The author discusses the efforts to compile a dictionary and text collection of the Native-American language Salish-Pend d'Oreille. The author mentions the assistance provided by the tribal elders in preserving their language. She explains the factors that bring Salish-Pend d'Oreille to this precarious position. The obvious answer, the absolute necessity for most Americans to speak English in order to survive economically, together with the appeal of mainstream American culture to most younger tribal members, tells only part of the story. Another factor is the boarding schools that many Native children were forced to attend, starting in the nineteenth century.
AT A LOSS FOR WORDS

The Native-American language Salish-Pend d'Oreille is on the brink of disappearing. More than half the world's 6,000 languages will be gone by the end of the century.

John Peter Paul, a rugged, dignified man, was extremely ill during the summer of 2000. He was ninety-one years old and suffering from stomach cancer. Still, every week he insisted on wheeling himself into the Ussnélxw (Longhouse) on the Flathead reservation in northwestern Montana. There, he and other elders of the Salish and Pend d'Oreille tribes would gather in meetings I had set up to expand and fine-tune the dictionary of their language and the collection of texts that we had been working on together for many years.

Flathead River area in Montana where the Hell Gate Treaty of 1855 established a reservation for the Native American Pend d'Oreille, Salish, and Kootenai tribes. The Pend d'Oreilles had lived in this area for thousands of years; the Salish originally lived farther south.

On one occasion in midsummer, when John's illness reached a crisis point, he refused to go to the hospital because he didn't want to miss our scheduled meeting the next day. As a result, he had to be rushed to the hospital in desperate condition the next morning. His fierce dedication to the task of documenting and preserving his language almost cost him his life.

Other elders I work with share his dedication to their language and the culture it expresses. Some are Pend d'Oreilles, like John; the rest are Bitterroot Salish (also called Flatheads). Although they are different tribes, they share the same language—which is called, logically enough, Salish-Pend d'Oreille--albeit with minor dialect differences.

But like so many indigenous languages on every populated continent, Salish-Pend
d'Oreille is on the point of vanishing. Fewer than thirty fluent native speakers remain, and nearly all of them are elderly. The great majority of the roughly 6,000 Salish and Pend d'Oreille tribal members do not speak their ancestral language at all.

The fluent Salish-Pend d'Oreille speakers who work with me report that the only opportunities they have to "talk Indian" are at the tribes' Culture Committee's weekly elders' meetings from the fall through the spring, and in their weekly language sessions with me during the summer. John Peter Paul, who died in 2001 at the age of ninety-two, was married to his wife Agnes Poker Jim Paul, a Bitterroot Salish, for seventy-two years; they were the last married couple who spoke their language regularly at home. Their oldest daughter, Josephine Quequesah, is a fluent and highly skilled speaker of the language, but some of her younger siblings have a more passive level of fluency.

What happened to bring Salish-Pend d'Oreille to this precarious position? The obvious answer—the absolute necessity for most Americans to speak English in order to survive economically, together with the appeal of mainstream American culture to most younger tribal members—tells only part of the story. Another factor is the boarding schools that many Native children were forced to attend, starting in the nineteenth century. Those schools implemented the United States government's policy of assimilating Indians by replacing their native cultures, including their languages, with Anglo culture and English. (The policy had close parallels in Canada and Australia.)

THE ASSIMILATION POLICIES THAT took place on the Flathead reservation—and elsewhere—were often brutal. Some teachers and principals beat children for speaking their language anywhere on the school grounds.

Louis Adams, a Bitterroot Salish elder in his late seventies, recounts what happened to him in the first grade, in a public school on the reservation. He and his friend Peter Pierre were talking Indian in the hallway of the school; a teacher heard them and broke her yardstick over Peter's head, then hit Louis with the biggest of the broken pieces. Next she took them to the principal, who said that if they spoke Indian again, he'd whip them with his belt. Louis complained to his father about the treatment and was told that he should do what the teachers wanted in school, but go on talking Salish outside of school. "Don't throw away your language," his father told him. Louis didn't, but many of his peers did.

The policy encouraged tribal members to suppress their own language. Harriet Whitworth, a Bitterroot Salish woman now in her late eighties, who—like all the remaining fluent speakers of Salish-Pend d'Oreille—has native-speaker fluency in both English and Salish, once told me she raised her five children to speak only English: "I didn't want my kids to go through what I went through." I asked whether she'd do things differently if she had known then that her language was in grave danger of vanishing forever: "Yes," she told me. "But it's too late now."
The circumstances that brought Salish-Pend d'Oreille to the brink of extinction differ from the stories of other communities only in the details. All dwindling languages fight against time in the face of increasing pressures to speak a dominant language. English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Arabic, Russian, Mandarin, Quechua (before the Inca Empire was destroyed by invading Spaniards), and other expanding languages have all been spoken by powerful outsiders who imposed their own order and language on subjugated, or at least less powerful, peoples. Two obvious questions arise here: Just how widespread is the phenomenon of language loss? And, more fundamentally, so what?

Before answering those questions, let me clarify that when linguists talk about language death, we are not referring to languages like Latin. Latin certainly qualifies as a dead language, but it did not die by losing all its speakers to another language; instead, it evolved into a sizable group of descendants, the modern Romance languages, almost all of which still thrive. The vanishing languages that I'm talking about leave no descendants.

Estimates of the number of threatened languages vary. About 6,000 languages are spoken in the world today. Pessimists like the linguist Michael Krauss of the University of Alaska Fairbanks predict that 90 percent of them will be dead by the end of this century; optimists predict the demise of only about 60 percent by then. Either way, we are looking at a future of catastrophic language loss.

There are, of course, quite a few languages that are certainly not going to vanish in the foreseeable future: all the languages listed above except Quechua are safe, for instance. Millions of people speak those languages, many of which are official in one or more nations. In fact, among the 200 or so nations in the world, English ranks as the most popular official tongue, cited in fifty-two countries (not counting the United States, which stands nearly alone in having no official language). French follows, official in twenty-nine countries; Arabic and Spanish are tied, each with twenty-four; and Portuguese has eight countries that recognize it as official. Do the math. The count for those five languages totals 137 nations--a great majority of the world's languages.

One might assume that other languages with at least a million speakers should also be safe, but that's not necessarily so. Quechua, with several million speakers and official-language status in Bolivia and Peru, is steadily losing ground to Spanish, which is also official in both countries. If that is so, consider the plight of "smaller" languages, those with only 100 to 10,000 speakers--nearly half the languages in the world. Only the most isolated can be considered stable in their communities. But geographic and social isolation is itself vanishing fast, in every part of the world.
Salishan languages, twenty-three in all, were widely spoken in the Pacific Northwest before Whites arrived in force in the 1800s.

The Salish and Pend d'Oreille tribes were allies of the neighboring Nez Perce and Kootenai tribes, and enemies of the Blackfeet.
Pend d'Oreille elder John Peter Paul (1909-2001) stands near the spot in Montana's upper Bitterroot Valley where the Salish tribe first encountered the Lewis and Clark expedition. Paul and his wife Agnes were the last married couple to regularly speak Salish-Pend d'Oreille at home.

Salish enduring forced removal from the Bitterroot Valley in Montana in 1891 by the United States government, which enacted the policy to open the entire Valley to White settlement.

DOES LOSING A LANGUAGE matter so much? Some people favor moving toward one world language, or at least toward a drastic reduction in the cacophony of thousands. One recurrent argument, voiced loudly by proponents of the "English Only" and "Official English" movements in the U.S., is that reducing the number of languages will promote understanding and therefore national (and, ultimately, world) peace. It's hard to take this argument seriously in a country that fought both a Revolution and a Civil War in which both sides spoke English, and in an era when Sunni and Shiite Iraqis, all speakers of Arabic, are killing each other by the hundreds almost daily.

Another common argument claims that English (or Arabic, or Spanish, or French, or
Mandarin, or ...) enables you to communicate anything you might want to say. According to that view, the loss of a language can be compared to the disappearance of the type of frigate that dominated Western navies in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: the sailors who had mastered the intricate manipulations of the sails surely mourned their loss, but the need for effective fighting vessels made it inevitable that technological progress would sweep the sails away.

I believe, along with most other linguists and a great many minority language communities all over the world, that any such comparison fails. Sure, tearing down language barriers would streamline international business and tourism. But a language cannot be evaluated solely on grounds of efficiency. In a very real sense, you cannot say anything you want in any language. This is not a question of translatability—of course it's possible to translate sentences like "Please pass the salt" into any language in the world—but of less tangible things, such as cultural ties, through language, to one's great-grandparents and to traditional ethnic ways of thinking about the world. Languages place special emphases on things and concepts that are important to their speakers: shapes of objects, meanings of certain plants and animals, fundamental ways of seeing the world. For instance, the word for "automobile" in Salish-Pend d'Oreille, p'ip'úyš'n, is named for the appearance of tire tracks—literally, "it has wrinkled feet"!

Most Americans who have spoken English all their lives, and whose parents and grandparents also speak (or spoke) English, may find it hard to understand how a heritage language could matter so much. I got my first inkling of its importance when, right after college, I spent a year in Germany, speaking German constantly and becoming fluent. Although I was delighted with my new linguistic skill, I spent the whole year with the uncomfortable feeling that I wasn't quite the same person as when I was speaking English. It felt like a slight personality transplant, with different rhythms of thought and speech. I was glad to return to my English-speaking self when the year ended. This sort of discomfort must have a far more profound effect on people like the elders who grew up speaking Salish-Pend d'Oreille, but have had no chance to use it regularly for decades. And the elders I've talked to feel their own loss, and their community's loss, acutely.

In addition to the profound loss to the community, every language that dies without being thoroughly documented and analyzed robs us of potential insights into human linguistic capabilities, and reduces our chances of arriving at a comprehensive understanding of the workings of the human mind. That may sound grandiose—after all, even if upwards of 60 percent of the world's languages vanish during this century, we'll still have a couple of thousand left, and besides, scholars have other tools for figuring out how the mind works. But there's a lot to the old notions that language is what makes us human and that its structures open a window into the mind.

The variation in human languages is not infinite. The fact that any human baby can learn any human language with equal ease is evidence of a fundamental similarity in all
our languages. Nevertheless, the amount of variation is immense, and our understanding of the range and details of such variation can help challenge our theories about the nature of human language.

Even with the growing popularity of Chinese, Japanese, and Arabic, most foreign-language study in the West involves familiar European languages. English, French, Spanish, German, Italian, Russian, and Portuguese all belong to just one of the world's hundreds of language families, the Indo-European family. As a result, they share numerous structures in their grammar, sound systems, and ways of organizing their vocabularies. Studying an unrelated language is an eye-opener: it's not just a matter of memorizing a lot of new words and learning how to fit relatively familiar pronunciations and grammatical patterns into new configurations. Languages outside the Indo-European family are different in ways you can't imagine until you experience them.

SALISH-PEND D'OREILLE SURPRISES me every summer. It includes sounds that are rarely heard in Indo-European languages: stops produced with a glottal catch, sounds produced with the air sliding noisily past the sides of the tongue (lateral fricatives), sounds pronounced far back in the pharynx (pharyngeal consonants). The alphabet used to spell the language therefore contains letters that look very different from English letters, as the following examples illustrate. The language has no detectable limits on the number of consonants that can occur in a row, so that there are marvelous words like Ta qesm'il'mél'cstmsmstxw ("Don't play with it!") with eight consonants in a row at the end, and sxwst'sqá ("someone whose job it is to take care of livestock"), with seven consonants at the beginning. It has words as long as your tongue, for instance qwo qi-c-taxw1-m-nt-sút-m-nt-m ("he would come up to me"). The short word, qwo, means "me;" the long word has a root, taxw1 "start," preceded by two prefixes and followed by six suffixes, some of them repeated. Words in Indo-European languages don't have anything approaching this exuberant deployment of prefixes and suffixes.

Salish makes subtle distinctions that would require much more verbiage if expressed in an Indo-European language. Both ciptés and ciptém mean "s/he hunted it," for instance, but the verb ending in -és indicates that the hunter is the most prominent character in the narrative, whereas the verb ending in -ém indicates that some character other than the hunter--maybe the hunted creature--is more prominent than the hunter in this context. It's not that this distinction can't be expressed in English or any other Indo-European language; of course it can. But not as easily, and such specificity certainly isn't obligatory in Western languages, as it is in Salish-Pend d'Oreille. Storytellers often used this grammatical distinction to signal a subtle shift of attention from one character to another.

But like other aspects of Salish-Pend d'Oreille culture, some of the most "exotic" features of the language are fading: the last native speakers all speak English much more often than they speak Salish-Pend d'Oreille. To give one example of the effect that has on sound systems, only about three or four of the elders I work with
pronounce clear pharyngeal consonants.

And in some semantic domains, most strikingly in the area of kinship categories and terminology, the much simpler English system has replaced much of the elaborate native Salish-Pend d'Oreille system. In my most recent session with the elders, in the summer of 2007, I wanted to find out how many of the old kinship terms are recognized by the current generation of elders. The kinship terms were compiled in 1976 with the help of a group of elders who are all now deceased.

At first the current group of elders said that they had never learned the old words; but the more they talked about their extended families, the more words they remembered. Dolly Linsebigler mentioned her father's brother: she always called him her smamá?, but "after my dad died, everything changed--then he was my iwéstn ("aunt or uncle after the death of the connecting relative"). Josephine Quequesah remembered a word, smé?el, that meant either uncle or nephew, and then Louis thought of another reciprocal kin term: "Yeah, like my t'ot'ó used to call me her t'ot'ó ("great-grandparent or great-grandchild").

Dolly also commented that people who come from big families like hers got used to all the complicated terms, like iqâqce? ("woman's older brother"), q'e?éw's ("middle brother"), and sísn'ce? ("woman's younger brother"). But many words were already beyond their memories, unrecognized. Like other complex systems of kin terms around the world, Salish-Pend d'Oreille offers insights into the possible range of categories for human relationships. But the old system teeters on the brink of oblivion, and the same is true of intricate kinship systems all over the world.

Within the next twenty or thirty years, there will be no speakers left who learned Salish-Pend d'Oreille as a first language, spoke it regularly in their younger years, and revisited it throughout their lives. There are twenty-two other languages in the Salishan family, and they await the same sad fate. When there are no longer any Salishan speakers who remember how their grandparents and great-grandparents spoke, the old kin terms will vanish, along with the other cultural and historical riches encoded in the ancestral languages.

Language death, much too much language death, seems inevitable in this and future decades. But the picture is not completely dark. Many communities whose languages are threatened, including the Salish-Pend d'Oreille tribes, have begun vigorous efforts to document and revitalize their languages, so that today’s and tomorrow’s children will be able to learn them. In a few spectacular recent cases, notably Maori in New Zealand and Hawaiian in the U.S., heritage languages have been restored to the community's children. And in perhaps the most dramatic historical case, Modern Hebrew emerged as the native language of a new nation's children after 2,000 years of near-death.

Even when efforts to save heritage languages fail, that doesn't mean the effort has
been wasted. If fluent native speakers help document a dying language, with a full grammatical description, a dictionary, and a collection of narratives, the possibility of revival will always be there. The revived version won't match the earlier version, but it can still serve its community. It can allow traditional practices and values to be expressed without the disruptions of translation, making the past more accessible. It can contribute its unique data to the scientific understanding of the universal human capacity for language.

Ultimately, though, if a community loses its language as its main vehicle of communication, both the community and its individual members lose an irreplaceable part of their identity. And at the same time, a part of our common world that their language uniquely illuminated goes dark.

Elders such as Johnny Arlee (standing) who try to pass down the Salish language to the next generation face an uphill battle. But some younger Salish, including Chaney Bell (seated, center), have embraced this mission; in fact, Bell named his son the Salish word for "Whirlwind."

~~~~~~
By Sarah Grey Thomason

Thomason has worked with the Salish-Pend d'Oreille Culture Committee since 1981, compiling a dictionary and text collection in collaboration with tribal elders. Thomason, who is currently co-authoring a textbook on endangered languages for Cambridge University Press, is the William J. Gedney Collegiate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Michigan and is a former president of the Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas.