



Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice

Master's Degree
in Interpretariato e Traduzione
Editoriale, Settoriale

Final Thesis

**A Translation of
Words of Wonder by
Nicholas Evans:
Language Endangerment and
its analysis**

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Matriculation Number 893686

Academic Year

2023 / 2024

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Abstract

All experiences need to be lived but most importantly, they need to be elaborated. It is only possible for human beings to fully comprehend those experiences if they can share and describe them - speaking to others gives individuals the chance to unveil the mysteries of their subconscious and helps them discover parts of themselves that they did not know existed. At the same time, it is useful to go beyond the limits of own's own perceptions and internalise something that is brand new. Languages are not only the vehicle, but they are also the experiences. Nowadays a lot of languages all over the world are disappearing, taking with them all these undiscovered and priceless realities.

In my dissertation, I will introduce and analyse a book written by Nicholas Evans, a Distinguished Professor at the Australian National University. *Words of Wonder: Endangered Languages and What They Tell Us* (2022) is the result of his studies about linguistic diversity, the current mass language endangerment and its impact, and the process of revitalisation.

In addition, I will also present my own translation of some excerpts from two chapters of this book from English into Italian, including a commentary and a glossary of words that may help the comprehension to my translation choices. The chapters are “*Warramurrungunji's Children*” which introduces the author and his attitude towards the topic through anecdotes and personal research; and “*Listening While We Can*”, which offers a spark of hope in the future of linguistic diversity, but only if everyone takes their own responsibilities trying to preserve it.

Languages play a crucial role in the understanding of our reality. Evans' work is able to represent the importance and wealth that each language brings into the world. It perfectly conveys the need to give each language the rightful recognition and to protect language diversity. All we need to do is listen to *them* while we can.

Introduction

This dissertation focuses on the language endangerment phenomenon, and the different types of solutions that are applied to help save different languages and realities all around the world. In fact, languages are not only the vehicle of communication, but they also shape the human's cognitive processes and, consequently, they form the very same experiences that every individual lives. Without languages - and particularly, language diversity - the human's cultural heritage and their essence will be lost forever. Therefore, it is fundamental to try and intervene before they disappear. This project is based on two translations from English to Italian of two chapters from the book *Words of Wonder: Endangered Languages and What They Tell Us* (2022), written by Distinguished Professor Nicholas Evans. The translated chapters – the first and the tenth of the book - perfectly represent the urge and the main themes that are necessary to approach language endangerment and its revitalisation process, underlining the importance of leaving traces of their passage through a complete language documentation which needs to be produced by both indigenous people and professional linguists. In this project, all the bibliographic material was collected after a careful selection of important titles in the linguistic and anthropological field, mostly based on Evans' research and field studies, but also other resources such as websites and academic papers and articles. For the translations, both physical and online dictionaries were used. Moreover, online glossaries and corpora of texts were fundamental during the translation process to choose the right equivalent into Italian based on context.

The first chapter of this dissertation is an introduction on the importance of storytelling and oral traditions to demonstrate the full potential of the human's cognitive system and the infinities stories that are contained in it. Storytelling represents the basis of communication, and this is particularly clear when coming into contact with speech communities that can only rely on their oral traditions. These communities hold crucial knowledge of the world, and if their languages disappear – together with their oral traditions – all this inestimable information will fall into oblivion too. Consequently, the language endangerment phenomenon is analysed to understand its causes and its dangerous consequences. Moreover, it is introduced the process of language documentation that is one of the most useful methods of language preservation. The difficulties of collecting the right information and its archiving process are recurrent topics of discussion within the linguistic field. Despite the importance of language documentation, it is not enough to revive a dead language. Therefore, in today's linguistic research, the revitalization process

and its strategies are fundamental in order to save languages that are on the brink of death or to try to reawaken languages that have already fallen silent. The second chapter of this dissertation is about Nicholas Evans' findings obtained on fieldwork and his contribution to these fundamental topics. In this chapter, it is analysed his research on documentary linguistics, a new branch of linguistics that is fundamental to leave traces of the past and current linguistic situation to future generations. Moreover, his contribution on the language revitalization process is inestimable since he strongly believes that the new technological advancements and the global digitalisation can help restore and revive languages all around the world, but it is necessary to constantly keep up with new updates. The third chapter is about the two translations of chapters one and ten of *Words of Wonder*. These are two of the most important chapters of the book due to the purposes of each chapter: the first one, '*Warrammurunguji's Children*', analyses the history of the current global multilingualism, the main causes that originated this phenomenon and the variegation that derives from it. He also underlines the importance of indigenous knowledge which can be found in oral traditions, and that the consequences of language disappearance will endanger the world's cultural heritage too. He proceeds to explain - through anecdotes and stories that he collected during his fieldwork - the ecological links between indigenous languages and their environment, focusing on the crucial contribution that this type of knowledge has in today's linguistic, ecological, ethnobiological research; the tenth chapter, '*Listening While We Can*' is the most persuasive chapter, since the author insists on the importance of recording and documenting languages, and the urge to intervene and preserve endangered languages before it is too late. Evans underlines the need of a collaboration between indigenous people (and their fundamental traditional knowledge) and professional linguists (with their academic formation) to obtain correct and useful documentations. He also talks about new advancements of digital technology used in the archiving process, but he encourages to keep up with the changes of future archiving methods to avoid losing material. He strongly believes in everyone's shared responsibility to preserve linguistic diversity around the world. These two chapters are the most representative of the purpose and style of the author, and this is why they were chosen to be translated into Italian, in order to become part of the Italian scientific literature and provide its readers with the means to understand this phenomenon and inspire others to take on the preservation and revitalisation missions. The fourth chapter is the translation commentary and textual analysis that are useful to understand the translation choices that were made during the translation process. Moreover, this is fundamental to understand the English textbook genre and its differences with the Italian

one, exploring how the author used the English language to achieve his goals. In the fifth chapter there is the glossary of the translations, which is useful to consult during the reading. Finally, this dissertation explores the language endangerment, documentation and revitalisation processes, raising awareness towards their origins and consequences, and urging everyone to give each language their own recognition and protect them before it is too late.

1. Language endangerment and revitalisation

1.1 Narration of the self in oral traditions

It is widely believed that the self, that is the identity of every human being, is a narrative phenomenon. This means that everyone applies narrative approaches in order to understand, metabolise and act in different events, breaking down reality to make it comprehensible. Narrating is a cognitive process through which everyone builds their own perceptions and, therefore, their identities. Every culture has based their entire existence on telling stories, attempting to find their own place in the world. It is something that brings together different - and sometimes conflicting - realities. Roland Barthes, a semiologist and linguist, affirmed:

All classes, all human groups, have their stories, and very often those stories are enjoyed by men of different and even opposite cultural backgrounds. [...] [Narrating] like life itself, it is there, international, transhistorical, transcultural. (Barthes, 1975, p.237)

The act of narrating can be defined as the use and mastery of a language. The ability to narrate implies the possession of a set of fundamental perceptions that allow the comprehension of life events as something that can be put into words and conveyed to an audience willing to hear it.

Every verbal expression is linked to a more or less brief dose of narration, which can go from a fragmentary account or barely hinted anecdote to more defined discourses marked by linguistic conventions which tend to be called stories or tales. (Herrnstein Smith, B., in Jedlowski, 2000, p.65)

This means that narration is part of people's everyday life, and it is embedded into every word, even in basic and simple conversations. Since it is a cognitive process, narrative tropes are used to break down not only the main elements of a conversation (participants, what has been said etc.), but also its contextual elements (cultural background of the interlocutors, when and where the conversation is held, etc.).

Conversations serve a variety of different functions. They may be used to entertain, identify the speaker, to elicit a positive response from the listener, and to share knowledge. One of the main functions of conversations is the referential one, since its goal is to provide the listener with information. On the other hand, there are also other crucial functions, like the expressive function, which enables the speaker to convey their own feelings or moral principles, and to elicit a reaction from the interlocutor. Individuals share their experiences and their stories which ultimately facilitate the creation of connections.

Storytelling is believed to be the basis of human society. Sharing stories in a community means affirming its model values, passing them on to younger generations and conveying their knowledge. It is through stories that a group identity is formed, and in order to be part of said group, its members need to recognise their importance and to stand by them. Therefore, narrating can be used to control one's reality, revealing the truth behind phenomena that individuals do not comprehend, and manipulating it to impose one's will and power upon others. Storytelling shapes the human's perceptions of the world but also their emotive reactions to it. Narrating means creating a way to explore and control the human's possibilities. In fact, sharing stories aims at the 'pleasure of multiplying life' (Jedlowski, 2000). On a more pragmatic level, its main function is to allow the interpretation of whatever one experiences; while on the social plan, it is to allow integration, creating common cognitive models that bring together a group of people.

Stories are instruments by which one can reduce uncertainty, since they represent possible explanations to what is ignored or impossible to understand. Moreover, these produce parallel realities that are filled with new emotions, experiences never lived before, and new perspectives that increase the understanding of the world. The priceless value of narration, especially when two different cultures come in contact, is a phenomenon which has been identified as a primary need of the human need to be recognised both by oneself and by others. The act of narrating one's experience and listening to the narratives of others, facilitates the construction of each one's self-identity. This process allows individuals to recognise their own selves when confronted with the experiences of others. In fact, stories usually convey the memory and history of a group, and the principles its members live by may differ from those of any other group. Listening to them can help broaden narrow-minded attitudes and bring to light new parts of the self. This can be really useful especially when interacting with communities in which the oral tradition is prevalent, since storytelling is the way that its members use to approach both their internal dimension and the external world.

In oral traditions, communication is characterised by different features: the immediacy of the act, the transmission of information through sound and its memorisation based on mnemonic models. In fact, in oral cultures, humans learn about their traditions and ways of surviving through the process of listening and repeating what they hear, combining their knowledge with primary experiences and memory. The elders usually tell stories to the children with the objective of establishing models and examples and facilitating the construction of individual interpretations of life events. This allows the young generations to find their place in the flow of time while retaining a connection to the past. Therefore, languages that are used to tell the stories contain invaluable information and elements that belong only to that specific group and culture that cannot be found anywhere else. Languages become the means to convey not only these stories, but also their priceless knowledge about the environment and the context in which they are used. In oral communication, narrative threads are usually intertwined and overlapped, but, unfortunately, they tend to be volatile until they are written down. Storytelling in primitive social groups was passed on by memory and it is a fundamental element in modern oral traditions too. Nonetheless, memory - together with those who hold it - is not permanent. Many oral cultures faded away over time, without leaving traces of their existence, and the loss that derives from this phenomenon is enormous. Particularly in the case of oral traditions, it is of the utmost importance to recognise the value of each language in the world, so that this can prompt action to preserve both them and the culture they represent before it is too late. Far too many languages fell into oblivion in the past, but for others there is still a little time to counteract the damages of language disappearance all around the world.

1.2 Basic notions on linguistic anthropology

In linguistic anthropology, language is a social phenomenon and, as such, it must be studied according to its context. In order to analyse and master a language, the essential areas are phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Anthropologists usually start from the last two fields to explore the others. The anthropologist Laura Ahearn (2017, preface xiii) states that speaking a language means engaging in a form of social action that is filled with cultural values and meanings according to its context, therefore, it should not be isolated from other social practices. Social systems like languages and cultures are created and shaped by people and their groups that act in a socio-culturally influenced way.

Research on linguistic anthropology takes into consideration the insights and findings of other fieldworks (for example, the linguistic and cultural ones), and anthropologists usually have many different questions to answer and collect data, using several research methods, such as recording hours of conversations or living among the communities they are investigating. This last method is known as ‘participant observation’ (Ahern, 2017, p.35) and not only is it one of the most used methods, but it is also the most resourceful. In fact, since language is a social act, the most proficient way of gaining insights into it is to reside among the individuals who utilise it and observe how they employ language in their daily lives. Another useful method to collect information is conducting interviews in order to collect information. There are three main types of interviews: structured (preparing an ordered list of questions pertaining to the subject matter); semi-structured (making lists of more general questions not necessarily in order, so that the topic of discussion may vary) and open-ended (the most informal one, these are usually simple conversations that aim at eliciting specific topics needed for the research). Interviews are useful, but sometimes the interviewers may be biased, they can miss out some crucial information, or ask the wrong questions; on the other hand, the interviewees may not be collaborative enough if they feel to be under scrutiny. This is why, Charles L. Briggs - an American anthropologist and Professor at UC Berkeley - believes that it is fundamental to ‘learn how to ask’ (Briggs, 1986, p.93) the right questions according to the culture and traditions that are investigated. Apart from surveys and questionnaires, another efficacious methodology for the acquisition of data is the recording of natural occurring conversations. In the beginning, it was a problem for anthropologists to demonstrate the truthfulness of these conversations, but they were able to show that the recorded conversations happened in a spontaneous way, and they simply took note of the context in which said conversations happened. Many researchers often excluded themselves from the recording by giving the participants full control over them or others even recorded the participants without them knowing. This last method arose many ethical problems, but researchers avoided them by requesting a written formal consent by the subjects of the investigation. Recording bits of conversations can elicit many helpful insights in linguistic research, since they are provided by the speakers of that language, and they have full power over it.

According to most linguistic anthropologists, the relationship between language, culture and thought is mutually interdependent, since it is the result of the interaction between these three elements, which in turn is a fundamental aspect of language acquisition and cultural evolution. All the 7,164 languages spoken all around the world have cognitive effects on humans due to their complex grammatical structures and conventional symbols. It is a specific characteristic

of humankind since animals do not have this type of complexity in their own signalling system. In fact, all human babies are born with the ability of recognising and then reproducing the sounds of all existing languages, even though, after six months they start learning all the specific sounds of their mother tongues and, as adults, they will no longer be able to either distinguish or reproduce different sounds belonging to other languages without proper training. This is due to the great influence that everyone's language has on their cognitive systems. Language has a strong influence on culture too: Sapir - one of the fathers of the linguistic relativity theory - considered it as the 'symbolic guide to culture' (Sapir, 1949, p.162), and together they build humans' perception on their reality and also the identity of a specific speech community. Despite the existence of numerous competing theories and uncertainties surrounding the definition of a 'speech community' - since researchers have difficulties in defining what its members should share - one of the most prevalent and well-known outlooks is John J. Gumperz', an American linguist, who believed that:

This universe is the speech community: any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage. Most groups of any permanence, be they small bands bounded by face-to-face contact, modern nations divisible into smaller subregions, or even occupational associations or neighborhood gangs, may be treated as speech communities, provided they show linguistic peculiarities that warrant special study. (Gumperz, 1968, p.381)

In other words, a speech community is a social group that frequently interacts and shares a set of verbal signs. This implies that they do not have to speak the same way (there could be different dialects or even different languages), but they employ speech varieties that are related to the same set of social norms (or 'language ideologies'). This is the basis for the well-known formulation of the linguist William Labov who stated:

The speech community is not defined by any marked agreement in the use of language elements, so much as by participation in a set of shared norms. These norms may be observed in overt types of evaluative behavior, and by the uniformity of abstract patterns of variation which are invariant in respect to particular levels of usage. (Labov, 1972, pp.120-121)

According to Labov, these shared norms can be identified through the evaluative attitude that the speakers have towards their own language, and through similar variation schemes. There are two main criteria to define the concept of speech community: external objective criteria, such as the socio-geographical identity and the language; and internal subjective criteria, such as the sense of belonging and self-identification behaviours. All the languages and their variations - which can be found within a speech community - form the linguistic repertoire of that same community. This is why a speech community can be monolingual, bilingual or multilingual. Even though a monolingual repertoire is rare, it is common that a monolingual perspective is the outcome for those countries who have a powerful language of wider communication use. This means that the attempts of achieving a fluent and unhindered communication may lead to the neutralisation of the prolific language variation of the world. On the other hand, every country in the world can be considered multilingual, even though they have official and standardised languages. For example, in India the 'official' language is Hindi, even though English has an important role in the government and schools. Together with these two languages, there are many others that have been officially recognised by the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India: in other words, multilingualism is at the very core of Indian national identity, generating unity rather than division. In most multilingual communities, languages, dialects and register variations are linked to their social status. In this regard, according to Ahearn (2017, pp.122-123), it is useful to make a distinction between language and dialects: the main difference is merely geopolitical, since a language is supported by official recognition emanated by the government, while any other linguistic variation, which is not official, is defined as dialect (or minor language). Moreover, according to Berruto and Cerruti (2019, pp. 72-80), a dialect is the regional or local variation of a language, and it is often stigmatised since it is stereotypically spoken by individuals that have a lower social status. The truth is that everyone speaks at least one dialect because everyone has a register range, building up the identity and pointing out not only a social status, but also provenance and cultural background. Language ideologies create a sort of hierarchy within the community based on social, political, or historical factors. This is why some languages have more authority while others are usually stigmatised. As a result, multilingual people usually switch from one language, dialect, or variation to another, according to the context in which they are. This shifting process has been divided into three different situations: diglossia, firstly theorised by the linguist Charles Ferguson in 1959 (pp.185-205), who believed that two codes are hierarchically related according to their prestige, therefore, one is known as 'high status' (H) code and the other 'low status' (L) code. The H code has official recognition, and it is used in official writing, schooling

and broadcasting, while the L code is reserved for informal contexts - especially within the households - in conversations with friends and family. This shift is mostly related to the change from one social setting to another. Code-switching is the shift from one language code to another in the same social setting. Finally, code-mixing is a type of shift which occurs mid-sentence or mid-word. It blurs the boundaries between different codes, creating new hybrid words or expressions. According to Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, p.272, p.67), one of last century's most important literary critics, there are two opposite forces operating in a language: the 'centralising' (or centripetal) force that is used by governments and authority in general to unify and standardise that language, and the 'decentralising' (or centrifugal) force that pushes it towards further stratifications and variations. Nowadays, globalisation has led both to centralisation - by establishing dominant languages, such as English, in this new globalised world – but, Ahearn (2017, p.135) affirms that it has also generated high rates of migration which have brought further stratification and language variations. These studies are key concepts in order to dive into the modern multilingual and globalised world.

1.3.1 Language endangerment

A language can live, die or be born again, and it can be subject to different changes that help it overcome the adversities of time and reality. According to the French linguist Claude Hagège (2002, pp.7-8), concepts like life, death, resurrection, and evolution are anthropomorphic concepts, which means that they belong to the understanding of human beings. On the other hand, they are often used in language studies in a metaphorical way, to increase the comprehension and relatability of its contents. These metaphors are also useful to underline the complexity of languages intended as cognitive and social organisms. In fact, languages follow the path of human groups: if they disappear, their language is bound to have a similar fate. Languages, since they preserve traces of life in them, are sources of life itself. Memory is the vital principle behind languages: languages are created as a result of the history of human evolution over time. Due to these particular characteristics, languages were often compared to natural beings and, therefore, thought to be studied as a branch of natural sciences. These types of studies were mostly associated with August Schleicher (1869, p.21), a biologist who became a linguist. During his studies, he approached Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859) to compare living beings' progressive evolution to that of linguistic changes.

Nevertheless, Schleicher (1869) took into account only the natural properties of languages, without considering the fact that they are social constructions. As a matter of fact, it is Darwin's concept of natural selection (1859) - in an economic and social perspective - that can be important to understand the motives behind language shifts over time. In fact, just like plants, animals and humans, languages compete against each other to prevail and progress. The precarity of a language is due to the incapacity of sustaining external pressures from a more 'dominant' language. Moreover, the linguist William Dwight Whitney affirmed that languages cannot be considered natural organisms, since they are created by the will of social groups, but 'its rise, development, decline, and extinction are like the birth, increase, decay, and death of a living creature' (Whitney, 1867, p.46). As a consequence, it is common to find metaphorical expressions like 'dead language' in linguistics and anthropology: in order to make the concepts of language disappearance and revival comprehensible and relatable.

Even though sometimes it goes completely unnoticed, the death of a language is a phenomenon that has always had many impacts on reality and society, since it represents the end of the existence of an entire population, culture and, therefore, a piece of the world itself. A language is considered 'dead' when there are no speakers alive and that has almost no traces of its culture or people. On the other hand, even though no one actively speaks languages like Latin or Ancient Greek, they cannot be categorised as dead languages, but rather as 'ancient languages'. Scholars came up with this definition to refer to languages that are not used, but that are still studied thanks to the fact that there is written archaeological evidence (such as texts, coins, or other materials). In order to understand the reasons and consequences of the dying process of a language, it is useful to dive into the current linguistic situation around the globe.

There have been some difficulties for anthropologists and linguists to provide a precise number of all the languages that are spoken in the world: starting from whether to consider either languages or dialects, or the other linguistic variations too, and dealing with the difficulties in distinguishing clear differentiations between them. One of the most authoritative and consulted sources to get data about the current linguistic situation is *Ethnologue*, an online database made by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL)¹, a Christian group which is involved in different projects that aim at linguistic documentation in order to translate the Bible into every known language. They usually collect data through fieldwork and previously conducted research in native contexts, but also through authoritative sources such as government censuses, academic and linguistic research, with the help of many other organisations and universities. Some of the

¹ About the SIL group: <https://www.sil.org/about>

main research entries include the language's name, the number of speakers and the geographic distribution, and the relations between that language and other different languages or dialects. According to the 27th edition of *Ethnologue* (lastly updated in February 2024)², there are currently 7,164 living languages worldwide. The numbers change frequently, due to the new developments in the research field, but the estimates are that roughly 40% of these languages are endangered, since they are spoken by less than 1,000 users.

It has been a recurrent argument between scholars on how to classify the health status of a language, assessing those that are more likely to survive and those that are destined to disappear. Among different academics, the theories of the American linguist Michael Krauss on language endangerment are crucial to the purposes of the investigation. He estimated that, by the end of the century, half of the current number of languages all around the world will disappear, and these dying languages are defined as 'endangered languages'. The current estimates of language endangerment all around the world are concerning because the numbers are devastatingly high, and this will result in the loss of the inestimable variety around the world. Therefore, there are many associations, organisations and institutions that are working hard in order to raise awareness about language endangerment, also encouraging efforts in revitalisation processes. Krauss (2006, pp.1-8) classified languages according to their viability, creating three main categories: safe, endangered, and extinct. Languages that are considered 'safe' are those that are officially recognised by the government and have large numbers of speakers (more than one million). 'Endangered languages' are divided into different sub-categories: stable (when the language is the mother tongue of a state and children still learn it, but it is threatened by the dominance of another language or other external factors); unstable (or eroded, it is the case of languages that are spoken by a part of the children, but not the majority of the mass); definitively endangered (in which the language is no longer the mother tongue learnt and used by children, but it is spoken by their parents); severely endangered (in which the only speakers are part of the grandparental generation); critically endangered (spoken exclusively by few persons of the great-grandparental generation). Finally, a language is considered 'extinct' when there are no speakers alive. The fact that a language ceases to be transmitted to children by their parents is an alarming symptom that puts it in a state of precariousness, even if it does not necessarily mean that the language is extinct. Children may learn and master another language, but adults (first parents, then they will become grandparents, and so on) will still preserve the fading knowledge of the endangered language. This particular condition leads to the formation of

² <https://www.ethnologue.com/ethnoblog/welcome-27th-edition/>

bilingualism within the household, but the contact and coexistence between two languages will not necessarily result in the death of one of the two if the language status is equal. On the other hand, if this type of situation is persistent and becomes unbalanced, one language may put more pressure on the other due to its privileged social or political status, and the disappearing one may succumb. During the process of language death, grammatical and syntactical structures are often simplified, and they can be lost, integrating features of the new dominant language. In some cases, it is a top-down process in which the language is no longer used in formal domains, such as ceremonies or by the official institutions but it is still spoken in informal setting, such as at home; while in other cases it is a bottom-up process, in which the language is no longer used at home, but it is used in public events and domains. The changes that an endangered language endures are faster and more impactful than the ones of a language that is not at risk. The flow of time, together with the speakers' fading memory, will inevitably lead to the language's end.

1.3.2 The impact of language disappearance

The loss of language diversity will mean that we will never even have the opportunity to appreciate the full creative capacities of the human mind.
(Marianne Mithun, 1998, p. 189)

One of the first questions that academics ask while approaching the topic of endangered languages is what the real loss is if a language disappears. According to the linguist K. David Harrison (2007, pp.15-19), one of the first things that may be lost during the process of disappearance of a language is the human knowledge base. Nowadays, it is estimated that 86% of the Earth's 8.7 million plant and animal species have yet to be discovered and described by modern science. More often than not, in the past scientists relied on the knowledge of indigenous people to identify and collect information about unknown species. Human knowledge of the natural world is a wide system which provides information that sometimes cannot be found in books or on the internet, especially if it is part of indigenous culture that risks being forgotten and not passed onto future generations. It is, however, difficult for traditional knowledge to be transferred to bigger languages, because it has its roots in a specific culture that may not be understood or shared by anyone else, and it may be overruled by the imposed culture. Another element that is at risk together with endangered languages is the

human cultural heritage. The creativity of human art, oral traditions, storytelling, wordplays, and literature are fundamental parts of each language in the world, but if these elements are not written down, they are bound to be forgotten as their language disappears. A third element that can be lost is human cognition: languages are able to contain and reveal the maximum use of the human's brain. It usually processes information and experiences in a similar way for everyone, and so linguists over time have investigated in order to discover the universal elements in all the languages in the world. However, many small and undocumented languages present such particular and different structures that contradict the purposes of the search for the mythical Babel Tower. This shows the true potential and capacity of the human brain that may be lost if endangered languages become extinct.

1.3.3 Main causes

There are many different causes that lead to language extinction. As already mentioned, the main definition of language death is when all its speakers are no longer alive or they refuse to speak it, without passing it on to the next generations. On the other hand, there are many other nuances to add to this definition and many other possible reasons to this phenomenon. According to Claude Hagège (2002, pp.88-134), the main causes for language death can be divided into three main categories. There are physical causes: it is important to take into consideration the causes of the death of those speakers since it could happen because of natural disasters such as volcano eruptions. One example is the Tamboran language, when the volcano eruption exterminated its population in Sumbawa (Indonesia), the only trace left of this language and its population was a small list of words left by an English traveller. Another physical cause can be generated by human action such as genocides, ethnocides, and deportations. For example, in 1932 more than 30,000 indigenous people were massacred in El Salvador after their uprising against the government. Most of the survivors stopped using their own language and customs because of their fear of retaliation and to fit in with the political power. Another category of causes are the economic and social ones. In order to manage its internal administration, a group of people in a community usually takes on foreign and more powerful models to be in control over the others. If it gains more power than other groups, its language - which is the representation of the group's economic and social force - will end up imposing itself on the vernacular ones. For example, nowadays the leading economic force is represented by the English language, since it is the language of the most industrialised and

progressed countries, used in almost every commercial transaction and relation. The English language is considered to be the language of advancement, generating a monolingual attitude. As a consequence, plurilingualism gets more and more devalued and associated with underdevelopment. When two or more languages come into contact and there is an imbalance of power, the speakers of the less dominant language are usually forced, or they spontaneously decide to take on the more socially and economically dominant language. Therefore, the less dominant language starts to become ideologically despised by its own speakers, thus considered 'inferior'. These negative language ideologies can be transmitted by the parents to the younger generations and therefore, the language ceases to be spoken. This is an example of the application of Darwin's natural selection theory, although the main difference with natural species is that languages are not natural organisms, but they are social institutions whose relations of dominance are the metaphorical representation of social data. The final category is the political one. The pushes that come from an external force - and its imposed culture and government - pressures colonised people to abandon their language in favour of the dominant language. The general idea behind colonialism, in fact, is that multilingualism is a deterrent for its dominance purposes, this is why central governments usually persecute indigenous languages and it often results in linguicide, which is the obliteration of a language through political intervention. An example is the 1616 Education Act emanated by the Scottish Parliament, that demanded the spread of the English language in order to abolish Gaelic. Certainly, central governments have different means to exercise their power, such as the army, the media and especially schools. It is also important to remember the pressures Native American children had to suffer in many US Bureau of Indian Affairs schools in the past, where they were forbidden to speak their languages, painting them as 'barbaric' and 'uncivilised', as a result, many Native American languages disappeared. Nowadays, there are a lot of efforts to claim justice: many associations were created to grant the rights of indigenous people, and their main purpose is, in fact, to revive and restore lost languages.

1.4.1 Language revitalisation

Despite the inevitable end of different languages, there are ways that can be applied in order to reawaken some of them or save them from the brink of death. If the language has some authoritativeness or particular importance for its last speakers, it will be easier to bring it back to life. Promoting its active use, where it is still possible, can allow its revitalisation. On the

other hand, it is a trickier process for minority and indigenous languages, and it has no guarantees of success. Indigenous languages are languages spoken by autochthonous people of a region or territory and they are generally the languages that are most at risk when talking about language endangerment, since they are spoken by a small minority of the population of a specific place. When a language is used less and less, it is bound to disappear, especially when it is substituted by another. This also happens to different minor languages, when immigrants decide to take on the language which is considered more prestigious in terms of economic or political factors. Therefore, sometimes families voluntarily sacrifice their autochthonous language in order to fit in the new political and social environment. On the other hand, the loss of indigenous languages is often related to the appropriation and destruction of indigenous territories, to englobe their population into a larger and homologated society. Most of the times, immigrant people are destined to be part of the lower-class of this newly formed society and, due to this, they formulate a negative perception of their own autochthonous language: they start despising their own language because it is considered 'inferior' and, even in the private informality of their households, they only speak the assimilated dominant language. However, there is a growing attention towards the linguistic situations around the world, and indigenous people are fighting to have their rights recognised and to save their own languages from oblivion.

Nowadays, there are very few examples of languages that were entirely brought back to life because, most of the time, when a language dies there are no speakers left. On the other hand, there may be some descendants of this moribund language that can oppose its dying process. They can learn it through written texts or recordings left for them by the elders: this type of collaboration is essential to the efforts of reawakening a dead language. Furthermore, some community-based programmes were developed to increase the prestige of endangered languages and encourage people to learn them, and to reverse the language shift (or RLS, an acronym created by the American linguist Joshua Fishman, in 1991, used to indicate the attempts to oppose the decline and final extinction of a language). Even though there are no flawless methods to reverse this process for minority languages in small speech communities, there are a lot of people interested in doing something to help the cause. The American linguist Leanne Hinton uses the expression 'language revitalisation' (Hinton, 2001) to refer not only to the actual languages that come back to life, but also to different processes and efforts carried out by organisations, institutions, and single individuals to restore endangered languages all around the world. Therefore, in some cases, the efforts of language revitalisation may aim at helping children restore forgotten features of that language or, if the language is almost

completely extinct, creating programmes that allow people to learn it afresh, and pushing to set it as the main language of communication of that community. So, each goal varies according to each linguistic situation. It is important to note that indigenous people have been victims of oppression and they have lost and keep losing their lands and cultural identity because of geopolitical and economic reasons. Therefore, professionals and their research need to respect their will and rights regarding the future application of their culture and language, because the choice is theirs to make.

In order to start a revitalisation process, a minimum of one interested person is necessary. This person needs to be dedicated to the linguistic cause and they need to have some knowledge of the community and their language to set up linguistic meetings and document said language. It is likely that community support may come later, but one person can do enough. Hinton reformulated Fishman's eight steps³ to approach language revitalisation based on the Hebrew RLS model and other large-scale languages in order to focus more on small communities' languages and their realistic possibilities. In fact, one of the few successful attempts at language revitalisation is Hebrew, which was an endangered language during the 2,000 years of the Jewish diaspora, used for religious purposes and that was restored by the Jewish community when the state of Israel was created and set as its official language. It is very different and more complicated for smaller languages to achieve such results. Hinton (2001, p.6-7) believes that local languages can only reach up to the third or fourth step of the language revitalisation process: step 1, assessing and planning the linguistic situation within the community (how many speakers, their ages, their attitudes towards their own language etc.); step 2, if the language has no speakers alive, it should be fundamental to look for available language records and start teaching programmes about said language; step 3, if the language only has elder speakers, it will be necessary to document their language, putting together a language documentation based on their knowledge; step 4, develop a second-language programme for adult speakers, who will

³ Fishman's eight steps for language revival (1991) originally included (in this order): 8. The learning of the language by adults, especially where the only speakers are the elders, or they are isolated from other speakers of the same language; 7. The formation of an integrated population made of active speakers; 6. A system of support for the informal use of the language in their daily lives, in order to protect it and use exclusively that language; 5. once the oral competence is achieved, it should be important to encourage literacy; 4. Where possible, the institution of the study of that language in some compulsory education systems; 3. If the previous stages have been correctly achieved, encourage the use of the language in the workplace; 2. Afterwards, encourage its use in local government services and media; 1. Finally, after all the previous stages have been achieved, encourage the establishment of the language for higher education purposes, the government, and so on.

have a crucial role in transmitting it later on; step 5, enhance and support cultural practices in order to use the endangered language both at home and publicly; step 6, school support is a fundamental element in language revitalisation, it is useful to develop second-language programmes at school; step 7, use the endangered language at home as the first means of communication to allow children to learn it; step 8, spread the use of the endangered language to local public domains such as media, public functions, local commerce, and so on; finally, she added a step 9, expand the language to make it the official language of a national or regional government for wider communication. Certainly, some steps like the eighth or the ninth are beyond the bounds of possibilities for indigenous and local languages, therefore, in most cases the most important step is the second in order to gather as much documentation and recordings as possible before it is too late to do so, and to develop teaching programmes that could help the transmission of the endangered language. According to Hinton (2001, pp.7-17), there are five main categories to practically approach language revitalisation. First of all there are school-based programmes, which are differentiated into three subcategories: teaching an endangered language as a subject - if taught using the right methods - it can be really useful for children to achieve fluency in that language, to erase the negative ideology towards it and to generate interest towards the revitalising process, some examples are the Native American languages (Hupa, Tolowa, Karuk and Yurok) that are taught in public schools in Humboldt County, California; bilingual education is carried out in communities where children still speak the endangered language and it consists of a portion of the whole education system taught in the minority language; finally, immersion schools, where the entire education is carried out in the endangered language. Languages like Māori and Hawaiian have been supported and helped through this kind of programme. It is important to mention that teaching a language does not automatically mean teaching an entire culture and their traditions. Language and culture are closely related but if the language is taught outside the heart of that specific culture, traditional culture needs to be taught and added to the classroom's linguistic activities. For example, for what concerns indigenous languages, storytelling is an important part of their culture, but it is not a typical practice in school programmes. Therefore, many classroom-based language revitalisation programmes have integrated traditional storytelling in their lessons. The second category Hinton refers to are children's programmes outside the school, sometimes these are organised during summer breaks or after-school programmes that help children deepen their knowledge and brush it up. Another category is the programmes organised for adults. Most of the time, these consist of evening classes for adults but also families who want to support their children's studies in full immersion schools. These should not consist of typical lessons, but

they should rather include activities such as cooking, going for walks, housework, and practising the endangered language in the meantime. These are useful to standardise the use of that language in their daily lives. Another category is documentation and materials development. There is a negative prejudice towards the recording of a language, which is considered as an activity that is required exclusively if the language is already on the brink of death, but preserving a language actually means to keep it alive for the benefit of its growth. In many cases, documentation is the last resort and starting point of the revitalisation process. Therefore, it is important to know how to access the existing documentation. There are, in fact, many archives such as the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C., or the American Philosophical Library in Philadelphia, and other institutions around the world that have different projects whose main focus is language revitalisation. Most of them put their energy in keeping updated on the new forms of accessible sound recordings, converting wax cylinder recordings into audio tapes to be digitised and easily accessible on the Internet. Keeping track of all the linguistic changes is almost impossible, but new and updated documentation is mostly needed to help not only with the creation and integration of archives, but also with the adaptation of new technological teaching devices which can be used during language lessons (audiotapes, videotapes, CD-ROMs, and so on). Finally, the last category is the family-based programmes at home, this can be applied when the use of the endangered language is so widely spread that it is used in households and learnt by children as a first language. For example, Hawaiian was substituted by English as the official language of Hawaii, but things have changed during the last decades and Hawaiian has been recognised as an official language of the state: it is spoken both at school and at home and it is also the most widely studied Native American language. Conversely, for minor local languages that are found within larger and more powerful nations, parents may be biased towards the minority language, leading them to prefer to teach the standardised one only. For the purposes of the language revitalisation programmes, it is fundamental to encourage speakers to speak and practise their native language.

1.4.2 Language documentation as a form of preservation

Documentation is a fundamental stage in the language revitalisation process. It is great importance for endangered languages, particularly when there are no living speakers. However, if there are any remaining and the language is at risk, then it is imperative that the entire

community works together to create a database. Linguistic research and documentation are not only reserved for professionals of the field, but also the community can have a fundamental role in this process. Schools take part in documentation processes too, and they usually video or audio tape elders when they are invited to tell stories or simply to talk. These tapes will be used by children in the future.

Language documentation consists of different steps: the creation of recordings (audio, video or written); transferring them on computers; their transcription, analysis of their context and their translation for future purposes; their integration into archives; making them accessible for different users; assuring their long-term preservation (Wittenburg, Skiba, Trilsbeek in the Language Archive Newsletter of MPI, 2004, pp.3-4). Despite the many technological advances of the digital era, paper documentation keeps being the most persisting and long-lasting form of preservation. Computerised documentation needs to be constantly updated due to the frequent changes of formats and, furthermore, the risk of losing information detained in computers or hard disks (that may become obsolete) is quite high. However, paper documentation cannot contain the typical sounds, phonetic features, or facial expressions of a language, and most endangered languages do not have a writing system, and this is why communities usually rely on video or audio recordings. It is widely agreed that the most useful way of preserving language information is video-taping its speakers on different occasions in order to record as many conversations and registers as possible, and these tapes need to be translated for future purposes. In the past, translations were usually taped too, but this created some issues because some original tapes and their translations have been separated from each other over time. It was opted to include subtitles on original tapes to avoid this problem. Nowadays, there are different types of useful technologies that are used in order to support digital video cameras, transcriptions, and annotations, simplifying the information gathering process (Wittenburg et al. 2004).

Documenting a language revolves around the concept of preserving information for future generations. Therefore, finding ways to correctly preserve and make it easily accessible are crucial tasks for those who are interested in this process. The first thing to do to achieve a correct preservation is labelling the tapes and adding detailed descriptions of their contents, then, the following step should be to make backup copies. Finally, it is recommended that tapes be stored in secure and stable environments, within controlled conditions that are cool, and dry, without any risk of demagnetisation. Moreover, a stable archive should be ensured for this kind of work, like a library or a local government office. On the other hand, today's language archives are mostly in digital formats that allow their reproducibility and easy access. These present a series

of disadvantages, such as limited storage of media and the need to constantly update new data formats. In digital archives, the data material is contained inside magnetic sequences of ones and zeros, and it can be accessed through the computers' hardware and software that decode those codecs strings according to their format type. Finally, it is fundamental to choose the right tools and technologies to ensure a high quality and long-lasting language archive.

Documentation is one of the most important tools used in the process of language revitalisation, although sometimes it needs to be integrated with a reconstitution stage, which starts from existing information and knowledge about the extinct language or other similar languages in order to make hypotheses on what the language was like. Comparing two similar languages may result in a deeper understanding of the internal mechanism of the disappearing one, even if it results in a mixture of influences between the two. In fact, it is vital for languages to constantly change. Change is a symptom of liveliness, because it means that it is spoken and used in the present-day context. Therefore, in order to revive a 'silent' language it is fundamental to develop different domains of use to fulfil the needs of its future speakers. Starting from the written form, which is the mode that allows language study and research, it is useful to create genres to use as forms of communication and to develop spoken domains of use. Families do have a responsibility to raise their children in order to fit with the society they live in, but it is extremely helpful to the cause of language endangerment when the silent language is spoken and practised at home. Using a language - even as a second language - at home may be a step forward towards its revitalisation. As it has already been stated, a revitalisation process for minority and indigenous languages is more difficult than it is for other languages that have more recognition or power in the current linguistic scenery. On the other hand, even including few expressions or words of the endangered language while speaking other languages represents some vital efforts to oppose the complete extinction of said language. Community support is a great help to the cause, but at first, even the dedication of one single person can make the difference.

1.5 Final considerations

Scholars and academics over time have desperately tried to find the so-called 'Tower of Babel', a mythical solution - based on linguistic universals - that allows free and easy communication between different cultures and populations. On the other hand, as the German philosopher and linguist Wilhelm Humboldt (2000, p.234, p.51) affirmed, language is a sort of 'third universe'

between the external 'empirical world' and the interiorised structures of human's conscience. Therefore, homogenising the art of communication would mean losing different worlds of possibilities and never expanding the potential of cognitive constructs. Everyone has their own stories, and the language used to convey them is not only the means, but it is the representation of those narrations: embedded in every single word and in their intricate structures there is the history and memory of all its speakers. Losing a language means losing a part of the identity of the world. In some cases, it is already too late to intervene but, as it has been shown in this chapter, there may be a margin of intervention and new advancements in the revitalisation field that can be crucial to avoid further language disappearances and preserve a part of the essence of human beings.

2. Words of Wonder: Endangered Languages and What They Tell Us

2.1 Introduction on the author

This work is focused on the book *Words of Wonder: Endangered Languages and What They Tell Us* (2022), written by Nicholas Evans. Nicholas Evans is a Distinguished Professor of Linguistics at the Australian National University. He also directs the ARC Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language (CoEDL)⁴ - whose goal is to integrate descriptive linguistics and learning different ranges of linguistic types, and bring together experts from diverse backgrounds to generate new discoveries, in order to encourage a research that may be entirely based on diversity and language change - and the Evolution of Cultural Diversity Initiative (ECDI)⁵ - whose aim is to investigate the reasons and the different processes that led to the cultural evolution and linguistic diversification in Oceania, integrating different studies like linguistics, anthropology, biology, genetics and so on. Throughout his career, he has published more than 200 scientific papers, together with nine monographs, nine edited books, and several grammars and dictionaries. Furthermore, he is also a translator of traditional oral literature. He is particularly interested in fieldwork and has spent more or less seven years working in remote communities in order to learn their languages and record them. His fieldwork has mostly been centred on the study and research of indigenous languages in Australia and Papua New Guinea, and on how their deep diversity could answer many of the humanistic and scientific questions about actuality, society and humankind in general. In fact, he focuses on the debate between the documentation of minority and indigenous languages and its role in the investigation about the nature of language itself. His main purpose is to train young students and new generations on how to document a language, mostly supported by a reciprocal engagement of native speakers within a speech community and by the study and development of new technological tools that assist the linguistic research.

⁴ CoEDL's website: <https://legacy.dynamicsoflanguage.edu.au/>

⁵ ECDI's website: <https://evolutionofculturaldiversity.anu.edu.au/>

2.2.1 Words of Wonder: Endangered Languages and What They Tell Us

His most famous book, *Dying Words: Endangered languages and what they have to tell us* (2009), was translated into many different languages such as German, Korean, Japanese and French. In this book, he explored the phenomenon of language loss across the world and the inevitable and disastrous consequences of such an event. In fact, he deepens the topic by analysing the loss of vital human knowledge that disappears together with the languages in which it is conveyed. Due to the new public awareness and advances in this field, Evans came out with a second and latest edition of this book, renamed *Words of Wonder: Endangered Languages and What They Tell Us* (2022), which is the object of interest of this dissertation. This change in title is the consequence of the new focus of this book, underlining the wonder of linguistic diversity and the state of endangerment of many disappearing languages. This latest edition includes a new chapter about new developments of language revitalisation - a glimmer of hope for those who are interested in this crucial process - and also a section about how language documentation can provide a good portrait of the current language diversity all around the world. This book also includes different anecdotes about other linguists and discoveries made during fieldwork and, most importantly, the voices of indigenous people that tell their own stories. They have a crucial role in this text, since they speak up for themselves to preserve their linguistic and cultural richness.

Since Evans' main purpose is pedagogical - in order to teach young scholars about said topics - the book falls under the category of the genre of scientific didactic textbook. It is, in fact, aimed at not only undergraduate, graduate students, and scholars studying language endangerment and preservation, but also at anyone who is interested and has some basic notions of linguistics.

Textbooks [...] disseminate discipline-based knowledge and, at the same time, display a somewhat unequal writer-reader relationship, with the writer as the specialist and the reader as the non-initiated apprentice in the discipline, or the writer as the transmitter and the reader as the recipient of established knowledge. (Bhatia, 2004, p.33)

According to Bhatia (2004), the academic textbook genre relies on the purpose of making knowledge available to those who are interested. In this particular case, Evans writes for an audience that has some notions of linguistics and is driven to explore the current linguistic situations and varieties in the global scenario. Textbooks also rely on already existing works, books, and research. In fact, on multiple occasions, Evans quotes different sources that help paint a thorough picture of his findings: the studies and research of other authors, linguists, anthropologists, and ethnobiologists support his reasonings throughout the text, but they are also used as a way to oppose his ideas in a critical way so that he can either contradict them and make his point or use them to ask questions and plant the seed for future applications and research. Therefore, his text fits perfectly within the scientific linguistic community.

According to Roman Jakobson's communicative functions (1960, p.470), it is clear that Evan's goals for his work are mainly informative and descriptive, providing the readers with the means to understand what he is talking about. On the other hand, he also wants to send his message, which is to convince people of the crucial and pivotal necessity to raise awareness towards endangered linguistic diversity, in order to intervene before it is too late, and it falls into oblivion. He achieves this persuasive purpose by using evaluative language and his own voice to influence the reader's reasoning. Moreover, his main influences derive from the oral traditions he worked with, this is why he includes traditional and moralising narrative stories and the direct voices of all the indigenous people he met.

Words of Wonder is a project that revolves around years and years of established studies, the author's fieldwork, and a highly specialised type of language. The book is written in English, even though the presence of different languages urges particular techniques and resources to make them understandable for an English-speaking audience. In fact, the main issue with this kind of work is to represent unfamiliar sounds. Evans, in his preface, wonders whether it could be more useful to adapt the English alphabet or to use technical phonetic symbols that can represent the sound in a more accurate way, but this would require the reader to have prior knowledge of linguistics and phonetic alphabets. There are some languages, though, that have sounds that cannot be rendered in English. Hence, throughout this text, the author uses special phonetic symbols (which a non-professional reader can avoid or ignore) and also, he proposes his translation of the original text into English, to clarify its meaning. He includes video and sound files into his collected material, but also maps and an index to precisely localise the mentioned languages and countries.

Evans' whole research is based on the documentation and preservation of languages and language diversity all around the world. His method of research consists of different techniques

but mostly, it relies on his observations collected during fieldwork or what the anthropologist Ahearn defines as ‘participant observation’ (2017). It is known that Evans has spent - and is still spending - a lot of time living among native speakers, he has learnt their languages, and he is familiar with their traditions and cultures. Also, he takes part in every activity of the speech community to get to know them. His field notes are important for the purposes of his research. This method is useful to provide crucial insights about that specific group and their language and to have immediate answers to his questions. Moreover, he created connections with his teachers and other indigenous people, gaining their trust and helping them in their own language preservation process. Recordings play a fundamental role since his goal is to study the daily lives of these people and also to involve them as much as possible in his research. In fact, he collaborates with native speakers to produce audio and video recordings of them telling their stories, or simply having informal conversations with each other. On the other hand, when a language is already dead and, therefore, there are no speakers alive, Evans believes that - where it is possible - it is essential to find every existing link with said language, underlining the crucial role of the ‘last hearers’(Evans, 2022, p.210) They are the last persons alive who have witnessed and heard the language throughout their lives but who had no desire, necessity or confidence to learn it and speak it. In this book, Evans collects some interesting anecdotes on the people and the different realities he interacted with. Therefore, he creates a miscellaneous project based on scientific and linguistic information, and the personal stories and traditional knowledge that help create that language.

Whoever approaches the language endangerment phenomenon has to deal with a lot of material because the interest towards linguistic varieties and the precarity of languages all around the world has been a subject of debate for a really long time. One central concept that is important in this type of studies is, in fact, language documentation. Evans uses the term ‘documentary linguistics’ to refer to this new branch of linguistics.

Documentary linguistics is concerned with the creation of an enduring, permanent record of language. The centerpiece of this work is the representation of naturally occurring speech using annotated audio and video recordings. (Gary Holton, accessed: 23/05/2024)⁶

⁶ Holton’s website: <https://gmholton.github.io/documentary-linguistics/>

On the other hand, when a language dies and therefore there are no speakers alive, there are a few difficulties to collect new and priceless information, but also to dive into the existing amount of material. Evans recounts his difficulties in dealing with recordings of dead languages left by other specialists without any transcription, translation or contextual information. Therefore, he underlines the importance of providing future generations of linguists and native speaker linguists with the right and complete means to handle the existing documentation.

2.2.2 Endangered linguistic variety and documentation

According to the author, each language has its own story to tell, in which it is possible to find a sort of library that includes its grammar, vocabularies, dictionaries, botanical and zoological encyclopaedias, and also literary and oral traditions. It unfolds into two opposite dimensions: the ‘out there’, within the speech community and the ‘in there’, within the individual minds of its speakers. Especially in the case of oral cultures, these competencies and their use rest and rely on the memory of the last living witnesses of said language. The value and importance of documenting an endangered language lies in this concept, even though this process is more difficult to achieve than what is generally believed to be. In fact, the amount of information that is detained and represented at the same time by a language is so wide that its documentation could be compared to the attempts to map the human genome. The main difference is that, if it has not developed a writing system, the endangered language could disappear without leaving any trace of its existence.

Canonically, the efforts of descriptive linguists have been focused on the compilation of grammars, texts, and dictionaries in order to record a language. On the other hand, nowadays, documentary linguists are more and more interested in collecting information regarding its intonation, gestures, facial expressions and so on, especially through the use of sound and video recordings. This is considered to be a success and an advancement in the documentary linguistics field, although it only represents a small part of what resides in the minds of its speakers. A good linguistic description, according to Evans, should rely on the deep and right questions asked by linguists and, therefore, the purpose of *Words of Wonder* is to show what should be important to investigate about, while listening to the several languages around the globe that are quickly falling silent.

In the current global scenario, there is the increasing phenomenon of world languages (English, Chinese, Spanish, and so on) that increases the formation of a monolingual attitude and

ideology. Despite this situation, many small social groups cherish their linguistic diversity, since this feature is at the very core of their stories, traditions, and cultures. Evans refers to Jorge Luis Borges' concept of *The Library of Babel* (1941) to explain the importance of linguistic variation: it is a metaphor to conceive the magnitude of infinite stories or ideas that each language can create. One of the most important and first starting points that Evans investigates is about the origins of the great numbers of the global linguistic diversity. For countries - or even small territories - in which there is a widely spread language variety (such as Arnhem Land), he excludes the cause of mutual isolation due to geographical barriers, since most of the time it can be found within the same household. Evans explains that the small-scale societies in certain parts of the world that present these high rates of language diversity are economically self-sufficient and they are the centre of their own world without relying on outside and more dominant groups and, therefore, they do not need to align to their world languages. The current distribution of languages is uneven, and the different levels of diversification depend on several factors: an original stratum of language diversity can be traced back to when all humans were hunter-gatherers and there was no need for intercommunicating networks (a demonstration is the existence of groups that have remained mostly hunter-gatherers over time); the Neolithic agricultural expansion led to more recent strata of diversification, leaving patterns of large numbers of languages that belong to shared linguistic families; the effects of state formation caused a drop of the linguistic diversity rates (due to its homogenising reach); and finally, the European colonisation and other nation states have conspired to subdue indigenous linguistic variations for their dominance purposes.

Evans compares the loss of a language to that of biological species, particularly for what concerns the concept of variety that is considered to be the 'reservoir of adaptability' (Evans, 2022, p.17). Small and indigenous languages hold crucial and detailed biological and ecological knowledge about their surroundings; therefore, their disappearance can also mean the loss of inestimable cultural heritage of the world itself.

In these types of studies, the linguistic relativity theory of Sapir and Whorf is commonly used in order to underline the influence of language in cognitive processes of the human's brain: the construction of their own realities starting from the language they speak. Thought generates mental categories and processed information in a given language, creating patterns that are used to explain life events.

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of

the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group. (Sapir, 1949, p.162)

Therefore, language diversity has different impacts on thought. It shapes different aspects of reality, and it redirects the human's reasonings towards different and unexplored cognitive patterns and connections. It is barely possible to conceive the magnitude of its potential when a language is truly well documented, providing the means for other individuals to understand not only another language, but also its interior world. Moreover, recording a fading language is fundamental to keep its culture alive or what Evans calls its 'verbal art', which are the many different masterpieces produced by oral communities (such as oral traditions, storytelling, songs, and so on).⁷ Their recording may preserve the richness of their cultures.

All the existing species (animals, plants, even human beings) leave traces on the planet after their deaths, but speech is evanescent since it only persists as vibrations in the air, making languages the human's most fragile creations. Hence, the need of recording and documenting a language has deep roots in human civilizations, starting from the invention of its writing system, which can be useful to achieve language persistence over time. On the other hand, not all languages have developed a writing system. In fact, the main difficulty in recording indigenous and minority languages is how to make them long-lasting. The creation of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) - which contains 170 phonetic symbols created to write down a great number of human sounds - was considered a solution to this problem, even though it is not able to capture all the non-verbal signs that occur in a language (gestures, signs, gaze direction, implicatures and so on). This is why sound and video recordings are considered such breakthroughs in linguistic research and documentation. Starting from Bell's invention of the phonograph for sound reproduction during the 20th century, this important development was followed by many advances of new technologies, especially for what concerns the visual documentation through video tapes.

⁷ Professor Christopher Jocks (1998, p.231) affirmed: 'The [...] culmination occurs when the ceremonial life of a traditional people is threatened by language erosion. That is, when the most deep- and far-reaching forms of expression the people possess [...] grow pale, lose significance and coherence, and begin to die.'

Evans supports his research with his own experience on the field, having worked with many different speech communities and disappearing languages in places like Arnhem Land and Croker Island for a long time. He offers a lot of insights on what languages like Ilgar, Iwaidja or Kayardilt have to offer and, therefore, he urges their correct and long-lasting documentation. As aforementioned, he works with languages that have already fallen into oblivion, and this is why he explores all the difficulties in documenting languages that are officially considered dead. During his many years on the field, he realised the crucial and commonly underestimated role of ‘last speakers’, the last real indirect witnesses of a language. For example, he talks about a recording he had access to in which there were a few old people talking in Marrku, a language spoken in Croker Island. These recordings dated back to the 60s and it was made by the investigators Schebeck and Hinch. Unfortunately, the two researchers did not leave any contextual information on the recordings or transcriptions of their contents. After the death of the last speaker of this language, he was able to find - by chance - the daughter of one of the persons of the recordings, who grew up hearing the language but had never had the necessity to speak it. Thanks to this last hearer, he was able to gain further information about Marrku, even though there is still a long way to go in order to create a thorough and useful language documentation. Furthermore, he also emphasises the use of a comprehensive type of documentation which includes not only the linguistic features (its semantic, lexical and morpho-syntactical structures) but also the cultural and ethnobiological contexts, and in order to achieve this, he strongly believes in the collaboration - which he defines as ‘co-authorship’ - of both academically trained linguists and native community members, in order to produce a final result that may be as complete as possible. In this case, native community members need to have an academic formation to link the different spheres of language. On the other hand, it should be fundamental to respect the will and rights of indigenous people towards their own languages and cultures, giving them the choice to decide what to do with their own knowledge and providing them with the right means, so that they can have a central role in the documentation process. Furthermore, in order to achieve inclusivity, governments and the schooling system should encourage and include formal education of indigenous people through linguistic programmes and similar initiatives.

Evans collaborated with Seifart, Hammarström and Levinson - professionals of the field - to write a useful article on the future of language documentation (2018). The scholar’s knowledge of the world’s languages has increased by 15%, thanks to the increasing advances and technologies implemented for digital archived material, using programmes such as DoBeS (an international documentation programme, funded by the Volkswagen Foundation), ELDP

(Endangered Language Documentation Program), and DEL (Documentation of Endangered Languages). Despite the impending disappearance of many languages all around the world, there is a high percentage of languages that have not been documented yet. On the other hand, up till now, programmes such as those aforementioned have documented more than 500 additional languages, archiving their records with annotations.

Nowadays, a new branch of linguistics is finally dedicated to language documentation, and it has a few interesting and useful characteristics: it has to focus on multimedia data and its archiving, the digital annotation of their recordings, the easy access to these archives for scholars to use, and the interdisciplinary work with other specialists (such as ethnobiologists, anthropologists, and so on).

Evans⁸ believes in the incredible support and importance of the role of indigenous scholars in the research, composing a community-based language research in order to decolonise itself⁹. One crucial aspect is the training of indigenous people on documentation methods, so that they can add academic training to their traditional knowledge. This approach is spreading quickly thanks to programmes such as the ‘Breath of Life/Silent No More’ Native California Language Restoration Workshops, in which language archives are used to assist the revitalisation process of extinguishing languages. A lot has been achieved in terms of documenting and archiving a language, but there is still a lot of work to do. Each researcher should take on small tasks to ensure verified data collections that allow coordinated comparison for linguistic analysis. Therefore, it should be important to compile lists of standardised words, inventories of grammatical categories and semantic fields, together with their descriptive purposes. These tasks can help build up a more thorough language documentation, in order to provide the means to allow and encourage the use of a dying language, and hopefully, its transmission to younger generations.

Language loss is still a concerning phenomenon and the disappearance of traditional and environmental knowledge that is embedded into those endangered languages will have serious consequences in future specialised research and in the preservation of the world’s biodiversity.

⁸ Seifart, Evans, Hammarström and Levinson (2018, pp. e327-328)

⁹ In this regard, Fishman (1982) affirms: ‘[...] each collectivity contributes its own thread to the tapestry of world history, and [...] each is accepted and respected for making its own contribution’.

2.2.3 Language reawakening

According to Evans, despite being a crucial form of preservation, language documentation alone is not enough to reawaken a silent language. He insists that the last speakers of a dying language can have their role in the process of language revitalisation, in order to find ways to assure its transmission over time. In other cases, recordings can be used by distant descendants that are interested in language reawakening. For example, he reports the case of Kaurna, a language that was spoken in Adelaide, South Australia, which is one of the most successful attempts at language revival in the country. In 1838, two Lutheran missionaries, Christian Teichelmann and Clamor Schürmann, developed Kaurna's writing system and compiled its comprehensive grammar and a 2000 words dictionary. They also opened a school where children used to write letters both in English and in Kaurna, and the letters still exist. The last native speaker of Kaurna died in 1929, but recently, some descendants of this language have started a campaign to revive Kaurna through an organisation called 'Kaurna Warra Pintyandi' ('Creating Kaurna language') and the documentation left by the two missionaries and those children are the real foundations of Kaurna's revival. Therefore, a few people have started using this language on a daily basis and there has been a growing recognition of Kaurna even in several ceremonies and public functions.

Evans underlines the distinction between the concepts of 'reclamation', which is the revival of a sleeping language that is no longer spoken; 'revitalization', which is the process that encourages the use and active transmission to younger generations of a language that is spoken by a few speakers; and 'reinvigoration', aimed at endangered languages that have few children speaking it.¹⁰

According to Evans, one successful method used for language revitalisation is what is known as 'Te Kohanga Reo' in Maori, 'language nests' that were useful in the revival of the Maori

¹⁰ The 'Language Revival Diamond', created by Rob Amery and Ghil'ad Zuckermann, is a conceptualised language revival scheme whose central goal is the language revival which relies of four quadrants: the role of language owners/custodians (native speakers of descendants); linguistics (linguistic techniques used, research and reconstruction, dictionaries and grammars, new media, and so on); public sphere (the public and official use of the language, such as in media and government); education (methods and trainings to properly use the language, formal education and schooling, together with traditional rituals and songs, and so on). According to them, an effective language revival is achievable only if these four quadrants work together.

(Zuckermann, 2017. Available at <https://www.professorzuchermann.com/gallery?lightbox=dataItem-k5llywtk>).

language, and it had successful results in Canada, parts of Australia, and Taiwan too. These connect older speakers (belonging to grandparental or great-grandparental generations) to children in monolingual immersion preschools, in order to encourage the natural use of the language in informal contexts. Certainly, this method can only be applied if there are enough dedicated speakers who encourage its use.

Another important approach of language revival is the reversing of public erasure of indigenous languages (which can involve the disappearance of said language from public spheres and informal contexts). This erasure may happen either by deliberate force (physical punishments, institutional and legal bans and so on), or by simple negligence or ignorance. As a result, its effect is to negate and diminish the languages' status and value. However, as endangered languages gain more and more visibility, the erasure of some local ones is being subverted: in some small regions, public signages are appearing written in their minority languages (such as welcome signs in regional airports).

Furthermore, new technologies and social media allow speech communities to stick together and to reclaim their languages. For example, Facebook groups are created to connect strangers who share the same cultural heritage and language, linked by shared interests in the platform. An important part of the revitalisation process is developing the right educational frameworks that teach and strengthen the learning of indigenous languages. The main issue is how to place indigenous languages education in the national schooling system, therefore, whether it should be included as a separate curriculum of the system, or if it should be optional. Different hybrid models have been developed to avoid these problems, such as offering teaching the indigenous language as a subject to everyone and providing further programmes to those who are interested (Saturday schools, language camps, and so on). Creating curriculum materials from what had already been documented can pose a few challenges too because, typically, the original purpose of language documentation is to cover grammatical issues, creating dictionaries or recording traditional texts. Therefore, it is not directly meant for its daily and informal communicative use. On the other hand, it may be useful to find a common ground between the communicative intentions of those who are studying the ancestral language and the recorded material which can be found in earlier documentation and that is based on more formal structures and aspects. Moreover, blending the language teaching and the local biological and ecological knowledge can be useful to develop relational skills because when children are brought up in bilingual or bicultural systems, they not only speak two different languages, but they also learn the correspondences between them, and they may develop new cognitive patterns for the understanding of their surroundings.

For what concerns the revival of languages that have only been transmitted orally, these face some major obstacles. Despite their orthographic adaptations (through phonetic symbols or their romanisation), such methods are not easily learnt by native individuals who do not have a prior linguistic formation. Adding sound files to allow the hearer to learn and reproduce the right pronunciation of those words could be a solution to this problem. Also, if these recordings are supported by video materials it can be easier to observe and mimic the lip movements and the speakers' gestures. Vice versa, when the only available mode of communication is the written one, it might pose a series of challenges too. In fact, if storytelling in oral traditions is reduced to just its writing, then its vitality can be lost. In fact, according to Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer (1998) about the implementation of literacy in the formal education systems:

Confusion about the role of literacy is common in NSL (Native Second Language) instruction, and literacy is obviously a component of materials development, even where it is intended for teachers to present materials orally. Many teachers become enthusiastic about literacy after participating in teacher-training workshops and are eager to teach it, but forget that while they already know the language, their students do not. They tend to substitute literacy for building a base in oral fluency.

Digital technologies have been developed to ensure a mixture between literacy and oracy: modern books have included digital solutions such as qr codes and links to access videos or recordings of storytelling or other situations, achieving immediacy. The process of learning to speak, read, and write indigenous languages is supported by Facebook groups, Youtube channels and other online sources, which provide subtitles and translations too¹¹.

Mobile phones are also used for text messaging, and in recent years a lot of new screen keyboards appeared to include the writing systems of many languages around the world (Google is now estimated to support more than 900 keyboards across more than 70 writing systems). Future accomplishments may involve the compilation of a large number of language corpora to build a comprehensive system of predictive texting. Moreover, online dictionaries

¹¹ Evans includes an example of a Facebook group called 'Chatino Language Documentation', created by Hilaria Cruz, Rosalina Salvador, and Isa de los Santos, to share with their community - and with those who are interested - their cultural traditions, but also to freely use their language: https://en-gb.facebook.com/groups/102434476471103/?ref=pages_profile_groups_tab&source_id=1293937817305230.

are an important source for language revival. According to Evans, social media have an increasing resonance in the ‘autodocumentation’ movement that is developing in recent years, making resources and linguistic data available to distant descendants. This is a new and growing movement that was developed by the linguist Amina Mettouchi, and it relies on the potential and future application of the internet, based on the concept of decolonising research methods, and using affordable and available local materials. It is a way for indigenous people to record and choose what they believe to be important to preserve. This movement is spread in Tamazgha, the region of North Africa where Amazigh languages are spoken¹². Social media are linked together through a reference website, and not only do they include videos, recording or messages in that language, but also online courses and techniques. One of the major problems of this kind of movement is how this approach may be integrated in parts of the world where there is no connectivity, or it is extremely poor. On the other hand, it represents a revolutionary step forward towards the preservation and decolonisation processes of linguistic research and human linguistic heritage.

2.3 Conclusive thoughts

In conclusion, according to Nicholas Evans, it should be essential to support and encourage the richness of linguistic diversity all around the world. He also believes that the future of language documentation and revitalisation lies in interdisciplinary collaboration. Linguists need to work together with other specialists (anthropologists, ethnobiologists, ecologists, educators and so on), to create a good and useful language documentation and to ideate new preservation strategies. In fact, it should be important to build new global networks in order to share knowledge, to raise awareness on today's linguistic situation, and to intervene wherever it is possible, providing support to small realities. Evans strongly believes in the pivotal role of the collaboration between linguists and community members who can develop new policies for language preservation and its revitalisation, working together to fill the gaps of each other's knowledge and competences. Therefore, Evans advocates for a future where language documentation and revitalization are community-driven, technologically supported, and based

¹² Evans provides the link to the Amazigh Languages website: <https://llacan.cnrs.fr/amazigh/>.

on interdisciplinary aid. He wants to empower communities, integrate cultural knowledge to language documentation, and foster global collaborations.

The author strongly believes in the shared responsibilities of every human being in the language revitalisation and documentation process. Everyone can do their part in order to preserve not only endangered languages, but also and foremost, the piece of the world's essence that is contained in each culture, tradition, and society. Every single language has something to teach, and all it is left to do is listen to it whilst it is possible.

3. Translations

In this chapter there are two translations of the chapters 1 and 10 taken from the book *Words of Wonder: Endangered Languages and What They Tell Us*, written by Nicholas Evans. These two chapters are not only representative of the style of the author, but they are also fundamental to the purposes of the whole text.

The first chapter, '*Warrammurunguji's Children*', introduces the author's style and sets his purposes for the book. His storytelling and his experiences are used in order to show the results of his research on the great language variety and on the disappearing languages in Papua New Guinea. Here, he analyses the history of these languages and the origins of multilingualism in small societies. Multilingualism is the real treasure of our world, since each language is a reservoir of priceless knowledge that needs to be protected. In small communities, in fact, indigenous knowledge is passed on orally so, if the language dies, it will be endangered too. Evans, then, proceeds to provide examples of ethnobiological information detained in some small languages, proving that the words and expressions of these languages are the results of millennia of close observation of nature and that, without proper intervention, all of them could slowly fade away.

The tenth chapter, '*Listening While We Can*', is one of the most persuasive and explicative chapter in the book. It shows not only the importance of recording and documenting a disappearing language, but it also urges everyone to take on the responsibility of this crucial task. Documenting a language is fundamental to preserve linguistic diversity all around the world, and it can be decisive in its preservation process. The author shows that the collaboration between indigenous speakers – with their background knowledge and use of the language - and professional linguists - with their formal education - is a key point for the production of a thorough documentation. Finally, Evans focuses on raising awareness on the fragility of digital means in the documentary process, urging to keep up with the changes of future archiving methods to avoid losing priceless material.

1

Warramurrungunji's Children

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا

Oh Mankind, we have created you male and female, and have made you into nations and tribes that ye may know one another.

(*Qur'an* 49: 13, Pickthal 1938 translation)

In the oral traditions of northwestern Arnhem Land, the first human to enter the Australian continent was the ancestress Warramurrungunji, who came out of the Arafura Sea on Croker Island near the Cobourg Peninsula, having travelled from Macassar in Indonesia. Her first job was to sort out the right rituals so that the many children she gave birth to along the way could survive. The hot mounds of sand, over which she and all women thereafter would have to purify themselves after childbirth, remain in the landscape as the giant sandhills along Croker Island's northern coasts. Then she headed inland, and as she went she put different children into particular areas, decreeing which languages should have be spoken where. In the Iwaidja version of the story she said, *Ruka kundangani riki angbaldaharrama! Ruka nuyi nuwung inyman!* 'I am putting you here, this is the language you should talk! This is your language!', naming a different language for each group before moving on.

Language Diversity and Human Destiny

[...]

The Judeo-Christian tradition sees the profusion of tongues after the Tower of Babel as a negative outcome punishing humans for their presumption, and standing in the way of cooperation and progress. But the Warramurrungunji myth reflects a point of view much more common in small speech communities: that having many languages is a good thing because it shows where each person belongs. Don Laycock quotes a man from the Sepik region of Papua New Guinea saying 'it wouldn't be any good if we all talked the same; we like to know where people come from.' The Tzotzil oral traditions of the Mexican Chiapas give another twist to this view: 'while the sun was still walking on the earth, people finally learned to speak (Spanish), and all people everywhere understood each other. Later the nations and municipalities were divided because they had begun to quarrel. Language was changed so that people would learn to live together peacefully in smaller groups.'

I recently drove down the dusty road from Wilyi on the coast near Croker Island, to the inland town of Jabiru, while working with speakers of Iwaidja, the language in which Tim Mamitba had told me the Warramurrungunji story. The 200-km transect follows Warramurrungunji's path, traveling inland and southwards from the beach through eucalyptus savannah, stretches of tropical wetlands and lily ponds, and occasional sandstone outcrops whose caves hold vast galleries of rock paintings. It is a timeless landscape rich in wild food - magpie geese, fish, bush fruits, and yams. Its Aboriginal inhabitants can live easily throughout the year, finding all they need on their own clan countries. The few river crossings do not present geographical barriers. But Warramurrungunji's legacy of linguistic diversity is clearly here. In a few hours on the road, we passed through the territories of nine clans and seven languages from four language families, at least as different from each other as English, Portuguese, Russian, and Hindi (see Table 1.1).

To give a rough idea of how different the languages are at the two ends of this transect, consider the sentence 'you eat fish'. Taking Iwaidja from one end, and Kun-djeyhmi from the other, we compare *kunyarrun yab* and *yihngun djenj* - of which only the final *-n* in the two languages, which marks present tense in both, is historically relatable (or 'cognate'). Imagine I had driven from London to Moscow - 15 times as far. The Russian equivalent *ty esh rybku*, although incomprehensible to English ears, contains three cognate elements, at least if we cheat a bit by taking the earlier English version, *thou eatest fish*: *ty* (with English *thou*), *e* (with English *eat*) and *-sh* (with the older English suffix *-est* in *eatest*). [...]

Some of these languages are now down to just a couple of speakers (Amurdak) or have recently ceased to be spoken (Manangkardi), but others are still being learned by children. Bininj Kunwok, the largest, now has about 2000 first language speakers as members of other groups shift to it. But the average population per language in this region is much smaller, probably less than 500 speakers. And many are even smaller: a study by Rebecca Green on Gurrgoni, a few hundred kilometres to the east of the Warramurrungunji track, suggests it has been quite stable for as long as anyone remembers, never with more than around 70 speakers.

Each person from this region has one 'father language', which they have special rights in, by virtue of the clan membership they obtain from their father. This vests them with authority and spiritual security as they travel through their ancestral lands. In travelling to places that have not been visited for some time, clan members should call out to the spirits in the local language, to show they belong to the country. Doing this with visitors is the duty and right of a host, and this has been adapted in contemporary settings as 'welcomes to country' by the relevant custodians. It is said that many resources, such as springs, can only be accessed if you address them in the local idiom. For these reasons there are deep emotional and spiritual links between language and country. Travellers sing songs listing the names of sites as they move through the land, and switch languages as they cross creeks and other clan boundaries. In epics of ancestral travels, it is common to identify where the characters have got to simply by switching the language the story is told in - as if *The Odyssey* were told not just in Greek, but in the half-a-dozen ancient Mediterranean languages Ulysses would have encountered in his travels.

Table 1.1 Clans and languages along the 200-km track from Wilyi to Jabiru.

<i>Clan</i>	<i>Language</i>	<i>Language family</i>
Murran	Iwaidja	Iwaidjan; Iwaidjic
Manangkali	<i>Amurdak</i>	Iwaidjan; Southern
Minaka	<i>Manangkardi</i>	Iwaidjan; Iwaidjic
Born/Kardbam (Alarrju)	<i>Bininj Kunwok (Kunwinjku dialect)</i>	Gunwinyguan (Central)
Mandjurlngun	<i>Bininj Kunwok (Kunwinjku dialect)</i>	
Bunidj	<i>Gaagudju</i>	Gaagudjuan (Isolate)
Mandjurlngun Mengerr	<i>Mengerrdji</i>	Giimbiyu
Manilakarr	<i>Urningangk</i>	
Bunidj Gun-djeihmi	<i>Bininj Kunwok (Kun-djeyhmi dialect)</i>	Gunwinyguan (Central)
Mirarr Gun-djeihmi		

Throughout Aboriginal Australia, speaking the appropriate local language is a kind of passport, marking you - both to local people and to the spirits of the land - as someone known and familiar, with the right to be there. I once went out in a boat with Pat Gabori and some senior women to map a Kayardilt site a few kilometres off shore, in the company of a few children who did not know their ancestral language. Pat and the women called out in Kayardilt to the spirits and ancestors of the place, identifying themselves and introducing the silent children, and explaining gently that the children's inability to speak Kayardilt did not make them strangers - they just hadn't learned the language yet.

[...]

Normal members of Arnhem Land society are highly multilingual, often speaking half-a-dozen languages by the time they are adults. This is helped by the fact that you have to marry outside your clan, which probably means your wife or husband speaks a different language from you. It also means that your parents each speak a different language, and your grandparents three or four languages between them. [...] In this system your clan language is your title deed, establishing your claims to your own country, your spiritual safety and success in the hunt there. Meanwhile the knowledge of other languages gives you the far-flung network of relatives, spouses actual and potential, ceremonial age-mates and allies, which makes you someone who counts in the greater world. This combination of highly developed multilingualism with strong attachments to small local languages is by no means an Arnhem Land oddity - around the world, it is common in zones of high linguistic diversity, like Nagaland in northeastern India, or the Mandara Mountains of Cameroon.

Most non-Aboriginal people are astonished when they learn how many demographically tiny languages etch their distinctive local domains across the Australian map. Modern citizens of industrialized countries like Britain or Japan take it for granted that they can use their languages with hundreds of millions of people and that a single language occupies the entire territory of their nation, bar dialect variation, immigrants, and one or two beleaguered minorities like Welsh or Ainu. For speakers of big languages, the question is: why are there so many languages in the

world/in Papua New Guinea/in Australia/etc.? The naïve explanation sometimes offered, that they result from mutual isolation in distant valleys and gorges, just does not bear up. In Arnhem Land there are no significant geographical barriers at all, and the same is true in many other linguistically exuberant parts of the world, such as Southern New Guinea. And marriage patterns, in Arnhem Land, Southern New Guinea, or the Vaupés region of Amazonia, mean that several languages are spoken on a daily basis inside the one household (indeed, in the one bed!) - hardly a case of mutual isolation.

But maybe we are approaching the problem from the wrong end. It makes more sense to turn the question round and ask, not why Melanesia, the Amazon, Arnhem Land, Cameroon, or the Caucasus have so many languages, but rather why Europe or parts of Asia have so few?

Indeed, there are good reasons to believe that our little transect through Arnhem Land is a good representation of how we humans have been for most of our past - not just for the 99% or so of our history up to 10 000 years ago when we were all hunter-gatherers, but also for much of the time that followed. This is because the dawn of agriculture, although it led to an explosion in human populations, did not automatically lead to the development of much larger societies. Speech communities got a bit bigger, but it was rare for them to exceed the few score thousand that could be held together as a homogeneous unit without the panoply of state control that only began with our incorporation into large centralized political entities like the Roman Empire or a modern nation state. [...]

The island of New Guinea and its Melanesian surrounds, a few hundred kilometres to the north of Warramurrungunji's territory, is a good illustration of a region almost completely made up of Neolithic agricultural societies, with no centralized states until recent colonization by Europeans and Indonesians. Its population of around 10 million people speaks some 1150 languages-under 10 000 people per language. In the Central Highlands, where the population density is highest thanks to intensive agriculture and pig breeding, elaborate networks of production and ceremonial exchange have gradually bound people together into larger speech communities. The more intensified the system, the more speakers per language. But, even in the most elaborate and intensified highland Papuan communities, the average number of speakers per language rarely exceeds 40 000. [...]

We see small languages wherever in the world societies have lain beyond the homogenizing reach of great empires. But the situation is most extreme where groups can maintain themselves self-sufficiently without needing to call on the hospitality of others. The village cluster of Archib (population 1237) in the Caucasus is the only place in the world where the Archi language is spoken - a language whose morphology is so complex that it has been calculated that a single verb possesses more than 1.5 million inflected forms. [...] Or, in northwestern California, the entire territory of the Chimariko people and their language consisted of a 20-mile stretch along a narrow canyon of the Trinity River. Until the Gold Rush, their economic self-sufficiency on this small patch was assured by the rich salmon stocks in the river.

There is evidence from many parts of the world that small groups in favoured areas did not simply rely on the drift of time to carry their languages apart from those of their neighbours. In northern Australia the reigning ideology is that each clan should have its own distinct language variety. This then sanctions the investiture by tribal elders of variant forms as proper to their local languages, driving along a relentless diversification.

Peter Sutton, working on clan identities in the Cape York Peninsula of Australia, reports cases where the fission of clans is rapidly followed by the emergence of new language varieties. In settings where fewer than 100 people may speak a ‘clan-lect’, one or two powerful individuals can readily impose what may have started out as individual idiosyncrasies, and seed the emergence of a new system. In Iwaidja, many forms of nouns and verbs mutate their initial consonants – ‘his or her arm’ is *bawurr*, from the root *mawurr*, for example, whereas the corresponding words in related languages like Charlie Wardaga's language Ilgar keep the original *m*. The mutated forms are based on an obscure 'miscellaneous' gender so rare in all the languages of the family that it would never have won out as the standard form by processes of normal change. More likely, at some point in the past, Iwaidja speakers deliberately extended the use of the miscellaneous gender to set their language apart from their neighbours, on the ‘you say tomahto, I say tomato’ principle.

In New Guinea language differentiation is sometimes fostered even more deliberately. When we compare the Uisai dialect of Buin (1500 speakers), on Bougainville Island, with the other dialects of Buin (about 17 000 speakers in all), we see that it has completely flipped over all of its gender agreements: all the masculines have become feminine, and all the feminines have become masculine. Because no known mechanism of normal linguistic change could produce this effect, Don Laycock has suggested that ‘an influential Uisai speaker innovated a linguistic change to differentiate his community from the rest of the Buins.’ Again we see how much influence a single individual can have in a small speech community. [...]

Although for illustrative purposes we have concentrated on decisions affecting a single word or grammatical feature, this is just the thin end of the wedge. William Thurston studied ‘esoterogeny’ - the engendering of difference and linguistic obscurity - with Anem speakers on the island of New Britain, off the New Guinea mainland. He found that ‘esoterogenic’ languages tend to streamline pronunciation in ways that make the overall structure harder to see, comparable to saying *dja* for *didja* from *did you* in English. They replace clear regular relationships with ‘suppletive’ (totally irregular) ones, revelling in alternations like *good: better* at the expense of the more transparent *big: bigger* style. They have huge numbers of opaque idioms, of the kick the bucket type, and entrench prescriptive traditions that limit flexibility of language: ‘you must speak this way to be a member of our community!’ They also elaborate terminology to make subtle distinctions, and speakers take more pride in the greater richness of their language than the neighbouring language of Lusi in this regard.

During Thurston's research on Anem he found that ‘some of the boys had devised a competitive word game aimed at exposing one another's ignorance of the name for an obscure vine or bush; in order to keep ahead, boys were asking older people, secretly, for words they could use to try tricking other boys’. All these forces conspire to maximize difference between one language and its neighbours - although I should stress that, up till now, we have no more than the sorts of anecdotal evidence reported here, and systematic studies of the causes and processes of change in small languages are badly needed.

Small-scale societies in such parts of the world are economically self-sufficient, and proudly form the centre of their own social universe without needing to defer unduly to more powerful outside groups. Their constructive fostering of variegation - which holds social groupings to a small and manageable size, and keeps outsiders at a suitable distance - is not offset by the need to align their language with large numbers of other people in the world. The great Swiss linguist

Ferdinand de Saussure saw language as being pulled in opposite directions by the ‘spirit of the steeple’- the parochialism of showing which little community you belong to - and the ‘spirit of wider communication’. But, for those small-scale societies able to subsist mostly on their own resources, the force of the steeple is dominant.

Language Diversity through Time and Space

The classic estimate of the world's population on the eve of the Neolithic, 10 millennia ago, is 10 million. Combining these figures with a very generous 2000-speaker maximum for hunter-gatherer languages suggests that, on the eve of agriculture and fixed settlements, there were already 3000 to 5000 languages in the world - roughly the same number as now, even though the population was less than 0.5% of its current level. If we assume 1000 speakers per language, a more realistic figure in my view, the number doubles to between 6000 and 10 000. Levels of language diversity whose full magnitude we can barely grasp have been with us for a very long time.

[...]

Let us come back to the emergence of agriculture at the beginning of the Neolithic. As agriculture spread around much of the world from then on, it is likely that the increases in language populations of cultivating groups - perhaps to New Guinea-like levels of around 10000 - would have been more than offset by the explosion in overall world population, so that the number of languages in the world may have risen to 10 000 or 15 000. However, scholars like Colin Renfrew and Peter Bellwood have argued that the bearers of agricultural expansion would have been just a small number of groups who had made a radical cultural transition. From the hunter-gatherer perspective, agricultural life looks pretty unappealing. [...] Inexorably, though, the ‘demic expansion’ that agriculturalists could feed from the increased food yields they drew from the land would gradually have squeezed out or assimilated the original populations of hunter-gatherers.

The expansion of these few agriculture-based lineages would have produced the ‘Renfrew-Bellwood’ effect: a decrease in deep-level diversity, i.e., in the number of unrelated stocks or deep lineages, as clusters of closely related languages spread outward from the dozen or so foci where agricultural complexes were developed. This would have obliterated the deep-time variability that was there beforehand. [...]

We can see the Renfrew-Bellwood effect clearly in Indonesia where, over most of the archipelago, no linguistic trace remains of the hunter-gatherers who must have occupied its fertile lands until the coming of the Austronesian agriculturalists a few thousand years ago. It is also clear in New Guinea, where the whole fertile highland cordillera along which root-and-pig farmers expanded over the past few millennia is occupied by a single ‘Trans New Guinea’ family, albeit one with around 400 member languages. New Guinea's most mind-boggling lineage diversity is found in lowland areas like the Sepik and the Trans-Fly region, north and south of the cordillera, where people either practice a much less intensive form of agriculture or mix agriculture, fishing, hunting, and gathering.

We have seen already, though, that even in the densely populated New Guinea Highlands, and even after 6000-7000 years of intense agriculture, there were no really large languages.

This is because it was only with the advent of centralized and then industrialized state societies that a few languages began to spread to the point where they counted hundreds of thousands and then millions of speakers. Unfortunately, most of these expansionist new societies had no interest in recording anything about the languages of the peoples they subjugated, as we will see in Chapter 2. But we can get some idea of what the world was like as the first great empires emerged by looking at the Italian peninsula in the fifth and sixth centuries ace. There, under Greek influence, a number of different civilizations developed their own writing systems in time to leave some record of their languages before they were all sucked into the Latin-speaking vortex of the Romans.

Inscriptions in pre-Roman Italy attest between 12 and 15 distinct languages, quite different from one another, and belonging to four branches of at least two distinct families - three branches of Indo-European (Celtic, Italic, and Greek) plus Etruscan, which was non-European. The Romans did not actively try to stamp out other languages - indeed, the retention of other languages by non-Romans favoured the policy of *diuide et impera* 'divide and rule'. Umbrians, for example, continued to make inscriptions in their language for centuries after Roman annexation. But eventually the power and status of Latin prevailed, particularly after all residents of Italy became Roman citizens in the middle of the final century BCE. At first, other groups would just have used Latin for 'outside' purposes, but gradually the centralizing power of Rome 'relegated the local speech, just as it did political initiative and concerns, to a secondary, subordinate, and ever retreating position'. We do not know exactly when the last speakers of Oscan, Umbrian, Etruscan, and other languages of the peninsula finally passed away, but the elimination of all non-Latin languages from the Italian peninsula is likely to have been almost complete by the time Pontius Pilate washed his hands of another death in another part of the Roman Empire.

Emerging kingdoms in many parts of the world - in Egypt, Arabia, Persia, Mali, China, Korea, India, Mexico, and the Andes - had similar impacts on the smaller peoples in their domains. It was probably in this period - beginning around 2000 BCE- that the first languages with more than a million speakers emerged. Expansionist agricultural-military complexes like the Bantus in the southern half of Africa obliterated vast mosaics of diversity. And then, from 1492, European colonial expansion began to take its toll. Little more than half a century after the Spaniards reached Cuba and Puerto Rico, the Arawakan language Taino would cease to be spoken, although some of its words have survived as loanwords into Spanish (*cacique* 'chief') and others passed further into English (*barbacoa* 'barbecue'; *canoa* 'canoe'; *tabaco* 'tobacco'). Thousands of other languages around the world would suffer a similar fate, leading to the accelerating loss of linguistic diversity we see today, and the concomitant dominance of the dozen or so languages with more than 100 million speakers.

Where the Hotbeds Are

The upshot of what we have been discussing is that language diversity is now distributed very unevenly around the world. On one estimate, 17 countries hold 60% of all languages, although these countries make up only 27% of the world's population and 9% of its land area. Table 1.2 shows two slightly different rankings of the top 25 language-diverse countries - a calculation

of the sheer number of endemic languages, and an alternative measure showing the number of linguistic lineages, which is a better measure of deep-level language diversity. It also shows the top 25 countries for biological diversity, for reasons we will return to later.

Table 1.2 The top 25 megadiverse countries, for two measures of language diversity and for vertebrate species.

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Endemic languages</i>		<i>Endemic linguistic lineages</i>		<i>Endemic higher vertebrate species</i>	
1	Papua New Guinea (PNG)	856	PNG	74	Australia	1,346
2	Indonesia	688	Indonesia	57	Mexico	761
3	Nigeria	480	USA	52	Brazil	725
4	India	390	Brazil	35	Indonesia	673
5	Australia	353	Australia	30	Madagascar	537
6	China	304	Peru	26	Philippines	437
7	Mexico	293	Sudan	24	India	373
8	Cameroon	241	Colombia	21	Peru	332
9	USA	227	Bolivia	19	Colombia	330
10	Brazil	218	Mexico	16	Ecuador	294
11	Dem. Rep. Congo	186	Venezuela	14	United States	284
12	Philippines	168	Russian Fed.	12	China	256
13	Vanuatu	135	Ethiopia	12	PNG	203
14	Russian Federation	117	Canada	12	Venezuela	186
15	Chad	112	Chad	11	Argentina	168
16	Tanzania	107	India	10	Cuba	152
17	Peru	103	China	9	South Africa	146
18	Malaysia	98	Argentina	9	Zaire	134
19	Nepal	94	South Sudan	8	Sri Lanka	126
20	Myanmar	82	Ecuador	8	New Zealand	120
21	Ethiopia	82	Nigeria	7	Tanzania	113
22	Colombia	82	Chile	7	Japan	112
23	Canada	73	Turkey	6	Cameroon	105
24	Sudan	72	Solomon Is.	6	Solomon Islands	101
25	Solomon Islands	71	Paraguay	6	Ethiopia =	88
					Somalia =	88

As the preceding discussion should have made clear, the current distribution of languages reflects many influences. The effects of each region's history have been superimposed on

original patterns that are likely to have shown even closer parallels between linguistic and biological diversity:

(1) An original stratum of deep-time language diversity goes back to when all humans were hunter-gatherers. This is visible in regions where people have remained hunter-gatherers until recently. Here there is high language diversity on both measures (i.e., total number of languages and number of independent lineages) except in spread zones such as deserts and other less favoured regions that show the effects of repeated recolonization and cultural pressures to extend intercommunicating networks.

(2) A second stratum results from small-scale agricultural expansion since the end of the Neolithic in some regions, although it was much more recent in some areas. This expansion wiped out hunter-gatherer languages but re-grew a more recent pattern of diversification-with more or less lineage density depending on the time-depth of agriculture - leaving a pattern of large numbers of languages groupable into deep-level families like Indo-European or Austronesian.

(3) The effects of state formation, between 3000 BCE and 1000 CE depending on the area, produced a steady fall in linguistic diversity. In most countries of East Asia (Korea, Japan), Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East the low scores are due to comparable effects over the past two or three millennia; the high score still found in China reflects minority populations at the edges of Han control, especially in Yunnan province where the number of reported languages has grown substantially over the past two decades.

(4) Most recently the effects of expansionist colonization by Europeans and the elites of the nation states they created have been to wipe out indigenous linguistic diversity in many of their colonies. Uruguay, Cuba, Haiti, and all islands of the Caribbean - ironically, the only sea to be named after an indigenous language (Carib)- have the dubious distinction of having completely silenced their indigenous languages.

If we look at countries like Australia, the United States or South Africa, colonized by Europeans in the past few centuries, we get very rapid rates of language loss under the impact of English. Comparably rapid rates of language extinction are occurring in much of Brazil under the impact of Portuguese, in Siberia under Russian, in the Sudan under Arabic, throughout Indonesia under Indonesian, and even in some quite remote parts of Papua New Guinea under Tok Pisin, the newly developed national lingua franca.

Looking back beyond the recent flattening of multiformity by colonial languages - and the scores in Table 1.2 largely bracket this off by giving known numbers of languages at the moment of colonial contact- we can see strong correlations between linguistic and biological diversity. Arizona linguistic anthropologist David Harmon first looked at this correlation in an important 1996 study, and since then his findings have been replicated world-wide on a country by country basis, confirmed for Africa at a coarse resolution, and at quite fine resolutions for the Americas using passerine birds as the index of biodiversity and sampling geographical cuts down to squares one degree wide. More recent approaches to this question have used broad

ecological areas instead of the rather accidental boundaries given by countries, and again found strong correlations. Ten of the world's top dozen 'megadiverse' countries on biological measures also make it into the A-league of the world's top 25 countries for endemic linguistic diversity. Harmon's work also makes it clear where both types of diversity are concentrated: Central and South America, tropical Africa, South and Southeast Asia on through Indonesia, Melanesia, and Australia to the Western Pacific.

The Wellsprings of Diversity in Language, Culture, and Biology

[Continued loss of biocultural diversity will] staunch the historical flow of being itself, the evolutionary processes through which the vitality of all life has come down to us through the ages.

(Harmon 2002: xiii)

The arguments for conserving diversity are similar whether we consider the loss of a rare bird or tree species, a body of cultural knowledge that will soon be forgotten, or an endangered language. Since Darwin, we have begun to articulate, at the scientific level, what most cultures have had enshrined in their aesthetics and cosmologies for a long time: that variety is the reservoir of adaptability.

[...] The traditional (agri)cultural practices that were displaced by the technology-driven Green Revolution, with its fertilizers, standardized seeds, and productive new breeds, are increasingly being seen as having strengths that were often overlooked 40 years ago: drought resilience, disease resistance, lower demands on local water tables - and, ironically, higher yields if we factor in water consumption rather than just tons of yield per area. The many 'landraces' of traditional agriculture around the world are now being genetically archived, so that at least it is possible to draw on their genetic diversity. But we also need all the cultural knowledge that grew up around them. [...] and if we only store seeds without the accompanying knowledge we still have an impoverished picture.

Within the western scholarly and scientific traditions, we can identify two types of attitudes to global knowledge. One is universalizing, and sees it as possible to incorporate all knowledge into the world language of the era - Latin, Arabic, French, and English have all had their turn-spoken by a 'unified mankind within a single unified realm, subscribing to a universal value system'. The other recognizes the strength and richness that comes from distinct traditions that can never be straightforwardly mapped onto a single value system speaking a single world language: 'any reduction of language diversity diminishes the adaptational strength of our species because it lowers the pool of knowledge from which we can draw.'

Joshua Fishman outlines this alternative view, showing how it has been developed by a succession of thinkers from Vico and Herder to Boas, Sapir, and Whorf:

the entire world needs a diversity of ethnolinguistic entities for its own salvation, for its greater creativity, for the more certain solution of human problems, for the constant rehumanization of humanity in the face of materialism, for fostering greater esthetic, intellectual, and emotional capacities for humanity as a whole, indeed, for arriving at a higher stage of human functioning... the great creative forces that inspire all humanity do not emerge out of universal civilization but

out of the individuality of separate ethnic collectivities-most particularly, out of their very own authentic languages.

(Fishman 1982:7)

Fishman's wording makes it clear that this is neither a plea for the thousands of particularistic small societies to become mutually isolated museum pieces, nor for a few cute local words to be lifted into a world language like English to form a sort of linguistic theme park. Rather, it recognizes the deep creative interactions and synthetic insights that are revealed when we look at one language or culture through the prism of another.

[...] But to close this chapter, as we have been talking about the relation between linguistic diversity, species diversity, and ecology, let us look at some of the ways in which small languages hold detailed biological and ecological knowledge, which generations of speakers have gradually discovered and recorded in their languages. These examples will also show how the loss of our linguistic heritage is intimately tied up with the loss of cultures and habitats. [...]

Words on the Land

[I]ndividuals draw on cultural resources to structure and accomplish problems with which they engage in everyday socially organized activities.

(Saxe and Esmonde 2005: 173)

Small languages and societies have kept their place in the world by being finely tuned to their local ecologies and amassing a rich fund of knowledge about them. Much of this has been carried forward only in their languages. Many aspects of their traditional knowledge are still unknown to western science, and in fact languages are arguably the most important and distinctive of the 'cultural resources' that Saxe and Esmonde are referring to in this section's opening quote.

Consider Seri, spoken by around 500 hunter/gatherer/fisherpeople in Baja California in Mexico. This is most probably an isolate language without known relatives, although some linguists argue it is a southern outpost of the Hokan languages of California. In the course of documenting the Seri lexicon, linguists Edward and Mary Moser were told by Seri speakers about their use of eelgrass (*Zostera marina L.*) as a source of grain, leading to the involvement of ethnobotanist Richard Felger. The resultant research was published in *Science* with a title appropriately including 'discovery of its nutritional value by the Seri Indians'. The authors concluded that this is the only known case of a grain from the sea being harvested as at human food source, and emphasized its considerable potential as a general food resource for humankind, which can be cultivated without fresh water, pesticides, or artificial fertilizer. Despite its potential importance in a world likely to need new crops, this crucial knowledge had been known only to members of the tiny Seri world, held inside their language. Many other words in Seri contain information about the treatment, products, and harvesting of eelgrass. For example, the month of April is called *xnois iháat iizax* 'moon of the eelgrass harvest', and the onset of harvest time is signalled when the black brant bird known as *xnois cacáaso* 'the foreteller of eelgrass seed' dives into the sea to feed on the plant.

All around the world indigenous people transmit, through the words and expressions of their languages, the fruits of millennia of close observation of nature and experimentation with its products. In Arnhem Land there have been a number of cases where the impulse for western natural scientists to recognize new species has come from indigenous traditions of taxonomic naming. The large and striking Oenpelli python, long known to Kunwinjku speakers as *nawaran*, is one such species: it was first incorporated into western scientific taxonomy in 1977 as *Morelia oenpellensis*.

[...]

Traditional cultures also contain detailed knowledge of the healing properties of plants, transmitted in local languages. The recent discovery of a drug, prostarin, effective against HIV-type 1 goes back to a conversation between Samoan tribal healer Epenesa Mauigoa and ethnobotanist Paul Allen Cox about traditional medicinal uses of the stem of a particular tree, *Homalanthus nutans*. The fact that Cox had learned Samoan as a missionary's son was a key fact in enabling this conversation. Comparable curative potentials abound across the immensely variegated world of traditional ethnobotany, and their full investigation requires the collaboration of traditional healers, ethnobotanists, and linguists.

A recent study by Cámara-Leret and Bascompte (2021) tallied up the total known 'medicinal plant services' - pairings of a medicinal plant species and a medicinal subcategory (e.g. *Ficus insipida* + digestive system) across three regions with high biocultural diversity – North America, New Guinea, and Northwest Amazonia. Of the total of 12 495 such 'medicinal plant services' they found, across a sample of 236 indigenous languages, 75% were linguistically unique-in other words, just one language in their sample records this connection. They conclude: 'Our finding of high uniqueness in indigenous knowledge and strong coupling with threatened languages suggests that language loss will be even more critical to the extinction of medicinal knowledge than biodiversity loss.'

Vocabularies of indigenous languages are not just guides to plant use, but often also show the ecological links between plant and animal species. Throughout Arnhem Land the spangled grunter fish bears the same name as the native white apple tree, *Syzygium eucalyptoides*, because this fish eats the fruits that fall from this tree into creeks and billabongs: in Kunwinjku both are called *bokorn*. Knowledge of this link is of obvious value to anyone who happens to be out fishing for spangled grunter: look for the tree, and in the water below you are likely to find its fish 'mate'. The languages of Central Arnhem Land abound in such pairings, making them a veritable fisherman's guide to the area.

[...]

A host of examples like these lead out into the vast ethnobiological wings of our Library of Babel. But all such knowledge is at great risk, as long as it is only available in little known languages spoken by just a few hundred people, since a shift to another language can cut off its transmission. Once we go over to calling the *bokorn* fish a 'spangled grunter', and the *bokorn* tree a 'white apple', our words no longer deliver the ecological link between them.

1

I figli di Warramurrungunji

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا

O uomini, vi abbiamo creati da un maschio e da una femmina, e abbiamo fatto di voi vari popoli e tribù affinché vi conosceste a vicenda.

(Corano 49: 13, [translation])

Nelle tradizioni orali dell'Arnhem Land nord-occidentale, il primo essere umano ad essere entrato nel continente australiano fu l'antenata Warramurrungunji, emersa dal mare degli Arafura sull'isola di Croker (vicino la penisola di Cobourg), proveniente da Makassar in Indonesia. La sua prima opera fu quella di scegliere i giusti rituali in modo che i tanti figli che aveva partorito durante il viaggio potessero sopravvivere. Gli ardenti cumuli di sabbia, sui quali lei e le donne dopo di lei si purificavano dopo il parto, restano nel paesaggio sotto forma delle gigantesche dune di sabbia lungo le coste settentrionali dell'isola di Croker. Dopodiché partì alla volta dell'entroterra, e lungo il tragitto, collocò diversi figli in aree specifiche, decretando quali lingue si sarebbero dovute parlare e dove. Nella versione iwaidjana della storia disse: “*Ruka kundangani riki angbaldaharrama! Ruka nuyi nuwung inyman!*”, “Vi colloco qui, questa è la lingua che dovrete parlare! Questa è la vostra lingua!”, nominando una lingua diversa per ogni gruppo prima di passare al successivo.

La diversità linguistica e il destino umano

[...]

La tradizione giudaico-cristiana contempla la profusione delle lingue a partire dalla Torre di Babele come un risultato negativo che punisce gli esseri umani per la loro presunzione, opponendosi alla cooperazione e al progresso. Tuttavia, il mito di Warramurrungunji riflette un punto di vista molto più comune nelle comunità di lingue minoritarie: la diversità linguistica è una cosa positiva poiché rappresenta l'appartenenza di ogni persona. Il linguista e antropologo australiano Donald Laycock, che ha basato le sue ricerche sulle lingue in Papua Nuova Guinea, cita un uomo della regione del Sepik che afferma: “non servirebbe a nulla se parlassimo allo stesso modo; ci piace sapere da dove vengono le persone.” Le tradizioni orali dei Tzotzil, nel Chiapas messicano, offrono una nuova svolta a questa prospettiva: “quando il sole camminava ancora sulla Terra, le persone imparavano finalmente a parlare (spagnolo) e, di conseguenza, tutti riuscivano a comprendersi. In seguito, le nazioni e le contee si divisero poiché iniziarono

a litigare. La lingua fu cambiata in modo che le persone potessero imparare a vivere insieme pacificamente in gruppi più piccoli.”

Il percorso di Warramurrungunji forma un vero e proprio transetto lungo 200 km, che parte da Wilyi (sulla costa, vicino l’isola di Croker) fino a Jabiru (città nell’entroterra). Si estende all’interno del paese e verso sud, partendo dalla spiaggia e attraversando la savana di foreste di eucalipto, tratti di paludi tropicali, stagni di ninfee e gli sparsi affioramenti arenacei, le cui grotte custodiscono vaste gallerie di pitture rupestri. Si tratta di un paesaggio senza tempo, ricco di cibo selvatico (ocche gazza, pesce, frutta selvatica, igname). Gli aborigeni riescono a sopravvivere facilmente durante tutto l’anno, trovando tutto ciò di cui necessitano nei territori del proprio clan. I pochi fiumi che attraversano queste terre non rappresentano una barriera geografica. Tuttavia, la diversità linguistica lasciata in eredità da Warramurrungunji è tangibile. A qualche ora dall’inizio del viaggio, si attraversano le terre di nove clan e sette lingue derivanti da quattro famiglie linguistiche, tanto diverse le une dalle altre quanto l’inglese, il portoghese, il russo e l’hindi. (Tabella 1.1).

Per dare un’idea generale di quanto le lingue ai due estremi del transetto siano diverse, si può prendere in considerazione la frase “tu mangi pesce”. Da una parte vi è la lingua iwaidja e dall’altra la lingua kun-djeyhmi, la frase si traduce rispettivamente *kunyarrun yab* e *yihngun djenj*, nelle quali solo la *-n* finale nelle due lingue (che indica il tempo presente in entrambe) è storicamente riconducibile (o “affine”). Si consideri, invece, la distanza da Londra a Mosca, che è 15 volte maggiore rispetto al percorso di Warramurrungunji. L’equivalente russo della frase menzionata è *ty esh rybku* il quale, sebbene incomprensibile all’ascolto per una persona inglese, contiene tre elementi affini all’inglese, o perlomeno ciò si evince se si considera la versione arcaica della lingua inglese *thou eatest fish: ty* (simile all’inglese *thou*), *e* (simile a *eat*) and *-sh* (simile al suffisso arcaico *-est* in *eatest*). [...]

Alcune delle lingue di queste terre sono ormai ridotte ad un paio di parlanti (come la lingua amurdak) o di recente hanno cessato di essere parlate (manangkardi), ma altre vengono ancora apprese dai bambini. La lingua bininj kunwok, la più grande, ad oggi conta più di 2000 parlanti madrelingua, dato che membri di altri gruppi continuano ad unirvisi. Tuttavia, la popolazione media per lingua in questa regione è molto più ristretta, si tratta probabilmente di meno di 500 parlanti. E molte sono ancora più piccole: Rebecca Green, docente e ricercatrice presso la University of New South Wales in Australia, ha effettuato uno studio riguardo la lingua gurr-goni, parlata a poche centinaia di chilometri ad est dal percorso di Warramurrungunji, il quale suggerisce che i numeri siano abbastanza stabili da molto tempo, mai con più di circa 70 parlanti.

Tutte le persone che provengono da questa regione hanno una “lingua paterna” attraverso la quale posseggono dei diritti speciali in virtù dell’appartenenza al clan, ottenuta dai loro padri. Ciò li investe di una certa autorità e sicurezza spirituale quando viaggiano attraverso le loro terre ancestrali. Infatti, quando vanno in luoghi che non sono stati visitati da tempo, i membri del clan sono tenuti a richiamare gli spiriti nella lingua locale per dimostrare di appartenere a quel territorio. È necessario anche nei confronti dei visitatori, ed è il diritto e dovere di un ospite. Questo rito è stato interpretato, in chiave moderna, come il “benvenuto nel paese” dato dai custodi di riferimento. Si dice che sia possibile accedere a molte risorse, come le sorgenti, solo se ci si rivolge nella lingua locale. Ed è per questi motivi che esiste una profonda connessione emotiva e spirituale tra la lingua e il paese. I viaggiatori intonano canzoni elencando i nomi dei

luoghi in tutti i territori, e cambiano lingua non appena attraversano i corsi d'acqua e i confini degli altri clan. Nell'epica dei viaggi ancestrali, è comune riuscire a identificare il luogo in cui i personaggi sono giunti, cambiando semplicemente la lingua nella quale viene raccontata la storia (come se l'*Odissea* fosse raccontata non solo in greco, ma anche nella mezza dozzina di antiche lingue mediterranee che Ulisse incontrò nei suoi viaggi).

Tabella 1.1 I clan e le lingue lungo il percorso da Wilyi a Jabiru (200 km).

<i>Clan</i>	<i>Lingua</i>	<i>Famiglia linguistica</i>
Murran	Iwaidja	Iwaidjana; Iwaidjica
Manangkali	<i>Amurdak</i>	Iwaidjana; meridionale
Minaka	<i>Manangkardi</i>	Iwaidjana; Iwaidjica
Born/Kardbam (Alarrju)	<i>Bininj Kunwok (dialetto kunwinjku)</i>	Gunwinyguana
Mandjurlngun	<i>Bininj Kunwok (dialetto kunwinjku)</i>	(Centrale)
Bunidj	<i>Gaagudju</i>	Gaagudjuana (Isolata)
Mandjurlngun Mengerr	<i>Mengerrdji</i>	Giimbiyu
Manilakarr	<i>Urningangk</i>	
Bunidj Gun-djeihmi	<i>Bininj Kunwok (dialetto kun-djeyhmi)</i>	Gunwinyguana (Centrale)
Mirarr Gun-djeihmi		

In tutta l'Australia aborigena, parlare l'appropriata lingua autoctona è una sorta di passaporto, facendo sì che il parlante venga identificato (sia da parte delle persone del luogo che dagli spiriti del territorio) come conoscente e familiare, che ha diritto ad essere lì. Un esempio è l'episodio in cui Pat Gabori, l'ultimo parlante nativo di kayardilt, in compagnia di alcune donne anziane e di alcuni bambini che non conoscevano questa lingua ancestrale, richiamarono in kayardilt gli spiriti del luogo, presentandosi e identificando anche i bambini silenziosi: spiegarono loro che l'impossibilità dei bambini di parlare kajardilt non li rendeva degli estranei, ma che semplicemente non avevano ancora imparato la lingua.

[...]

I membri medi della società in Arnhem Land sono estremamente multilingui: spesso parlano una mezza dozzina di lingue già da prima che diventino adulti. Ciò è incoraggiato dal fatto che bisogna sposarsi con qualcuno di esterno al proprio clan; dunque, è probabile che il proprio marito o la propria moglie parli una lingua diversa. Inoltre, ciò significa che ognuno dei genitori parla lingue diverse, e che i nonni parlano tra di loro tre o quattro lingue diverse. [...] In questo sistema la lingua del proprio clan rappresenta l'atto di proprietà, il quale reclama i diritti nel proprio paese, la propria sicurezza spirituale e il successo nella caccia in quelle zone. Inoltre, la conoscenza di altre lingue fornisce l'estesa rete di parenti, consorti di fatto o potenziali, coetanei o alleati solenni, acquisendo dunque autorevolezza in questo vasto mondo. La combinazione tra il multilinguismo altamente sviluppato, attraverso forti legami, e le lingue autoctone minoritarie, non è una rarità propria dell'Arnhem Land: si tratta di un fenomeno comune in zone dalla grande diversità linguistica in tutto il mondo, come il Nagaland nell'India nord-orientale o anche i Monti Mandara in Camerun.

La maggior parte dei popoli non-aborigeni resta sbalordita quando scopre quante lingue demograficamente minoritarie incidano sui propri distinti domini locali lungo tutta la mappa australiana. I cittadini moderni dei paesi industrializzati come la Gran Bretagna o il Giappone danno per scontato che possano utilizzare le loro lingue con centinaia di milioni di persone e che una singola lingua occupi l'intero territorio della loro Nazione, impedendo la varietà dialettica, gli immigranti e una o due minoranze assediate come quella gallese o quella ainu. Per i parlanti delle grandi lingue la domanda è: perché ci sono così tante lingue nel mondo/in Papua Nuova Guinea/in Australia, ecc.? A volte, la spiegazione più semplice che viene fornita, ovvero che queste siano il risultato di isolamenti reciproci in valli e gole distanti, semplicemente non regge. In Arnhem Land non ci sono barriere geografiche significative e lo stesso vale in molte altre parti del mondo linguisticamente abbondanti, come ad esempio la regione meridionale della Nuova Guinea. Le unioni coniugali in Arnhem Land, nella regione meridionale della Nuova Guinea, o nel dipartimento di Vaupés in Amazzonia, rivelano che diverse lingue vengono parlate nelle stesse case quotidianamente (addirittura nello stesso letto!), dunque non può essere definito "isolamento reciproco".

Tuttavia, è probabile che si affronti la questione dal punto di vista sbagliato. Avrebbe più senso chiedersi per quale motivo l'Europa o alcune parti dell'Asia abbiano così poche lingue, rispetto al motivo per cui la Melanesia, l'Amazzonia, l'Arnhem Land, il Camerun o il Caucaso ne abbiano così tante.

In effetti, ci sono buoni motivi per credere che il piccolo transetto attraverso l'Arnhem Land sia una buona rappresentazione della situazione linguistica degli esseri umani per la maggior parte del passato (dunque, non solo per circa il 99% della storia fino a 10000 anni fa, quando erano cacciatori-raccoglitori, ma anche per molto tempo dopo). Ciò spiega perché l'avvento dell'agricoltura, sebbene abbia condotto all'esplosione delle popolazioni umane, non abbia automaticamente portato allo sviluppo di società più grandi. Le comunità linguistiche aumentarono leggermente, ma era raro che eccedessero il traguardo di un migliaio di parlanti, tenuto insieme come un'unità omogenea senza la panoplia del controllo di stato che iniziò solo con l'incorporazione in entità politiche più grandi e centralizzate, come l'Impero romano o le nazioni moderne. [...]

L'isola della Nuova Guinea e il suo circondario melanesiano, a poche centinaia di chilometri a nord dal territorio di Warramurrungunji, è un buon ritratto di una regione quasi completamente formata da società neolitiche rurali, con nessuno stato centralizzato se non fino alla recente colonizzazione da parte degli europei e gli indonesiani. La sua popolazione di circa 10 milioni di persone parla più o meno 1150 lingue, con meno di 10000 persone per lingua. Sulla Cordigliera Centrale (la catena montuosa della Nuova Guinea, dove la densità di popolazione è più alta grazie all'agricoltura intensiva e all'allevamento di maiali), elaborate reti di produzione e scambi cerimoniali hanno gradualmente legato le persone l'une alle altre in comunità linguistiche sempre più grandi. Più è denso il sistema, maggiore sarà il numero di parlanti per ogni lingua. Tuttavia, anche nelle comunità più elaborate e dense della Cordigliera papuana, il numero medio di parlanti per lingua raramente eccede i 40000. [...]

È possibile trovare lingue minoritarie laddove, nel mondo, tali società si siano affermate al di là della portata omogeneizzante dei grandi imperi. Tuttavia, la situazione è più estrema nei gruppi che riescono a mantenersi in autosufficienza senza fare affidamento sull'ospitalità degli altri. L'insieme di villaggi Archib (1237 persone) nel Caucaso è l'unico luogo nel mondo in cui

viene parlata la lingua archi, una lingua la cui morfologia è così complessa che si è calcolato che un singolo verbo possenga più di un milione e mezzo di forme flesse. [...] Oppure, nella California nord-occidentale, l'intero territorio della popolazione chimariko e la loro lingua sono composti da un tratto di 20 miglia lungo la stretta vallata del fiume Trinity. Fino alla corsa all'oro, l'auto-sufficienza economica su questa piccola chiazza di terreno era assicurata dal ricco assortimento di salmone nel fiume.

Vi è la testimonianza di molte parti del mondo in cui i gruppi più piccoli, che si stabiliscono in aree favorevoli, non fanno esclusivamente riferimento sulla deriva del tempo per differenziare la propria lingua da quella delle popolazioni vicine. Nell'Australia del nord, l'ideologia dominante è quella secondo cui ogni clan debba avere una distinta variazione linguistica. Ciò sancisce la legittimazione di forme varianti da parte dei membri anziani delle tribù, fomentando un'inarrestabile diversificazione.

Peter Sutton, linguista e antropologo australiano, durante le sue ricerche sulle identità dei clan nella Penisola di Capo York in Australia, riporta casi nei quali la scissione dei clan è rapidamente seguita dall'affioramento di nuove varietà linguistiche. Si consideri lo scenario in cui meno di 100 persone parlano il cosiddetto "clan-letto", uno o due individui influenti potrebbero prontamente imporre quella che nascerebbe come un'idiosincrasia individuale per diventare, in seguito, il seme della nascita di un nuovo sistema. Nella lingua iwaidja sono state modificate le consonanti iniziali di diverse forme nominali e verbali (ad esempio, "il suo braccio" si traduce come *bawurr*, derivante dalla radice *mawurr*, mentre le corrispondenti parole in lingue affini come quella di Charlie Wardaga, parlante nativo di ilgar, mantengono l'originale *m*). Le forme modificate sono basate su un genere "misto" sconosciuto, tanto raro tra tutte le lingue della famiglia linguistica che non sarebbe mai prevalso come forma standard attraverso i processi di normale cambiamento linguistico. È più probabile che, ad un certo punto nel passato, i parlanti di iwaidja abbiano esteso deliberatamente la forma del genere misto per differenziare la propria lingua da quella dei popoli vicini, sul principio della creazione di forme diverse per affermare identità diverse.

In Nuova Guinea, la diversità linguistica a volte è incoraggiata ancora più deliberatamente. Quando si paragona il dialetto uisai della città di Buin (1500 parlanti, sull'isola di Bougainville) con gli altri dialetti di Buin (circa 17000 parlanti in totale), si nota che questo abbia invertito completamente tutti gli accordi di genere: tutti i maschili sono diventati femminili e tutti i femminili sono diventati maschili. Dato che nessun meccanismo conosciuto del normale cambiamento linguistico produce questo effetto, Donald Laycock affermò che "un parlante influente di uisai ha generato un cambiamento linguistico per differenziare la sua comunità dal resto della regione". Ancora una volta, si nota quanta influenza possa avere un singolo individuo in una piccola comunità linguistica. [...]

Anche se per scopi illustrativi ci si è concentrati su decisioni riguardo una singola parola o una caratteristica grammaticale, in realtà non è altro che la punta dell'iceberg. William Thurston aveva studiato l'"esoterogeneità", ovvero l'origine della differenza e dell'oscurità linguistica, attraverso i parlanti di anem sull'isola di Nuova Britannia, al largo della terraferma della Nuova Guinea. Scopì che le lingue "esoterogeniche" tendono a semplificare la pronuncia in modo da rendere l'intera struttura più difficile da comprendere, paragonabile a dire *dja* al posto di *didja*, da *did you* in inglese. Queste lingue sostituiscono relazioni regolari chiare con altre "suppletive" (totalmente irregolari), godendo di alternanze come *good: better* (buono: migliore) a scapito

dello stile più trasparente *big:bigger* (grande:più grande). Presentano un enorme numero di modi di dire torpidi, come *kick the bucket* (tirare le cuoia) e consolidano tradizioni prescrittive che limitano la flessibilità del linguaggio: “bisogna parlare in questo modo per essere un membro della comunità!”. Queste lingue creano anche una terminologia per fare sottili distinzioni e i parlanti si vantano della maggiore ricchezza della loro lingua rispetto a quella della lingua vicina, il lusi.

Durante la sua ricerca sulla lingua *anem*, Thurston scoprì che “alcuni dei ragazzi avevano ideato un gioco di parole competitivo, mirato ad esporre l’ignoranza degli altri riguardo il nome di una vite o un cespuglio sconosciuto; per rimanere nel gioco, i ragazzi chiedevano, segretamente, agli anziani le parole che potessero usare per provare ad ingannare gli altri ragazzi”. Tutte queste forze cospirano per massimizzare la differenza tra una lingua e le altre, anche se, bisogna sottolineare, non si ha altro che il tipo di testimonianze aneddotiche qui riportate. Gli studi sistematici sulle cause e i processi di cambiamento nelle lingue minoritarie sono, dunque, estremamente necessari.

Le società a scala ridotta in tali parti del mondo sono economicamente autosufficienti e formano con orgoglio il centro del loro stesso universo sociale senza deferire eccessivamente su gruppi esterni più potenti. La loro costruttiva promozione della diversità, che mantiene le aggregazioni sociali di dimensioni ridotte e gestibili e tiene gli estranei a debita distanza, non è controbilanciata dalla necessità di allineare la loro lingua ai grandi numeri delle altre persone nel mondo. Il grande linguista svizzero Ferdinand de Saussure vedeva la lingua tirata in direzioni opposte dallo “spirito di campanile” (il parrocchialismo è necessario per dimostrare a quale piccola comunità si appartiene) e dallo “spirito della comunicazione più ampia”. Ma, per quelle società a scala ridotta capaci di sussistere principalmente con le proprie risorse, la forza del campanile è dominante.

La diversità linguistica attraverso il tempo e lo spazio

La stima classica della popolazione mondiale alla vigilia del Neolitico, 10 millenni fa, è di 10 milioni di persone. Combinando questi dati con una massima molto generosa di 2000 parlanti per ogni lingua di cacciatori-raccoglitori, ciò suggerisce che, alla vigilia dell’avvento dell’agricoltura e degli insediamenti fissi, vi erano già dalle 3000 alle 5000 lingue nel mondo, più o meno lo stesso numero di oggi, anche se la popolazione era meno dello 0.5% del suo livello attuale. Se si prendono in considerazione 1000 parlanti per lingua (dato molto più realistico), il numero raddoppia tra le 6000 e le 10000 lingue. I livelli di diversità linguistica, la cui piena portata si può a malapena comprendere, sono presenti da molto tempo.

[...]

Tornando alla nascita dell’agricoltura all’inizio del Neolitico e al momento in cui questa si diffuse, nella maggior parte del mondo è probabile che l’aumento delle popolazioni linguistiche dei gruppi di coltivatori (forse simile ai livelli della Nuova Guinea di circa 10000 lingue) sarebbe stato più che compensato dall’esplosione della popolazione mondiale complessiva, in modo che il numero di lingue nel mondo potrebbe essere aumentato di 10000 o di 15000 lingue. Tuttavia, studiosi come Colin Renfrew e Peter Bellwood sostenevano che gli artefici dell’espansione agricola fossero solo un piccolo numero di gruppi, i quali avevano avviato una

transizione agricola radicale. Dal punto di vista del cacciatore-raccoglitore, la vita agricola appariva abbastanza tediosa. [...] Inesorabilmente, però, l'”espansione demica” riguardo il fatto che gli agricoltori potevano sostenere la popolazione grazie alle coltivazioni sempre più redditizie che raccoglievano dalla terra, ha gradualmente schiacciato e assimilato le popolazioni originarie di cacciatori-raccoglitori.

L'espansione di queste poche linee evolutive basate sull'agricoltura ha prodotto l'”effetto Renfrew-Bellwood”: una diminuzione della diversità a livelli profondi, ad esempio, nel numero di varietà e linee evolutive non correlate, mentre gruppi di lingue strettamente affini si diffondevano a partire dalle dozzine di foci in cui si erano sviluppati gli agglomerati rurali, cancellando la variabilità del tempo profondo.

[...]

Si può vedere chiaramente l'effetto Renfrew-Bellwood in Indonesia. Nella maggior parte dell'arcipelago, non resta alcuna traccia linguistica dei cacciatori-raccoglitori che occuparono le sue terre fertili fino all'arrivo degli agricoltori austronesiani alcune migliaia di anni fa. È, inoltre, chiaro che in Nuova Guinea, in cui i coltivatori di radici e allevatori di maiali si sono stanziati ed espansi negli ultimi millenni, è occupata da una singola famiglia linguistica, quella della “trans-Nuova Guinea”, nonostante sia composta da circa 400 lingue affiliate. La diversità tra le linee evolutive della Nuova Guinea si ritrova nelle aree pianeggianti come il Sepik e la regione Trans-Fly, a nord e a sud della Cordigliera, dove le persone praticano una forma di agricoltura molto meno intensiva o una combinazione di agricoltura, pesca, caccia e raccolto.

Nella Cordigliera della Nuova Guinea che è densamente popolata, anche dopo 6000-7000 anni di agricoltura intensa, non sono presenti lingue realmente grandi. Ciò è dovuto al fatto che solo con l'avvento delle società statali centralizzate e poi industrializzate, alcune lingue hanno iniziato a diffondersi, fino al punto che comprendevano centinaia di migliaia e successivamente milioni di parlanti. Sfortunatamente, la maggior parte di queste nuove società espansionistiche non aveva alcun interesse nel documentare le lingue delle popolazioni che avevano sottomesso. Ma si può avere un'idea di come fosse il mondo quando sono nati i primi grandi imperi prendendo in considerazione la penisola italiana nel V e nel VI secolo a.C. Lì, sotto l'influenza greca, diverse civiltà svilupparono il proprio sistema di scrittura in tempo per lasciare delle documentazioni delle loro lingue prima che venissero risucchiate nel vortice del latino parlato dai romani.

Alcune iscrizioni nell'Italia preromana attestano tra le 12 e le 15 lingue diverse le une dalle altre e appartenenti a quattro rami di almeno due famiglie linguistiche diverse: tre appartenenti al ramo indoeuropeo (celtico, italico e greco) e l'etrusco, che non era europeo. I romani non avevano attivamente tentato di soffocare le altre lingue, anzi, la conservazione delle altre lingue da parte dei non romani aveva favorito la politica del “divide et impera”, ovvero del “dividi e conquista”. Gli umbri, ad esempio, continuarono a fare iscrizioni nella loro lingua per secoli dopo l'annessione romana. Ma alla fine, il potere e lo status del latino prevalse, in particolar modo dopo che tutti i residenti in Italia divennero cittadini romani a metà dell'ultimo secolo a.C. Inizialmente, gli altri gruppi utilizzavano il latino per scopi “esterni”, ma gradualmente il potere centralizzante di Roma relegò la lingua locale, così come le iniziative politiche e preoccupazioni, ad una posizione secondaria, subordinata, in retrocessione. Non si sa precisamente quando i parlanti di osco, umbro, etrusco e delle altre lingue della penisola si siano estinti, ma l'eliminazione di tutte le lingue non latine dalla penisola italiana è probabile fosse

quasi completa quando Ponzio Pilato si lavò le mani di un'altra morte in un'altra parte dell'Impero romano.

Regni emergenti in molte altre parti del mondo (in Egitto, Arabia, Persia, Mali, Cina, Corea, India, Messico e nelle Ande) ebbero impatti simili sulle popolazioni minoritarie all'interno dei loro territori. Fu probabilmente in questo periodo (all'inizio del 2000 a.C. circa) che emersero le prime lingue con più di un milione di parlanti. Gli agglomerati espansionistici agricolo-militari, come il Bantu nel centro dell'Africa meridionale, hanno cancellato vasti mosaici di diversità. E a partire dal 1492, l'espansione coloniale europea iniziò ad avere il suo costo. Appena poco più di metà secolo dopo che gli spagnoli raggiunsero Cuba e Porto Rico, il taino, una lingua aruachi, smise di essere parlata, anche se alcune delle sue parole sopravvivono come prestiti in spagnolo (*cacique* "capo") e altre passarono addirittura all'inglese (*barbacoa*, in inglese "barbecue", *canoa* "canoe"; *tabaco* "tobacco"). Migliaia di altre lingue in tutto il mondo subirono un destino simile, portando alla perdita accelerata della diversità linguistica che si può vedere oggi e il concomitante predominio delle dozzine di lingue con più di 100 milioni di parlanti.

Al centro del focolaio

La conclusione di ciò che è stato discusso fino ad ora è che la diversità linguistica è, ad oggi, distribuita in maniera diseguale in tutto il mondo. Secondo una stima, 17 paesi detengono il 60% di tutte le lingue, anche se questi costituiscono solo il 27% della popolazione mondiale e il 9% della sua superficie terrestre. La Tabella 1.2 mostra due classifiche leggermente diverse dei primi 25 paesi divisi per diversità linguistica: un calcolo del numero totale delle lingue endemiche e un criterio alternativo che mostra il numero di linee evolutive linguistiche e che risulta essere un criterio di misurazione migliore e più profondo della diversità linguistica. Mostra anche i primi 25 paesi divisi per diversità biologica.

Tabella 1.2 I primi 25 paesi mega diversi, divisi in base a due criteri di diversità linguistica e alle specie vertebrate.

<i>Posizione</i>	<i>Lingue endemiche</i>		<i>Linee evolutive linguistiche endemiche</i>		<i>Specie endemiche di vertebrati superiori</i>	
1	Papua Nuova Guinea (PNG)	856	PNG	74	Australia	1346
2	Indonesia	688	Indonesia	57	Messico	761
3	Nigeria	480	USA	52	Brasile	725
4	India	390	Brasile	35	Indonesia	673
5	Australia	353	Australia	30	Madagascar	537
6	Cina	304	Perù	26	Filippine	437
7	Messico	293	Sudan	24	India	373
8	Camerun	241	Colombia	21	Perù	332
9	Stati Uniti d'America (USA)	227	Bolivia	19	Colombia	330

10	Brasile	218	Messico	16	Ecuador	294
11	Rep. Dem. Congo	186	Venezuela	14	Stati Uniti	284
12	Filippine	168	Fed. russa	12	Cina	256
13	Vanuatu	135	Etiopia	12	PNG	203
14	Federazione russa	117	Canada	12	Venezuela	186
15	Ciad	112	Ciad	11	Argentina	168
16	Tanzania	107	India	10	Cuba	152
17	Perù	103	Cina	9	Sudafrica	146
18	Malesia	98	Argentina	9	Zaire	134
19	Nepal	94	Sudan del sud	8	Sri Lanka	126
20	Myanmar	82	Ecuador	8	Nuova Zelanda	120
21	Etiopia	82	Nigeria	7	Tanzania	113
22	Colombia	82	Cile	7	Giappone	112
23	Canada	73	Turchia	6	Camerun	105
24	Sudan	72	Is. Salomone	6	Isole Salomone	101
25	Isole Salomone	71	Paraguay	6	Etiopia =	88
					Somalia =	88

Come già appurato in precedenza, l'attuale distribuzione delle lingue riflette molte influenze. Gli effetti della storia di ogni regione si sono sovrapposti agli schemi originali, i quali probabilmente mostravano parallelismi ancora più serrati tra la diversità linguistica e quella biologica:

(1) Uno strato originale del tempo profondo della diversità linguistica risale a quando tutti gli esseri umani erano cacciatori-raccoglitori. Ciò è evidente nelle regioni in cui le persone sono rimaste tali fino a tempi recenti. Qui, vi è un'alta diversità linguistica in entrambi i criteri (ad esempio, sul numero totale di lingue e sul numero di linee evolutive indipendenti), ad eccezione per le zone diffuse come i deserti e altre regioni meno favorevoli che mostrano gli effetti della colonizzazione ripetuta e delle pressioni culturali ad espandere le connessioni per la comunicazione interna.

(2) Un secondo strato risulta dall'espansione agricola su piccola scala a partire dalla fine del Neolitico in alcune regioni, sebbene fosse molto più recente in alcune aree. Quest'espansione eliminò le lingue dei cacciatori-raccoglitori ma ha generato un modello più recente di diversificazione, con più o meno densità di linee evolutive a seconda del tempo profondo dell'agricoltura, lasciando un modello formato da tante lingue raggruppabili in famiglie linguistiche come l'indoeuropeo o l'austronesiano.

(3) Gli effetti della formazione dello stato, tra il 3000 a.C. e il 1000 d.C. a seconda dell'area, produssero una diminuzione stabile della diversità linguistica. Nella maggior parte dei paesi dell'Asia dell'Est (Corea, Giappone), dell'Europa, dell'Africa del Nord e del Medio Oriente, i punteggi bassi sono dovuti agli analoghi effetti ottenuti negli scorsi due o tre millenni; l'elevato risultato attuale della Cina è dovuto alle popolazioni minoritarie ai margini del controllo della

dinastia Han, in particolare nella provincia dello Yunnan, dove il numero di lingue segnalate è cresciuto notevolmente negli ultimi due decenni.

(4) L'eliminazione della diversità linguistica indigena in molte colonie è uno degli effetti principali più recenti della colonizzazione espansionistica condotta dagli europei e dalle alte società degli stati-nazioni. Infatti, possono vantare la discutibile onorificenza di aver completamente silenziato le lingue indigene in Uruguay, Cuba, Haiti e in tutte le isole dei Caraibi (l'unico mare il cui nome deriva da una lingua indigena, Carib, paradossalmente).

Se si considerano paesi come l'Australia, gli Stati Uniti o il Sudafrica, colonizzati dagli europei negli ultimi secoli, si ottengono tassi molto rapidi di perdita linguistica dovuti all'impatto con l'inglese. Tassi simili di rapida estinzione linguistica si verificano in gran parte del Brasile, a causa dell'impatto del portoghese, in Siberia con il russo, in Sudan con l'arabo, in tutta l'Indonesia con l'indonesiano e anche in alcune parti remote della Papua Nuova Guinea con il Tok Pisin, la recente lingua franca nazionale.

Guardando indietro oltre il recente appiattimento delle multiformità da parte delle lingue coloniali [...] si possono notare le forti correlazioni tra la diversità linguistica e quella biologica. L'antropologo e linguista dell'Arizona, David Harmon, ha analizzato tale correlazione in un importante studio del 1996 e da allora tutti i suoi risultati sono stati replicati in tutto il mondo su base nazionale, confermando per l'Africa una risoluzione grossolana e, invece, risoluzioni dettagliate per le Americhe. Egli utilizzò i passerai come indice della biodiversità, campionando tagli geografici fino a quadrati ampi un grado. Approcci più recenti a questa domanda hanno utilizzato ampie aree ecologiche invece dei confini piuttosto accidentali forniti dai paesi e ancora una volta si sono trovate forti correlazioni. Dieci dei primi dodici paesi "mega diversi" al mondo misurati in termini biologici rientrano anche nella "serie A" dei primi 25 paesi al mondo per la diversità linguistica endemica. Il lavoro di Harmon indica anche chiaramente dove sono concentrate entrambe le tipologie di diversità: America centrale e meridionale, Africa tropicale, sud e sud-est asiatico attraverso l'Indonesia, la Melanesia e l'Australia fino al Pacifico occidentale.

Le fonti della diversità nella lingua, cultura e biologia

[La continua perdita di diversità bioculturale] arresterà il flusso storico dell'essere stesso, i processi evolutivi attraverso i quali la vitalità di tutti gli esseri è arrivata a noi nel corso della storia.

(Harmon 2002: xiii, [Translation])

Le discussioni riguardo la conservazione della diversità sono simili sia se si considera la perdita di una rara specie di uccello che quella di un albero, un corpo di sapere culturale che sarebbe ben presto dimenticato o una lingua in pericolo. A partire da Darwin si è iniziato ad articolare, a livello scientifico, ciò che la maggior parte delle culture hanno custodito nella loro estetica e cosmologia per lungo tempo: che la varietà è il serbatoio dell'adattabilità.

[...] Fino a 40 anni fa, i punti di forza delle pratiche (agri)culturali tradizionali (deposte dalla Rivoluzione verde basata sulla tecnologia, con i suoi fertilizzanti, i suoi semi standardizzati, e nuove specie riproduttive) erano fortemente sottovalutati; di recente, invece, sono stati

rivalutati: la resistenza alla siccità, alle malattie, le minori richieste per le falde acquifere e, paradossalmente, la maggiore resa se si considera in base al consumo di acqua, anziché in base a quante tonnellate di raccolto per area. Le diverse “specie autoctone” dell’agricoltura tradizionale in tutto il mondo sono state geneticamente archiviate, in modo che potesse essere possibile attingere alla loro diversità genetica. Ma è necessario anche tutto il sapere culturale che si è sviluppato attorno ad esse. [...] Se si conservano semi senza accompagnarli al sapere, si ottiene comunque un quadro impoverito.

All’interno delle tradizioni accademiche e scientifiche occidentali si possono identificare due tipi di posizioni nei confronti del sapere globale. La prima è universalizzante e crede sia possibile incorporare tutto il sapere nella lingua globale del momento (a turno il latino, l’arabo, il francese e l’inglese), parlata da un’umanità unificata all’interno di un singolo regno unificato, che si attiene a un sistema di valori universale. L’altra posizione riconosce la forza e la ricchezza che derivano da tradizioni diverse e che non possono essere schematizzate in un sistema di valori universale basato su una singola lingua globale: “il calo della diversità linguistica fa sì che anche la capacità di adattamento della specie umana si riduca, perché restringe il bacino di sapere dal quale si può attingere.”

Fu il linguista americano Joshua Fishman a delineare questa prospettiva alternativa, mostrando come si fosse sviluppata attraverso una serie di teorici, a partire da Vico e Herder fino a Boas, Sapir e Whorf:

il mondo intero necessita di una diversità delle entità etnolinguistiche per la sua stessa salvezza, per la maggiore creatività, per una più certa soluzione dei problemi dell’essere umano, per la costante riumanizzazione dell’umanità nonostante il materialismo, per favorire maggiore estetismo, maggiori capacità intellettive ed emotive per l’umanità intera, anzi, per ottenere livelli più alti del funzionamento umano... le grandi forze creative che ispirano l’umanità non nascono a partire dalla civiltà universale, bensì dall’individualismo delle collettività etniche separate, più precisamente, dalle loro lingue autentiche.

(Fishman 1982:7, [translation])

Le parole di Fishman chiariscono che ciò non si tratta né di una supplica rivolta alle migliaia di società minoritarie e individualiste a divenire musei sempre più isolati vicendevolmente, né un’incitazione ad elevare alcune graziose parole autoctone all’interno di lingue globali come l’inglese, per creare una sorta di parco a tema linguistico. Invece, egli riconosce le profonde interazioni creative e le intuizioni sintetiche che si svelano quando si osserva una lingua attraverso il prisma di un’altra.

[...] Per concludere questo capitolo, dato che si è parlato della relazione tra diversità linguistica, diversità tra specie ed ecologia, è importante osservare alcuni modi in cui le lingue minoritarie detengono conoscenze biologiche ed ecologiche dettagliate che intere generazioni di parlanti hanno gradualmente scoperto e registrato nelle loro lingue. Questi esempi mostreranno come la perdita dell’eredità linguistica sia intimamente legata alla perdita di culture e di habitat. [...]

Parole sulla terra

Gli individui attingono alle risorse culturali per strutturare e risolvere problemi con i quali hanno a che fare nelle loro giornaliere attività sociali organizzate.

(Saxe e Esmonde 2005: 173 [traduzione])

Lingue e società minoritarie hanno mantenuto il loro posto nel mondo essendo attentamente sintonizzate con le loro ecologie locali e accumulando un ricco fondo di conoscenza a riguardo. La maggior parte è stato tramandato esclusivamente nelle loro lingue. Molti aspetti del loro sapere tradizionale sono ancora sconosciuti alla scienza occidentale e infatti le lingue sono presumibilmente le più importanti e distintive tra le “risorse culturali” a cui si riferiscono Saxe ed Esmonde nella citazione introduttiva di questa sezione.

Si consideri la lingua seri, parlata da circa 500 cacciatori/raccoglitori/pescatori in Bassa California, in Messico. Si tratta probabilmente di una lingua isolata senza parentela conosciuta, anche se alcuni linguisti credono si tratti un avamposto meridionale delle lingue hokan della California. Nel corso della documentazione del lessico seri, i linguisti Edward e Mary Moser vennero a conoscenza, attraverso i parlanti di seri, del loro uso della zosteria (*Zostera marina* L., una pianta acquatica) come risorsa di grano marino. Dunque, coinvolsero anche l’etnobotanico Richard Felger: la ricerca finale fu pubblicata sulla rivista *Science* con il titolo che riportava “la scoperta degli indigeni seri riguardo il suo valore nutritivo”. Gli autori arrivarono alla conclusione che si trattasse dell’unico caso in cui il grano marino fosse coltivato come risorsa alimentare umana e sottolinearono il suo notevole potenziale in quanto risorsa per l’umanità: questa pianta può essere coltivata senza acqua fresca, pesticidi o fertilizzanti artificiali. Nonostante la sua potenziale rilevanza in un mondo che ha bisogno di nuovi raccolti, questo sapere cruciale è noto solo ai membri del piccolo mondo seri, conservato all’interno della loro lingua. Molte altre parole in seri contengono informazioni riguardo i trattamenti, prodotti, e coltivazione della zosteria. Ad esempio, il mese di aprile è *xnois iháat iizax* “luna del raccolto di zosteria”, e l’inizio del periodo del raccolto è indicato dall’oca colombaccio nera, quando si immerge nel mare per cibarsi della pianta, ed è conosciuta come *xnois cacáaso* “oracolo dei semi di zosteria”.

Nel mondo indigeno le persone trasmettono, attraverso le parole e le espressioni delle loro lingue, i frutti di millenni di osservazioni sulla natura ed esperimenti con i suoi prodotti. In Arnhem Land vi sono stati una serie di casi nei quali l’impulso dei naturalisti occidentali a riconoscere nuove specie derivasse dalle tradizioni indigene della nomenclatura tassonomica. Il grande e impressionante pitone oenpelli, conosciuto dai parlanti di kunwinjku come *nawaran*, ne è un esempio: fu incorporato alla tassonomia scientifica occidentale nel 1977 per la prima volta come *morelia oenpelliensis*.

[...]

Le culture tradizionali, inoltre, contengono il sapere dettagliato sulle proprietà curative delle piante, trasmesse nelle lingue locali. La scoperta recente di un composto chimico, la prostratina, efficace contro l’HIV di tipo 1, risale alla conversazione tra il curatore tribale samoano Epenesa Mauigoa e l’etnobotanico Paul Allen Cox riguardo gli usi medicinali tradizionali del fusto di un particolare albero, l’*homalanthus nutans*. Il fatto che Cox avesse imparato il samoano (in quanto figlio di un missionario) rappresentò un punto chiave che consentì la comunicazione.

Potenziati curativi simili abbondano in tutto l'immenso e vario mondo etnobotanico tradizionale e l'intera ricerca richiede la collaborazione di curatori, etnobotanici e linguisti.

Uno studio recente condotto dai ricercatori Cámara-Leret e Bascompte (2021) ha totalizzato l'insieme delle "prestazioni delle piante medicinali" note, combinazioni di specie di piante medicinali e una sottocategoria medicinale (es. *ficus insipida* + sistema digestivo) in tre regioni caratterizzate da elevata diversità bioculturale (America del Nord, Nuova Guinea e Amazzonia nord-occidentale). Delle 12495 "prestazioni di piante medicinali" totali che identificarono, considerando un campione di 235 lingue indigene, il 75% erano linguisticamente uniche, in altre parole, solo una lingua nel loro campione documenta tale connessione. Hanno, dunque, concluso che "la nostra scoperta dell'elevata unicità del sapere indigeno e una forte connessione con le lingue a rischio suggerisce che la perdita linguistica sarà ancora più decisiva nei confronti dell'estinzione della conoscenza medicinale rispetto alla perdita della biodiversità."

I vocabolari di lingue indigene non sono solo guide agli usi delle piante, ma spesso mostrano anche i legami ecologici tra le piante e le specie animali. In tutto il territorio di Arnhem Land, si trova una particolare specie di pesce, il *leiopotherapon macrolepis*, che porta lo stesso nome dell'albero di mele bianche native, il *syzygium eucalyptoides*, perché questo pesce mangia i frutti che cadono da questo albero nei ruscelli o negli stagni: entrambi, in kunwinjku, sono chiamati *bokorn*. Essere a conoscenza di questa connessione è di ovvia importanza per chiunque si ritrovi a pescare quel tipo di pesce: sarebbe sufficiente cercare l'albero, nello specchio d'acqua in basso è probabile che si trovi il proprio "compagno" di pesca. Le lingue dell'Arnhem Land centrale sono piene di queste combinazioni, rendendole una vera e propria guida per i pescatori nella zona.

[...]

Molti esempi come questi si estendono all'interno delle vaste sezioni etnobiologiche della Libreria di Babele. Ma tutto questo sapere è in grave pericolo, e lo sarà finché sarà disponibile solo nelle lingue orali poco conosciute da appena poche centinaia di persone, dato che il cambiamento in un'altra lingua potrebbe cessare la sua trasmissione: una volta che il pesce *bokorn* viene definito "*leiopotherapon macrolepis*", e l'albero *bokorn* "albero di mele bianche", le parole non trasmettono più l'originale connessione ecologica che esiste tra di loro.

Listening While We Can

*Chë che'eñ chëñ nochi ëñ niku chëñ
nakue'e chi ëñ nochi ëñ.*

My grandfather went out to learn all there is to be
learned, to learn by learning wherever one learns
(Lezama Tejada 2020)

One by one, at a quickening tempo, many of the world's 7000 languages are falling mute and withdrawing from the parliament of tongues. It may be Sixto Muñoz, the last speaker of Tinigua, who until his 90s was living along on a small farm in Colombia - in this case the linguist Katherine Bolaños had managed to record much from him in his last years. Or Dayaku Irfai, the last speaker of the Papuan language Dre, which nobody knew about it until he walked for three days from his village, with his nephew, eager to record at least something before he passed away. The silence may come years before the actual death of the last speaker. An old lady, who for decades has stubbornly kept addressing her children in her mother tongue though they only ever answer back in another language, suffers a stroke and loses the power of speech. Or two sisters become separated when one moves into an old people's home. Unnoticed, the last conversation in their language slips past.

It is not always outside forces that halt the talk. Aaron Lansky, whose battles to save the forgotten patrimony of Yiddish literature took him right across the American Jewish diaspora, 'marveled that Yiddish still existed at all, since it seemed everyone I met who spoke the language refused to speak with everyone else'. Or the poet Gary Snyder tells the following story from his travels in northern California in the mid-1970s:

We spoke for some time of people and places along the western slope of the northern Sierra Nevada, the territories of Concow and Nisenan people. Finally my friend broke his good news: Louie, I have found another person who speaks Nisenan." There was perhaps no more than three people alive speaking Nisenan at that time, and Louie was one of them. 'Who?' Louie asked. He told her name. 'She lives back of Oroville. I can bring her here, and you two can speak.' "I know her from way back,' Louie said. 'She wouldn't want to come over here. I don't think I should see her. Besides, her family and mine never did get along.'

To a young community member wanting to hear and learn their ancestral tongue, or to a linguist wanting to make last-ditch recordings, these biographical vagaries can be decisive in cutting short the afterglow of a language's final years.

On the other hand, it is not all that rare for people to turn up who speak languages that have been declared extinct [...]

A further example is in a speech community, in which the few remaining elderly speakers are less than fully fluent, where a younger speaker may be discovered whose life circumstances enabled them to learn the language to a level that effectively turns back the clock of language obsolescence by a generation or two. This happened with the Pacific Coast Athabaskan language Hupa. Mrs Verdona Parker, now in her 60s, had lived until recently with her mother in a remote town in Oregon. When she made contact with Athabaskanist Victor Golla she turned out to be a highly fluent speaker of this language, speaking a pure classical form of Hupa at least as fluently as the first speakers he had worked with in the 1960s.

Something similar happened in my own experience working with Dalabon: hearing that my teacher Maggie Tukumba was dying, in her 80s, I paid a visit to her in hospital in Katherine, grieving that not only was I bidding farewell to a much-loved elder, but was also witnessing the end to further attempts to get really detailed information on the language. Then beside the Katherine River on the same visit I met Manuel Pamkal, who I had heard about but somehow never had the chance to meet. Though Manuel was born a generation later, in the early 1960s, he grew up in the bush (his parents wanted him to grow up holding traditional culture) and has turned out to have such a deep knowledge of Dalabon that he can interpret many obscure words in old recorded texts, which Maggie had rejected as incomprehensible, such as a special verb for cutting open a kangaroo's belly to insert hot stones when cooking it in a ground oven. [...]

Though stories like those given here focus on 'last speakers', the final glow of a language's existence is actually held in the minds of what I'll call its 'last hearers'. These are people a generation below the last speakers, who grew up hearing and understanding the language, typically from their own parents, without ever getting the confidence or opportunity to speak it.

Sometimes such last hearers can make a huge difference to the value of existing documentation. In the prologue I described the distressing funeral of Charlie Wardaga on Croker Island, the last speaker not only of Ilgar but of several other languages of the Cobourg region. When we buried him, in 2003, it looked like that was the final nail in the coffin of our hopes of recording the Marrku language.

There were, however, a few hours of taped material from the 1960s, made on the hop by two different investigators - Bernhard Schebeck and Heather Hinch - in the course of their fieldwork on other languages. Unfortunately, these lacked any transcriptions or translations, and basically consisted of a few old people talking unchecked, just in Marrku. Marrku is so different from all other languages around that without assistance from someone who could at least understand it, this material was almost useless. [...] Among the slurred ramblings of the old men was a 20-minute passage in a woman's voice, clear as a bell. A couple of days later, sitting on the beach with our main Iwaidja teacher, Joy Williams, I tried playing her that passage. She sat rapt, laughing and crying as she listened. 'That's my mum!' she said. 'She used to talk to me in that language all the time. I can understand that right through.' [...]

It later turned out that another old Iwaidja man, Khaki Marrala, could understand some of what these other speakers were saying, and could help in a comparable way with one of the male speakers on the tape, who had brought him up. Thanks to the knowledge of these two ‘last hearers’ it has been possible to get a certain amount of information on this language - though still falling way short of what we would need to write a full grammar or dictionary.
[...]

The Process of Language Shift

[...]

So far these vignettes have focussed just on the final phases of language death. But leaving aside natural disasters or genocide, the passing of a language takes at least a lifetime to occur, from the birth to the death of whoever turns out to be its last speaker, often as an octogenarian or older. More often the process takes longer, many generations or even many centuries, and this gives a way of diagnosing how far the language has moved between health and death.

Table 10.1 reproduces one method for doing this, developed by Michael Krauss. First, to count as ‘safe’ (A⁺ rating), a language needs either to have over 1 million speakers, or be the official language of a sovereign nation state, such as Icelandic. Once below this threshold the best rating a language can get is ‘stable’ (A), on the assumption that even if things seem fine for a small traditional speech community, its very smallness renders it at risk from all sorts of disasters, ranging from volcanic eruptions or tsunamis to the establishment of large mines on its territory with their devastating impact on the local population. From then on, the indicators essentially pick up the relentless demographic shifts outlined in the next paragraph.

Table 10.1 Krauss' schema for assessing language endangerment. (Krauss 2006b: 1, with permission.)

Category	Rating	Descriptor
‘Safe’	A ⁺	> 1 million speakers, or official language of monolingual nation
Stable	A	all speak, children and up
unstable; eroded	A ⁻	some locales where children speak
definitively endangered	B	spoken only by parental generation and up
severely endangered	C	spoken only by grandparental generation and up
critically endangered	D	spoken only by very few, of great-grandparent generation
extinct	E	no speakers

First, some communities begin switching to another language, but the language is maintained in more isolated locations (A⁻). Then a day will come when there is no household left where children still learn their language, though at first this is barely noticeable - teenagers may be heard speaking the language to their elders, but not to their younger siblings. Decade

by decade the speaker profile ages, until the youngest are in the parental generation (B), then the grandparental (C), then just a few old speakers survive from the great-grandparent generation (D). Finally, the language becomes extinct with the death of its last speaker (E).

Krauss's scheme does not include a category for a situation where there are still some 'last hearers' alive, which I would add as an additional phase before definitive extinction, nor does it add the increasingly important situation of 'reawakened languages' where they may be a growing number of speakers in the process of reviving the language, with the own complexities that situation provides in terms of their fluency, range of domains they use the language for, and the possibility of a reverse dynamics where children in such circumstances are more fluent than their parents. We talk about this in the 'Outro', at the very end of the book.

A further difficulty in applying Krauss's scheme is that at any point along the trajectory, people will typically mix words from the dominant language into their own. This may give the impression of incipient language shift. But it's not always clear whether speakers are doing this out of choice, and could have said everything in their own language if necessary, or out of necessity, because they no longer command the full grammar and vocabulary needed for a language to survive as a viable medium of complete communication.

Likewise, the scheme may be unduly alarmist about bi- or multilingual settings. Except in cases of great geographical or social isolation, the long-term maintenance of a small language implies not just the persistence of one language but the enduring coexistence of two or more.

[...] Provided that the traditional ethos of 'egalitarian multilingualism' is maintained, as it is in this region [Southern New Guinea], the intrusion of one or more outside languages is not an inherent threat to the maintenance of traditional *tok ples* 'local languages'. It is only when changes in practice and ideology lead to couples raising their children with a single common language (typically a lingua franca like Tok Pisin, in the Papua New Guinea context) that local languages become threatened.

These problems aside, classifications like Krauss's give us reasonable accuracy in diagnosing how far language shift has progressed in a particular community. [...]

Estimates of how much of the world's linguistic heritage is endangered attempt to compile scores like this for every part of the globe. They range from pessimistic estimates that 90% of the languages spoken today will have become extinct by the end of the century to more 'optimistic' estimates that put the figure closer to 50% - a statistic that still works out at one language dying every two weeks.

There are three main difficulties in coming up with accurate predictions at the global level.

Firstly, like all predictive enterprises they cannot foresee the impact of unknown future factors. Technological changes are now taking global media and global languages into the remotest villages in the world, and this is likely to hasten language shift even further, as will the accelerating destruction of traditional environments for many small peoples. On the other hand, new technologies are also making it easy for communities that have become spatially disconnected to reconstitute themselves through social media, as well as offering many new opportunities for language revival which we will glimpse in the 'Outro'.

Apart from the impact of technological factors, much will also depend on who comes out on top in major ideological battles, particularly in regard to the desirability (and ready achievability) or otherwise of bi- and multilingualism. Traditional languages are seen as the enemy of economic development by monolingualist advocates, from economists to nationalist

governments. [...] It is the belief that humans are basically monolingual, rather than the presence of world languages per se, which is the crucial factor in determining whether communities maintain their own language. Ever more psycholinguistic studies illustrate the cognitive benefits of multilingualism. But in large predominantly monoglot countries they tend to be ignored in public policy and discussion, and the majority's monolingual mindset can easily get foisted on minorities who traditionally regarded multilingualism as the norm (see Box 10.2). So, while some communities may see isolation as the key to maintaining their culture, it is pluralism and a positive valuation of multilingualism that holds the real ideological key to supporting language maintenance around the world.

The second cause of uncertainty in our projections is that there are some regions - particularly Africa - where the effective collapse of some nation states and absence of research infrastructure makes it almost impossible to gather data. Meaningful statistics are thus hard to obtain for this part of the world. Yet the huge number of languages in Africa - at an estimated 2000, it contains nearly one-third of the world's languages - magnifies the impact of uncertainties there on any global projection.

Third, there are huge differences at continental and national levels. In the Caribbean and Uruguay all indigenous languages are already extinct, and figures of 90% rates or worse of language loss seem possible for the English-speaking settler lands (Australia, United States, Canada). However, in much of South America indigenous languages are on a better footing. If we go from the listings of languages and their vitality levels in Adelaar (2006) and Moore (2006), it appears that 71% of indigenous South American languages (except for the southern cone of Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay) are still being learned by children, giving the much less pessimistic projected extinction rate of 29% for that part of the world by the end of this century (see Table 10.2). For Sub-Saharan Africa, Simons & Lewis (2013) find an even less significant loss rate, of under 10%.

[...]

In many parts of PNG (not all-see Box 10.2) the unparalleled levels of linguistic diversity will soon be a thing of the past, despite the lack of any true engagement of villages with economic and educational development. The younger generations have traded away their heritage without receiving the hoped-for integration into the world economy.

To summarize this section, there is considerable uncertainty in our estimates of how many of the world's languages face extinction by the end of this century, even if we can confidently place the percentage between an upper limit of 90% and a lower limit of 50%. An obvious factor is how far small speech communities are able to retain control of their destiny on their traditional lands, but the reality of economic migration means that attempts to maintain indigenous languages in urban settings will play an increasingly important role.

Table 10.2 Summed number of languages in each category for South America (excluding Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay), based on figures in Adelaar (2006) and Moore (2006). Summed figures for the A⁺ and A- show languages still being transmitted to children, summed figures for B and below are those unlikely to survive the century

Krauss category	Summed number	Adelaar (2006) (%)	Moore (2006) (%)
A ⁺	261	66.4	70.7
A-	17	4.3	
B	2	0.5	29.1
C	14	3.5	
D	79	20.1	
E	20	5.0	

In general, the more desperate the case, the more uncertain are our figures. The most urgent scenarios are equally prone to inaccurate overestimates and premature obituaries that leave unknown last speakers out of account. This means that it is often more helpful to just get out and start careful documentation, which often turns up further speakers, rather than over-investing in broad-brush surveys, which can deliver untrustworthy results.

Whether the 50% or the 90% figure ends up being more accurate, the magnitude of the task facing us in documenting so many languages is enormous; for every language where the chance to do something will disappear within months, there are many more where we still have decades to respond. Compared to the rapid extinction reported for some natural species with shorter lifespans, such as the Golden Toad of the Costa Rican cloud forests that became extinct in a few short years due to climate change, language death potentially gives humankind a generation or two to respond, provided we are prepared to commit adequate resources to the task. [...]

My Language for Ever ...

[...]

In most cases, speech communities are eager to have their languages put on record for posterity. Individual speakers most often focus on their own descendants - their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. But, as a way of reclaiming their own culture, so often despised or undervalued by outsiders, they often also want to share this with the rest of the world. [...]

The problems with confining linguistic investigation to academically trained outsider linguists have increasingly come to the fore. This is part of the move, captured by the slogan ‘nothing about us without us’: to decolonize research so that it reflects what groups want to find out themselves, and the way they want to conduct research, rather than what members of some colonizing culture want to find out about them. Successful language documentation, in fact, draws on and cross-fertilizes the work of a wide range of people, and achieves the best results when it capitalizes on the different talents and motives that each brings to the task, including the complementary perspectives of insiders and outsiders. One of the satisfactions of linguistic fieldwork, for both sides, is that it establishes a sophisticated, evolving, and life-long bond between people of quite different worlds brought together by their shared interest in a language that one speaks and the other wishes to learn and understand.

[...]

Time and again our knowledge is advanced by insiders, who rapidly reveal themselves to be formidable natural linguists, commanding great respect within their own small community for their traditional knowledge, even though they may lack formal education altogether and be unable to read or write. Indeed, I personally believe that it is a natural interest in and flair for language that enables a sub-set of individuals from the last generation of speakers to acquire their ancestral tongue in the adverse circumstance of language obsolescence.

A compelling example of how a brilliant insider with limited formal schooling can contribute directly to documenting indigenous knowledge, this time at the boundary between linguistics and ethnobiology, is the case of Saem Majnep (Figure 10.2), a speaker of Kalam in the Upper Kaironk valley of Madang Province, Papua New Guinea. Majnep started out as a field assistant to anthropologist Ralph Bulmer, who noted his outstanding bush knowledge. Bulmer was committed (using the terminology of his day) to:

the need in ethnographic reporting for two-sided partnerships in which the informant is given equal status with the anthropologist. He meant not only joint authorship, but, above all, a form of ethnographic reporting in which the insider is allowed to speak for himself, instead of having his words filtered through the prism of the anthropologist's interpretation and reformulated in Western forms of discourse.

To make this happen he needed an orthography for Kalam, and enlisted Maori linguist Bruce Biggs and his student Andy Pawley. Majnep, though he had only got as far as second year primary school, learned to write Kalam in this orthography and began putting together a compendium of ethnobiological essays, working by talking onto a cassette recorder in Kalam and Tok Pisin, and then transcribing these in a series of notebooks. Bulmer then helped arrange these thematically, and worked up an English translation aided by a Kalam dictionary that Pawley, Majnep, and others developed over the decades. This material eventually grew into two immense published treatises on traditional Kalam biological knowledge, one on birds and one on mammals, with a third on plants yet to appear. An example of the depth of Majnep's knowledge is his discussion, in *Birds of our Kalam Country*, of a bird with poisonous feathers—something that western science at that time believed impossible. The Kalam name for this bird is *wobob* (pronounced *wompwomp*) and Majnep wrote about it that 'some men say the skin is bitter and puckers the mouth'. Some years later western biologist Jack Dumbacher picked up this lead, and reported on its toxic properties in the pages of *Science*. Significantly, Majnep does not appear as a coauthor in that publication, and there is now a strong push for the contributions of such indigenous knowledge-holders to be recognized through appropriate coauthorship.

[...]

Having a broad-based team of speakers, then, gives a richer and more varied profile of the language, and builds a sense of shared enterprise in the community. It can also draw in younger speakers who might otherwise be left out of the process, in ways that can range from transcription and translation to taking a major part in the documentary process (Box 10.4).

However, this is only the beginning. How best to tap and develop the full talents and knowledge of the 'natural linguists' so commonly encountered during fieldwork is one of the greatest challenges facing linguistics today.

[...]

Native speakers are also likely to be much more tuned-in to variability inside the speech community, where outsiders tend to build a more essentialized model. An elegant example of how much 'dynamic texture' can be added through the ear of a native speaker linguist is the analysis of Chatino tone by Chatino linguist Emiliana Cruz, working with veteran fieldworker Tony Woodbury. Chatino has a hugely complex tonal system, with up to 14 distinct tones in some dialects. Being a native Chatino speaker not only made it easier for Cruz to hear the contrasts, but also to enlist further researchers from the community, and to perceive differences in the tonal systems of other dialects:

We also emphasize the continued role [in working out the tone system] of teaching and speaker-training in local contexts. This has been possible... because of the high levels of interest and appreciation of Chatino in Chatino communities, and the view that writing is a way for the language to receive respect.... [R]esearch can be more exact when speakers, through linguistic study and through learning to write, become critically aware of the tonological systems of their languages.

(Cruz and Woodbury 2014: 521)

Box 10.4 For our words to beach safely

The Kuikuro documentation programme in the Upper Xingu region of Brazil, led by Bruna Franchetto with support from the Volkswagen Foundation's DoBeS programme, shows how far it is possible for members of speech communities to participate in the documentation of their own language. Though their remote setting may seem geographically distant from institutions of formal education, the Kuikuro have a deeply ingrained interest in the workings of their language. This is epitomized by the metaphor they use for grammatical particles and deictic words anchoring meanings to context: *tisakisü enkgutoho*, roughly 'made for our words to beach safely'.

After gaining the endorsement of tribal chiefs to carry out their own documentation, and overcoming the reluctance of some community members to have insiders carrying out the role of language documenter, several young Kuikuro have embarked on a comprehensive programme of recording their own language in a wide range of contexts. One of them, Mutua, recently submitted his undergraduate thesis on the intricacies of plural semantics in Kuikuro through an innovative programme at the Indigenous University of Mato Grosso (UNEMAT) - testimony to the ability of some insiders to harness their traditional knowledge in formal western education despite their non-standard educational background.

The benefits to the speech community itself are equally great. Advanced training of community members creates new possibilities for the whole community to understand and shape the

impingement of the outside world. At the level of social and economic justice, formal education of native speaker linguists gives them the skills and recognition their talents deserve, and creates a more interesting and interactive research dynamic within the world-wide community of scholars. [...]

Obvious and desirable as the goal is, however, we are still a long way from meeting the challenge of properly training native speaker linguists. There are many obstacles. Universities in many parts of the world are conservative in their admission requirements, and generally unaware of the advantage that pre-existing language knowledge can bring for native speakers interested in language analysis. Most institutions are willing to admit PhD candidates with a training in linguistics but no knowledge yet of the language they will study. They only rarely extend the converse recognition to those with a deep knowledge of their language but no formal training in linguistics.

Native speaker linguists, apart from an initial lack of formal academic training, may face special demands that traditional community life places on them, such as the obligation to attend ceremonies and funerals whose timing may be unpredictable and may clash with crucial academic dates. [...] It may also happen, paradoxically, that communities can be less receptive to linguistic work by insiders than by outsiders [...]

Despite these problems, there have been some notable programmes for training native speaker linguists. One of the most instructive is OKMA (*Oxlajuuj Keej Maya' Ajtz'iib'*) in Guatemala, established as a linguistic research and training group dedicated to Mayan linguistics. This was set up in the late 1980s to help re-establish a Mayan identity after the ravages of the Guatemalan civil war, along with other Mayan language institutions like the Academy of Mayan languages. Mayan speakers asked US linguist Nora England to give them the training they needed to carry out their own linguistic research. [...]

The structure of the OKMA programme is interesting. From an initial recruitment of a larger number of young would-be linguists, two trainees per language were selected for two years of training. From this starting point, subsequent 'generations' were brought in to be trained every couple of years by a combination of previous generations, England herself on a less intense basis, and other linguist visitors. Many graduates of this programme have now gone on to more conventional linguistic studies.

Do the roles of insider and outsider linguist differ, from a scientific point of view? Felix Ameka has written a thoughtful assessment of the history of grammatical descriptions of his mother tongue, the Ghanaian language Ewe. In it he weighs up the varying contributions of both native-speaker and outsider linguists in the century since the first Ewe grammar appeared in 1907, by the German missionary linguist Diedrich Westermann. Ameka is well-placed to evaluate this question, having worked as an insider on his mother tongue and as an outsider on another language of the Ghana-Togo mountains, Likpe. In addition, he has trained both insiders and outsiders to work on Ewe and other languages of West Africa. He concludes that each perspective is both vital, and inadequate by itself, citing the late Mary Haas, who worked on so many Native American languages: "We gain insight from the outside looking in as well as from the inside looking out. Another angle on the same theme is suggested by a team involving both *arrarrkbi* 'Aboriginal' and *balanda* 'European/whitefella' researchers into the role of song in keeping traditions and languages alive in northwestern Arnhem Land: just as traditional Arnhem Land culture cultivated a texture of being 'different together', with each group

contributing its language and song styles to a broader societal whole, so all sorts of new insights can grow out of cross-culturally collaborative research.

This brings us to the other challenge - that of training 'outsiders' as field linguists. In a way this is a problem that linguistics has been facing for a long time, since the golden days of Boas and Sapir. Strangely, though, there have also been recent periods where powerful figures in the most academically influential countries have denigrated or ignored the role of descriptive work, compared to the supposedly nobler and more scientifically challenging task of 'theoretical' work in formal paradigms like generative grammar. After the ascent to dominance of Chomskyan generative linguistics in the 1960s, the focus in North America and in many countries that followed its academic trends has been on theoretical modelling of fragments of well-known languages, rather than on new empirical work. Indeed, it is currently the case that in most US universities a reference grammar of a little-described language is not a permissible doctoral topic, despite the fact that it is about the most demanding intellectual task a linguist can engage in. This has led to an explosion of work on English and a dozen or so other well-known languages, and a corresponding neglect of the other 7000+ languages of the world.

Doctoral work is perhaps the ideal moment in a young scholar's life for undertaking fieldwork, with the freedom to spend long periods in a remote location, and the opportunity to concentrate exclusively over several years on the task of figuring out the language. Yet the talented and committed human resource offered by doctoral students is being squandered by the very field that we would expect to have the greatest interest in charting the world's linguistic diversity.

[...]

But, the field of linguistics still needs a massive turnaround of professional priorities, an expansion of field training, and a proper recognition of the value and the time demands of descriptive work. Only then can we marshal the number of trained linguistic scholars that is needed to document our fragile linguistic heritage over the coming decades. As the British colonial administrator Colonel Lorimer put it, in the preface to his 1935 grammar of the enigmatic Burushaski isolate language of northern Pakistan:

How much can now be done will again be governed by the time factor- the harvest is ripe, but the labourers are few.

Bringing it out and Laying it Down

Descendants of speakers will not be learning the language so that they can order a meal in a restaurant or ask directions to the railway station. They will want to know what is special about their heritage.

(Marianne Mithun)

In Chapter 2 we mentioned a tried-and-true approach to illustrating the many facets of a language in an approachable form: the so-called Boasian trilogy, named after Franz Boas, which can present a rich portrait of a language in three mutually illuminating volumes: grammar, texts, and dictionary. However useful it is, this trilogy will not supply answers to all the questions that future linguists and community members will want to ask.

To begin with, however hard the linguist has tried to be comprehensive in their grammatical description, and to represent the functionings of the language in a way that does justice to its own unique genius, there will always be phenomena they have overlooked or failed to understand. As Andy Pawley once wrote, 'a language should not be assumed to have just the characteristics of its linguistic description. Text collections, and a rich set of sample sentences distilled into dictionary entries, are a useful reservoir of material whose significance the grammarian may have overlooked, and in which later researchers may find undetected patterns.

As we saw in Chapter 2, the idea of making substantial, ethnographically informed text collections goes back a long way. This was the basis of Sahagún's epocal Aztec/Spanish compendium *General History of the Things of New Spain*, and it has kept resurfacing in text collections by linguists ever since. But, however rich and extensive they may be, such collections do not capture every aspect of language use. They typically favour the formal and literary at the expense of the casual and slangy. They filter out the hesitations and mistakes of actual speech that may play a crucial part in pointing the way to future changes in the language. Additionally they can be uninformative about exactly how people speak to each other in intimate situations.

Since the mid-1990s, a number of linguists, Nikolaus Himmelmann foremost among them, have argued that we need a new sub-field of linguistics in its own right, *documentary linguistics*, independent of the traditional concerns of descriptive linguistics. This sub-field would be concerned with the compilation and preservation of linguistic primary data, and with securing a lasting, multipurpose record of a language:

The net should be cast as widely as possible. That is, a language documentation should strive to include as many and as varied records as practically feasible... Ideally a language documentation would cover all registers and varieties, social or local; it would contain evidence for language as a social practice as well as a cognitive faculty, it would include specimens of spoken and written language; and so on.

Essentially, this approach is concerned with elaborating a set of procedures that have two goals. First, to make sure that linguists are scrupulous in making their primary data available to other investigators. Second, (and this is more difficult) to ensure that all phenomena of a language are well-sampled in the recordings they make. Only in this way can we ensure that documentary linguists do what Wittgenstein exhorted philosophers to do: 'plough over the whole of language'.

The paradox that documentary linguistics must confront is how to provide for future questions that the original documenter does not ask.

[...]

Each language possesses certain structural densities of its own that require targeted investigation and whose logic may not become apparent in a naturalistic corpus, because even a large corpus contains all sorts of gaps. But just where the linguist will need to apply these techniques of systematic probing depends on the genius of the language.

In one language, it will be important to vary all the dimensions of a verb or noun paradigm to make sure all logical cells are recorded, since paradigms tend to be nests of irregularity

where each combination needs separate checking. Just leaving it to chance for these all to come up could leave us waiting a very long time indeed. Take verbs in the Papuan language Nen as an example, which can have over 3500 inflected forms due to their prolific combination of subject (singular, dual, plural), object (singular, dual, plural, large plural), around a dozen tense/aspect/mood combinations, and an iterative category (do at many times or places). [...]

On top of that, to be really useful a corpus must contain discussions of the various ways that each sentence in it can be interpreted in different contexts- a semantically annotated meta-corpus. Again, this can only be produced by embroidering structured probing onto the original text.

The best guarantee for the future useability of a documented corpus is thus a complex hybrid of natural and elicited data. In practice linguists proceed best in an everlasting spiral of texts, grammar, and dictionary, with advances in each informing how the others are understood. For those parts of a language where the linguist glimpses the outlines of a well-organized structure, rigorous description and analysis makes sure that all relevant combinations are asked about and recorded. As a report on what makes documentation adequate put it, 'analysis is itself critical to assessing the sufficiency of a documentation corpus.'

One of the key qualities of a good field linguist is their ability to sense where these nodal zones lie and zero in on them for more structured intensive questioning. For other parts of the language, a more free-flowing approach that emphasizes balanced sampling is the best hedge against unasked questions.

Two final key ingredients go into making a robust and broad documentation. Firstly, the more wide ranging the linguist's curiosity is - and we have seen in this book just how widely the phenomenon of language engages with questions touching on many areas of knowledge - the more they will sense where to probe deeper. The great lexicographer James Murray, founding architect of the Oxford English Dictionary, credited much of his success to his omnivorous interest in every conceivable topic that humans talk about.

This leads on naturally to the second crucial ingredient. The more diverse the team of investigators who work on a given language - insiders and outsiders, linguists with different foci of interest, other investigators ranging from ethnobiologists to musicologists to specialists in material culture - the greater the range of issues that, in Maggie Tukumba's words, will be 'brought out' from the minds of speakers into dialogue, and 'put down' in some more durable form for the sake of future generations:

Nunh kenbo, kardu marruh-kûno nga-yawoh-dulu-burlhkeyhwoyan nga-yawoh-yungiyen bebakah... Nunh kenbo ngahlng-burlhkeywoyan rerrickah, duludjerrnguno, kanhkuno ngah-yungiyen kanunh bebakah. Kenbo yilah-dulu-burlhkeyhwoyan, mak kaduluwanjingh, bah kadjahlng-ngongno kanh duluno, kanh drebuy njelng yilaye-yenjdjung.

'From now on, whenever, I bring out a story or word, I'll put it in the book... And other things, that I'll bring out later, new words, I'll put them on paper. Then we'll bring out the meaning of things, not just one idea, but all sorts of meanings, including the subtleties of what we say.'

From Clay Tablets to Hard Drives

Today's linguists can access printed and handwritten documentation that is hundreds (sometimes thousands) of years old.

However, much digital language documentation and description becomes inaccessible within a decade of its creation...

In the very generation when the rate of language death is at its peak, we have chosen to use moribund technologies, and to create endangered data.

(Steven Bird and Gary Simons)

It is no use recording detailed language and cultural material if the recordings themselves are not properly conserved and archived - or our fragile recordings may follow the speakers they contain into oblivion.

The enthusiastic uptake of each new technological advance can leave orphaned recordings in abandoned and inaccessible media. A central challenge for language archives is to ensure that endangered materials don't go the way of the languages they record. This often requires complex technical conversion procedures to ingest the materials into a digital format, including a small museum of playing devices such as wax cylinder players, wire recorders, and old-fashioned reel-to-reel recorders.

The media themselves, too, are often perishable. Cassette tapes become demagnetized and most are unlikely to be usable beyond 2025. Hard drives crash, books and manuscripts burn or go mouldy. To get around this problem, a number of digital archives have been set up, such as PARADISEC in Australia, AILLA in the United States, the ELAR archive in London, LACITO in France, and the Language Archive (TLA) at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in the Netherlands.

A mundane but typical example is a set of 11 tapes that reached PARADISEC from New Caledonia some years ago. They had been recorded by Leonard Drilë Sam in his own language, Drehu, from the Loyalty Islands, then kept for about 20 years in his home. Due to the lack of a reel-to-reel player and because the tapes themselves had grown a visible white mould he could no longer play them. Before they could be read into a more abiding digital format, they needed to be cleaned and demoulded by being placed in a vacuum oven at low temperature for a few weeks.

Yet even when converted into a digital format, archives are not safe. Electronic records can become gobbledygook as proprietary fonts and data formats change - they only remain accessible if contained in an archive that assures their automatic and ongoing format migration with correct preservation of all fonts.

In this regard, Sumerian clay tablets still remain unsurpassed for archival stability and long term interpretability. Initiatives like the Rosetta Project are now seeking to make permanent physical records available in the form of micro-engraved materials that could, with ingenuity, be accessed by our remote descendants or by extra-terrestrial visitors, even if some physical disaster on our earth were to wipe out the complex infrastructure that maintains our digital records. Another approach being mooted, along the lines of the Global Seed Vault, is to recon-

vert digital data into microfiche and lodge it deep in the Arctic World Archive, deep inside a mountain in the demilitarized Svalbard archipelago.

At least as problematic as physical degeneration or format marooning is the likelihood that recordings or field notes will be forgotten in a dead scholar's trunk, or thrown out as worthless junk by people who don't realize their worth. There is a great temptation to hold onto your own field material until you've analysed it definitively and spare yourself the embarrassment of being shown up for your poor transcriptions or overlooking grammatical analyses obvious to other scholars. But death or Alzheimer's often arrive before analytic perfection is attained. Even where the material is salvaged by an executor or other relative, the crucial metadata – about who is speaking, when, where, and about what may be lacking from the record, sometimes rendering it all but useless.

So, it's not just languages that can be fragile - their recordings can be too. There is growing awareness of these issues, and the beginnings of a consensus about how long-term archiving of material can be secured. From the depositors, it entails the use of open-source software to avoid locking up data in proprietary formats, a commitment to archiving their materials with full metadata, so as to make them available to the speech community and other scholars. From the archives, it requires appropriate systems to ensure that some material can remain restricted following community requests, a commitment to massive data storage, permanent format migration, and the mirroring of data across several 'cybraries' to get around the potential vulnerability of any one location.

Among scholars and institutions, there still needs to be a shift of responsibility, from researchers and universities who typically measure time in decades to the institutions most knowledgeable about long-term conservation: museums and libraries. These have the know-how and the right time perspective, but in many cases do not yet value digital data from oral cultures in the way they value books and objects - I hope that the examples I have used in this book have shown how wrong this attitude is.

Ascoltare finché è possibile

*Chë che'eñ chëñ nochi ëñ niku chëñ
nakue'e chi ëñ nochi ëñ.*

Mio nonno andò in giro ad imparare tutto ciò che
si può imparare, per imparare conoscendo qualunque
luogo in cui si possa imparare
(Lezama Tejada 2020 [Translation])

Una ad una, con frequenza sempre maggiore, molte delle 7000 lingue del mondo stanno scomparendo, ritirandosi dal parlamento delle lingue. Un esempio di questo fenomeno è fornito da Sixto Muñoz, l'ultimo parlante di tinigua (una lingua nativa della Colombia), che fino agli anni Novanta viveva in una piccola fattoria in Colombia. Grazie al suo aiuto, durante i suoi ultimi anni di vita, la linguista Katherine Bolaños era riuscita a documentare questa lingua. Un ulteriore esempio è Dayaku Irfai, l'ultimo parlante della lingua papuana dre, la cui esistenza era sconosciuta fino a quando decise di incamminarsi in un viaggio durato tre giorni, partendo dal villaggio con suo nipote, per poter documentare la sua lingua prima di morire. Tuttavia, il silenzio di una lingua potrebbe giungere molti anni prima dell'effettiva morte del suo ultimo parlante. Se, ad esempio, una signora anziana (che da decenni parla testardamente ai propri figli nella sua madrelingua anche se loro le rispondono in un'altra) avesse un ictus, in questo caso perderebbe la facoltà di parlare. O due sorelle che si separano quando una delle due va a vivere in una casa di riposo: senza dare nell'occhio, le ultime conversazioni nella loro lingua scivolerebbero via.

Ciò non è sempre dovuto a forze esterne. Aaron Lansky, che durante la diaspora degli ebrei americani, si impegnò nella lotta per salvare il patrimonio dimenticato della letteratura yiddish, "si meravigliava del fatto che lo yiddish esistesse ancora, dato che sembrava come se tutti coloro che conoscessero questa lingua, si rifiutassero di parlarla con chiunque". O il poeta Gary Snyder che racconta la seguente storia tratta dai suoi viaggi nella California del nord, durante la metà degli anni Settanta:

Parlammo per un po' di persone e luoghi scoperti lungo il pendio occidentale della Sierra Nevada settentrionale, i territori di Concow e la popolazione nisenan. Alla fine, il mio amico diede la sua buona notizia: "Louie, ho trovato un'altra persona che parla nisenan." Vi erano forse non più di tre persone vive che parlavano questa lingua all'epoca e Louie era una di queste. "Chi?" Louie chiese. Disse il suo nome. "Vive ad Oroville. Posso portarla qui e voi due potete parlare." "La

conosco da tempo” Louie disse, “Non vorrebbe venire qui. Non penso dovrei incontrarla. Inoltre, la sua famiglia e la mia non sono mai andate d’accordo.”

Per un membro giovane di una comunità che vuole ascoltare e imparare la propria lingua ancestrale o per un linguista che vuole raccogliere le ultime e disperate documentazioni, queste varietà biografiche possono essere decisive per porre fine al crepuscolo degli ultimi anni di una lingua.

D’altro canto, non è affatto raro che spuntino persone che parlano lingue che sono state dichiarate estinte. [...]

Ad esempio, in una comunità linguistica nella quale i pochi parlanti anziani che rimangono non sono completamente fluenti, ci potrebbe essere un parlante più giovane le cui circostanze di vita gli hanno permesso di imparare la lingua a tal punto da riuscire a portare indietro le lancette dell’obsolescenza linguistica di una o due generazioni. Ciò accadde con la lingua athabaska della costa del Pacifico, l’hupa. Verdena Parker, ad oggi sulla sessantina, ha vissuto fino a poco tempo fa con sua madre in una città remota in Oregon. Quando si mise in contatto con il nativo Victor Golla, si scoprì che lei parlava una forma classica e pura di hupa in maniera fluente, come i primi parlanti con i quali lui aveva lavorato durante gli anni Sessanta.

Qualcosa di simile successe con la lingua dalabon, appartenente alla famiglia linguistica gunwinyguana in Arnhem Land: la morte dell’insegnante e parlante di dalabon, Maggie Tukumba, sull’ottantina, rappresentò la fine di ulteriori tentativi di ottenere informazioni dettagliate sulla lingua in questione. Nonostante ciò, Manuel Pamkal, sebbene nato una generazione dopo, nei primi anni Sessanta, crebbe nella landa selvaggia (poiché i suoi genitori volevano che crescesse seguendo la cultura tradizionale) e rivelò di possedere una conoscenza di dalabon tale da poter interpretare molte parole oscure presenti in antichi testi registrati che Maggie aveva precedentemente scartato perché incomprensibili, come ad esempio, il verbo che indica l’azione di tagliare il ventre di un canguro per inserirvi delle pietre bollenti quando lo si cuoce in un forno interrato. [...]

Sebbene storie simili si concentrino sugli “ultimi parlanti”, l’ultimo bagliore dell’esistenza di una lingua si trova in realtà nelle menti dei suoi “ultimi ascoltatori”. Si tratta di persone che appartengono alla generazione successiva a quella degli ultimi parlanti e che sono cresciuti ascoltando e comprendendo la lingua (di solito dai loro stessi genitori), senza aver mai avuto la sicurezza o l’opportunità di parlarla.

A volte, questi ultimi ascoltatori possono realmente fare la differenza per il valore della documentazione esistente. Charlie Wardaga non solo era l’ultimo parlante della lingua ilgar, ma anche di diverse altre lingue della penisola di Cobourg e si pensava che la sua morte rappresentasse anche la fine della speranza di poter documentare la lingua marrgu.

Tuttavia, vi erano alcune ore di materiale registrato degli anni Sessanta, create inaspettatamente da due ricercatori diversi, Bernard Schebeck e Heather Hinch, durante la loro ricerca riguardo altre lingue. Sfortunatamente, queste registrazioni non avevano né trascrizioni né traduzioni e si trattava semplicemente di alcune persone anziane che parlavano tra di loro esclusivamente in marrgu, a ruota libera. La lingua marrgu è così tanto diversa da tutte le altre che la circondano che senza l’aiuto di qualcuno che potesse perlomeno comprenderla tutto questo materiale risultava pressoché inutile. [...] In mezzo a tutto il borbottio sconnesso, vi era un passaggio di circa 20 minuti in cui si sentiva la voce di una donna, chiara come il sole, e quando Joy Williams, parlante e insegnante di iwaidja, ascoltò il passaggio, rimase ad ascoltare estasiata, ridendo e piangendo contemporaneamente. “È mia madre!” disse. “Mi parlava in questa lingua continuamente, riesco a capire tutto.” [...]

In seguito, si scoprì che anche un altro anziano iwaidjano, Khaki Marrala, riusciva a capire alcune parti di ciò che i parlanti dicevano e poté aiutare similmente a comprendere uno degli uomini della registrazione, dato che lo aveva cresciuto. Grazie alla conoscenza di questi due

“ultimi ascoltatori” è stato possibile ottenere un po’ di informazioni su questa lingua, sebbene non abbastanza da poter scrivere un’intera grammatica o un dizionario.

[...]

Il processo di deriva linguistica

[...]

Fino ad ora, questi aneddoti si sono concentrati esclusivamente sulle fasi finali dell’estinzione linguistica. Ma tralasciando fenomeni come i disastri naturali o i genocidi, la morte di una lingua richiede almeno un ciclo di vita per accadere, dalla nascita alla morte del suo ultimo parlante, spesso ottuagenario o anche più anziano. Di solito, il processo è anche più lungo: impiega molte generazioni o addirittura secoli, e ciò fornisce il tempo e il modo per valutare lo stato di salute della lingua.

La tabella 10.1 segnala un metodo sviluppato dal linguista Michael Krauss. Per prima cosa, per considerare “sicura” (criterio A⁺) una lingua, questa necessita almeno 1 milione di parlanti, o deve essere la lingua ufficiale di uno stato-nazione sovrano, come l’islandese. Al di sotto è possibile trovare l’unica altra categoria positiva, quella “stabile” (A), partendo dal presupposto che, sebbene la situazione possa sembrare favorevole per la comunità linguistica minoritaria e tradizionale, le sue stesse dimensioni la rendono vulnerabile ad ogni tipo di disastro (dalle eruzioni vulcaniche agli tsunami, alla costruzione di enormi miniere sul proprio territorio con impatti devastanti sulla popolazione locale). Gli indici successivi rilevano gli incessanti cambiamenti demografici descritti nel seguente paragrafo.

Tabella 10.1 Lo schema di Krauss per valutare lo stato di salute di una lingua (Krauss 2006b:1, con permesso)

Categoria	Criterio	Descrizione
“Sicura”	A ⁺	> 1 milione di parlanti o la lingua ufficiale di una nazione monolingue
Stabile	A	Parlata da tutti, dai bambini in su
Instabile; erosa	A ⁻	In alcune località è parlata anche dai bambini
Certamente in pericolo	B	Parlata dalla generazione dei genitori in su
In pericolo grave	C	Parlata solo dalla generazione dei nonni in su
In pericolo critico	D	Parlata solo da pochi, principalmente dalla generazione dei bisnonni
Estinta	E	Nessun parlante

In primo luogo, alcune comunità iniziano a passare ad altre lingue, ma la lingua in questione continua ad essere parlata nelle zone più isolate (A⁻). Progressivamente, non vi sarà più alcuna famiglia i cui bambini imparano quella lingua, pur trattandosi di un fenomeno che, inizialmente, è a malapena percettibile (ad esempio, gli adolescenti potrebbero parlare la lingua con i più anziani, ma non con i più giovani). Decennio dopo decennio, il profilo del parlante invecchia, fino a quando i più giovani diventano la generazione dei genitori (B), dopodiché quella dei

nonni (C) e in seguito, i pochi parlanti sopravvissuti, diventano la generazione dei bisnonni (D). Infine, la lingua si estingue con la morte del suo ultimo parlante (E).

Lo schema di Krauss non include una categoria per le situazioni in cui gli “ultimi ascoltatori” sono ancora in vita (da aggiungere come ulteriore fase prima dell’estinzione definitiva) né viene presa in considerazione l’importanza delle “lingue risvegliate”, nelle quali vi è un numero sempre maggiore di parlanti che prendono parte al processo di rivitalizzazione della lingua, con tutte le sue complessità per quanto riguarda la scioltezza, la gamma dei domini di utilizzo della lingua e la possibilità di dinamiche inverse nelle quali i bambini, in alcune circostanze, sono più fluenti dei genitori.

Un’ulteriore difficoltà nell’applicare lo schema di Krauss sta nel fatto che, ad un certo punto lungo il tragitto, i parlanti di solito iniziano a mescolare alcune parole provenienti dalla lingua dominante all’interno della propria. Ciò potrebbe dare l’impressione di un’imminente deriva linguistica. Tuttavia, non è sempre chiaro se i parlanti lo facciano deliberatamente (potrebbero, dunque, esprimersi nella propria lingua se necessario), o se per necessità, poiché non hanno più il pieno controllo della grammatica e del vocabolario necessari affinché la lingua possa sopravvivere come mezzo di comunicazione completo e valido.

Allo stesso modo, lo schema potrebbe risultare eccessivamente allarmista riguardo gli scenari bilingui o multilingui. Ad eccezione dei casi di profondo isolamento geografico o sociale, il mantenimento a lungo termine di una lingua minoritaria implica non solo la persistenza di una singola lingua, ma anche la coesistenza duratura con altre due o più.

[...] Ammesso che sia mantenuto l’ethos tradizionale del “multilinguismo egualitario”, come nella Nuova Guinea meridionale, l’intrusione di una o più lingue esterne non rappresenta una minaccia per il mantenimento del *tok ples* tradizionale, le “lingue locali”. La lingua autoctona è minacciata solo nel caso in cui i cambiamenti nella pratica e nell’ideologia sono tali da costringere alcune coppie a crescere i propri figli con una singola lingua comune (tipicamente una lingua franca come il tok pisin, nel contesto della Papua Nuova Guinea).

Mettendo da parte questi problemi, categorizzazioni come quella di Krauss forniscono notevole accuratezza per diagnosticare quanto sia progredita la deriva linguistica in una determinata comunità. [...]

Le stime di quanta dell’eredità linguistica globale sia in pericolo tentano di elaborare percentuali del genere per ogni parte del mondo. Queste variano dalle più pessimiste che prevedono che il 90% delle lingue parlate oggi si estingueranno entro la fine del secolo, a stime più “ottimiste” che abbassano la percentuale al 50% (la quale ad ogni modo prevede la morte di una lingua ogni due settimane).

Si possono incontrare tre principali difficoltà nel formulare predizioni accurate a livello globale.

In primo luogo, non è possibile prevedere l’impatto di fattori futuri sconosciuti. Oggi, i cambiamenti tecnologici stanno trascinando i media e le lingue globali in luoghi remoti nel mondo, e ciò è probabile che acceleri ancora di più il processo di deriva linguistica, così come la distruzione accelerata degli ambiti tradizionali per molte popolazioni minoritarie. D’altra parte, le nuove tecnologie stanno rendendo sempre più facile per le comunità che sono spazialmente sconnesse a ricostruire se stesse attraverso i social media, offrendo nuove opportunità per la rivitalizzazione delle lingue.

Oltre l’impatto dei fattori tecnologici, molto dipenderà anche da chi vincerà le principali battaglie ideologiche, in particolare per quanto riguarda la desiderabilità (e la pronta realizzazione) o meno del bilinguismo e del multilinguismo. Le lingue tradizionali sono percepite dai fautori del monolinguisimo come le nemiche dello sviluppo economico, a partire dagli economisti fino ai governi nazionalisti. [...] Piuttosto che la presenza delle lingue mondiali in sé, il fattore cruciale per determinare quali comunità possano mantenere la propria lingua è la credenza che l’essere umano sia essenzialmente monolingue. Sempre più studi

psicolinguistici illustrano i benefici cognitivi del multilinguismo, ma nei grandi paesi prevalentemente monolingui, questi vengono ignorati nella politica e nei dibattiti pubblici. Inoltre, la mentalità monolingue della maggioranza può essere impostata facilmente sulle minoranze che sono solite considerare il multilinguismo come la norma. Dunque, mentre alcune comunità considerano l'isolamento come la chiave per mantenere la propria cultura, in realtà sono il pluralismo e la valutazione positiva del multilinguismo a detenere la vera chiave ideologica per supportare il mantenimento linguistico in tutto il mondo.

La seconda causa di incertezza nelle previsioni è data da alcune regioni, in particolare in Africa, nelle quali l'effettivo collasso di alcuni stati-nazioni e l'assenza di infrastrutture di ricerca hanno reso quasi impossibile la raccolta di informazioni. Le statistiche rilevanti sono, dunque, difficili da ricavare in questa parte del mondo. Tuttavia, il grande numero di lingue in Africa (circa 2000, contiene quasi un terzo di tutte le lingue del mondo) amplifica l'impatto delle incertezze all'interno di quel territorio, in qualsiasi proiezione globale.

Terzo, vi sono enormi differenze a livello continentale e nazionale. Nella zona dei Caraibi e in Uruguay, tutte le lingue indigene sono già estinte, e tassi del 90% (o peggio) di perdita linguistica sembrano possibili per le terre dei coloni anglofoni (Australia, Stati Uniti e Canada). Tuttavia, in gran parte dell'America del Sud, le lingue indigene hanno basi più solide. Facendo riferimento alle liste di lingue e dei loro livelli di vitalità dei linguisti Adelaar (2006) e Moore (2006), pare che il 71% delle lingue indigene dell'America del Sud (ad eccezione del cono meridionale del Cile, dell'Argentina e dell'Uruguay) venga ancora appreso dai bambini, ottenendo un tasso di estinzione previsto molto meno pessimista del 29% per quella parte del mondo entro la fine di questo secolo (Tabella 10.2). Per l'Africa subsahariana, i linguisti Simons e Lewis (2013) trovano un tasso di perdita ancora meno significativo, inferiore al 10%.

[...]

In molte parti della Papua Nuova Guinea (non tutte) i livelli di diversità linguistica senza precedenti saranno presto obsoleti, nonostante la mancanza di un vero e proprio impegno nello sviluppo economico e dell'istruzione da parte dei villaggi. Le generazioni più giovani hanno scambiato il loro patrimonio senza ricevere l'agognata integrazione all'interno dell'economia globale.

Per riassumere questa sezione, vi è una considerevole incertezza nelle valutazioni riguardo quante lingue nel mondo saranno estinte entro la fine del secolo, anche se si può collocare una percentuale compresa tra un limite massimo del 90% e un limite minimo del 50%. Un fattore ovvio è fino a che punto le comunità linguistiche minoritarie saranno capaci di mantenere il controllo del loro destino sulle loro terre tradizionali, ma la realtà della migrazione economica indica che i tentativi di mantenere lingue indigene in contesti urbani avranno un ruolo sempre più importante.

Tabella 10.2 Numero sommato di lingue in ogni categoria dell'America del Sud (ad eccezione del Cile, Argentina e Uruguay), in base ai dati raccolti da Adelaar (2006) e Moore (2006). La somma dei dati per le lingue classificate come A+ e A-, indicano le lingue che sono ancora trasmesse ai bambini, mentre quelle per le lingue B e a seguire sono quelle che è improbabile riescano a sopravvivere al secolo.

Categoria di Krauss	Numero sommato	Adelaar (2006) (%)	Moore (2006) (%)
A ⁺	261	66.4	70.7
A-	17	4.3	
B	2	0.5	29.1
C	14	3.5	
D	79	20.1	
E	20	5.0	

In generale, più il caso è disperato, maggiore sarà l'incertezza dei dati. Gli scenari più urgenti sono ugualmente inclini a formulare stime inaccurate e necrologi prematuri che trascurano gli ultimi parlanti sconosciuti. Ciò significa che, spesso, iniziare una documentazione accurata risulta più utile (dato che può portare alla scoperta di ulteriori parlanti), piuttosto che investire eccessivamente in indagini ad ampio raggio, le quali possono fornire risultati non affidabili.

L'entità dell'attività di documentare così tante lingue è enorme, sia che si tratti della percentuale del 50% che quella del 90%; per ogni lingua in cui la possibilità di poter intervenire sparirà entro alcuni mesi, ne corrispondono molte altre per le quali si hanno ancora decenni per poter intervenire. Se paragonata alla rapida estinzione di alcune specie naturali dalla breve aspettativa di vita (come il rospo dorato, che si trova nelle foreste nebulose in Costa Rica, estinto in appena pochi anni per via del cambiamento climatico), la morte linguistica fornisce potenzialmente una generazione o due per intervenire, ammesso che si possano mettere a disposizione le risorse adeguate. [...]

Una lingua è per sempre

[...]

Nella maggior parte dei casi, le comunità linguistiche sono ansiose di documentare le proprie lingue per i posteri. I parlanti individuali si concentrano principalmente sui loro discendenti (i loro nipoti o pronipoti). Tuttavia, desiderano anche condividere la propria cultura (spesso disprezzata o sminuita dagli altri) con il resto del mondo. [...]

Stanno sorgendo sempre di più i problemi che derivano dal confinamento della ricerca linguistica condotta da linguisti esterni con formazione accademica. Ciò è parte del movimento catturato dal motto che riporta "niente su di noi, senza di noi", ovvero decolonizzare la ricerca in modo che rifletta quello che i singoli gruppi vogliono scoprire e il modo in cui vogliono condurla, al posto di riflettere quello che i membri di altre culture colonizzanti vogliono scoprire su di loro. La documentazione linguistica di successo, infatti, si basa sul lavoro di diversi tipi di persone e sugli scambi reciproci tra di esse, e ottiene migliori risultati quando sfrutta i diversi talenti e le ragioni che ognuno porta con sé all'interno dell'investigazione, compresi i punti di vista complementari sia dei membri interni che degli osservatori esterni. Una delle principali soddisfazioni del lavoro sul campo in ambito linguistico, per entrambi le parti, è che stabilisce un legame sofisticato, in evoluzione e duraturo tra persone appartenenti a mondi diversi, unite dall'interesse condiviso nei confronti della lingua che uno parla e che l'altro desidera imparare e comprendere.

[...]

Talvolta, la conoscenza è arricchita dai membri interni, i quali si rivelano essere formidabili linguisti naturali, guadagnandosi grande rispetto all'interno della loro piccola comunità grazie al sapere tradizionale, pur non possedendo l'istruzione formale e non sapendo né leggere e né scrivere. In effetti, si pensa che si tratti di un interesse naturale e un certo talento per la lingua,

che permettono ad un sottoinsieme di individui appartenenti all'ultima generazione di parlanti di acquisire la loro lingua ancestrale nell'avversa circostanza dell'obsolescenza linguistica.

Un esempio convincente di come un eccezionale membro interno avente istruzione formale limitata possa contribuire direttamente alla documentazione del sapere indigeno (in questo caso al confine tra la linguistica e l'etnobiologia) è quello di Saem Majnep, un parlante della lingua kalam, nella valle superiore Kaironk della provincia di Madang, in Papua Nuova Guinea. Majnep iniziò come assistente di campo dell'antropologo Ralph Bulmer, che notò la sua eccezionale conoscenza delle foreste. Bulmer era impegnato (utilizzando la terminologia dei suoi tempi) nella:

necessità, nei rapporti etnografici, di collaborazioni bilaterali nelle quali l'informatore abbia lo stesso status dell'antropologo. Egli intendeva non solo il riconoscimento in quanto collaboratori, ma principalmente un genere di rapporto etnografico nel quale il membro interno sia autorizzato a parlare per se stesso, senza che le sue parole vengano filtrate attraverso il prisma dell'interpretazione dell'antropologo e riformulate attraverso i modi occidentali.

Per renderlo possibile, gli serviva un'ortografia kalam, e pertanto reclutò il linguista maori Bruce Biggs e il suo studente Andrew Pawley, (oggi linguista e professore emerito presso l'Università Nazionale Australiana). Majnep, sebbene avesse frequentato la scuola primaria solo fino al secondo anno, imparò a scrivere in kalam in quest'ortografia, realizzando un compendio di saggi etnobiologici: attraverso un registratore a cassette, si registrava parlando in kalam e in tok pisin e dopodiché trascriveva le cassette in una serie di quaderni. Bulmer lo aveva aiutato ad assemblare questi materiali tematicamente, e lavorò ad una traduzione in inglese, aiutato da un dizionario in lingua kalam che Pawley, Majnep ed altri avevano sviluppato nel corso dei decenni. Questo materiale fu utilizzato per creare due immensi trattati sul sapere biologico della tradizione kalam, uno sugli uccelli e uno sui mammiferi, mentre un terzo sui vegetali è ancora in attesa di pubblicazione. Un esempio della profondità del sapere di Majnep è la sua tesi *Uccelli della nostra Kalam*, riguardo un uccello dotato di piume velenose (cosa che la scienza occidentale dell'epoca credeva impossibile). Il nome kalam per questa specie è *wobob* (pronunciato *wompwomp*) e Majnep scrisse al riguardo: "alcuni uomini dicono che la pelle sia amara e che faccia arricciare la bocca". Anni dopo, il biologo occidentale Jack Dumbacher seguì questa pista e riportò le sue proprietà tossiche nelle pagine della rivista *Science*. È significativo il fatto che Majnep non appaia come coautore in quella pubblicazione, mentre oggi esiste un forte impulso nel riconoscere i contributi di tali detentori di sapere indigeno, attraverso l'appropriato riconoscimento dei diritti di collaborazione.

[...]

Dunque, lavorare con un ampio gruppo di parlanti dà l'opportunità di ottenere un profilo della lingua più ricco e vario e costruisce un senso di iniziativa condivisa all'interno della comunità. Inoltre, coinvolge anche i parlanti più giovani che potrebbero altresì essere esclusi dal processo, partendo dalle trascrizioni e le traduzioni, fino ad ottenere ruoli importanti nel processo di documentazione. (Riquadro 10.4)

Tuttavia, si tratta solo dell'inizio. Una delle sfide attuali più grandi che la linguistica deve affrontare è capire come poter sfruttare al meglio e sviluppare le competenze e conoscenze complete dei "linguisti naturali". [...]

Inoltre, i parlanti madrelingua sono spesso più in sintonia con la variabilità all'interno della comunità linguistica, mentre i membri esterni hanno la tendenza a costruire modelli più essenziali. Un esempio elegante di quanta "consistenza dinamica" possa essere aggiunta alla ricerca attraverso l'orecchio di un linguista madrelingua, è fornito dall'analisi della linguista chatina Emiliana Cruz insieme al ricercatore Tony Woodbury, sui toni del chatino, una lingua indigena del territorio messicano. Il chatino ha un sistema tonale particolarmente complesso, alcuni dei suoi dialetti raggiungono fino ai 14 toni differenti. Il fatto di essere nativa non solo

facilità Cruz a riconoscere i vari contrasti, ma anche a reclutare ulteriori ricercatori dalla comunità, e a percepire le differenze dei sistemi tonali degli altri dialetti:

Sottolineiamo, inoltre, il ruolo perpetuo (nella ricerca sul sistema tonale) dell'insegnamento e della formazione dei parlanti in contesti locali. È stato possibile... grazie agli elevati livelli di interesse e apprezzamento della lingua nelle comunità chatine, e alla convinzione che la scrittura sia un modo per far guadagnare rispetto alla lingua... La ricerca può essere più esatta quando i parlanti, attraverso gli studi linguistici e imparando a scrivere, diventano più consapevoli in maniera critica dei sistemi tonali delle loro lingue.

(Cruz e Woodbury 2014: 521 [translation])

Riquadro 10.4 Affinché le parole approdino in sicurezza

Il programma di documentazione della lingua *kuikuro*, parlata a nord della regione dello Xingu, un fiume in Brasile, condotto da Bruna Franchetto (con il supporto del programma DoBeS della fondazione Volkswagen), mostra quanto i membri della comunità possano partecipare nella documentazione della loro stessa lingua. Nonostante la loro posizione remota possa sembrare geograficamente distante dalle istituzioni di istruzione formale, i *kuikuro* hanno un profondo interesse radicato per i meccanismi della loro lingua. Ciò può essere sintetizzato dalla metafora che utilizzano per le particelle grammaticali e i deittici che ancorano i significati ai contesti: *tisakisü enkgutoho*, che si traduce, più o meno, “creati affinché le nostre parole approdino in sicurezza”.

Dopo aver ottenuto l'approvazione dei capi delle tribù per realizzare la loro stessa documentazione e dopo aver superato la riluttanza di alcuni membri della comunità all'idea che membri interni potessero svolgere il ruolo di documentatori della lingua, molti giovani *kuikuro* si sono imbarcati all'interno di un programma esauriente di registrazioni della loro lingua in un'ampia gamma di contesti. Uno di loro, Mutua, recentemente, ha presentato la sua tesi universitaria riguardo la complessità delle categorie semantiche in *kuikuro*, attraverso l'innovativo programma presso l'università indigena di Mato Grosso (UNEMAT), la quale rappresenta la prova della capacità di alcuni membri interni di sfruttare le proprie conoscenze tradizionali all'interno del sistema di istruzione formale occidentale, nonostante il loro contesto educativo non convenzionale.

I benefici per la comunità linguistica in sé sono ugualmente positivi. La formazione avanzata dei membri della comunità crea nuove possibilità per comprendere e modellare l'impatto del mondo esterno. A livello della giustizia socioeconomica, l'istruzione formale dei linguisti madrelingua dà loro le capacità e il meritato riconoscimento dei loro talenti. Inoltre, crea una dinamica di ricerca più interessante e interattiva all'interno della comunità accademica globale. [...]

Nonostante l'obiettivo sia chiaro e desiderato, la sfida di ottenere linguisti madrelingua formati è ancora abbastanza lontana poiché vi sono molti ostacoli. Le università in molte parti del mondo sono conservative nei loro requisiti di ammissione e sono, di solito, inconsapevoli dei vantaggi che il sapere preesistente alla lingua può apportare ai parlanti nativi interessati all'analisi linguistica. La maggior parte delle istituzioni sono propense ad ammettere ai dottorati di ricerca candidati che abbiano una formazione in linguistica ma senza alcuna conoscenza della lingua che studieranno. Raramente hanno esteso il contrario riconoscimento a coloro che posseggono una conoscenza profonda della loro lingua, ma senza alcuna formazione in linguistica.

I linguisti madrelingua, oltre all'iniziale mancanza di istruzione accademica ufficiale, potrebbero dover adempiere alle richieste speciali delle loro comunità, come l'impegno a partecipare alle cerimonie e ai funerali, le cui tempistiche sono imprevedibili e potrebbero sovrapporsi alle scadenze accademiche cruciali. [...] Inoltre, potrebbe accadere, paradossalmente, che le comunità possano essere meno ricettive nei confronti del lavoro linguistico svolto dai membri interni, rispetto a quello svolto dagli esterni [...].

Nonostante questi problemi, sono stati creati notevoli programmi di formazione per i linguisti madrelingua. Uno dei più esemplari è OKMA (*Oxlajuuj Keej Maya' Ajtz'iib'*, "organizzazione della lingua guatemalteca maya") in Guatemala, fondato sulla base della ricerca linguistica e da un gruppo di formazione dedicato alla linguistica maya. È stato formato alla fine degli anni Ottanta per aiutare a ristabilire l'identità maya a seguito della sua distruzione dovuta alla guerra civile guatemalteca, insieme ad altre istituzioni basate sulla lingua maya, come l'Accademia delle Lingue Maya. I parlanti di questa lingua chiesero alla linguista statunitense Nora England di formarli in modo da poter condurre la loro stessa ricerca linguistica. [...]

La struttura del programma OKMA è interessante. A partire dal reclutamento iniziale di un numero maggiore di giovani e aspiranti linguisti, vennero selezionati due apprendisti per ogni lingua per un periodo di formazione di due anni. Da lì in poi, le seguenti "generazioni" vennero accolte per essere formate ogni paio di anni a seconda di una combinazione di generazioni precedenti, di England stessa (su una base meno intensa) e di altri linguisti di passaggio. Molti diplomati appartenenti a questo programma hanno proseguito con studi linguistici più convenzionali.

Ci si potrebbe chiedere se i ruoli dei membri interni differiscono da quelli dei membri esterni nel contesto linguistico da un punto di vista scientifico. Felix Ameka, linguista e professore presso l'Università di Leida, nei Paesi Bassi, ha scritto un'attenta valutazione sulla storia delle descrizioni grammaticali della sua madrelingua, la lingua ghanese ewe. All'interno di questa, egli valuta i vari contributi sia dei parlanti nativi che dei linguisti esterni nel secolo a partire dall'apparizione della prima grammatica della lingua ewe nel 1907, scritta dal missionario e linguista tedesco Diedrich Westermann. Ameka è nella posizione giusta per rispondere a questa domanda, dato che ha lavorato sia in quanto membro interno della sua madrelingua che in quanto esterno della lingua likpe, un'altra lingua delle montagne a confine tra il Ghana e il Togo. Inoltre, egli ha formato sia membri interni che esterni per lavorare sull'ewe e su altre lingue dell'Africa occidentale. Ha concluso che ogni prospettiva è in sé sia vitale che inadeguata, citando la defunta Mary Haas, che aveva lavorato su molte lingue native americane: "Otteniamo discernimento dall'esterno guardando all'interno, così come dall'interno guardando all'esterno". Un altro parere sullo stesso tema è offerto dal gruppo che coinvolge ricercatori sia *arrarrkbi* "aborigeni" che *balanda* "europei/bianchi" nello studio delle canzoni che permettono di mantenere vive le tradizioni e le lingue nell'Arnhem Land nordoccidentale: così come la cultura tradizionale di questo territorio ha coltivato una consistenza tale da risultare "diversa ma insieme" (grazie al contributo di ogni gruppo alla propria lingua e ai generi musicali per ottenere un insieme sociale più ampio), anche i nuovi tipi di discernimento possono svilupparsi a partire dalla ricerca collaborativa interculturale.

Ciò conduce ad un'ulteriore sfida: quella di formare gli "esterni" come linguisti sul campo. In un certo senso, questo è un problema che la linguistica si pone da molto tempo, a partire dal periodo d'oro dei linguisti Boas e Sapir. Stranamente, però, nell'ultimo periodo sono state riportate cifre importanti nei paesi accademici più influenti che hanno denigrato o ignorato il ruolo della ricerca descrittiva, in favore dell'attività "teoretica" all'interno di paradigmi formali come la grammatica generativa, che è presumibilmente più nobile e più ardua scientificamente. A seguito dell'ascesa al potere della linguistica generativa chomskiana negli anni Sessanta, il fulcro dell'attenzione nell'America del Nord (e in molti altri paesi che hanno seguito la sua tendenza accademica) si concentrò sui modelli teorici basati su frammenti di lingue ben note,

piuttosto che sul nuovo lavoro empirico. In effetti, nella maggior parte delle università negli Stati Uniti non è permesso presentare né una grammatica referenziale né una lingua poco descrittiva come temi di discussione per il dottorato, nonostante si tratti di alcuni dei lavori più impegnativi per un linguista. Ciò ha portato ad un'esplosione di lavori sull'inglese e su un'altra dozzina di lingue note, e la corrispondente negligenza delle altre 7000 (e più) lingue del mondo.

Lo studio di ricerca per il dottorato è forse il momento ideale nella vita di un giovane studente per intraprendere il lavoro sul campo, avendo la libertà di passare lunghi periodi in località remote e l'opportunità di concentrarsi esclusivamente per diversi anni sull'attività di comprensione dei meccanismi della lingua. Eppure, la ricerca talentuosa e impegnata dell'essere umano offerta dai dottorandi è sprecata da quello stesso ambito che dovrebbe avere il più grande interesse nel tracciare la diversità linguistica globale.

[...]

Tuttavia, l'ambito linguistico ha ancora bisogno di un importante cambio di rotta per quanto riguarda le priorità professionali, l'espansione della formazione sul campo e il degno riconoscimento del valore e del tempo richiesti per il lavoro descrittivo. Solo allora si potrà ordinare il numero di linguisti formati che è necessario per documentare la fragile eredità linguistica nei prossimi decenni. Come scrisse nel 1935 l'amministratore coloniale britannico, il Colonnello Lorimer, nella prefazione della sua grammatica burushaski, l'enigmatica lingua isolata nel nord del Pakistan:

Quanto sia possibile intervenire sarà ancora una volta deciso dal fattore del tempo: il raccolto è maturo, ma i lavoratori sono pochi.

Estrarre per poi trascrivere

I discendenti e i parlanti non imparano la lingua per poter ordinare un pasto al ristorante o chiedere indicazioni per la stazione ferroviaria. Loro vogliono sapere cosa rende speciale la loro eredità.

(Marianne Mithun [translation])

Nonostante la sua utilità, la cosiddetta trilogia boasiana (da Franz Boas, pioniere dell'antropologia moderna), la quale presenta un ricco ritratto della lingua racchiuso in tre volumi reciprocamente illuminanti (grammatica, testi e dizionario), non è in grado di rispondere a tutte le domande che formuleranno i futuri linguisti e i membri della comunità.

In primo luogo, malgrado gli sforzi del linguista al fine di creare una descrizione grammaticale completa e di rappresentare i meccanismi del linguaggio in modo che possa rendere giustizia al suo stesso ingegno, vi saranno sempre dei fenomeni ignorati o che non sono stati compresi. Come scrisse Andrew Pawley: "non si dovrebbe presumere che una lingua abbia solo le caratteristiche della sua descrizione linguistica". Le collezioni di testi e il ricco insieme di frasi campione distillate nelle entrate dei dizionari sono un utile serbatoio di materiale la cui importanza è spesso sminuita dal grammatico e all'interno delle quali i successivi ricercatori potrebbero trovare percorsi inesplorati.

L'idea di creare un compendio di testi informati, essenziali ed etnografici risale a molto tempo fa. Questa era, infatti, alla base della creazione dell'epocale compendio azteco-spagnolo *Storia generale delle cose della Nuova Spagna*, meglio conosciuto come *Codice fiorentino* scritto dal frate Bernardino de Sahagún, che i linguisti continuano a citare in ogni collezione di testi. Sebbene tali collezioni possano essere ricche ed estese, non sono in grado di catturare ogni aspetto degli usi della lingua, dato che la maggior parte favoriscono quelli formali e letterari, a discapito di quelli informali e gergali. Questi compendi filtrano le esitazioni e gli errori delle tradizioni orali che hanno un ruolo cruciale nel segnalare i possibili cambiamenti nella lingua. Inoltre, possono risultare antipedagogici riguardo a come i parlanti parlano tra loro in situazioni colloquiali.

A partire dalla metà degli anni Novanta un grande numero di linguisti (in particolar modo Nikolaus Himmelmann) discussero riguardo la necessità di una nuova sottocategoria della linguistica, ovvero la “linguistica documentaria”, indipendente dalle tradizionali occupazioni della linguistica descrittiva. Questa sottocategoria prevede la compilazione e preservazione dei dati linguistici principali e ha come obiettivo la garanzia della testimonianza duratura e polivalente di una lingua:

La rete dovrebbe essere gettata quanto più lontano possibile. Ciò significa che la documentazione di una lingua deve sforzarsi di includere quante più testimonianze possibili... Idealmente, la documentazione di una lingua dovrebbe includere tutti i registri e le varietà, sociali e locali; dovrebbe contenere le testimonianze della lingua in quanto pratica sociale così come in quanto facoltà cognitiva; dovrebbe includere campioni di linguaggio parlato e scritto e così via.

Essenzialmente, questo approccio riguarda l'elaborazione di un insieme di procedure che hanno due obiettivi: il primo, assicurarsi che i linguisti siano scrupolosi nella raccolta dei dati resi disponibili agli altri ricercatori; il secondo, (il più difficile) assicurare che tutti i fenomeni di una lingua siano inclusi in modo corretto nelle testimonianze che vengono raccolte. Ciò rappresenta l'unico metodo affinché i linguisti documentatori riescano in quello che voleva il filosofo Wittgenstein, ovvero di “arare l'intera lingua”.

Il paradosso che deve affrontare la linguistica documentaria è come prevedere le future domande non ancora poste.

[...]

Ogni lingua possiede certe densità strutturali che richiedono una ricerca mirata e la cui logica potrebbe non essere evidente in un corpus naturalistico, dato che anche un corpus ampio può contenere ogni sorta di buchi. Ma dove il linguista debba applicare queste tecniche di inquisizione sistematica dipende dall'ingegno della lingua.

In una lingua, è importante analizzare tutte le dimensioni di un paradigma verbale o nominale per assicurarsi che tutte le sezioni logiche vengano documentate, dato che i paradigmi hanno la tendenza ad essere il nido delle irregolarità, nel quale ogni combinazione necessita di un controllo individuale. Non è possibile aspettare che tali combinazioni si rivelino da sole, dato che si tratta di un processo che potrebbe impiegare molto tempo. Si prendano in considerazione i verbi nella lingua papuana nen come esempio, la quale ha più di 3500 forme flesse a causa alla sua prolifica combinazione dei soggetti (singolare, duale e plurale), oggetti (singolare, duale, plurale e plurale maggiore, ottenuto unendo affissi singolari o duali), circa una dozzina di combinazioni di tempi/aspetti/modi e una categoria iterativa (in molti tempi o luoghi). [...]

Inoltre, per essere davvero utile, un corpus deve contenere le discussioni dei vari modi nei quali ogni frase al loro interno può essere interpretata a seconda dei vari contesti (un meta-corpus con commenti semantici). Ancora una volta, ciò può essere ottenuto attraverso la ricerca degli intrighi strutturali all'interno del testo originale.

La migliore garanzia per il futuro utilizzo di un corpus di ricerca è dunque un complesso ibrido di dati naturali ricavati. Nella pratica, i linguisti procedono meglio all'interno di un'infinita spirale di testi, grammatiche e dizionari, facendo progressi in ognuno, solo una volta compresi gli altri. Per quelle parti della lingua all'interno delle quali il linguista intravede i contorni di una struttura ben organizzata, una descrizione rigorosa e la sua analisi fanno sì che tutte le combinazioni rilevanti vengano indagate e registrate. Come riportato in un resoconto su quello che rende adeguato una documentazione “l'analisi è, di per sé, cruciale per valutare l'idoneità di un corpus di ricerca”.

Una delle qualità chiave per un buon linguista sul campo è la capacità di individuare i nodi e concentrarsi su questi per effettuare investigazioni più intensive e strutturate. Per altre parti del linguaggio un approccio più libero, che possa enfatizzare la raccolta di campioni equilibrata, è la migliore garanzia contro le domande non poste.

Due ingredienti finali si uniscono nel creare una documentazione robusta e ampia. Innanzitutto, più è ampio il raggio della curiosità del linguista (ed è chiaro quanto si possa estendere il fenomeno della lingua con domande che toccano molte aree del sapere) più saprà capire su cosa indagare ulteriormente. Il grande lessicografo James Murray, inventore e fondatore del dizionario inglese *Oxford English Dictionary*, accreditò il proprio successo al suo interesse onnivoro riguardo ogni plausibile tematica di discussione dell'essere umano.

Ciò conduce naturalmente al secondo ingrediente cruciale. Più è diverso il gruppo di ricercatori, i quali lavorano su una certa lingua (interni e esterni, linguisti con diversi sbocchi di interesse, altri ricercatori che variano dall'etnobiologia alla musicologia agli specialisti in materiale culturale), più quesiti sorgeranno: come affermato da Maggie Tukumba "estrarranno" dalle menti dei parlanti all'interno del dialogo e "saranno messi nero su bianco" in forme persistenti per il bene delle future generazioni:

Nunh kenbo, kardu marruh-kâno nga-yawoh-dulu-burhkeyhwoyan nga-yawoh-yungiyen bebakah... Nunh kenbo ngahlng-burhkeyhwoyan rerrikah, duludjerrnguno, kanhkuno ngah-yungiyen kanunh bebakah. Kenbo yilah-dulu-burhkeyhwoyan, mak kaduluwanjingh, bah kadjahlng-ngongno kanh duluno, kanh drebuy njelng yilaye-yenjdjung.

"Da questo momento in poi, estrarrò una storia o una parola, la metterò nero su bianco nel libro... E altre cose che estrarrò in seguito, nuove parole, le metterò per iscritto sulla carta. Dopodiché estrarremo il significato delle cose, non solo un'idea ma anche tutti i possibili significati, includendo il sottinteso di ciò che diciamo."

Dalle tavolette d'argilla ai dischi rigidi

I linguisti di oggi hanno accesso alla documentazione stampata e manoscritta che è di centinaia (a volte migliaia) di anni fa.

Tuttavia, molta della documentazione linguistica digitale e la sua descrizione diventa inaccessibile a partire da un decennio dalla sua creazione...

Abbiamo deciso di utilizzare tecnologie moribonde e creare dati in pericolo nella stessa generazione in cui la percentuale di morte linguistica è al suo massimo.

(Steven Bird e Gary Simons [translation])

Non serve a nulla registrare materiale linguistico e culturale in maniera dettagliata, se le registrazioni stesse non sono conservate e archiviate a dovere, dato che altrimenti potrebbero cadere nell'oblio come i parlanti che contengono.

L'entusiasmante diffusione di ogni nuovo avanzamento tecnologico può lasciare registrazioni orfane all'interno di mezzi abbandonati e inaccessibili. Una sfida centrale per gli archivi linguistici è quella di assicurare che i materiali in pericolo non facciano la stessa fine delle lingue che registrano. Ciò spesso richiede complesse procedure di conversione tecnica per assimilare i materiali in formato digitale, e anche un piccolo museo di supporti di registrazione sonora come i cilindri fonografici, registratori a filo e gli antichi registratori a bobina aperta.

Persino i supporti sono deteriorabili. Le audiocassette si possono smagnetizzare ed è improbabile che possano essere usate dopo il 2025. I dischi rigidi si possono rompere, libri e manoscritti possono bruciare o ammuffire. Per ovviare a questo problema, sono stati creati diversi archivi digitali, come PARADISEC in Australia, AILLA negli Stati Uniti, l'archivio ELAR a Londra, LACITO in Francia, l'archivio linguistico (TLA) presso l'istituto di psicolinguistica Max Planck nei Paesi Bassi.

Un esempio mondano ma tipico è la collezione di 11 cassette giunta a PARADISEC dalla Nuova Caledonia alcuni anni fa. Erano state registrate da Leonard Drilë Sam nella sua stessa lingua, drehu, proveniente dalle Isole della Lealtà e conservate per 20 anni in casa sua. Egli non poteva ascoltarle poiché non possedeva un registratore a bobina aperta e, inoltre, le cassette

stesse erano ricoperte da muffa bianca. Prima che potessero essere convertite in un formato digitale più duraturo, fu necessario pulirle, ponendole all'interno di un forno ventilato a bassa temperatura per alcune settimane per togliere la muffa.

Tuttavia, anche dopo aver ultimato la conversione, gli archivi non sono al sicuro. Le registrazioni elettroniche possono diventare incomprensibili se vengono cambiati i caratteri brevettati e il formato dati (accessibili solo se contenuti in un archivio che garantisce la migrazione automatica del loro formato con la corretta conservazione di tutti i caratteri).

A tal fine, le tavolette d'argilla sumere restano insuperabili per la loro stabilità archivistica e la loro interpretazione a lungo termine. Oggi, iniziative come il Progetto Rosetta (progetto di collaborazione tra linguisti per realizzare una stele di Rosetta moderna, archiviando 1000 delle 7000 lingue del mondo) stanno cercando di rendere permanenti le registrazioni fisiche disponibili nella corsa di materiali micro-incisi che possano, ingegnosamente, essere accessibili ai discendenti che verranno o ai visitatori extraterrestri, anche se dovessero avvenire disastri naturali sulla Terra che spazzino via l'intera e complessa infrastruttura che contiene le registrazioni digitali. Si è parlato anche di un altro approccio, seguendo le linee guida dello Svalbard Global Seed Vault (un bunker atto alla conservazione di semi di specie provenienti da tutto il mondo), ovvero di riconvertire i dati digitali in microfiche per piantarle nelle profondità dell'Arctic World Archive (una banca dati che ha il fine di conservare i dati globali per almeno 500 anni), scavata all'interno di una montagna nell'arcipelago demilitarizzato delle Svalbard, in Norvegia.

La probabilità che le registrazioni o gli appunti sul campo possano essere dimenticati nel bagagliaio di un accademico ormai defunto o gettati via in quanto considerati spazzatura da persone che non ne riconoscono il valore, è tanto problematica quanto la degenerazione fisica. Vi è una grande tentazione di tenere stretto a sé il proprio materiale sul campo fino a che non si è analizzato completamente, per risparmiarsi l'imbarazzo di presentarsi con trascrizioni mediocri o di lasciarsi sfuggire analisi grammaticali che risultano ovvie ad altri specialisti. Tuttavia, la morte o l'Alzheimer arrivano sempre prima che la perfezione analitica possa essere raggiunta. Anche laddove il materiale fosse messo in sicurezza da un esecutore o qualcun altro, i metadati fondamentali (riguardo chi parla, quando, dove e riguardo cosa) potrebbero mancare dalla registrazione, rendendola inutile.

Dunque, anche le registrazioni delle lingue possono diventare fragili. Vi è una consapevolezza sempre maggiore riguardo questi problemi e l'inizio di un consenso generale su come garantire l'archivio di materiale a lungo termine. Per quanto riguarda il deposito, ciò implica l'uso di programmi applicativi *open source* (software creato e distribuito da più team e sviluppatori in modo che possano essere liberi di modificarlo e ampliarlo con nuove caratteristiche o correzioni per il suo continuo sviluppo e aggiornamento) per evitare di rinchiudere i dati in formati brevettati, ovvero un impegno ad archiviare i materiali con i metadati completi, in modo da renderli disponibili alla comunità linguistica e agli altri accademici. Per quanto riguarda gli archivi, invece, ciò richiede sistemi appropriati per assicurare che alcuni materiali possano rimanere limitati seguendo le richieste della comunità, ovvero un impegno per l'immagazzinamento di un enorme numero di dati, migrazione del formato permanente e il riflesso dei dati attraverso diverse "cybraries" (o "librerie digitali", piattaforme online dedite alla sicurezza informatica), per evitare la potenziale vulnerabilità della loro localizzazione.

Tra gli accademici e le istituzioni vi è ancora bisogno di un cambio di responsabilità, a partire dai ricercatori e dalle università che misurano tipicamente il tempo in decenni, fino alle istituzioni più riconosciute riguardo la conservazione a lungo termine: musei e biblioteche. Queste possiedono la prospettiva sul come e sul tempo, ma in molti casi non danno ancora il giusto valore ai dati digitali ricavati dalle culture orali, a differenza di libri e oggetti. Gli esempi riportati in questo libro dimostrano quanto questo tipo di comportamento possa essere errato.

4. Translation Commentary

4.1.1 Text type and genre analysis

The object of this investigation - the book *Words of Wonder: Endangered Languages and What They Tell Us* - is a textbook written by the Australian professor Nicholas Evans.

The textbook is a type of written text that has some particular characteristics. First of all, it is written: the channel from which it is conveyed is fundamental to both the creating and translating processes. The written mode involves careful planning which is the second most important feature of this text type, since the content of this text is the result of the author's choices and his own voice. A textbook is also revised and edited. In fact, *Words of Wonder* is the second edition of a previous book (formerly called *Dying Words: Endangered Languages and What They Have to Tell Us*), and it includes a new chapter about language revitalisation: the author believed that the former version needed a whole new chapter to provide the reader with the knowledge to help and preserve endangered languages all around the world.

The addressor of this text is Nicholas Evans, a Distinguished Professor of the department of Linguistics at the Australian National University. Evans has a deep knowledge of his country and of the other Oceanian territories' heritage and history, and he wants to raise awareness about them as much as he can. He believes that the real patrimony of these regions relies on its linguistic and cultural variety. During his numerous research on the field, he got to meet a lot of different people: not only professionals from the linguistic field but also autochthonous people that helped him on many different levels, teaching him their languages and allowing him to gather information about their heritage. He is the head of different research projects based on the wellsprings of linguistic diversity and he also advocates for a new approach to language studies that places diversity and variation at the very core. His research is often built on fieldwork, which is crucial: it is his own way to prove his point and to provide the reader with all the information and data that he has come across during his work. Since his own experiences are fundamental to the objectives of his research, they play a pivotal role in the linguistic choices Evans made throughout the text. Therefore, the author's presence is apparent and identifiable in this register but most importantly, he relies on his anecdotes since he uses his own fieldwork to draw conclusions on more general topics.

Apart from the addressor, another fundamental figure for textual analysis is the addressee: the author has an intended audience in his mind, and this influences the way he writes. Thanks to his straightforward and simple writing, it is clear that Evans writes for a wide range of people, but due to the specificity of the topic, it can be narrowed down to undergraduate, graduate students, and fellow colleagues who are interested in language endangerment and preservation. Therefore, there is a certain amount of shared background knowledge between the addressor and the addressee which is fundamental for the comprehension of the more general pieces of information provided in the text: this allows Evans to imply already-known topics, taking them as given, in order to focus more on his own conclusions. On the other hand, the specialisation of the text provides new and detailed knowledge, fulfilling the informative goal that the author wants to achieve.

The whole book is a great example of what is known as scientific didactic text. In this type of publications, researchers or research teams can share their discoveries and activities within their scientific community, together with their methodologies and new advancements in the field. Evans provided his own experience on the field, but since his purpose is to be as informative and referential as possible, he also added detailed explanations and previously conducted research by other linguists. The register is generally formal, but his own voice is quite present throughout the work, especially when he tells his anecdotes. As a matter of fact, the author uses storytelling techniques, drawing on the oral traditions he learned. In oral cultures, the elder members of a tribe usually tell the children stories and parables to help them understand their traditions and to guide them throughout their lives. Aboriginal cultures have a lot of crucial knowledge of their own language and their surroundings that they pass on generation by generation. Nevertheless, if these languages are bound to disappear, the knowledge they carry will be at risk too. Evans wants to show how academic formation and priceless indigenous knowledge must blend to provide the right means to conduct a proper linguistic study and preserve endangered languages. This explains the presence of anecdotes throughout his work, followed by formal context and scientific explanations. His style of writing is descriptive and redundant for the benefit of cohesion and for his didactic purposes, but it is also persuasive to convey his message.

According to Jakobson's communicative functions (1960, p.470), the main communicative function of this text is the referential one, since Evans uses a descriptive type of language to provide information for his didactic purposes. On the other hand, other important functions are the conative one, used to be persuasive - urging the reader to take on the responsibility of the linguistic task - and the metalinguistic one: Evans uses language to comment on the language

itself. In this type of text, the author uses a type of language that respects the main features of the English scientific and specialised discourse. The whole text is made up of long and complex sentences, with a prevalence of subordinating conjunctions over coordinating ones. The main verb tenses are present simple and past simple, although it is observed that conditional clauses and future simple are frequent too. This is to underline the nature of his methodology, based on observation and experimentation on the field: he often formulates hypothesis and makes assumptions about the future development of these studies. There is also a great number of repetitions that helped the author create cohesion and a pervasive type of language, especially regarding the specialised and technical terminology. Specialised language is, in fact, the most important feature of the text: it characterises it and it provides the reader with a detailed vocabulary from the linguistic field, especially for what concerns the endangerment of small languages, but also from other fields such as the digital world (and its advanced methods of archiving language documentation). Its style is clear, although the point of view is not completely impersonal, due to the frequent use of the first-person pronoun to recount the author's experiences. Nonetheless, this is essential to his didactic purpose, because it allows him to draw more general conclusions.

In these translations, there were some changes to be made in order to adhere to the original purposes of the source texts and also to create target texts that can be fully integrated in the Italian scientific literature. In fact, the Italian didactic genre is usually more formal than the English one, with a prevalence of passive voice and third-person pronouns. It is characterised by long and complex sentences, and it is common to use all the verb tenses. Repetitions are a resourceful cohesive device, but it is important to avoid too much redundancy, which is not natural in Italian. Once again, the main feature of the didactic genre is the highly specialised language and terminology, and it was necessary to find the right equivalents in the Italian linguistic field to allow the target readers to understand and to access to its contents.

4.1.2 Macrostrategies

During the translation process, it is necessary to decide the most suitable macrostrategy for the translation itself. In the field of Translation studies, many theorists produced a lot of different translating orientations that could help understand the translator's choices and changes. During the 60s, one of the most important theories that influenced these studies was Sapir (1929, pp. 207-214) and Whorf's hypothesis (1956, pp. 207-219) about linguistic and cultural relativity:

language has a strong impact on the way speakers perceive and understand their own reality. Therefore, on the one hand, thought is created by the language, but on the other, language is shaped according to the needs of the individuals in their communities. This is why cultural elements are crucial to build the meaning behind things and language. One of the most important translation theorists was Eugene Nida, who worked in the Bible field. According to him (1982), the goal of the translator should be to find out the deep or real meaning of the source text and to convey it to the target readers, soliciting the same reaction as the source readers'. Nida makes a distinction between two types of equivalence regarding translation orientation: the formal equivalence and the functional equivalence. The formal equivalence focuses more on the lexical, grammatical and structural form of a source text, resulting in a literal translation; while the functional equivalence focuses more on the function and purpose of the given text, and the reaction that is expected from the source readers¹³. Following Nida's insightful approach to translation orientation, the American translation theorist Lawrence Venuti came up with the terms 'domestication' and 'foreignization': the first one is a strategy that is meant to create a target text that blends easily in the target culture thanks to its transparent structure, filled with cultural references that are comprehensible to the target audience; while the foreignization strategy is used to keep the foreign items of the source text in order to 'send the reader abroad' (Venuti, 1995, p.20).

In this translation, the strategy that was mostly used was domestication. Trying to respect the didactic function of the text, the purpose of this translation was to create a product that could be comprehensible for a wide audience and that could be part of the Italian scientific literature. The source text is made for young Australian undergraduate and graduate students, or other professional linguists that are interested in language endangerment and in the linguistic diversity of their surroundings. However, the Italian audience may not be familiar with certain topics or people that are introduced in these two chapters. It was crucial that the translation could be as fluent as possible in Italian, so it was opted to observe the typical features of the Italian scientific language and genre. This is why some changes and additions were made, in order to provide more information and explanations to the Italian readers and give them the same background knowledge of their Australian peers.

¹³ In *Language, Culture and Translating* (1993, p.118), Nida explains functional equivalence by stating: 'the readers of a translated text should be able to comprehend it to the point that they can conceive of how the original readers of the text must have understood and appreciated it.'

4.2.1 The first chapter

The first chapter, 'Warramurrungunji's Children', represents the real opening of the whole book. From the beginning, the reader dives into the author's personal writing style. As a matter of fact, this chapter starts with storytelling: this strategy is usually used by Evans to help the reader understand what he is inferring, simplifying it in order to make it memorable so that it sticks with the reader. The journey of the mythical character Warramurrungunji, the mother of all the languages in Arnhem Land - whose story is told in the first few lines - is the real guiding principle of the whole chapter. The myth is part of the oral traditions of northwestern Arnhem Land, and it is meant to give an explanation to the great linguistic variety of the territory. This story is, in fact, the support of an extensive delineation of the linguistic history and development in this area through practical examples, given data and already existing studies. Evans intertwines storytelling and oral traditions with academic facts, because he wants to demonstrate that indigenous culture is crucial to the understanding and the recording of disappearing languages.

4.2.2 Textual analysis

The style is clear and cohesive through the use of many lexical cohesive devices such as repetitions (the names of the places are repeated constantly: 'Arnhem Land', 'Croker Island', 'Papua New Guinea'; but also some key words: 'language', 'tradition', 'diversity', 'language diversity', 'knowledge', 'clan', 'agriculture', 'speaker', 'speech community', 'population', 'nation', 'country', 'biology', 'ecology', 'language loss', 'culture' etc., that are used by the author to create cohesion within the text which revolves around the topics of linguistic diversity, language loss, and indigenous culture and their sense of belonging) and synonyms (e.g. tribe/clan, tongue/language, nation/country/territory, idiom/dialect, standard/normal, multilingualism/linguistic diversity etc. - although some of these words have different shades of meaning, they are sometimes used in the text as synonyms of each other), but also some grammatical cohesive devices, such as anaphoric references:

In the oral traditions of northwestern Arnhem Land, the first human to enter the Australian continent was the ancestress Warramurrungunji, who came out of the Arafura Sea on Croker Island near the Cobourg Peninsula, having

travelled from Macassar in Indonesia. Her first job was to sort out the right rituals so that the many children she gave birth to along the way could survive.

(Evans, 2022, p.5)

Or:

A host of examples like these [referring to previous examples] lead out into the vast ethnobiological wings of our Library of Babel. But all such knowledge is at great risk, as long as it is only available in little known languages spoken by just a few hundred people, since a shift to another language can cut off its transmission.

(Ivi. p.20)

Anaphoric references are used to link different parts of the text or different sentences, it is a useful way to achieve cohesion.

The vocabulary of the text is fundamental, since it is the main feature of the scientific didactic genre. Monoreferentiality, the one-to-one reference to something in a given context, is used by the author to avoid ambiguity. In scientific didactic text, this is an important feature because the goal is to provide factual information, and using a precise vocabulary is fundamental to increase this perception (for example, the expression ‘deep-time’ is used in geology to refer to a geological time of billions of years, here it is used to point out the longevity of language variation). Another important lexical feature is conciseness: it is achieved through the use of abbreviations, such as PNG - Papua New Guinea, USA - United States of America, BCE - Before the Common Era, CE - Common Era, HIV - Human immunodeficiency virus; but also Dem. Rep. Congo - Democratic Republic of Congo, Russian Fed. - Russian Federation, Solomons Is. - Solomon Islands etc. These are used by the author to express concepts in the shortest form possible, to occupy less space, or to avoid redundant repetitions. Other languages are a key concept of this whole book, Evans provides the reader with examples and bits of some of the languages he came in contact with during his career. This is why there are many foreignisms (Iwaidja - *kunyarrun yab*, Kun-djeymi - *yihngun djenj*, Russian - *ty esh rybku* Taino/Spanish - *cacique, barbacoa, canoa*, etc.). These other languages are used to include the audience in the linguistic and metalinguistic research conducted by the author. There are also examples of conservatism such as ‘*thou eatest fish*’, an old English version of the modern ‘you eat fish’, which has some similarities with other languages that are really different and far from each other, like Russian. This example is used to demonstrate that the languages spoken in the small territory of Arnhem Land are more different from each other than other languages spoken in very distant parts of the world. Moreover, Latin is used in the idiomatic expression ‘*divide*

et impera' and for the scientific names of some species: *Zostera marina* L., a type of eelgrass that can be found in Mexico; *Morelia oenpelliensis*, a python that is commonly known as Oenpelli; *Homalanthus nutans*, a tree; *Syzygium eucalyptoides*, the common white apple tree in Arnhem Land. Latin is an important feature of scientific language, and it is specifically used in taxonomy. Neologisms are sometimes used in order to increase the specificity of the text and make it unique. For example, Evans uses the term 'clan-lect', a word created through the process of blending between the words 'clan' and 'dialect': the word 'clan' has assimilated the morpheme -lect from the word 'dialect'. This term refers to a specific type of diatopic variation (based on a geographical variation) that is differentiated according to what clan or tribe each speaker belongs to.

Oral traditions are not scientific facts. These are stories that are meant to provide explanations, examples, or warnings, so this type of language is not void of multiple connotations or emotion. In fact, Evans wants to encourage the study and inclusion of indigenous knowledge to better understand and preserve the linguistic diversity of his country. This is why, even though this is a didactic text, it is filled with evaluative language (e.g. 'The naïve explanation...', 'The great Swiss linguist...', 'a more realistic figure in my view...' etc.) and metaphors, especially in the titles of some paragraphs: e.g. 'Warramurrungunji's Children', the 'children' the author refers to are the native people that live in the area of Arnhem Land in which there is a lot of language diversity, but it may also be a metaphor for the world's population, the 'offspring' of a huge number of different languages.

For what concerns the morpho-syntactic plan, the text generally respects the main features of the scientific language, so it is made of complex sentences linked by subordinating conjunctions. It is important to note the presence of premodification (e.g. 'expansionist agricultural-military complexes', 'comparable curative potentials', etc.) to focus the attention and characterise the object, rather than the action. This is a recurrent feature of scientific language because it creates sentence complexity. The use of verb tenses is predominantly past simple and present simple both active and passive to sound more objective and omit the agent of the action. This is a strategy used to give authority to the author's research and findings. On the other hand, Evans also uses the first-person pronouns in some parts:

I recently drove down the dusty road from Wilyi on the coast near Croker Island, to the inland town of Jabiru, while working with speakers of Iwaidja, the language in which Tim Mamitba had told me the Warramurrungunji story.

(Ivi. p.6)

This is useful to highlight Evan's involvement in the field research, recounting his anecdotes and introducing all the people he worked with. At times, he involves the reader in his text, for example:

And marriage patterns, in Arnhem Land, Southern New Guinea, or the Vaupés region of Amazonia, mean that several languages are spoken on a daily basis inside the one household (indeed, in the one bed!) - hardly a case of mutual isolation. But maybe we are approaching the problem from the wrong end.

(*Ivi*, p. 10)

The author seems to share and validate the possible reaction of the reader who may be surprised to discover that it is common - in this area - that couples speak different languages in the same household. Then, he proceeds to use the plural first-person pronoun to show the readers his line of questioning, to include them in his reasonings.

4.2.3 Translation Commentary

For what concerns the register, the text is quite formal and technical, and these two characteristics are also main features of the target text, keeping in mind that the shared purpose is to refer to a specific type of audience (graduate and undergraduate students or other linguists). On the other hand, the Italian scientific language is more formal and impersonal than the English one. Therefore, since one of the aims of this translation is to create a final product that could be included in the Italian scientific literature, there were some inevitable changes to keep the language as neutral as possible. Even though the author is quite formal throughout the text, there are a few examples of diatopic variation: the author is Australian, this is why the English used in this text presents some typical Australian expressions. For instance, he uses words such as 'billabong' which, in the Australian slang, refers to a small lake. The strategy used to solve this problem was neutralisation, because the word 'billabongs' would have been too foreignizing for the Italian audience to understand, so it was opted to use a more neutral '*stagni*'.

Each chapter has a defined structure and layout. There are different paragraphs that have their own titles and purposes. The general layout was kept as similar as possible in the final translation. For instance, some of the paragraphs begin with a quotation used by the author to

give the reader a glimpse of what the paragraph is going to be about. These quotes were translated because it was important to provide the target reader with the same elements as the source text's. Throughout the text there are many tables and boxes that are used to give further information on different topics, and they were translated accordingly since they are a fundamental feature of the Italian didactic genre too. On the other hand, there are some differences between the English text and the Italian one. For example, regarding the textual organisation, the source text is characterised by the use of dashes, that allow the author to add further information and to briefly pause the flow of the reading. In Italian this is not a common feature, but in order to achieve the same effect, it usually resorts to commas or brackets.

William Thurston studied 'esoterogeny' - the engendering of difference and linguistic obscurity - with Anem speakers on the island of New Britain, off the New Guinea mainland.

(Ivi, p.12)

William Thurston aveva studiato l'"esoterogeneità", ovvero l'origine della differenza e dell'oscurità linguistica, attraverso i parlanti di anem sull'isola di Nuova Britannia, al largo della terraferma della Nuova Guinea.

Repetitions are really important because they increase the cohesion between different parts of the text. However, the Italian scientific language tends not to use excessive repetitions in order to avoid redundancy. In this translation, instances of lexical repetitions - related to technical terms or key points - were retained:

An original stratum of deep-time language diversity goes back to when all humans were hunter-gatherers. [...] Here there is high language diversity on both measures [...]

(Ivi, p.15)

Uno strato originale del tempo profondo della diversità linguistica risale a quando tutti gli esseri umani erano cacciatori-raccoglitori. [...] Qui, vi è un'alta diversità linguistica in entrambi i criteri [...]

On the other hand, repetitions concerning general language have been reduced thanks to the use of superordinates (e.g. the word 'creeks' was translated '*corsi d'acqua*', it was needed a more general word that could embrace all sorts of waterways, since the author talks about natural

boundaries), but also pronouns or synonyms. Anaphoric references are quite common in scientific language, both in English and in Italian, but there are some cases in which in Italian it is more natural to repeat the subject.

He found that ‘esoterogenic’ languages tend to streamline pronunciation in ways that make the overall structure harder to see [...]. They replace clear regular relationships with ‘suppletive’ (totally irregular) ones [...]

(Ivi, p.12)

Scoprì che le lingue “esoterogeniche” tendono a semplificare la pronuncia in modo da rendere l’intera struttura più difficile da comprendere [...]. Queste lingue sostituiscono relazioni regolari chiare con altre “suppletive” (totalmente irregolari) [...]

Moreover, the English language tends to place new information in rhematic position, which means that the unknown piece of information is at the end of the sentence, while in Italian it can be found in a thematic position, towards the beginning of the sentence. This is why some changes were made in this regard, using the strategy of inversion:

It makes more sense to turn the question round and ask, not why Melanesia, the Amazon, Arnhem Land, Cameroon, or the Caucasus have so many languages, but rather why Europe or parts of Asia have so few?

(Ivi, p.10)

Avrebbe più senso chiedersi per quale motivo l’Europa o alcune parti dell’Asia abbiano così poche lingue, rispetto al motivo per cui la Melanesia, l’Amazzonia e l’Arnhem Land ne abbiano così tante.

In this part, it was opted to put the main question at the beginning of the sentence, in order to sound as natural as possible in Italian.

One of the most important plans of this text is the lexical/semantic one. Technical terms are the main feature of the didactic genre, since they increase the specificity of its content. Both in English and Italian, scientific language is characterised by monoreferentiality. In this text there are many words that were rendered as precisely as possible according to their use in the Italian linguistic or ethnobiological field (e.g. language diversity- *diversità linguistica*, scientific taxonomy - *tassonomia scientifica*, small languages - *lingue minoritarie*). Nonetheless, there

are some instances in which the author uses words that may be polysemic and it is important to understand the right connotation according to the context and the purpose. For example, the word ‘cognate’ could also be translated ‘*consanguineo*’ or ‘*connesso*’ (‘blood related’ or ‘connected’) in formal Italian, but in linguistics - and in this context - this term is translated as ‘*affine*’: cognate languages are languages that descend from the same ancestral language. Another example is the word ‘suppletive’ which means ‘*integrante*’ (‘integral’), but in linguistics it is translated as ‘*suppletivo*’ and it refers to grammatical forms that, despite having different origins, are constituents of the same inflectional paradigm. Moreover, all the abbreviations that can be found in the source text have been translated and adapted into their Italian equivalents. For example, BCE (Before the Common Era) and CE (Common Era) are measurements of dates, introduced by Jewish academics. These abbreviations were created to oppose the Gregorian Calendar (divided into BC - Before Christ and AD - *Annus Domini*) that use the supposed birth date of Jesus Christ as finishing and starting point. This new system does not change the date measurements of the traditional one. BCE and CE are used to create a neutral type of language and avoid religious references. In Italian, this type of neutralisation is not common yet, this is why it was opted to leave the traditional equivalent ‘*a.C.*’ (*avanti Cristo*) and ‘*d.C.*’ (*dopo Cristo*), so that the audience can collocate the events in their time dimension. On the other hand, the abbreviation HIV (Human immunodeficiency virus) was not translated, because these initials are also known and common in Italian, although it was assimilated as a loanword in the Italian language through phonetic assimilation.

4.2.4 Translation problems

In order to achieve a target text that could sound as natural as possible and be included into the Italian scientific literature, different translation strategies were applied.

One of the most important changes that was applied in this text was the depersonalisation of the general discourse and register. The author uses personal forms to address the audience or to allow him to tell and summarise his experiences. In Italian, the register of scientific didactic texts is really formal, and the trend is to eliminate any type of personalisation. Some strategies were used to avoid it and to fit in with the Italian genre:

I recently drove down the dusty road from Wilyi on the coast near Croker Island, to the inland town of Jabiru, while working with speakers of Iwaidja,

the language in which Tim Mamitba had told me the Warramurrungunji story. The 200-km transect follows Warramurrungunji's path, traveling inland and southwards from the beach through eucalyptus savannah, stretches of tropical wetlands and lily ponds, and occasional sandstone outcrops whose caves hold vast galleries of rock paintings.

(Ivi, p.6)

Il percorso di Warramurrungunji forma un vero e proprio transetto lungo 200 km, che parte da Wilyi (sulla costa, vicino l'isola di Croker) fino a Jabiru (città nell'entroterra). Si estende all'interno del paese e verso sud, partendo dalla spiaggia e attraversando la savana di foreste di eucalipto, tratti di paludi tropicali, stagni di ninfee e gli sparsi affioramenti arenacei, le cui grotte custodiscono vaste gallerie di pitture rupestri.

The whole period was changed using the strategies of reformulation (blending different parts of the source text and rewriting them) and omission of direct personal references: the reference to the Iwaidjian speaker Tim Mamitba was not fundamental in this context, since the focus was on the description of the territory of Arnhem Land, where there is a high level of linguistic diversity. Moreover, this strategy is used to give authority to the information the author collected, so that the Italian readers accept it as given facts. Another example is:

But to close this chapter, as we have been talking about the relation between linguistic diversity, species diversity, and ecology, let us look at some of the ways in which small languages hold detailed biological and ecological knowledge, which generations of speakers have gradually discovered and recorded in their languages.

(Ivi, p.18)

Per concludere questo capitolo, dato che si è parlato della relazione tra diversità linguistica, diversità tra specie ed ecologia, è importante osservare alcuni modi in cui le lingue minoritarie detengono conoscenze biologiche ed ecologiche dettagliate che intere generazioni di parlanti hanno gradualmente scoperto e registrato nelle loro lingue.

Here, the register is completely depersonalised, using impersonal forms for the verbs and avoiding the plural first-persons pronouns and references.

Regarding the lexical plan, whenever the author applied processes of word formation in the source text it was opted to recreate them in the target one. For example, the word ‘clan-lect’ (clan-dialect) was translated as ‘clan-letto’ (*clan-dialetto*), using the same blending process since it can be transparent for an Italian reader too. Another important element in the lexical plan of this text is toponymy that is the names of many territories. In this translation, all of them were translated in their most common equivalent in Italian (for example, Papua New Guinea-*Papua Nuova Guinea*, Britain-*Gran Bretagna*, Japan-*Giappone*, Cameroon-*Camerun*, Cape York Peninsula-*Penisola di Capo York* etc.). The same process was adopted to translate the names of all the languages (for example, Welsh-*gallese*, Arawakan language-*lingua aruachi*, Iwaidja-*iwaidja*, Kunwinjku-*kunwinjku* etc.). In addition, it is important to mention the descriptions of places or landscapes, because a key point of this text is how biodiversity can influence and be influenced by language. For instance:

It is a timeless landscape rich in wild food - magpie geese, fish, bush fruits, and yams. Its Aboriginal inhabitants can live easily throughout the year, finding all they need on their own clan countries. The few river crossings do not present geographical barriers.

(*Ivi*, p.6)

Si tratta di un paesaggio senza tempo, ricco di cibo selvatico (oche gazza, pesce, frutta selvatica, igname). Gli aborigeni riescono a sopravvivere facilmente durante tutto l’anno, trovando tutto ciò di cui necessitano nei territori del proprio clan. I pochi fiumi che attraversano queste terre non rappresentano una barriera geografica.

In this case, Evans refers to some species that can be easily found along Warramurrungunji’s transect, near Croker Island. It was opted to translate them with the common and known names of these species, to help the Italian readers picture them easily. On the other hand, there are some instances in which it was needed to keep the scientific name of those species:

Throughout Arnhem Land the spangled grunter fish bears the same name as the native white apple tree, *Syzygium eucalyptoides*, because this fish eats the

fruits that fall from this tree into creeks and billabongs: in Kunwinjku both are called *bokorn*. [...] Once we go over to calling the *bokorn* fish a ‘spangled grunter’, and the *bokorn* tree a ‘white apple’, our words no longer deliver the ecological link between them.

(Ivi, p.20)

In tutto il territorio di Arnhem Land, si trova una particolare specie di pesce, il *Leiopotherapon macrolepis*, che porta lo stesso nome dell’albero di mele bianche native, il *Syzygium eucalyptoides*, perché questo pesce mangia i frutti che cadono da questo albero nei ruscelli o negli stagni: entrambi, in kunwinjku, sono chiamati *bokorn*. [...] una volta che il pesce *bokorn* viene definito “*Leiopotherapon macrolepis*”, e l’albero *bokorn* “albero di mele bianche”, le parole non trasmettono più l’originale connessione ecologica che esiste tra di loro.

In this example, it was fundamental to keep the taxonomic names of these two species, since the author wants to underline that the Western tradition to homologate the language is a risk to the priceless knowledge that indigenous languages carry: the use of their scientific names creates further distance and has a foreignizing effect on the reader. Another issue was deciding how to deal with the English conservatism *thou eatest fish* in Italian:

Imagine I had driven from London to Moscow - 15 times as far. The Russian equivalent *ty esh rybku*, although incomprehensible to English ears, contains three cognate elements, at least if we cheat a bit by taking the earlier English version, *thou eatest fish*: *ty* (with English *thou*), *e* (with English *eat*) and *-sh* (with the older English suffix *-est* in *eatest*).

(Ivi, p.6)

Si consideri, invece, la distanza da Londra a Mosca, che è 15 volte maggiore rispetto al percorso di Warramurrungunji. L’equivalente russo della frase menzionata è *ty esh rybku* il quale, sebbene incomprensibile all’ascolto per una persona inglese, contiene tre elementi affini all’inglese, o perlomeno ciò si evince se si considera la versione arcaica della lingua inglese *thou eatest*

fish: *ty* (simile all'inglese *thou*), *e* (simile a *eat*) and *-sh* (simile al suffisso arcaico *-est* in *eatest*).

In this case, it was important to show the similarity between the structures of these languages: the conservatism is kept in English because it was more important to point out and explain the similar elements rather than their meaning.

Another problem is the different uses of the English language within the text. The text is originally written in English, but there are also different foreign languages (fundamental to the purposes of the author). Each expression or word is promptly translated into English in the source text to allow the readers to understand their contents. In these cases, English is used as a means to enable comprehension. This is why in this translation, the foreign utterances or sentences are kept as they are, while their English translation is substituted with their Italian translation that carries out the same function:

[Iwaidja] *Ruka kundangani riki angbaldaharrama! Ruka nuyi nuwung inyman!* 'I am putting you here, this is the language you should talk! This is your language!'

(Ivi, p.5)

[Iwaidja] "*Ruka kundangani riki angbaldaharrama! Ruka nuyi nuwung inyman!*", "Vi colloco qui, questa è la lingua che dovrete parlare! Questa è la vostra lingua!"

On the other hand, there are some instances in which the English language is used to explain a linguistic issue. For example:

He found that 'esoterogenic' languages tend to streamline pronunciation in ways that make the overall structure harder to see, comparable to saying *dja* for *didja* from *did you* in English. They replace clear regular relationships with 'suppletive' (totally irregular) ones, revelling in alternations like *good: better* at the expense of the more transparent *big: bigger* style.

(Ivi, p.12)

Scopri che le lingue "esoterogeniche" tendono a semplificare la pronuncia in modo da rendere l'intera struttura più difficile da comprendere, paragonabile a dire *dja* al posto di *didja*, da *did you* in inglese. Queste lingue sostituiscono

relazioni regolari chiare con altre “suppletive” (totalmente irregolari), godendo di alternanze come *good:better* (buono:migliore) a scapito dello stile più trasparente *big:bigger* (grande:più grande).

This example presents two different ways in which the English language was managed in the Italian translation: in the first case, the author focuses on pointing out how the expression ‘dja’ is the shortened version of ‘did you’, in the Italian text it was important to render the phonetic (its pronunciation) and morphological (the shortening process) change of this expression, rather than its meaning. In the second case, the English examples are used to explain that, in obscure languages, suppletive relations differentiate not only the structure but also the meaning, so it was needed to translate their meaning too, since these examples are explanatory in Italian too. Another problem was the presence of idiomatic expressions and how they have been rendered in Italian. In scientific language, idiomatic expressions and proverbs are not common. In this text, however, they represent an element of the author’s personal style. In this translation, different strategies were opted to sort them out. For example, in the source text the author uses the expression ‘you say tomahto, I say tomato’, to refer to the principle by which some tribes create different variations of a language to set their language apart from those spoken by their neighbours. This is a common idiomatic expression that is usually used to declare that even though people may have different opinions, there is no answer more correct than the other, but rather a personal preference. In this case, the expression is fitting to the context, but in Italian there is no exact equivalent. To try and solve this translation problem, a paraphrase was used to explain it and make its meaning explicit to the Italian readers: *‘principio della creazione di forme diverse per affermare identità diverse.’* Another idiomatic expression is ‘this is just the thin end of the wedge’, used by Evans to explain that the grammatical examples he had previously mentioned are simply the beginning of his investigation. This expression is commonly used to refer to something that may be unimportant in the first place, but it is bigger than it appears. In this case, this expression was adapted using its exact equivalent in Italian, which is *‘non è altro che la punta dell’iceberg’*. Furthermore, Evans uses the famous biblical expression ‘washed his hand of another death’:

We do not know exactly when the last speakers of Oscan, Umbrian, Etruscan, and other languages of the peninsula finally passed away, but the elimination of all non-Latin languages from the Italian peninsula is likely to have been

almost complete by the time Pontius Pilate washed his hands of another death in another part of the Roman Empire.

(Ivi, p.14)

Non si sa precisamente quando i parlanti di osco, umbro, etrusco e delle altre lingue della penisola si siano estinti, ma l'eliminazione di tutte le lingue non latine dalla penisola italiana è probabile fosse quasi completa quando Ponzio Pilato si lavò le mani di un'altra morte in un'altra parte dell'Impero romano.

He refers to the alleged period in which most of the Italic languages of the peninsula disappeared. He uses this expression as a euphemism because he implicitly refers to the period of the death of Jesus Christ. In Italian, this expression is frequently used and the implicit biblical reference to the death of Jesus Christ can be easily understood, this is why it was maintained in the target text.

For what concerns the morphological plan, transposition was one of the most used strategies throughout the whole translation process. An example of transposition, used to convert a verb phrase into a noun phrase, is '[...] that having many languages is a good thing because it shows where each person belongs.', whose translation is '*la diversità linguistica è una cosa positiva poiché rappresenta l'appartenenza di ogni persona.*', since it is more natural and concise in Italian. Another instance of transposition is the change from singular to plural or vice versa (e.g. '[...] they obtained from their father' - '[...] *ottenuta dai loro padri*', in this case the plural was needed in Italian, since the author refers to the fathers of each member of indigenous clans who traditionally pass on the 'paternal language' to their sons and daughters).

Finally, it is important to note some cultural problems and how they were managed in this translation. Since Evans writes mainly for his Australian students or colleagues, he sometimes takes for granted some bits of information that an international audience may need. For example, the author usually mentions other linguists and professors without introducing them openly. In the target text additional information was added to let the Italian readers know who these people are, using interlinear glosses, such as: '*Il linguista e antropologo australiano Donald Laycock, che ha basato le sue ricerche sulle lingue in Papua Nuova Guinea [...]*', the author refers to his colleague as 'Don Laycock', it was preferred to put his extended name and to add further information about this linguist, so that if the readers want to deepen their knowledge, they are provided with all the necessary instruments.

4.3.1 The tenth chapter

In this chapter, Evans introduces the dangers and consequences of the disappearance of languages all around the world. A language is declared ‘extinct’ when there are no speakers alive. While analysing the last moments of the evolution of a language, however, the focus should not be exclusively on the last speakers, but also on its ‘last hearers’. Here, Evans tells the stories of many people that are the last witnesses of different languages, men or women who do not actually speak those languages but were the last persons alive who had heard them. These ‘last hearers’ can play a crucial role in the process of language revitalisation and Evans underlines the importance of keeping records of their memories and languages to create a complete language documentation. He also states that a successful language documentation should draw on the work of both academic and indigenous people, since the perspectives of the insiders are as useful as those of the outsiders. Then, he proceeds to provide examples of co-authorship in linguistic research between indigenous people and scholars. He underlines the importance of formal education for native speakers and also of proper training for outsiders as field linguists so that their collaboration can elicit a complex hybrid documented corpus of data. Finally, Evans puts the focus on the fact that these documentations should be safely archived for future generations and purposes, keeping up with future digital advancements.

4.3.2 Textual analysis

The tenth chapter of this textbook is an excellent example of the author’s use of specialised language, even though he is able to keep his personal and narrative style. Some of the most used lexical cohesive devices are repetitions (e.g. ‘last hearers’, ‘record/recordings’, ‘language documentation’, ‘extinct/extinction’, ‘speech community’, ‘indigenous knowledge’, ‘corpus’, ‘archive’ etc.) and synonyms (sometimes the words ‘record/recordings’ are used as synonyms for the word ‘documentation’ and vice versa, ‘language extinction’ and ‘language death’ are synonyms too). Here, cohesion plays a crucial role, since it is fundamental for the author to convey his message. It is achieved by some grammatical cohesive devices too, such as anaphoric references:

Though stories like those given here focus on ‘last speakers’, the final glow of a language’s existence is actually held in the minds of what I’ll call its ‘last

hearers'. These are people a generation below the last speakers, who grew up hearing and understanding the language, typically from their own parents, without ever getting the confidence or opportunity to speak it.

(Ivi, p.210)

As shown above, anaphoric references are pervasive in this text, and they help link different pieces of the discourse.

Some of the most used lexical features in this text are: monoreferentiality, used by the author to avoid ambiguity and be as precise as possible (for example, 'language obsolescence' refers to the linguistic process by which a language gradually stops being spoken to be substituted by another). Another important lexical feature is conciseness, achieved mostly through the use of abbreviations such as PNG-Papua New Guinea, used to avoid redundancy. He also uses acronyms for the names of programmes or institutions like DoBeS, a programme founded by the Volkswagen foundation, which stands for '*Dokumentation bedrohter Sprachen*' and has the purpose to archive and preserve language documentations; another example is the abbreviation for the name of the Indigenous University of Mato Grosso, UNEMAT (*Universidade do Estado de Mato Grosso* in Portuguese). Once again, the presence of foreign languages is fundamental: in some cases, Evans reports bits of other languages, translating or explaining them in English for the benefit of his readers (e.g. the epigraph at the beginning of the chapter: '*Chě che 'eñ chěñ nochi eñ niku chěñ nakue'e chi eñ nochi eñ*. - My grandfather went out to learn all there is to be learned, to learn by learning wherever one learns' is a tone-twister in the Dibaku language, spoken in Mexico, which is part of a collection of literacy and verbal plays to promote this language). Moreover, English is also used in its metalinguistic function, namely when the author refers to the many paradigms and inflections of the Papuan language Nen. Another important field of this text is the one of digital archives, so there are many words relating to the Internet and its mechanisms (e.g. the names of the digital archives: PARADISEC, AILLA, ELAR, etc., but also technical digital vocabulary such as 'data formats', 'proprietary fonts', 'metadata' etc.). Here, there are also a few examples of neologisms, especially in the digital field. In fact, the author uses the word 'cybraries', resulted from the process of blending of the words 'cyber' (relating to the computer and virtual reality) and 'libraries', this word refers to a way to protect a lot of material, a sort of digital library.

Once again, evaluative language is used to persuade the readers: 'the best guarantee', 'the benefits to the speech community itself are equally great'. There are some metaphors too, such as 'afterglow of a language's final years', the afterglow is the final glow of the day just before

it darkens, so it is a metaphor to indicate the final moments of a language before its disappearance.

For what concerns the morpho-syntactic plan, the text generally respects the main features of scientific language, so it is made of complex sentences linked by subordinating conjunctions. There is a lot of premodification (e.g. 'small traditional speech community', 'sovereign nation state', 'large predominantly monoglot countries' etc.) to characterise the object rather than the action, and to profit by its conciseness. Thanks to this, sentence complexity is achieved. Verb tenses are mainly the past simple and present simple active and passive, to be more objective. This is a strategy used to give authority to the author's research and to omit the agent of the actions in case they are not known or unimportant. Another important tense in this text is the future simple, since the author wants to underline the urgency of putting into practice these studies for future profits and future perspectives. Again, the presence of the author is explicit in his use of the first-person pronoun, recounting his own experiences and research:

Something similar happened in my own experience working with Dalabon: hearing that my teacher Maggie Tukumba was dying, in her 80s, I paid a visit to her in hospital in Katherine, grieving that not only was I bidding farewell to a much-loved elder, but was also witnessing the end to further attempts to get really detailed information on the language. Then beside the Katherine River on the same visit I met Manuel Pamkal, who I had heard about but somehow never had the chance to meet.

(Ivi, p.209)

Finally, the author keeps involving the reader in his reasoning, especially when referring to all the things that need to be done in order to ensure language preservation.

[...]The magnitude of the task facing us in documenting so many languages is enormous; for every language where the chance to do something will disappear within months, there are many more where we still have decades to respond.

(Ivi, p.216)

In this way, the author shares with the readers the responsibilities in the difficult task of preserving - and possibly reawakening - disappearing languages all around the world.

4.3.3 Translation commentary

For what concerns the register, the text is formal and technical. The author uses a type of language that is even more specialised than the one in the first chapter. The two main semantic fields of this text are the linguistic and the digital-instrumental ones. Therefore, one of the most challenging plans to translate was the vocabulary: a lot of research was carried out in order to give the Italian audience the same instruments of the source text's. Moreover, it was necessary to neutralise certain parts of the text to make it more suitable for the Italian context, which is more formal and impersonal than the English one. For example, sometimes the author uses nicknames for his colleagues like Andy Pawley. In Italian he was named with his extended name, Andrew Pawley, to be more formal. Furthermore, there is an example of diatopic variation when the author uses the word 'whitefellas', which is an Australian term used to identify white or Caucasian persons, it was opted to neutralise this term, using the Italian neutral equivalent '*bianchi*'.

The layout was kept the same, and particular attention was put on the translation of tables and boxes, which were deemed fundamental to the purposes of each paragraph. For instance, Krauss' scheme for assessing language endangerment is a crucial element in this whole research, since its symbols (A+, safe- *sicura*; A, stable - *stabile*; A-, unstable - *instabile*; B, definitely endangered – *certamente in pericolo*; C, severely endangered – *in pericolo grave*; D, critically endangered – *in pericolo critico*; E, extinct - *estinta*) are recurrent throughout the chapter and they are useful to assess the health status of a language. It is also important to mention the Box 10.4, which provides an in-depth analysis of the success of blending formal education with precious indigenous knowledge. These elements add further information that help better understand what the author is trying to say, and they are a common element in the Italian scientific genre too.

For what concerns the textual organisation, dashes were once again substituted by either commas or brackets, following the Italian usual patterns:

The second cause of uncertainty in our projections is that there are some regions - particularly Africa - where the effective collapse of some nation states and absence of research infrastructure makes it almost impossible to gather data. Meaningful statistics are thus hard to obtain for this part of the world. Yet the huge number of languages in Africa - at an estimated 2000, it

contains nearly one-third of the world's languages - magnifies the impact of uncertainties there on any global projection.

(Ivi, p.214)

La seconda causa di incertezza nelle previsioni è data da alcune regioni, in particolare in Africa, nelle quali l'effettivo collasso di alcuni stati-nazioni e l'assenza di infrastrutture di ricerca hanno reso quasi impossibile la raccolta di informazioni. Le statistiche rilevanti sono, dunque, difficili da ricavare in questa parte del mondo. Tuttavia, il grande numero di lingue in Africa (circa 2000, contiene quasi un terzo di tutte le lingue del mondo) amplifica l'impatto delle incertezze all'interno di quel territorio, in qualsiasi proiezione globale.

In order to achieve cohesion, repetitions were required in the target text. On the other hand, the Italian language prefers to avoid too much redundancy because it can slow down the reading and make it particularly difficult, so some strategies were applied to solve this problem. For example:

This happened with the Pacific Coast Athabaskan language Hupa. Mrs Verdena Parker, now in her 60s, had lived until recently with her mother in a remote town in Oregon. When she made contact with Athabaskanist Victor Golla she turned out to be a highly fluent speaker of this language, speaking a pure classical form of Hupa at least as fluently as the first speakers he had worked with in the 1960s.

(Ivi, p.209)

Ciò accadde con la lingua athabaska della costa del Pacifico, l'hupa. Verdena Parker, ad oggi sulla sessantina, ha vissuto fino a poco tempo fa con sua madre in una città remota in Oregon. Quando si mise in contatto con il nativo Victor Golla, si scoprì che lei parlava una forma classica e pura di hupa in maniera fluente, come i primi parlanti con i quali lui aveva lavorato durante gli anni Sessanta.

Here, it was used the synonym 'nativo', to avoid repeating 'athabasko', and also the strategy of omission, since it was already clear that the author is talking about this language.

Moreover, it was necessary to apply the strategy of inversion, since the common English trend of placing new information in rhematic position is not natural in Italian, in which it can be found in a thematic position:

Ameka is well-placed to evaluate this question, having worked as an insider on his mother tongue and as an outsider on another language of the Ghana-Togo mountains, Likpe.

(Ivi, p.222)

Ameka è nella posizione giusta per rispondere a questa domanda, dato che ha lavorato sia in quanto membro interno della sua madrelingua che in quanto esterno della lingua likpe, un'altra lingua delle montagne a confine tra il Ghana e il Togo.

In this part, it was opted to put the language at the beginning of the sentence, since it is the new information, while the details about its localisation were put right after.

For what concerns the lexical and semantic plan, the text is full of many technical and specialised terms, both from the linguistic field (e.g. 'tonal system'- *sistema tonale*, 'grammatical particles'- *particelle grammaticali*, 'deictic words'- *deittici* etc.) but also from the digital and computerised field (e.g. 'hard drives' - *dischi rigidi*, 'electronic records' - *registrazioni elettroniche*, 'proprietary formats' - *formati brevettati* etc.). Thorough research was essential to find the right equivalents in Italian. It is interesting the case of the word 'record', which in the Italian translation is both translated as '*registrare/registrazione*' and '*documentare/documentazione*', according to the context: sometimes, it is not only used in its pragmatic meaning - which is 'recording using a playing device' - but also in its other connotations of 'putting down', 'keeping track', or 'documenting', this is why it was necessary to use the Italian synonym '*documentare*'. In this chapter, most of the abbreviations used by the author refers to the names of specific institutions that are exclusive and do not have an Italian equivalent. Therefore, they were kept as they are in the source text, but further information was added to give the Italian readers some background knowledge. For example, the Mayan programme for training native speaker linguists 'OKMA' is the acronym of *Oxlajuuj Keej Maya' Ajtz'iib'*, the author reports its extended name in Mayan, but in the target text there is also its translation to achieve transparency about the purpose of the programme: '*organizzazione della lingua guatemalteca maya*', which is 'Guatemalan Mayan language organisation'.

4.3.4 Translation problems

During the translation processes, there were a few problems that required different solutions, in order to obtain a target text that can be fully integrated into the Italian scientific literature and that could help all the persons who are interested in this particular field.

It was often required to change and reformulate certain parts of this translation. In the source text, the author speaks about some encounters he had in the past, when he tried to find and reach out to any ‘last hearers’ of many different languages. In order to produce the more impersonal Italian register, the stories of these people were told avoiding the direct intervention and voice of the author. Therefore, one of the most used strategies was reformulation:

Something similar happened in my own experience working with Dalabon: hearing that my teacher Maggie Tukumba was dying, in her 80s, I paid a visit to her in hospital in Katherine, grieving that not only was I bidding farewell to a much-loved elder, but was also witnessing the end to further attempts to get really detailed information on the language. Then beside the Katherine River on the same visit I met Manuel Pamkal, who I had heard about but somehow never had the chance to meet. Though Manuel was born a generation later, in the early 1960s, he grew up in the bush (his parents wanted him to grow up holding traditional culture) and has turned out to have such a deep knowledge of Dalabon that he can interpret many obscure words in old recorded texts [...]

(Ivi, p.209)

Qualcosa di simile successe con la lingua dalabon, appartenente alla famiglia linguistica gunwinyguana in Arnhem Land: la morte dell’insegnante e parlante di dalabon, Maggie Tukumba, sull’ottantina, rappresentò la fine di ulteriori tentativi di ottenere informazioni dettagliate sulla lingua in questione. Nonostante ciò, Manuel Pamkal, sebbene nato una generazione dopo, nei primi anni Sessanta, crebbe nella landa selvaggia (poiché i suoi genitori volevano che crescesse seguendo la cultura tradizionale) e rivelò di possedere una conoscenza di dalabon tale da poter interpretare molte parole oscure presenti in antichi testi registrati [...]

The location of their meeting and Evans' first-person experience were omitted, while his thoughts about his teacher's death were kept and generalised. A little gloss of explanation about the Dalabon language was added to give a little more context to the Italian readers.

One of the main difficulties was dealing with the neologism Evans uses when he speaks about the use of appropriate systems that can ensure the protection of the digitalised recorded material, allowing the mirroring of data across several 'cybraries' to avoid the vulnerability of their location. 'Cybrary' is a word formed through a blending process between the words 'cyber' and 'libraries': in the English language, assessing the origins of the word is easy, but in Italian it would not be as effective, since the word 'cyber' is an anglicism, an English loanword that spread in the Italian computer culture. As a matter of fact, most of the words of the digital world are coined in English, and the Italian language usually accepts these foreignisms in its own vocabulary as loanwords. Therefore, it was opted to leave this word in English (in italic) and to add an explanation right after: "*cybraries*" (o "librerie digitali", piattaforme online dedite alla sicurezza informatica), so that the Italian reader can fully understand what it is.

Another interesting lexical issue was that of the many inflectional paradigms of the Papuan language Nen:

Take verbs in the Papuan language Nen as an example, which can have over 3500 inflected forms due to their prolific combination of subject (singular, dual, plural), object (singular, dual, plural, large plural) [...]

(Ivi, pp.224-225)

Si prendano in considerazione i verbi nella lingua papuana nen come esempio, la quale ha più di 3500 forme flesse a causa alla sua prolifica combinazione dei soggetti (singolare, duale e plurale), oggetti (singolare, duale, plurale e plurale maggiore, ottenuto unendo affissi singolari o duali) [...]

Evans explains that for the object, this language has the numerable property of singular, dual, plural and also 'large plural', a category that is exclusive of this language. Since there is no right equivalent in Italian, it was opted to translate it as '*plurale maggiore*', to give the idea of a larger type of plural, and it was also added a gloss of explanation on its formation. Another issue was figuring out how to deal with the names of certain institutions, corpora or other mentioned books. For what concerns the institutions and the corpora, since there are no Italian equivalents, the only solution was to keep their foreign names (*fondazione Volkswagen*, Arctic World Archive, PARADISEC, AILLA, ELAR, LACITO), so that the readers can easily look

them up if they are interested in getting further information about them. Moreover, Evans tells the story of the Kalam speaker, Saem Majnep, to make an example of the inestimable contribution that a native person can add to linguistic and ethnohistorical documentation if they received formal education. He says that Majnep wrote -in *Birds of our Kalam Country* - about a bird with poisonous feathers. Some years later, the biologist Jack Dumbacher reported this interesting fact in the pages of the scientific magazine *Science* and that Majnep does not appear as a coauthor in that publication. In the target text, it was important that the readers could understand the title of Majnep's discussion, so it was translated '*Uccelli della nostra Kalam*' (Kalam is also the name of the tribe), omitting the word 'country' to make it more concise. On the other hand, the name of the scientific magazine *Science* was not translated, since it is a popular and well-known journal in Italy and its name is in English. Another mentioned book is *General History of the Things of New Spain*, an Aztec/Spanish compendium of texts. In Italian, this text is both translated literally - *Storia generale delle cose della Nuova Spagna* - but it is widely known by the name *Codice fiorentino*, so in this translation there are both names in order to be as precise and didactic as possible. In addition, in this text there are a few figures of speech that needed to be translated in Italian, for example:

[...] This is epitomized by the metaphor they use for grammatical particles and deictic words anchoring meanings to context: *tisakisü enkgutoho*, roughly 'made for our words to beach safely'.

(Ivi, p.221)

[...] Ciò può essere sintetizzato dalla metafora che utilizzano per le particelle grammaticali e i deittici che ancorano i significati ai contesti: *tisakisü enkgutoho*, che si traduce, più o meno, "creati affinché le nostre parole approdino in sicurezza".

These grammatical elements in the Kuikuro language are used to link meanings to their contexts, and they use the image of something stranded on the beach, so using the metaphorical verb '*approdare*' (a word that is part of the semantic field of the beach/sea) is fitting to this figurative image. He also uses a simile:

[...] Among the slurred ramblings of the old men was a 20-minute passage in a woman's voice, clear as a bell. [...]

(Ivi, p.210)

[...] In mezzo a tutto il borbottio sconnesso, vi era un passaggio di circa 20 minuti in cui si sentiva la voce di una donna, chiara come il sole [...]

In Italian, the adapted expression ‘*chiara come il sole*’ is used a lot to identify something obvious and apparent, so it suits this particular context.

Another problem was the translation of some of the titles of this chapter. The paragraph ‘The Process of Language Shift’ is about the risks of imposing one common language in a multilingual country (such as Papua New Guinea) that can threaten the small local languages, and the author provides a series of estimates of language loss due to this particular phenomenon. Language shift is a linguistic process that involves any type of modification within the system of a language, it can also refer to the process by which a language is substituted by another. In this particular case, it was needed to explain that the change the author refers to can cause the disappearance of a language, so it was opted to translate it ‘*Il processo di deriva linguistica*’, (the process of language drift), it is a specific type of linguistic shift that focuses on the loss of one language in favour of another which is more prestigious. The other title was ‘Bringing it out and Laying it Down’, this title is taken from a quote by Maggie Tukumba, a native speaker of Dalabon:

‘From now on, whenever, I bring out a story or word, I’ll put it in the book... And other things, that I’ll bring out later, new words, I’ll put them on paper. Then we’ll bring out the meaning of things, not just one idea, but all sorts of meanings, including the subtleties of what we say.’

(Ivi, p.226)

“Da questo momento in poi, estrarrò una storia o una parola, la metterò nero su bianco nel libro... E altre cose che estrarrò in seguito, nuove parole, le metterò per iscritto sulla carta. Dopodiché estrarremo il significato delle cose, non solo un’idea ma anche tutti i possibili significati, includendo il sottinteso di ciò che diciamo.”

‘To bring something out’ is a common phrasal verb in English, which means ‘to make something more evident, explicit’, while ‘to lay something down’ means ‘to formulate’. To translate this title, Maggie Tukumba’s words and their meaning were taken into account: the whole purpose of documenting a language is to extract knowledge from it and put it down on paper. Therefore, it was opted to translate it as ‘*Estrarre per poi trascrivere*’, which sums it up.

For what concerns the morphological plan, one of the strategies that was mostly used is transposition, for example:

Universities in many parts of the world are conservative in their admission requirements, and generally unaware of the advantage that pre-existing language knowledge can bring for native speakers interested in language analysis.

(Ivi, pp. 221-222)

Le università in molte parti del mondo sono conservative nei loro requisiti di ammissione e sono, di solito, inconsapevoli dei vantaggi che il sapere preesistente alla lingua può apportare ai parlanti nativi interessati all'analisi linguistica.

Here, there was a change from singular to plural in Italian because, in this context, it was important to underline the many benefits of pre-existing language knowledge for natives, the singular form would not have worked.

Finally, most of the cultural references within the source text were either explained through glosses or adapted to the Italian context. For example, the famous slogan 'nothing about us without us' is a fundamental principle of all the indigenous communities around the world, that encourages the participation of indigenous people in their own research and decisions that can impact themselves and their lives. In this text, it was translated as '*niente su di noi, senza di noi*', which is its adapted and widely known translation in Italian.

5. Glossary

These two translations were realised using different tools. Physical dictionaries were the most used ones, both bilingual¹⁴ and monolingual¹⁵, although many online dictionaries were a good support too.

- Collins online dictionary: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english>;
- Wordreference: <https://www.wordreference.com/>;
- Cambridge online dictionary: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>;
- Merriam-Webster dictionary: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>.

The Italian Synonyms and Contraries dictionary¹⁶ was really useful too. Moreover, Internet was a great source of information and most of the research was conducted using images, videos, language forums, and other useful websites. In addition, crucial role was played by online glossaries such as:

- IATE: <https://iate.europa.eu/home>,
- FAO Terminology Portal: <https://www.fao.org/faoterm/en/?defaultCollId=1>;
- AGROVOC Multilingual Thesaurus <https://agrovoc.fao.org/browse/agrovoc/en/>

And finally, corpora of texts were fundamental to be able to understand the meaning of certain words based on different contexts and to find the right equivalent into Italian.

- Webcorp, web corpus search engine: <https://www.webcorp.org.uk/live/index.jsp>

In the following pages, it is presented the English-Italian glossary of the two translations of the first and tenth chapters of *Words of Wonder: Endangered Languages and What They Tell Us* (2022).

¹⁴ Ragazzini, G. (2004). *Il Ragazzini 2005. Dizionario inglese-italiano, italiano-inglese. Con CD-ROM*. Italy: Zanichelli.

¹⁵ *Paperback Oxford English Dictionary*. (2012). United Kingdom: OUP Oxford.

¹⁶ Carassiti, A. M., Meldi, D. (2006). *Dizionario sinonimi e contrari*. Italy: RusconiLibri.

ENGLISH	ITALIAN
Aboriginal Australia	Australia aborigena
Aboriginal inhabitants	aborigeni
absence	assenza
academically trained	formazione accademica
accuracy	accuratezza
adaptability	adattabilità
admission requirements	requisiti di ammissione
advanced training	formazione avanzata
advocates	fautori
afterglow	crepuscolo
age-mates	coetanei
agricultural expansion	espansione agricola
agriculture-based lineages	linee evolutive basate sull'agricoltura
alive	in vita
alternations	alternanze
Amazonia	Amazzonia
Amurdak	amurdak
analysis	analisi
ancestral lands	terre ancestrali
ancestral language/tongue	lingua ancestrale
ancestress	antenata
Andes	Ande
anecdotal evidence	testimonianze aneddotiche
Anem	anem
Arabic	arabo
Arafura Sea	mare degli Arafura
Arawakan language	lingua aruachi
archival stability	stabilità archivistica
archived	archivate
Arnhem Land	Arnhem Land
Assessing/assessment	Valutare/valutazione
Athabaskan language	lingua athabaska
Austronesian	austronesiano
authority	autorità

automatic format migration	migrazione automatica del [...] formato
average population	popolazione media
Baja California	Bassa California
bar	impedendo
bear up	regge
beleaguered minorities	minoranze assediate
billabongs	stagni
Bininj Kunwok	bininj kunwok
biocultural diversity	diversità bioculturale
Biodiversity/biological diversity	Biodiversità/diversità biologica
biodiversity loss	perdita della biodiversità
biological knowledge	sapere biologico
biology	biologia
birth	nascita
black brant bird	oca colombaccio nera
Bougainville Island	isola di Bougainville
boundary	confine
branches	rami
Brazil	Brasile
breeds	specie riproduttive
Britain	Gran Bretagna
broad-brush surveys	indagini ad ampio raggio
Buin	Buin
bush	Cespuglio/landa/foreste
bush fruits	frutta selvatica
calculation	calcolo
Cameroon	Camerun
canyon	vallata
Cape York Peninsula	Penisola di Capo York
Caribbean	Caraibi
cassette recorder/tapes	registratore a cassette/audiocassetta
Caucasus	Caucaso
caves	grotte
Celtic	celtico
Central Highlands	Cordigliera Centrale

ceremonial exchange	scambi cerimoniali
Chatino	chatino
Chimariko people	popolazione chimariko
chomskyan generative linguistics	linguistica generativa chomskiana
civilizations	civiltà
clan	clan
clan boundaries	confini degli altri clan
clan identities	identità dei clan
clan member	membri del clan
clan membership	appartenenza al clan
clan-lect	clan-letto
clay tablets	tavolette d'argilla
climate change	cambiamento climatico
cloud forests	foreste nebulose
coauthor	coautore
coauthorship	riconoscimento dei diritti di collaborazione
Cobourg Peninsula	penisola di Cobourg
cognate	affine
cognitive faculty	facoltà cognitiva
collaborative research	ricerca collaborativa
collapse	collasso
Colombia	Colombia
colonies	colonie
colonization	colonizzazione
colonizing culture	culture colonizzanti
Communication/conversation	comunicazione
community member	membro di una comunità
compendium	compendio
complex hybrid	complesso ibrido
confidence	sicurezza
conserved	conservate
consonants	consonanti
context	contesti
conversion procedures	procedure di conversione
Countries/country	Paesi/territorio

creeks	corsi d'acqua/ruscelli
critically endangered	in pericolo critico
Croker Island	isola di Croker
crops	raccolti
cross-culturally	interculturale
cultural knowledge	sapere culturale
culture	cultura
curative potentials	potenziali curativi
cybraries	cybraries
Dalabon	dalabon
data	informazioni
data formats	formato dati
data storage	immagazzinamento di [...] dati
death	morte
decolonize	decolonizzare
decrease	diminuzione
deep-level diversity	diversità a livelli profondi
deep-time	tempo profondo
definitively endangered	certamente in pericolo
degeneration	degenerazione
deictic words	deittici
demagnetized	smagnetizzare
demic expansion	espansione demica
demographic shifts	cambiamenti demografici
denigrated	denigrato
descendants	discendenti
descriptive linguistics	linguistica descrittiva
descriptor	criterio
desirability	desiderabilità
despised	disprezzata
destruction	distruzione
development	sviluppo
dialect	dialetto
dictionary	dizionario
digital archives	archivio linguistico

digital data	dati digitali
digital format	formato digitale
digital language documentation	documentazione linguistica digitale
digital records	registrazioni digitali
disappear	sparirà
disasters	disastro
diversification	diversificazione
diversity	diversità
document	documentare
documentary linguistics	linguistica documentaria
documentary process	processo di documentazione
documentation	documentazione
documentation programme	programma di documentazione
documented corpus	corpus di ricerca
documenter	documentatori
domains	territori/domini
dominance	Predominio/potere
dominant language	lingua dominante
Drehu	drehu
dual	duale
dying	morte
ecological links	legami ecologi
ecology	ecologia
economic migration	migrazione economica
eelgrass	zostera
egalitarian multilingualism	multilinguismo egualitario
electronic records	registrazioni elettroniche
elicited data	dati naturali ricavati
elimination	eliminazione
elites	alte società
endangered	in pericolo
endangered data	dati in pericolo
endangered language	lingua in pericolo
endemic languages	lingue endemiche
endemic linguistic diversity	diversità linguistica endemica

English-speaking	anglofoni
equal status	stesso status
eroded	erosa
esoterogenic languages	lingue esoterogeniche
esoterogeny	esoterogeneità
ethnobiology	etnobiologia
ethnographic reporting	rapporti etnografici
ethnolinguistic entities	entità etnolinguistiche
ethnobotanist	etnobotanico
Etruscan	etrusco
eucalyptus savannah	foreste di eucalipto
European colonial expansion	espansione coloniale europea
evidence	testimonianze
evolutionary processes	processi evolutivi
Ewe	ewe
Extinct/extinction	Estinte/estinzione
extinction rate	tasso di estinzione
falling mute	stanno scomparendo
father language	lingua paterna
feminine	femminili
Ficus insipida	figus insipida
field assistant	assistente di campo
field linguist	linguista sul campo
field material	materiale sul campo
field notes	appunti sul campo
field training	formazione sul campo
fieldwork	lavoro sul campo
findings	risultati
first language speakers	parlanti madrelingua
fission	scissione
fixed settlements	insediamenti fissi
flattening	appiattimento
fluency	scioltezza
fonts	caratteri
foresee	prevedere

foreteller	oracolo
forgotten patrimony	patrimonio dimenticato
formal education/schooling	istruzione formale
formal paradigms	paradigmi formali
fostering	promozione
French	francese
gobbledygook	incomprensibili
gender agreements	accordi di genere
generation	generazioni
generative grammar	grammatica generativa
genetic diversity	diversità genetica
genocide	genocidi
geographical barriers	barriera geografica
Ghanian language	lingua ganese
glow	bagliore
Gold Rush	corsa all'oro
Golden Toad	rospo dorato
grain	grano
grammar	grammatica
grammatical particles	particelle grammaticali
grandparental generation	generazione dei nonni
great-grandparent generation	generazione dei bisnonni
Green Revolution	Rivoluzione verde
Guatemalan civil war	guerra civile guatemalteca
Gurrgoni	gurr-goni
Haiti	Haiti
hard drives	dischi rigidi
health	salute
hear	ascoltare
heritage	Patrimonio/eredità
Hindi	hindi
Hokan languages	lingue hokan
Homalanthus nutans	homalanthus nutans
homogeneizing reach	portata omogeneizzante
homogeneous unit	unità omogenea

households	case
hunter-gatherers	cacciatori-raccoglitori
Hupa	hupa
Icelandic	islandese
ideological battles	battaglie ideologiche
ideology	ideologia
idiosyncrasies	idiosincrasia
ignored	ignorato
Ilgar	ilgar
immigrants	immigranti
indigenous knowledge	sapere indigeno
indigenous language	lingua indigena
indigenous linguistic diversity	diversità linguistica indigena
indigenous traditions	tradizioni indigene
individual speakers	parlanti individuali
Indo-European	indoeuropeo
industrialized countries	paesi industrializzati
inflected forms	forme flesse
inland town	città nell'entroterra
Inscriptions	iscrizioni
insiders	interni
intercommunicating networks	connessioni per la comunicazione interna
Interpretability/interpretation	interpretazione
intrusion	intrusione
investigators	ricercatori
irregularity	irregolarità
isolation	isolamento
isoleted language	lingua isolata
Italian peninsula	penisola italiana
Italic	italico
iterative category	categoria iterativa
Iwaidja	Iwaidja
Jabiru	Jabiru
Japan	Giappone
Jewish diaspora	diaspora degli ebrei

knowledge	Conoscenza/sapere
Korea	Corea
lack	manca
land	terra
landraces	specie autoctone
language	Lingua/linguaggio
language analysis	analisi linguistica
language archives	archivi linguistici
language death	estinzione linguistica/morte linguistica
language differentiation/diversity	diversità linguistica
language documentation	documentazione linguistica
language documenter	documentatori della lingua
language extinction	estinzione linguistica
language families	famiglie linguistiche
language loss	perdita linguistica
language maintenance	mantenimento linguistico
language obsolescence	obsolescenza linguistica
language populations	popolazioni linguistiche
language revival	rivitalizzazione delle lingue
language shift	deriva linguistica
large plural	plurale maggiore
last hearers	ultimi ascoltatori
last speaker	ultimo parlante
left out	esclusi
legacy	eredità
lexicon	lessico
Library of Babel	Libreria di Babele
lifespans	aspettativa di vita
lily ponds	stagni di ninfee
lingua franca	lingua franca
linguist	linguista
linguistic change	cambiamento linguistico
linguistic description	descrizione linguistica
linguistic fieldwork	lavoro sul campo in ambito linguistico
linguistic heritage	eredità linguistica

linguistic investigation/research	ricerca linguistica
linguistic lineages	linee evolutive linguistiche
linguistic obscurity	oscurità linguistica
linguistic studies	studi linguistici
linguistic trace	traccia linguistica
linguistic work	lavoro linguistico
linguistics	linguistica
listening	ascoltare
loanwords	prestiti
local contexts	contesti locali
local idiom/language	lingua locale
local people	persone del luogo
local population	popolazione locale
local speech	lingua locale
local words	parole autoctone
location	localizzazione
long-term archiving/conservation	Archivio/conservazione a lungo termine
loss	perdita
loss rate	tasso di perdita
Loyalty Islands	Isole della Lealtà
Lusi	lusi
Macassar	Makassar
magpie geese	oche gazza
mainland	terraferma
Mali	Mali
Manangkardi	manangkardi
Mandara Mountains	Monti Mandara
Marrku language	lingua marrgu
masculines	maschili
materialism	materialismo
Mayan linguistics	linguistica maya
meanings	significati
media	mezzi
medicinal uses	usi medicinali
megadiverse countries	paesi mega diversi

Melanesia	Melanesia
meta-corpus	meta-corpus
metadata	metadati
metaphor	metafora
Mexican Chiapas	Chiapas messicano
micro-engraved materials	materiali micro-incisi
microfiche	microfiche
Middle East	Medio Oriente
minorities	minoranze
minority populations	popolazioni minoritarie
mirroring	riflesso
miscellaneous gender	genere misto
monoglot	monolingui
mood	modi
Morelia oenpellensis	morelia oenpellensis
moribund technologies	tecnologie moribonde
morphology	morfologia
Moscow	Mosca
mother tongue	madrelingua
mouldy	Ammuffire/muffa
multiformity	multiformità
multilingual settings	scenari multilingui
multilingualism	multilinguismo
multipurpose	polivalente
nation state	Nazioni/stati-nazioni
nationalist governments	governi nazionalisti
nations	nazioni
native speaker linguists	linguisti madrelingua
natural disasters	disastri naturali
natural linguists	linguisti naturali
natural scientists	naturalisti
natural species	specie naturali
naturalistic corpus	corpus naturalistico
Nen	nen
Neolithic agricultural societies	società neolitiche rurali

New Britain	Nuova Britannia
Nisenan	nisenan
norm	norma
noun paradigm	paradigma nominale
obituaries	necrologi
object	oggetti
oblivion	oblio
obscure words	parole oscure
observation	osservazioni
octogenarian	ottuagenario
odddity	rarietà
Oenpelli python	pitone oenpelli
official language	lingua ufficiale
opaque	torpidi
open-source software	programmi applicativi open source
Oral tradition	tradizioni orali
Oscan	osco
outside languages	lingue esterne
outsider linguists	linguisti esterni
pairings	combinazioni
panoply	panoplia
Papua New Guinea	Papua Nuova Guinea
parental generation	generazione dei genitori
parliament of tongues	parlamento delle lingue
parochialism	parrocchialismo
passed away	Estinti/morire
perishable	deteriorabili
persistence	persistenza
phenomena	fenomeni
physical records	registrazioni fisiche
plants	Piante/vegetali
playing devices	supporti di registrazione sonora
plural	plurale
pluralism	plaralismo
poisonous	velenose

policy	politica
political entities	entità politiche
population density	densità di popolazione
Portuguese	portoghese
posterity	posterì
power of speech	facoltà di parlare
practice	pratica
present tense	tempo presente
preservation	Preservazione/conservazione
pressures	pressioni
probing	inquisizione
programmes	programmi
progress	progresso
projections	previsioni
pronunciation	pronuncia
proprietary fonts	caratteri brevettati
prostarin	prostratina
Puerto Rico	Porto Rico
rankings	classifiche
rating	criterio
reawakened languages	lingue risvegliate
recognition	riconoscimento
Record/recording	Documentare/documentazione/ registrazione/registrare
reel-to-reel player/recorders	registratore a bobina aperta
registers	registri
reigning ideology	ideologia dominante
researchers	ricercatori
reservoir	serbatoio
resources	risorse
retention	conservazione
reviving	rivitalizzazione
Roman Empire	Impero romano
root	radice
Russian	russo
safe	sicura

Samoan	samoano
sample	campione
scholars	Studiosi/specialisti
scientific taxonomy	tassonomia scientifica
scores	Punteggi/percentuali
self-sufficiently	autosufficienza
sentence	frase
Sepik	Sepik
Seri	seri
settler	coloni
severely endangered	in pericolo grave
Siberia	Siberia
Sierra Nevada	Sierra Nevada
silence	silenzio
singular	singolare
slips past	scivolerebbero via
slogan	motto
small community	piccola comunità
small language	lingua minoritaria
small local languages	lingue autoctone minoritarie
small peoples	popolazioni minoritarie
small speech communities	comunità di lingue minoritarie
small-scale agricultural expansion	espansione agricola su piccola scala
small-scale societies	società a scala ridotta
social groupings	aggregazioni sociali
social isolation	isolamento sociale
social media	social media
social practice	pratica sociale
South Africa	Sudafrica
spangled grunter fish	leiopotherapon macrolepis
speaker-training	formazione dei parlanti
speakers	parlanti
species	specie
specimens	campioni
speech communities	comunità linguistiche

spiritual safety/security	sicurezza spirituale
stable	stabile
standard form	forma standard
state control	controllo di stato
state formation	formazione dello stato
steeple	campanile
story	storia
strangers	estranei
stratum	strato
structural densities	densità strutturali
sub-field	sottocategoria
Sub-Saharan Africa	Africa subsahariana
subject	soggetti
subsist	sussistere
suffix	suffisso
Sumerian	sumere
summed number	numero sommato
superimposed	sovrapposti
suppletive	suppletive
supporting	Supportare/supporto
survive	sopravvivere
Syzygium eucalyptoides	syzygium eucalyptoides
Taino	taino
Tape/tapes	Registrazione/cassette
taped material	materiale registrato
taxonomic naming	nomenclatura tassonomica
teaching	insegnamento
techniques	tecniche
technological advance/changes	avanzamento tecnologico/cambiamenti tecnologici
tense	tempi
terminology	terminologia
territories	Terre/territorio
text collections	collezioni di testi
The Odyssey	l'Odissea
Threat/threatened	Minaccia/minacciata

threatened languages	lingue a rischio
Tinígua	tinígua
to stamp out	soffocare
Tok Pisin	Tok Pisin
tok ples	tok ples
tonal system	sistema tonale
tongues	lingue
Tower of Babel	Torre di Babele
toxic properties	proprietà tossiche
Traditional culture	cultura tradizionale
traditional environments	ambiti tradizionali
traditional knowledge	Sapere/conoscenze tradizionale
traditional lands	terre tradizionali
traditional languages	lingue tradizionali
traditions	tradizioni
trained linguistic scholars	linguisti formati
trainees	aspiranti linguisti
training group	gruppo di formazione
transcriptions	trascrizioni
translations	traduzioni
transmission	trasmissione
travels	viaggi
tribal chiefs	capi delle tribù
tropical wetlands	paludi tropicali
twist	svolta
two-sided partnerships	collaborazioni bilaterali
Tzotzil	Tzotzil
Uisai dialect	dialetto uisai
Ulysses	Ulisse
Umbrians	umbri
unappealing	tediosa
uncertainty	incertezza
undervalued	sminuita
undetected	inesplorati
uniqueness	unicità

universal value system	sistema di valori universale
unstable	instabile
urban settings	contesti urbani
Uruguay	Uruguay
vagaries	varietà
valuation	valutazione
value	valore
variability	variabilità
variant forms	forme varianti
Variagation/varieties	Diversità/varietà
Vaupés region	dipartimento di Vaupés
verb	verbo
version	versione
vertebrate species	specie vertebrate
village	villaggio
virtue	virtù
visitors	visitatori
vitality	vitalità
vocabulary	vocabolario
volcanic eruptions	eruzioni vulcaniche
wax cylinder players	cilindri fonografici
western science	scienza occidentale
whitefella	bianchi
Wilyi	Wilyi
wipe out	Silenziato/spazzino via
wire recorders	registratori a filo
withdrawing	ritirandosi
world economy	economia globale
world languages	lingue mondiali
worth	valore
writing systems	sistema di scrittura
Zostera marina L.	Zostera marina L.

Conclusions

This dissertation focused on endangered languages and their documentation and revitalisation processes. Nicholas Evans' book *Words of Wonder* is the result of many years of fieldwork and research, and it is entirely focused on people: their stories, their voices, and their rights. He is able to represent each culture, community and individual with whom he interacted. His research is inestimable thanks to his purposes of preserving and rescuing the world's linguistic and cultural diversity. In today's linguistic scenario many languages - of the total 7,164 - are disappearing. This means that also a huge number of cultures, knowledge and realities are facing extinction. In these pages, the main internal and external causes of this event have been analysed and it has been shown the disastrous consequences of losing linguistic diversity and their effects on human's cognitive processes too. In fact, each language has its own stories to tell, and it is a human need to share those stories with those who are different, in order to be recognised by others and to find oneself in the meanwhile. Apart from external and imposing causes, one of the most impactful things that leads to language death is the negative ideology towards that language: the superiority and inferiority attitude towards it may encourage the disruption of its use, inevitably falling silent. It can only be counteracted by a dramatic change in ideology which can be achieved by using and keeping that language alive, recognising its value and importance in the world's linguistic heritage. A great deal remains to be done to completely revive minority languages that have already disappeared. Despite this, in the last decades, a lot of attention has been put on different solutions to this phenomenon. As shown in chapter 1 and 2 of this dissertation, the new technological advancements and new studies in documentary linguistics may be an initial step towards the future applications of language reawakening. Today's new awareness and interest towards language death has developed many refreshing attempts to save endangered languages: research programmes, indigenous movements, governments, and schooling systems are actively trying to support their linguistic diversity. It should be fundamental to enhance the collaboration between indigenous people – for their priceless traditional knowledge - and professionals of the linguistic field - for their academic formation – in order to create a thorough language documentation which can be used for practical applications and studies. This type of progress is surely crucial for languages that have not completely disappeared and therefore, there is still time to try and preserve it.

The purpose of this translation project was to encourage the interest and knowledge of the current global linguistic situation and to reach all those who might be interested in these topics.

Therefore, the goal was to create a target text that could be fully integrated into the Italian scientific literature and that could support the original intentions of the author, who wanted his text to be informative and persuasive. These functions were achieved by fitting with the main aspects of the Italian genre - so that the reading could be fluent for an Italian speaker – and by keeping the author’s anecdotal narration which is filled with crucial information and indigenous knowledge that he collected during fieldwork.

Evans’ book is an eye-opening experience about the need to take on the responsibility for the disappearance of languages all around the world, so that it can be possible to take action against it and ‘listen while we can’.

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