary to accept the exclusive end of orality in indigenous languages*,” specifies José Ribamar Bessa Freire. In 2023, Brazil had more than 3,600 indigenous schools serving 302,000 children.

Public and private initiatives have multiplied to save, promote, and foster the prosperity of indigenous dialects. A dozen cities have adopted one or more indigenous languages as co-official languages alongside Portuguese. Several states in the country have followed suit, including Amazonas, a region three times the size of France, which has granted this status to 16 indigenous languages.

### "Native Karaoke"

More original: an “indigenous karaoke” was organized in 2023 by the Museum of the Portuguese Language in Sao Paulo. The city of Oiapoque, on the border with French Guiana, saw the birth of the Maiuhi Theater, with plays in native languages. In Labrea, in the heart of the Amazon, a “paumari championship” is held every year, a language of the Arawa family. “*Twelve villages present themselves before a jury and tell a story staged with dances, songs and body painting*,” explains Edilson Rosario, 42, teacher and founder of the event.

Some are campaigning for the creation of an academy for Nheengatu, a language spoken by 8,000 people throughout the Amazon. “*We must fight for it with the same weapons as the whites!*” says writer Yaguarê Yama, 51, reached by telephone from his village, located 20 hours by boat from Manaus. According to him, Nheengatu, a “creolized” blend of ancient Tupi and Portuguese, is “*a living, modern language with a bright future*.”

WhatsApp chat groups, app-based courses, artificial intelligence, smartphone keyboards adapted to indigenous languages... Many projects rely on new technologies. For example, the digital platform Japiim—named after a bird whose song mimics many animal species, including the squirrel monkey—brings together 21 bilingual dictionaries, including Moré-Kuyubim, a rare and endangered language.

“*These participatory dictionaries are built by and for indigenous people*,” says Helder Perri, head of the Japiim project, which boasts 19,753 entries. “*Anyone can propose a new dictionary or new entries to our team. The idea is to create a model that is easy to replicate*.” The initiative is supported by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, which has declared the decade 2022-2032 the decade of indigenous languages. Japiim also receives support from the National Foundation for Indigenous Peoples, which is responsible for protecting and promoting indigenous rights in Brazil.

Upon returning to power in 2023, left-wing President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva made the defense of indigenous languages a national priority. Since then, he has ordered an increase in the budget allocated to indigenous schools and encouraged work to translate the country's main legislation, such as the Constitution, which will be adapted into Nheengatu in 2023. *"A big challenge! Many concepts of 'white people' do not exist in our culture,"* emphasizes Edson Baré, one of his translators. For the "president," it was necessary to use the word *Tuxawa* ("great leader"). There is no question of stopping there, he reports: *"We must now translate land and social law to allow indigenous people access to full citizenship."*

In 2024, the Ministry of Education established a national commission to promote the production of educational and literary materials for indigenous peoples. *"The time when it was shameful to speak an indigenous language in public is over. From now on, children will be able to live in a bilingual environment,"* proclaims Altaci Kokama, 48, who heads the department dedicated to languages and memories at the new Ministry of Indigenous Peoples.

On the ground, however, resources are lacking for indigenous teachers. *"We are reduced to using teaching booklets written by Catholic missionaries,"* complains Edilson Rosario, a Paumari teacher. *"The books provided by the authorities are more fun, more enjoyable, but they are distributed in small quantities. At best, we have one per teacher."*

#### **"Clear linguistic hierarchy"**

Indigenous dialects remain very marginal in higher education. For example, the powerful University of Sao Paulo (97,000 students, 5,000 professors) only offers an optional Guarani course, limited to... 50 places. *"We face a lot of prejudice. Many students still prefer to learn a foreign idiom rather than a language that has existed in Brazil forever,"* laments Leandro Karai Mirim Gonçalves, 30, training supervisor.

In the villages, the battle is just as arduous. Elissandra Barros da Silva, a doctor of linguistics at the Federal University of Amapa, studies the dynamics of Parikwaki, a language of the Aruak family, spoken by a few hundred members of the Palikur people, on the border between Brazil and French Guiana. *"Its transmission remains strong in families, but, even so, it remains very threatened,"* she says.

In the region's towns, she says, there is a *"clear linguistic hierarchy"*: *"In restaurants, banks, or at the town hall, it's impossible to find anyone who speaks anything other than Portuguese."* Raised on Brazilian music and telenovelas, Palikur children are bullied and mocked when they dare to speak Parikwaki at school. *"In fact, indigenous languages are excluded from the public sphere and remain confined to the private sphere,"* she warns. *"This is a prelude to extinction."*

Like many, the researcher fears the return to power of a far right inspired by the example of Donald Trump, author, on March 1, of a decree proclaiming English as the sole official language of the United States. In Brazil, such a measure would have serious consequences for indigenous culture, but also for the spread of fake news. Media in original languages still play a central role in the lives of isolated peoples and *"were very important during Covid-19 to combat rumors circulating on social networks and encourage vaccination,"* says Juliana Baré, producer at

Wayuri radio in Sao Gabriel da Cachoeira (the largest indigenous city in Brazil, on the edge of the western Amazon), known for broadcasting in Tucano, Baniwa, Nheengatu and Yanomami.

3,500 kilometers further south, the inhabitants of the village of "the pretty green forest" are nevertheless optimistic about the future. The community hopes to inaugurate a bilingual middle and high school in 2026. Some dream of seeing Guarani established as a second official national language. What could be more natural in a country that is essentially polyphonic? Linguist José Ribamar Bessa Freire reminds us mischievously: *"In the great Houaiss dictionary, the reference for Brazilian Portuguese, 45,000 of the 228,000 entries are indigenous, or one word in five!"*

## **Walking in two worlds: how an Indigenous computer scientist is using AI to revive threatened languages**

*By From Nature, 2 May 2025*

### **Michael Running Wolf leads artificial-intelligence initiatives to revive lost languages and empower Indigenous people**

University colleagues routinely describe Michael Running Wolf as someone who walks seamlessly between two worlds.

As an artificial intelligence (AI) researcher at the software-development company SynthBee in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and as co-founder of the First Languages AI Reality (FLAIR) programme at the Mila-Quebec Artificial Intelligence Institute in Montreal, Canada, Running Wolf holds a deep understanding of both the technology underlying AI and the societal benefits it could unlock. And as the son of Lakota and Cheyenne parents, he also knows how technology and data have been weaponized to harm Indigenous communities. Running Wolf therefore approaches his work — in which he revitalizes disappearing languages using AI and virtual-reality tools — with patience, empathy and a healthy dose of scepticism.

*"The work that Michael does is so sophisticated and complex because it's bridging the sacred with the science,"* says Estakio Beltran, a partnership adviser at the non-profit organization Native Americans in Philanthropy in Washington DC, who collaborates with Running Wolf and is of Tolteca-Mexica and Tlatoani origin. *"We're fortunate to have him overseeing efforts to reclaim Indigenous languages because his foremost thoughts are to protect and honour Indigenous sovereignty."*

Running Wolf grew up just outside the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation in southeastern Montana, in a remote town called Birney (2020 population: 97). The settlement often lacked running water and electricity, but it was nevertheless a comforting place where he was surrounded by family, literally — everyone in the town was an extended relative through his mother, and Running Wolf didn't meet a stranger until he left for university age 18. He spent his childhood learning traditional Cheyenne and Lakota artistry and hearing Indigenous languages spoken around him, an experience that is now increasingly rare.

*"For decades, the US government oversaw policies of forced assimilation, and as part of that, it was illegal to speak traditional languages or to practise our cultures openly,"* he says. *"Those*

policies were often enforced violently, and so we lost generations of fluent speakers that make it really difficult to come back from now.”

Running Wolf was a strong student from a young age, he says, and quickly developed an interest in technology, spurred by his mother’s career as a laser lithographer designing microchips for the computing firm Hewlett-Packard in Colorado. He learnt the basics of computer programming in primary school — including working out how to reprogram his graphing calculator to play games such as Snake. However, when it came to choosing a degree course at Montana State University in Bozeman in 1999, Running Wolf says he picked the then-nascent field of computer science on instinct. “No one in my family, or even my guidance counsellor, actually knew what it was.”

Even as he gravitated towards software development, Running Wolf retained an interest in Indigenous histories, noting that if he hadn’t become an AI researcher, he probably would have become an artist or a poet like his father, who holds a degree in fine arts. When he returned to Bozeman in 2007 after a three-year stint in industry to complete a master’s degree in computer science, Running Wolf’s future bridging the two fields began to take shape.

For his master’s thesis, Running Wolf drew inspiration from the work of researchers who had used oral histories to trace the origins of tales such as Little Red Riding Hood and to identify items eligible for repatriation under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. He spent the summer of 2014 in Siberia, Russia, collecting stories from local Indigenous peoples and using a type of AI called natural language processing to look for similarities between their cultures and those closer to his home. “Ecologically, the area is very similar to the Yellowstone biome in Montana, and so I was interested in how those types of force shape language and culture,” he says. “It stopped being pure computer science and brought in aspects of anthropology.”

Around this time, Running Wolf also met his wife Caroline, a member of the Apsáalooke Nation who speaks 11 languages and was then earning her master’s degree in Native American studies. Together, the two became consumed by thoughts of how computational tools and big data could be used to improve understanding of Indigenous cultures and to reclaim lost languages. The United Nations estimates that roughly half of the world’s 6,700 languages — the majority of which are spoken by Indigenous peoples — are on track to disappear by 2100, yet Running Wolf says there are rarely rigorous plans in place to save them.

“We were both frustrated with the lack of good progress in what was being done at the time,” Running Wolf says. He adds that Caroline has since joined him in co-founding an Indigenous non-profit technology firm called Buffalo Tongue and in managing ongoing projects focused on the applications of AI and immersive technologies for reclaiming Indigenous languages and cultures. “What began as these late-night conversations eventually kicked off this whole new chapter of using technology for language reclamation, and we’ve just become enmeshed in that space.”

### **The challenges of AI**

Indigenous languages differ from those with Latin roots in ways that make them a challenge to reconcile with existing machine-learning frameworks, Running Wolf says. Many Western languages follow a subject–verb–object sentence structure, for example, whereas Indigenous languages tend to be verb-based and polysynthetic, meaning that a single word can include multiple elements that, in English, would be written out as entire sentences. ‘Bird’, for instance, might translate to something like ‘the winged, flying animal that caws’.

Because generative AI models predict the next word in a sentence on the basis of the preceding words, these differences mean that algorithms often do a poor job of recognizing and translating Indigenous languages. However, models perform better when they include Indigenous languages, Running Wolf says, because training on a greater diversity of data ultimately makes the underlying algorithms more adaptive and flexible, just as people who know two languages typically have an easier time learning a third. “But that does create a risk for communities when our language data are suddenly valuable,” he adds.

Already, there has been a rush by companies such as OpenAI, Amazon and Google to gain access to Indigenous data on language and more; the firms use that information to develop services and products that are then offered back to users, often at a cost. Long-standing mistrust over how their information is likely to be misused has caused some Indigenous communities to disavow themselves of ever turning to AI-based technologies, a stance that Running Wolf respects.

“A lot of this kind of research is without consent, unfortunately, and it has soured people on even trying to engage,” he says.

“There’s a lot of risk with AI, and so I think that’s a very healthy response.”

### **Creating tools for societal good**

Running Wolf is working to overcome these hesitations through creating resources by and for Indigenous communities that help to educate them both about their cultures and the technology and, in turn, give them more control over how their data are used.

His early efforts began as employee network groups, including one for Indigenous researchers at Amazon when Running Wolf was there working on the company’s AI-powered assistant, Alexa. Later, he and Caroline were involved in launching two wider initiatives, Indigenous in AI and IndigiGenius. These partner with peer groups such as the information-technology consultancy firm Natives in Tech in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, the Indigenous Protocol and Artificial Intelligence Working Group and the Abundant Intelligences research project to shape the future of Indigenous-led AI efforts. In 2019, the Running Wolfs participated in two workshops alongside dozens of other researchers to produce a paper outlining how best to ethically design and create AI tools.

In many instances, one challenge these groups face is a lack of fluent speakers of Indigenous languages to both teach the next generation and to help train AI language models. Although children once learnt their ancestral languages at home, they now mostly engage with languages in the classroom. There’s an urgent need, Running Wolf says, for curricula and other resources — not to replace Indigenous speakers, but to train new teachers and standardize how Indigenous languages are taught.

"Now, we have a lot of Native Americans trying to learn in classes using methodologies that don't have good pedagogy or even good metrics for success," he says.

## 4. New publications

**Lorna Gibb: Rare tongues: Secrets of the world's hidden languages**

*Atlantic. £20. 342 pages*

*Reviewed by Harry Ritchie in The Spectator (UK), 25 March 2025*

It is one of academia's horrible ironies that linguistics, the subject devoted to human communication, has managed to communicate nothing about its many startling and fundamental discoveries to the world outside its university departments. So any book such as this linguistic tour of some of the world's exotic, hidden and endangered languages is to be welcomed with sobbing gratitude.

Almost all the languages Lorna Gibb describes are staples of linguistics course books, but I'm assuming each will come as startling news to a general readership. One which was new to me was the sign language used by native North Americans throughout the Great Plains, and thanks to Gibb, I also now know how to interpret their smoke signals: two puffs = all is well; three puffs = help!; four puffs = stranded whale.

As only linguists would expect, this tour of the linguistically weird and wonderful stops off at one of the less visited Canary islands, Gomera, home to the whistled language known as El Silbo. It has a range of more than a kilometre (about ten times that of a shout), and its differing whistles remarkably convey not only phonemes but grammatical features such as the tenses of verbs and the gender of nouns.

Linguists will also be unshocked to see that another of Gibb's destinations is the group of Khoisan languages in Southern Africa which use various click sounds. I say various – Nama has 20 different clicks, almost all indistinguishable to our ears but as obvious to a Nama speaker as an 'f' is from a 'p' to us. So that, for example, in Khoikhoi, 'lam' can denote verbs meaning 'to demolish', and 'to light', the adjective 'exclusive' and the noun 'clap', depending on the different click indicated by that 'l'. Shout out to !Xoo, a Khoisan language with a world record of 118 separate vowels and consonants, including the first two in its name for itself – a vigorous popping sound followed by the 'ch' in Scottish 'loch'.

And so to yet another language that is big only in linguistics, Dyirbal, spoken in north Queensland and boasting a unique system of noun classes that gave George Lakoff the title of his book *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*. The last I heard of it ten years ago, Dyirbal was hanging on with a handful of speakers, but Gibb brings the saddening news that its last native speaker is now gone and the language is officially extinct. There is, alas, nothing unusual in that. We are in the middle of an unstoppable process of language extinction. There are around 7,000 languages currently spoken on this planet and by the end of the century only 500 will have survived. A few heroic ethnolinguists are currently racing round the Amazon rainforest and Papua New Guinea with their notebooks and tape recorders, but the vast majority of those 6,500 mostly oral languages are doomed to vanish, leaving no trace of themselves.

As the author explains, this is not just vaguely regrettable but a significant loss, each departing language taking with it not only its charming quirks of syntax or phonetics but its specialist knowledge of local flora and fauna. A thought-provoking 90 percent of the Amazon's medicinal plants are linguistically unique, having names and known applications only in one local language.

Clearly of a sunnier temperament than me, Gibb tries to accentuate the positive, celebrating various apps and chatrooms that are trying to preserve endangered languages and citing the examples of the revival of Hebrew, the growing campaign to assert Maori as the national language of New Zealand, and the efforts to keep Scottish Gaelic alive. In the final pages, she eventually takes a brief stop-off at herself, as a dialect-speaking and working-class girl from the estates of Glasgow's hinterland who made her way up the educational ladder until she found herself in the linguistically foreign territory of middle-class London.

I could have done with a lot more of her autobiographical material, but then the culture as a whole badly needs that kind of testimony. That's because English is the only language of those 7,000 whose dialects are divided not just by geography but also by class. The result is that working-class speakers of perfectly respectable regional dialects suffer an unforgiving discrimination – unless they immediately achieve 100 percent fluency in the middle-class dialect, they will fail.

Extremely usefully, an appendix offers a beginner's guide to some of the key topics and terms of linguistics. In any other subject, the information would be laughably basic ("the universe is very big and stars are other suns"), but such is our collective culture's howling ignorance of anything to do with this subject, these are 22 pages of sorely needed explanations.

## 5. Events

### Mother Language Day marked at the British House of Lords

On 4<sup>th</sup> March the UK House of Lords reverberated with a vibrant palette of linguistic presentations through poetry, song and dance marking the silver jubilee of International Mother Language Day. 25 languages, 4 from South Asia and 21 from India were highlighted on the milestone event, organised by Sanskruti Centre for Cultural Excellence with Rt. Hon. Baroness Garden as Parliamentary Host. A commemorative book with all the expressions titled "Rhyme and Resonance" was released on the occasion. Presenters from a range of professional and linguistic backgrounds came together and showed their love for the respective mother languages, while including English translation for each of the expressions. Hon. Consul of the Kingdom of Bhutan Andrew Sutton spoke about the culture and language of Bhutan, as Lungten Tshering presented his poem in Dzongkha. Professor Peter K. Austin spoke about global language diversity and the need to support mother languages via multilingual linguistic ecologies. Young cultural ambassadors of Sanskruti Centre presented a short classical dance on a Sanskrit composition written during Tanjavur Kingdom. A folk dance was presented on a Hindi poem of celebrated poet

Maithili Sharan Gupta, who was a Member of Upper House Rajya Sabha of the Indian Parliament, who was famed to convey his thoughts to other parliamentarians through his poetry recitation. Dr Ragasudha Vinjamuri, Founder of Sanskruti Centre for Cultural Excellence also presented her self-authored Telugu poem, and outlined the need for creating a legacy for future generations and to continue to learn, read and write in mother languages, quoting the research by UNESCO Atlas of Languages in Danger.

## Canada: Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages announces WAVES 2025: Global Indigenous Languages Summit

**WAVES 2025: Global Indigenous Languages Summit to be held in Ottawa August 11–14, 2025**

OTTAWA, ON, Feb. 12, 2025 /CNW/ – The Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages (the Commission) today announced WAVES 2025, a Global Indigenous Languages Summit aimed at promoting, celebrating and championing Indigenous languages, and supporting Indigenous Peoples in Canada and around the globe in reclaiming, revitalizing, maintaining, and strengthening their languages. This summit supports the objectives of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

WAVES 2025 will convene language experts, practitioners, advocates, and supporters from across Canada and around the globe. The summit seeks to inspire innovative thinking, foster meaningful dialogue, and drive actionable solutions for strengthening Indigenous languages.

“WAVES 2025 is an opportunity to stand with a multitude of Indigenous nations, languages, and cultures and be part of the wave of voices committed to bringing Indigenous Languages out of the shadows and into the light,” said Stsméłqen, Ronald E. Ignace, Commissioner of Indigenous Languages.

Key Summit Highlights:

- Focus on promoting and championing all Indigenous languages in Canada
- Support for global Indigenous language revitalization efforts
- Open to all passionate about Indigenous languages and cultural celebration
- WAVES 2025 symbolizes a wave of momentum, carried forward from generations of work by communities, speakers and language champions
- Announcing WAVES 2025 Co-Hosts; Waneek Horn-Miller, Andrea Menard, and Tunu Napartuk
- Announcing three exciting WAVES 2025 keynote speakers; Peter-Lucas Jones, Sheila Watt-Cloutier, and Dr. Lorna Wanosts’a7 Williams
- WAVES 2025, hosted by the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages (the Commission), takes place August 11-14, 2025, on the ancestral and

unceded territory of the Anishinaabe Algonquin Peoples, in Ottawa, Ontario, at Rogers Centre Ottawa

- For more information and to register: [waves2025.ca](https://waves2025.ca)

More information and highlights will be released weekly on social media. The Commission invites everyone interested to follow its social media channels for updates on speakers, panelists, featured artists and entertainers, educators, and other leaders in land and language, technology and language, and community and language. Plus, exciting news on the 7Gen Youth Space at WAVES 2025 will soon be announced.

To find out more and to register, visit [waves2025.ca](https://waves2025.ca)

Update: June 19, 2025 / Twin Flames will no longer be a part of the entertainment line-up at the upcoming WAVES 2025 Summit.

About the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages  
The Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages (the Commission) is an independent organization established through the Indigenous Languages Act.

The Commission’s overarching purpose is to help promote Indigenous languages and support the efforts of Indigenous peoples to reclaim, revitalize, maintain, and strengthen their languages.

Visit [commissionforindigenouslanguages.ca](https://commissionforindigenouslanguages.ca) for more information on the Commission and its mandate.

SOURCE Office of The Commissioner of Indigenous Languages

For more information, please contact: Karran Finlay, Media and Communications, 780-717-9996, [karran@askcommunications.ca](mailto:karran@askcommunications.ca)

## FEL XXIX: The missing Sustainable Development Goal

*Why is the world shouting everywhere about sustainability but is decidedly mute on language?*

In 1987, the United Nations (UN) Brundtland Commission defined sustainable development as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Subsequently, the UN carried out extensive work on sustainability, and this was translated into a Development Agenda adopted by the General Assembly in 2015. This universal action plan of unprecedented scope and significance, a “supremely ambitious transnational vision”, contained 17 interconnected goals to be achieved by 2030.

These *Sustainable Development Goals*, or SDGs, are, in the words of the UN, “the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all”. They address “global challenges” which include eradicating poverty, ensuring good health and well-being, providing quality education, protecting the environment, upholding human rights, and promoting the rule of law, among others. However, languages are not explicitly mentioned, and the way in which culture is addressed remains very limited. As one linguist (Suzanne Romaine (2019: 41)) put it, “language is the missing link in the global debate on sustainability”.

Recognizing the significance of languages within the SDGs is not just an act of heritage preservation, it is a dynamic step, an instrument for ensuring equitable and effective development for all. Without linguistic diversity, many communities, partic-

ularly minority, indigenous and marginalized groups, are excluded from decision-making processes and denied equal access to vital resources.

The endangerment or extinction of languages plays an enormous role in this exclusion. Language dominance and dominance by language create fundamental forms of inequality and are often at the root of the very challenges for which the SDGs have been established.

The interrelationship of language and sustainable development has been the object of scrutiny in recent years. At the forefront of the debate, the Basque Country has identified and added to its own agenda, an 18<sup>th</sup> SDG relating to cultural and linguistic diversity. This 29<sup>th</sup> FEL Annual Conference will contribute to the promotion of the “missing 18<sup>th</sup> SDG” and its future adoption in the official agenda of the United Nations.

This conference will aim to explore the conceptual links between maintenance and revitalisation of endangered, minority and indigenous languages and sustainable development in different social, economic, ecological, and linguistic contexts; it will also seek to identify policy implications stemming from, and necessary to, further integration of language revitalization and sustainable development.

The conference will especially welcome contributions which deal with a number of sub-themes, including:

- The conceptualisation of the links between maintenance and revitalisation of endangered, minority, and indigenous languages and sustainable development.
  - The central role of language for the success and/or the failure of sustainable development (as vehicle for concrete action).
  - National and/or dominant languages vs EL, minority and indigenous languages, in the success or failure of promotion of concepts and realisation of goals.
  - Alternative approaches to articulating the relation between EL revitalisation and sustainable development and to ensuring success in different contexts.
- Experiences of community-based and public institution initiatives that integrate both agendas.
  - Examples of deliberate maintenance and revitalisation by communities in order to reach social, political and economic development goals
  - Examples of institutional use of endangered (incl. minority and indigenous) languages to guarantee success in sustainable development in local or national contexts
  - Examples of successful integrated sustainable development goals resulting from promotion and revitalisation of endangered languages
- Future prospects of the 2030 Agenda and the possibilities and challenges of including an 18<sup>th</sup> linguistic and cultural goal.
  - Successful international programmes in policy-making, advocacy and promotion of the inter-relation between languages (including EL) and sustainable development.
- Examples of campaigns promoting awareness of the interconnectedness of language (maintenance and revitalisation) and sustainable development.
- Obstacles to the understanding and promotion of the link between endangered languages maintenance and revitalisation and sustainable development (incl. insufficient knowledge of sustainable development and/or linguistic diversity).
- Deliberate political and other impediments to the promotion of the relationship between maintenance and revitalisation (M&R) and sustainable development.
- Designing SDG 18. SDGs have an average 10 targets. What crucial linguistic elements or dimensions should be represented in SDG 18 to enable achievement of sustainable development. May include the following or similar advice.
  - All States should raise awareness of importance of cultural and linguistic diversity in sustainable development.
  - Establish programmes to increase the profile and use of endangered, minority and indigenous languages in education, the media and all aspects of economic, social and political life.
  - Take decisive measures at national and community level to promote maintenance and revitalisation of endangered, minority and indigenous languages.

---

The conference will focus on developing and highlighting the interconnectedness of language and sustainable development. It will explore ways to increase understanding and generate commitment to the promotion of languages, especially endangered, minority and indigenous languages, for the purpose of achieving sustainable development.

The ultimate objective is to contribute to the conception and formulation of a new (18<sup>th</sup>) Sustainable Development Goal dedicated to language and to the necessary implications of its implementation within the framework of the UN Agenda 2030 and beyond.

#### More information

The conference will take place from 22 to 25 October 2025 at: University of the Basque Country

Participation will be on hybrid format. Online streaming and joining link will be available upon registration.

The languages of the conference will be English and Basque, and simultaneous translation will be provided.

An excursion to an area of significance to the Basque language and culture will be organised for those who attend physically.



**Panoramic view of Vitoria-Gasteiz, Basque Country. Photograph: Mikel Arrazola**





## The FEL manifesto

### 1. Aims

The Foundation for Endangered Languages exists to support, enable and assist the documentation, protection and promotion of endangered languages. In order to do this, it aims:

1. to raise awareness of endangered languages, both inside and outside the communities where they are spoken, through all channels and media
2. to support the use of endangered languages in all contexts: at home, in education, in the media, and in social, cultural and economic life
3. to monitor linguistic policies and practices, and to seek to influence the appropriate authorities where necessary
4. to support the documentation of endangered languages, by offering financial assistance, training, or facilities for the publication of results
5. to collect and make available information for use in the preservation of endangered languages
6. to disseminate information on all of the above activities as widely as possible

### 2. The present situation

At this point in human history, most human languages are spoken by very few people, but that majority of languages is about to vanish.

The most authoritative source on the languages of the world, the Ethnologue, lists nearly 7,000 living languages. Population figures for just over 6,000 show that:

- 52% of languages are spoken by fewer than 10,000 people
- 28% are spoken by fewer than 1,000
- 83% are spoken only in single countries, and so are particularly exposed to the policies of a single government

At the other end of the scale, 10 major languages, each spoken by over 109 million people, are the mother tongues of almost half of the world's population.

More important than this snapshot of proportions and populations is the outlook for survival of the languages that are spoken. Data about this is scarce, because of the sheer variety of the human condition: a small community, isolated or bilingual, may continue to speak a unique language for centuries, while elsewhere a populous language may for social or political reasons die out in little more than a generation. The period in which records have been kept is too short to clearly document trends: for example the Ethnologue has been issued only since 1951. However, it is difficult to imagine many communities sustaining everyday use of a language for even a generation with fewer than 100 speakers: yet at least 10% of the world's living languages are now in this position.

Some of the forces which threaten languages are clear: the impacts of urbanization, Westernization and global communications grow daily, all diminishing the self-sufficiency and self-confidence of small and traditional communities. Discriminatory policies and population movements also take their toll of languages.

Today, the preponderance of tiny language communities means that the majority of the world's languages are vulnerable to decline and extinction.

### 3. The likely prospect

There is agreement among linguists that over half of the world's languages are not being passed on to the next generation. We are living at the point in human history where, within two generations, most languages in the world will die out.

This mass extinction of languages may not appear to be obviously tragic. Some people believe that a reduction in the number of languages will increase communication, and help to build nations, even global solidarity. On the other hand, we know that human life across the planet depends on our ability to develop cultures enabling survival in a variety of environments. These cultures have been transmitted by languages, through oral traditions and, more recently, through writing. So when language transmission breaks down there is always a large loss of inherited knowledge. Once that knowledge is lost - whether its value is recognized or not - a community and the whole of humanity is poorer. Along with it may go a large part of the pride and identity of the community of former speakers. And there is another kind of loss, of a different type of knowledge. As each language dies, many sciences - linguistics, anthropology, prehistory and psychology - lose one more precious source of data, one more of the diverse and unique ways that the human mind can express itself through a language's structure, vocabulary and idiom.

The result of the impending loss of most of the world's linguistic diversity cannot be predicted. But language loss is generally irreversible and has no known positive outcomes. Speakers of endangered languages may rightfully resist the extinction of their linguistic identities and their traditions. And we, as concerned people, or as scientists, applaud and support them in their attempt to preserve the diversity that is one of humanity's greatest treasures.

### 4. The need for an organization

While we cannot stop the global forces which cause language decline and loss, we *can* work to combat their effects, to strengthen languages against them, and to highlight all that is lost when a language vanishes.

We can work to lessen the damage:

- by recording and documenting languages which are in terminal decline
- by promoting literacy and language maintenance programmes to increase language proficiency and morale within endangered language communities
- by encouraging support for language and cultural maintenance through use of media and communication technologies
- by emphasizing the value and benefits of language diversity

To pursue these aims, there is a need for an autonomous international organization which is not constrained or influenced by matters of race, politics, gender or religion. This organization will recognize that language issues are inseparable from the principles of self-determination, and group and individual rights. It will pay due regard to economic, social, cultural, community and humanitarian considerations. Although it may work with any international, regional or local authority, it will always retain its independence. Membership will be open to all.



