

WORLD

When A Language Dies, What Happens To Culture?

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JOHN DONVAN, HOST:

This is TALK OF THE NATION. I'm John Donvan.

We now turn to the world's 7,000 languages and the fact that nearly half of them are expected to vanish over the next 100 years. You're going to give me a moment to sip my water so that my voice returns. That was the sound of sipping water and it worked. Like the whole language in India or the Panau language of Papua New Guinea. And in the U.S., the Pacific Northwest is a major global hotspot for disappearing languages, like Athabaskan, a language of the Siletz tribe. Some languages have already gone extinct. In 2008, Chief Marie Smith Jones of Anchorage, Alaska, passed away, and she was the last native speaker of the Eyak language.

And if you speak an endangered language, we want to ask you in this program, what would you lose if that language were to disappear? Our number is 800-989-8255. Our email address is talk@npr.org. And you can join the conversation at our website. Go to npr.org and click on TALK OF THE NATION.

Well, joining us now is Bud Lane. He is the vice chairman of the Siletz tribal council. He also speaks the endangered language Athabaskan. He's also a language and traditional arts instructor for the Siletz tribe. Bud right now is participating in a program about endangered languages at this year's Smithsonian Folklife Festival. And he joins us on the phone from his office in Oregon. Welcome, Bud Lane, to TALK OF THE NATION.

BUD LANE: (Speaking foreign language) Hello.

DONVAN: Hello. I think you just said hello in another language to me, and I appreciate that because we're really interested in hearing the music of the language that you are working so hard to preserve and to grow. But I find it interesting to know ahead of time that you did not actually grow up in a bilingual household, and in fact as a kid, you only spoke a little bit of Athabaskan. So why did you decide to make yourself fluent in it?

LANE: Well, I always wanted to know my language. Actually, there's a couple of languages spoke here at Siletz - actually three major ones, English, of course, and the Athabaskan language, and then there's an Indian trade language that we call Chetco-Tolowa or Chetco jargon. And I knew a little bit of both of the Indian languages but as a young adult I heard other elders speaking fluently. And Athabaskan is always - was something that I wanted to do, so I made it my business to apprentice myself to those who could still speak the language when I was in my 20s.

DONVAN: So it was always there for you. It was always around. It was part of the background. So in some level, it must have been sinking in.

LANE: Oh, of course. But you have to remember in a lot of ways, languages were discouraged and not in ways that were so evident. You know, people kidded people about speaking the language. It was not seen as something that was - I don't know - a wonderful thing to do, and so many of our elders would

not even speak in public. The people that I learned from, I could never get them to really talk in public much. I'd have to go to their houses and sit with them just one on one basically to learn or in a smaller group.

DONVAN: So you're almost saying that once the language becomes not spoken by very many people, it starts to become almost uncool to speak it?

LANE: Well, it did then.

DONVAN: Hmm.

LANE: The reverse is true now.

DONVAN: Right.

LANE: It's very popular and very cool. We're talking 30 years ago, 25 years ago.

DONVAN: So you're part of making it cool and congratulations to you, quite seriously, for that. But I'm really interested to know how do you go about growing it?

LANE: Well, it's very difficult. You can't run down to the minimart and buy something in Athabaskan. Using the language, the clerks wouldn't understand, or you can't pay for your gas, and you act with your - the attendant there. So the challenge is for tribes and for individuals who are trying to revitalize, you have to - there has to be a need for a language. You just don't speak a language for no reason. And so making that need happen and making it relevant is the biggest challenge, and there's a lot of ways that we do that. We do that by - we conduct our traditional ceremonies, which, by the way, just ended over the weekend, in the Athabaskan language.

LANE: And - but also there's other things that you want to do. You want to learn to teach kids to sing songs and other things where children want to participate and want to do that. So creating that and coming up with that sort of innovative way of making young people attracted to it is an important part of what we're doing.

DONVAN: I'm curious because the language grew so small. And by small, I'm really talking about the number of people remaining speaking it, just so I'm clear about what I'm - my language is. But as it's based in that sense, grew so small. When you're in your 20s and wanted to pick it up and you end up almost had to pry it out of the people who spoke it, you know, comfortably and natively, are you left with only a fragment, a piece of what was there, or do you know that you have the whole language as it was spoken, say, 100 years ago?

LANE: We know that we have a really comprehensive vocabulary, and we have lots of legacy tapes and things from - our people were interviewed pretty widely, even people that were way before my time, so we know that it's a pretty comprehensive vocabulary. But it's true. You lose things over time. You do. And I think that we are dealing with a large piece of what once was. Yeah. That's a fair statement.

DONVAN: And how do you know how it sounded? Do you have - nowadays, you could literally record somebody. Do you - have you gone about doing that?

LANE: Oh, yeah. Yeah. As a matter of fact, one of the things that - the first things that we wanted to do was, you know, document everything that we had. There was this period of documentation. And so we

began to develop a lot of written materials but then began recordings. And we have the legacy recordings from - some of them are very old wax cylinders from the Smithsonian Institution, for instance.

But in a more modern sense, I began to record a dictionary that we have, and it took me two years, recorded all the 14,000 entries. And we worked with a group called Living Tongues, the Institute for Living Tongues, and they put it into a database, which is online now, and it's available to anybody. Our tribal members use it all the time, and you can go there, say, type in a word, say, for baby basket, for our traditional basket that we make to carry babies. And it's a search engine. It'll search the dictionary, and then it'll come up and it'll tell you, you know, a noun. It'll say (speaking foreign language). And then you click a little icon. It'll say (speaking foreign language) and you can hear it. So it's a good tool for us.

(LAUGHTER)

DONVAN: Thank goodness for technology. We're asking our listeners who also speak languages that are not widely spoken any longer and in danger of disappearing. We're asking them to call in, and our question to them is, what would you lose if the language vanished? And I want to ask you that, first of everybody since you're working so hard and actually have been very successful in keeping it going. But it sounds like it's a lot of effort. Why do it? What would you lose if the language were gone?

LANE: You would lose your people's view of the world, and not just of the world today but you would lose your view of how a world came to be for you. And there's lots of ways to describe things in many languages, of course. But like with ours, I'll just give you an example of how our people view our land here. You always - you hear different stories about how people love the land in many different cultures. But our word for the earth is (speaking foreign language), and what it literally means is made for you, and that's our view of our land. God made these lands for us. It's made for us to inhabit and to benefit from. And so when you take - when you say a world view, there's just a different way of looking at the world..

DONVAN: You know, that was such a perfect example. That was (unintelligible).

LANE: ...than another culture might have. And I'm not saying it's superior to any other culture. I'm just saying that it's different, and that's what we talk about, about language lost and the culture and the world view that goes with those words.

DONVAN: Let's bring in Chris(ph) from Detroit, Michigan. Hi, Chris. You're on TALK OF THE NATION.

CHRIS: Hi. Good afternoon.

DONVAN: Hi.

LANE: (Foreign language spoken)

DONVAN: (Foreign language spoken), Chris. What's your - tell us your story.

CHRIS: Well, I'm Chaldean, and Chaldeans come from the northern part of Iraq, and we speak the language called Aramaic, which actually is a very historical language and one that was spoken worldwide and spoken by Christ himself too. So I think one thing that would be lost if that language doesn't continue to be flourished is just the ability to, A, translate into documents that we still come

across all the time that would've been written in that language. And then, B, also there is just certain ways of communication that can just only be expressed in that language and it's hard to find a word or...

DONVAN: Can you give me a really good example of that?

CHRIS: Just like (foreign language spoken), like love, you know, it's just - it's so manifest and you can apply it in so many different ways. And, you know, it just has a very ancient context to it. So anything...

DONVAN: Well, I just want to push you a little bit because I know you said that, but I'm not feeling it. So I want you to find a way to make me kind of - maybe it's impossible because it can't be translated. But what's lost in the translation?

CHRIS: Yeah. I don't know. I think it's just the way that it's just - it's spoken, the way that it's communicated. You know, a lot of people outside who would watch a conversation going on would think that there might be an argument happening or, you know, there is just a lot of drive and passion in the words that can just convey so much just depending on how you're using it at that particular moment. And I really can't think of an example off the top of my head, except - but I do want make another point regarding the possible extinction of it and that's because of, you know, Chaldeans and Christians, in general, how they're persecuted in Iraq. And because of that, they've been forced to leave the country, and whether they travel to the greater Middle East where, you know, Arabic is obviously the majority spoken language or to Europe or even to America. It becomes more and more, you know, I'm first-generation American.

And, you know, there isn't many of my generation that can speak the language anymore because we've been, you know, taught to become Americanize and, you know, forget that language and learn the English language. So it's been lost and there is a little bit of hope of the younger generation, you know, wanting to pick it up.

DONVAN: All right, Chris. Thanks very much for your call.

LANE: You know what, if I could expand on that a little bit about love, he brought up a wonderful point. In our language, it's oh, we say a love between a man and a wife or a person and a significant other is (speaking foreign language). So it's viewed as this deep love. But the other - between family members and others is (speaking foreign language). So there's two kinds of love. So it's actually - breaks it down a step further in our language than it does in the English language.

DONVAN: And that feels real. That is - that's - that has impact and clout that difference.

LANE: Yes. Yes, it does.

DONVAN: Wow. You're listening to TALK OF THE NATION on NPR News. Let's bring in John from South Lake Tahoe, California. Hi, John(ph). You're on TALK OF THE NATION.

JOHN: Hi.

DONVAN: Hi.

JOHN: Pleasure to be with you today.

DONVAN: Great to have you.

JOHN: I work with native elements. We do cultural revitalization projects with Native Americans and, recently, with Polynesians a lot of it's in (unintelligible) building. But I've also done mapping projects. And so reclaiming the names, I think is one of the best starting points. I worked with the Washoe tribe in Tahoe, which has turned into Tahoe. And...

DONVAN: Oh, interesting.

LANE: Yeah.

JOHN: ...and we - I believe they have 12 native speaker - fluent speakers left in the tribe here in Tahoe. And...

DONVAN: How much - when they left the tribe - how much did the knowledge and, you know, just language clout did they take with them?

JOHN: Well, they were forced into the Stewart Indian Schools, you know, at the turn of the century. So at first it was beat out of them, and then slowly like your former guest said, it just became something we didn't talk or speak. So revitalizing the culture, the language is the basis of the culture. And so place names, I think, is a great place to start. And so working on mapping projects is key because when you're at these sites, you realize that the names don't come from a person, a great person or a person that owned the land. It came from what they did at these places.

DONVAN: All right. John, thanks very much. I just want to go back to Bud Lane and sort of take your point where it sounds like what John is saying, Bud, is that these words tell a story. They're not just names of things, but the names themselves contain a sort of story and a connection and a history.

LANE: Well, and they cannot - they can also describe the physical place, to some extent. My family, actually, hails from the mouth of the Rogue River, and that the term for it (speaking foreign language), and what it literally means is good, south place there, meaning on the south bank of the Rogue River, at the mouth. And the opposing village was called (speaking foreign language), which means rocks inside. And it's describing two, great big rocks that stood at the mouth of the north bank of the Rogue River and the village was just inside there.

So there's many different ways that - or could be a food source. Up north, there's a village called (speaking foreign language), which means mussels a lot there because of the ocean mussels that were at the mouth of that river. So there's so much cultural knowledge and identity contained within those names - those place names and the language itself. It's pretty amazing, really.

DONVAN: But to somebody like you who becomes an activist for a language and learns it and wants to promote it, are - do you - are you actually fluent? Can you just rattle off a whole conversation and tell jokes and get mad at the guy who crosses you in traffic in the language?

LANE: Well, I call myself very proficient at the language. People always say I'm the most fluent member of the Siletz tribe. And that maybe true. But, yeah, I can speak with different people.

DONVAN: Wow.

LANE: It's not...

DONVAN: Do you dream in the language?

LANE: No. As a matter of fact, I don't. But what I can tell you is it's just like with anything, like my daughter's - my granddaughter's middle name is (speaking foreign language), which means flower in our language. And when I think of her and her name - her English name is Halle, but to me, she's (speaking foreign language), so it's kind of an interchangeable thing. But I think when you grow up as an English speaker first, you're always, all through your life, you do think in English. But to me, it's kind of a simultaneous thing with Athabaskan. The more your head's in it, the more you learn it. We do live in an English-speaking world, though, in language struggles. I mean, it's a struggle all the time.

DONVAN: That English is - can be pretty overpowering, at times.

LANE: Well, it's not just English. It's also Spanish. And it's my understanding that Spanish, Chinese and English will be the dominant languages of the world at some point, and they already are pretty much.

DONVAN: Well, you really made a terrific argument over the last 15 minutes for what can be lost when the language disappears. And you've brought me around on it and then so did our callers. I know a lot of other people were lined up to call. You can join - make your comments on our website. So, please, do so. I just want to thank Bud Lane. He's vice chairman of the Siletz Tribal Council. He'll be featured in the program at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, which opens June 26th. It's called One World, Many Voices. And there's a link to that on our website on TALK OF THE NATION at npr.org. Thanks a very much. This is John Donovan, and this is, in several languages, TALK OF THE NATION.

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