

# **Incorporating Language Diversity into Cultural Heritage**

## **Research and Presentations**

### Video Transcript

Hello, my name is Mary Linn, and I am a curator of language and cultural vitality at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. I have a PhD in linguistics, and I was trained to document and describe Indigenous and minority languages, especially those in the United States. And I have written a grammar and dictionary of a small Native American language.

I also trained community people in linguistics and language teaching, so that they may work on their languages and help keep their languages alive and being used in daily use. And I have also been a linguist in a museum for nearly twenty years, where I have started collections of Native American languages, trained community members to use museum collections, and help people represent their languages and cultures to the larger public audience.

My lecture is on minority languages and museums. First, I will introduce the idea of language endangerment and the crisis of language shift in the world today. We will see why the loss of languages is important to museum professionals and discuss how your work can help minority languages, even if you're not a linguist.

Then I want to encourage you to participate actively in video documentation of traditional cultures and languages. We will look a little bit at why to collect, what to collect, and how to collect. In particular, we will look at a re-elicitation task that is used by linguists to get richer linguistic data out of cultural documentation.

The world has about 7,000 languages. We think that this is about the rough number of languages that the world has always had when we look at historical documentation. However, right now, the world is experiencing a major crisis in the loss of human languages. Right now, nearly ninety percent of the world's languages are in some degree of danger of disappearing. This means the speakers gradually shift to a majority language. This can happen in one generation, especially in context of immigration and urbanization, or it can happen gradually over many generations of being a minority language and culture.

Among a majority language and culture, minority languages generally have fewer economic and educational opportunities that help keep them alive, and keep people from shifting to the

majority languages, but the end result is that languages and cultures that they express are being lost.

Let's look at this map of language diversity and language loss in 1920. The dark green areas are language areas of diversity that have kept their languages. The lighter areas, the yellow and oranges, are those that have lost nearly twenty to thirty-three to fifty percent in some cases, already by the 1920s. You can see that the areas of long and intense colonialization from England are the main areas of language loss, such as the United States and Australia.

Let's jump ahead at seventy-five years later, and the world has experienced quite a few years of global economics by this time, and you can see the situation is dire. Those areas that had fifty percent language loss now have up to ninety percent language loss. And you can see that that fewer areas are actually not affected by language loss, Asia, now has more areas of yellow, as do most of South America as well.

Now let's look ahead, only twenty-five years to the present. This map is from 2019. You can see that, at this point, almost every area of the world is affected with the majority being up to thirty-three to ninety percent. The only green areas are those that are areas of more isolation, such as Greenland and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa or areas of low linguistic diversity to begin with, and therefore not experienced as much loss, such as Belgium or Saudi Arabia. Also, if you look at New Zealand, which is green—that is because they have reversed the language shift, and Māori is doing much better than it was twenty-five and fifty years ago.

Now let's talk about language diversity in China. China has 297 languages. It contains approximately thirteen percent of Asian languages. This diversity broadly follows global patterns as well, with higher diversity in the southern tropical regions, such as Yunnan Province, than in the north, and in higher diversities of biodiverse mountainous areas, such as the Tibetan Plateau.

If we look at this map of language density in China, the darker shading signifies large numbers of languages spoken in that province. For example, we can contrast the 155 languages spoken in Yunnan Province, or for about one in about every 300 people, with only eight languages, or one in every 4.7 million people that are spoken in the northeastern province of Heilongjiang.

Now let's look even closer at the languages of this issue of Sichuan Province, and that is what's called the ethnic corridor. You can see the larger languages, the Tibetan languages Amdo and Kham. The majority language, Mandarin Chinese, and Sichuan dialect, and the larger minority language, Yi to the south that extends into Yunnan Province. But in the middle you can see lots

of smaller languages that we're going to be calling Tibetic languages. When we talk about minority languages in Tibetan areas of China, we often refer to minority Tibetic languages. This includes Tibetan languages and non-Tibetan languages that are spoken by people who are culturally Tibetan.

Let's look at these minority Tibetan languages. There's two ways we can look at this. One are Tibetan languages that are very small— by Tibetan languages where these are related to each other. These include large or majority Tibetan languages, such as Amdo and Khams, and the Lhasa Tibetan dialect as well. It also includes some of those smaller or minority Tibetan languages. Naxi in the south, and it goes into Yunnan Province. And the unrecognized variations of Naxi la say, Mel masa, and there's also unnamed Tibetan languages, such as the variety that spoken around Lhagang Monastery in western Sichuan. There's also a Tibetic spoken in Shaowa township in southern Gansu Province. This is a Tibetan language, although the people do not consider themselves ethnic Tibetan. So we can see among the Tibetan languages, there's a wide variety of size of speakers.

Another way we can look at minority Tibetan languages are non-Tibetan languages that are not related to Tibetan, but they are spoken in Tibetic areas, or they consider themselves culturally Tibetan. Some examples of these are Khroskyabs, or Lavrung, Ersu, and Zhaba. Minority Tibetan languages, as well as minority and local or small languages around the world, are endangered. The younger generations are ceasing to speak their heritage languages, and they cease to pass them down to their children. In other words, they are shifting to larger culturally and economically more prestigious languages. As these generations grow older, the languages cease to be spoken on a daily basis. And when the last people of this last speaking generation dies, the language falls silent, unless we do something about this.

What do we lose when we lose a language? Well, we can look at this at human scientific and cultural levels. One of the most important things that we lose, our people's identities, can be on many different levels. It can be ethnic or subethnic, can be regional, local, religious, class, family, or clan, or even polity base or metropolitan or village base. The loss of identity has intergenerational impact on health and well-being, including lower graduation rates and higher cases of diabetes, alcoholism and drug abuse, and suicide rates in societies that have or are experiencing language loss. The opposite of this is also true. Those cultures that are reviving their languages are experiencing high rates of graduation and lowering rates of health and abuse issues.

When we lose a language, we also lose the traditional ecological knowledge, or how to care for the land, how to use resources from the land to live, including food and shelter and

medicine. The loss of traditional ecological knowledge and oral traditions to pass on knowledge are associated with the degradation of local economies, traditional ways of making a living, while living in situ, such as farming, pastoral care hunting, fishing, gathering, and the many works of artisans. For example, people may cease to know where certain grasses are located, or which grasses to use for traditional basket making or mat making or house making.

We also lose larger scientific knowledge for the rest of the world. When we lose languages, we also lose a trove of this intellectual knowledge. And we also lose how human languages work and our larger knowledge of what it means to be human, and how the human brain works with language. The linguist Ken Hale once said the loss of local languages and of the cultural systems which they express has meant irretrievable loss of diverse and interesting intellectual wealth. When you lose a language, a large part of the culture goes too, because much of that culture is encoded in the language.

So now that we understand a little bit about language endangerment and language loss, we may ask, “Well, as museum professionals, what can we do?” We’re not trained as linguists, and we’re not language teachers. Museums, special collections, libraries, and archives are called memory institutions. As such, museums house more than just objects, but we may collect memories and knowledge about the cultures that made and use these objects. After all, what good is an object if we don’t know who made it, how it was made, what it was for, how people felt about it? Was it beautiful? Was it just functional? Was it spiritual? Was it a bad example of that object? And what was it called?

Language is the basis for culture, and as museum professionals, it is our job to safeguard cultures and memories. We can take care of the collections that we have, but we can also actively shape our collections. We can do this in two main ways. By working with researchers and community members who are documenting today, we can make sure that their documentation collections are properly housed, archived, and accessible. And we can do this by actively video recording traditional culture ourselves.

It is especially important to create a record when traditional ways are changing fast and being lost. This is called primary documentation then, and it is a research basis for current exhibits, folklife festivals, and living museums. And as we see, it can be repurposed for maintaining minority languages, reversing shift of minority languages to majority languages, and reviving silent languages. In other words, you are creating a record for many generations to come.

What should you record? Well, we really want to record the process of making material culture, such as craft—for example, textiles, basketry, the instruments used to do farming or

pastoral care, tools, kitchenware. We want to record ritual objects and decorations and ritual costuming as well. We want to look at architectures, your houses, even the individual parts of it, such as frames and mantels. We want to look at foodways as well. What are people eating? How do they prepare it? What do they eat on special days? We also want to look at intangible cultural heritage. This is the knowledge and skills that are needed to produce material culture and lifeways. We want to look at oral traditions such as legends and historical narratives, for sure, but also include other things like jokes and insults and children's games. We want to look at the performing arts, music, dance, theater, rituals, festival events, big pageantry, but also the small everyday practices. We want to look at the knowledge concerning nature and the universe, this traditional ecological knowledge that underlies a lot of the other knowledge. In other words, take a walk with an elder and talk about the plants around you and how they can be used.

That's a good place to start, but there's a lot there that I just mentioned. So, how do you know what to record? I suggest working with the community that the language is situated in. We call this the source community. The source community, or people whose languages and cultures you are recording and whose objects are housed in your collections and represented in your exhibits. These are your main community ties. Involve the community and what to record from the very beginning. Creating video documentation with community members and in the community often leads to record recording, more than what you the researcher has ever had in mind. What you end up recording is what people feel is the most important to them to record, not necessarily what the researcher feels is the most important. This creates a more meaningful and useful documentation. We don't want to record just the exotic but the everyday. This is particular for helping revive languages which really need documentation of the everyday use of language.

I want to look at an example. A young linguist named Yulha has gone to the University of Oregon to learn how to be a linguist. She's from the Khroskryabs community. This language used to be called Lavrung, or you may know it as that as well. As a linguist, she began recording people in her community and her village, and this became the basis of her documentation work. The language is an unwritten language, and unwritten languages are even more susceptible to language shift and loss because they don't have the underlying documentation, they are generally not used in educational systems, and they're often considered just poor dialects of a language that is written.

When she was at the University of Oregon, she started sending back some audio tapes of her narrating her life in Oregon, and she sent them back to her family, and these got spread around in her village. She ultimately ended up making a series of videos to send back to her

community in the same way, things that she was interested in and things that the community was interested in knowing about her life in the United States. This is a wonderful example of documenting what is needed and wanted in a community. It may seem very little to videotape on your cell phone and send it through WeChat, but it really does make a difference and is the underlying basis of a lot of work that is being done today on the language.

Let's talk a little bit about archives. A language archive is often situated in a museum or a special collections in a library. Language archives are slightly different than most archives in that they contain generally primary and secondary language materials. Primary documentation includes the audio and video with spoken language, documents or books written in language, and elicitation work by a linguist, such as what Yu Lha was doing. Secondary documentation includes grammars and dictionaries and teaching grammars that are written about the language. Any primary recordings can be used later by communities and linguists for secondary documentation for teaching materials, for creating children's story books. And the list goes on and can be used for almost anything else.

Most museums and special collections don't have a specific language archive, and you may never be tasked with making a specific language archive, but primary language can be found throughout other areas of museums as well. In particular, language is often found in early maps and in genealogical records. On the screen, you can see a photograph of Mrs. Charmaine Baker. She is a Ponca researcher, and she was working in the National Anthropological Archives at the Smithsonian Institution. She didn't find much on her language until we looked at maps. She is holding up a map, a hand-drawn map of a river in Nebraska, a state in the United States, that has the names of the Ponco villages on them, and other Ponco information.

Another place that you can find language already in your collections are in biological collections. Often identification tags and field journals or sketchbooks will have Native or Indigenous names of the items in it as well. For example, you can see on your screen a very early sketchbook by Philip George Frederick from about 1736. He went to the United— it wasn't the United States yet. He went to Georgia, and he started drawing the flora and fauna around him. Besides writing in Latin and in German, he also recorded the Creek Native American language, and the Yuchi Native American language. In the case of Yuchi, this is the earliest known documentation of the language.

You may not be able to build a language archive, but you can keep language in mind and create language-rich materials as you build other collections. When you video record traditional culture, you are usually recording language as well. When you record, this

documentation becomes part of the permanent record of this culture and its language. You can get natural language data occurring in natural contexts when you record traditional culture, and modern culture, as Yulha did in her voyages in the United States. You can record a variety of speakers, age, gender, occupations, regions. All of this adds to a really rich linguistic data. The everyday, as I said before, is important.

There's an approach that many people use when their languages fall silent, when they no longer have fluent first-language speakers alive, are using the language daily. They have to fall back on documentation of the language if they want to revive the language. We have several very successful examples of a language that falls silent and then is later revived again from documentation. Examples of this include modern Israeli Hebrew and the Myaamia language, or Miami language, spoken in the United States now, again, and also the Wampanoag language, which was the first language encountered by English-speaking colonists when they arrived in the United States. It was silent for about a hundred years or more, and it's now being spoken by younger generations.

So, we can say that a language is not "dead," it is not "lost," if the language exists in any kind of usable form. In other words, documentation, and if there is a community that identifies with it and wants to revive it.

So, how do we begin collecting? First, I realize that most of you may not have video training. But we have a handy new Video Production Handbook that talks about videotaping as storytelling, and it introduces the ideas of framing your picture, lighting, and getting the best audio. It is an introduction also to getting informed consent. In other words, getting people's permission to record them and to archive them and to use the recordings. We have this little handbook available in English, Mandarin, and Tibetan, and we encourage you to use this if you are starting and have never done any videotaping before.

In most cases, you're going to work with somebody who is behind a video camera, and you will be the person asking the questions or you will be training a community person to ask these questions. So I'm going to give you a little just kind of down-and-dirty advice on how to do this.

On the screen, you can see a photograph of a young woman who is learning to interview. There's definitely somebody behind the camera, but notice that that she's taking notes, even while she's listening and talking and it's being recorded. And notice on the couch behind them is her cell phone, where she is making a backup recording on her phone. So, the person behind

the camera is videotaping and getting the main audio, but she has backup in her cell phone and by taking her notes by hand.

Now let's say you've gone out and taken some really wonderful video that you're very excited about, and you can't wait to use it. You get it back and you listen to it, and you realize it's a really good documentation, but nobody's really talking in it. In fact, most people don't narrate themselves, their daily lives. If you take a photograph, if you take a video of a woman weaving, she's not talking, generally, about what she's doing while she's doing it.

So we have what is called a stimulus re-elicitation task that we can do in order to get more language data after we've taken the natural videotape of the process. Stimulus re-elicitation is when you watch the video that you've made at the event or process or game with your consultant or consultants. You want to watch the video back with the consultants, at least one, preferably three times, and even more if you can.

The first time you watch, people generally laugh. They're a little embarrassed about seeing themselves. And in this time, you're recording the session of them watching it, and you're able to record the impression of the event or process. Oftentimes what comes out during this first watching is their reaction of whether it was typical or if they did a good job, or what they would like to have seen, done better. But you can also ask them questions afterwards, such as: how did you learn to do this? Do you always do it this way?

The second time you watch it, you want to turn the sound of the video off. Watch it in silence. This time, you want to have the consultant narrate what they're doing. This is not an easy task, and sometimes it takes them a couple tries. So the second time might take a couple times to get it, so that they feel a little bit more comfortable about it. The point of this is that in narrating what they're doing, they're going to be providing you with specific vocabulary for that task process or event.

The third time you watch the video again, you usually turn the sound off. And this time you stop in different places, and you ask them questions that you have. You ask them specific questions, such as: what are you doing here? For example, if you're talking to a grandmother making something, you may get more specific vocabulary, again, such as "grating" or "beating" or "pulling" something, aligning these kinds of words. You can also stop to ask them specific vocabulary about what they're using, the tools that they're using, such as the part of a loom. What specific type of material are they using? You can also ask them the specific meaning of what they're doing, or what they have made. For example, if there's a certain pattern, does it mean something? If they're using colors, do the colors mean anything?

Let's actually try this once. Let's watch a video of some young men playing a traditional bone game. We're going to watch it first together.



Okay, now that you've watched the video, you might ask them such questions as this: is the typical a typical example of the game, it seemed pretty short. Do you usually play longer? How did you learn how to play the game? How old were you when you first played this game? How many people can play at a time? What is the goal, and what are the rules? Do you always play on a blanket? Is it always played in summer and outside or on special occasions?

Okay, let's watch the video a second time. And this time, I'm going to play the part of the consultant narrating the video. Okay, here I am. It's my turn, and I flicked the bone. It goes off, so I don't get any points. Here's my friend. He's going second. He's crouching down. He's aiming. He shoots. He misses too. My turn again, and I shoot, it goes off the blanket, so it's my turn. I'm going to go, and yet— No, it doesn't work. Actually, I think I hit it a little bit. Yeah, now I missed. Okay. It's my friend's turn again, He always is very careful in his aiming. There he goes. Yep. Here you hit it, so he gets to go again. There you go. And there we go. Nope. Yeah, he's— It's pretty funny. It was a pretty bad shot, so— And I go. Oh, that one hit me. We're laughing about that. Okay. We kind of have a dry spell here. Nobody's really getting anything. And there again. And there we go. I finally got one again. It's my turn. Taking a little bit more time here, and nope, still doesn't work. There we go. It hits in. Okay, we're going to finish this game. We finished it up and put it in the middle so it's ready for the next game to go.

Okay. By doing that narration, we get vocabulary such as “crouch,” crouch down, to aim, to flick, to miss, my turn, to bounce, and other vocabulary like this.

The third time you watch this video, you may stop along the way to ask questions like: what do you call the bones again? Are there names for the scoring or the turns? How do you say out of bounds? Can you lose points? Okay, so you kind of understand this re-elicitation task now.

If you look at the photograph on your screen, you can see a picture of Jiatai, who is using the re-elicitation method in Dawu County and Sichuan Province. He's a young person that's learning to document his language and culture, and he is working with the family in the videotape that he's made. They're going through it using this stimulus re-elicitation. And as you can tell, they're having fun. Stimulus re-elicitation is a fun task. People enjoy seeing themselves, enjoy talking about what they were doing, and the recording that you're making of the re-elicitation task itself becomes a wonderful trove of people talking, laughing, discussing, and negotiating information about what they're looking at.

Re-elicitation does not happen just with videotapes. You can also use this kind of technique to help bring people into your museum, into your collections, and have them talk about the traditional material culture that you have housed in your collection.

On the screen, you can see a photograph of Native Americans in Oklahoma from the Natchez people in the ethnology collections of the Sam Noble Museum in Oklahoma. They're looking at traditional ball sticks. These are sticks that are used to play a traditional ball game. They're talking about the differences in who made what kind of stick, who the potential makers were. The museum didn't know who made them, but the Natchez people did know— recognized people's styles. Notice that they're older people and younger people. They're talking about the ball sticks, the language, and getting the younger people involved as well is really crucial.

Another photograph is a picture of Alutiiq researchers from Kodiak Island in Alaska, and they're at the Smithsonian in the National Museum of Natural History and their collections, and they're looking at some traditional boots and who the makers were, what they were made out of, about when they were made. They also, in looking at the collections, looked at the elliptic lamps. These lamps used whale oil to light the insides of traditional homes, and they were all stored as you see them, with a groove in it to put the whale oil facing up. The young researchers basically told the museum that that was the improper way to store them, that they needed to be stored with the groove facing down, so that the spirit of the lamp could not get out. The museum took them very seriously, and turned all of the traditional Alutiiq lamps the other direction.

So this kind of relationship in going over the items you have in your collection, gets rich linguistic data, it gets a lot of other cultural data, forges a relationship between you and the community, and helps you more properly care for your items.

In conclusion, you as a museum professional are not just housed with taking care of items, but also taking care of the memories around these items. You can be involved in rich cultural documentation that leads to rich language data. You can be involved with the community to participate and engage in your items and the languages. And as such, you are caretakers of the past but also of the future, and importantly, the future of minority languages.

Thank you.