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Say No More

By JACK HITT

Languages die the way many people do -- at home, in silence, attended by loved ones straining to make idle conversation.

"Did you sell any baskets?" Gabriela Paterito asks her neighbor Francisco Arroyo in her vowel-y Spanish. She's in her two-room shack in Puerto Eden, a tiny fishing village on Wellington Island in the Patagonia region of southern Chile. There is a long, long silence. She's a short woman, dense from some 70 years of life, but with a girl's head of beautiful black hair. In the room are Francisco and a few others, among the last six speakers of Kawesqar, the language native to these parts since the last ice age.

Linguists now estimate that half of the more than 6,000 languages currently spoken in the world will become extinct by the end of this century. In reaction, there are numerous efforts to slow the die-off -- from graduate students heading into the field to compile dictionaries; to charitable foundations devoted to the cause, like the Endangered Language Fund; to transnational agencies, some with melancholic names appropriate to the task, like the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages. Chile started a modest program, not long after the ugly debates surrounding Christopher Columbus in 1992, to save Kawesqar (Ka-WES-kar) and Yaghan, the last two native languages of southern Chile. But how does one salvage an ailing language when the economic advantages of, say, Spanish are all around you? And is it possible to step inside a dying language to learn whether it can be saved and, more rudely, whether it should be?

Gabriela crams another stick into her wood stove to keep us dry and warm. The rain is coming now like nails, as it does most days. The silence stretches out. You begin to feel it, like a cold draft. Three or four aching minutes of it. My boots need some examining.

"*Canastos*," mutters Francisco, repeating the Spanish word for baskets, his grunting tone suggesting a bad day. When languages die under the pressure of a dominant tongue like Spanish, there is a familiar path of retreat. The language will withdraw from the public sphere first, hiding out in the living rooms and kitchens of the fluent, where it becomes increasingly private and intimate and frail. Francisco takes a two-foot length of reedy grass and softens it by rubbing it against the stove. All around weaving begins -- the distinctive Kawesqar baskets, small with long grassy handles.

"It's been raining all day," Francisco adds, again in Spanish. Juan Carlos, who is 39 and my guide, motions me to give him a cigarette. Juan Carlos was born and grew up here but left at 15 for school. Now college-educated, he has devoted his life and work to helping the Kawesqar community. (He has just finished a documentary film about the Kawesqar.) He doesn't smoke, he told me, except here. For the last few days, smoking and enduring long silences have pretty much accounted for our social life. I haven't smoked seriously for 15 years. I'm blowing through two packs a day.

Every window here frames a magnificent photo op. Outside Gabriela's is a curving line of shacks hugging the

shore of a small bay, bright red-and-yellow fishing boats beached in front, and behind, a dramatic ascent of mountains capped in white -- gushing here and there with little snow-melt waterfalls. Full-spectrum rainbows break out so frequently that no one notices but me and the tourists. They, too, are visible out the window, all wearing their orange cruise-ship-issue rain slickers, their cameras aimed aloft. To get here, it's a three-day chug by boat through the cold, uninhabited island channels of Patagonia. Once a week, the tourists come. They have less than an hour onshore to feel the intensity of its remote beauty -- and maybe buy a native basket -- before motoring out to the anchored cruise ship and a night of pisco sours.

"A lot of rain," announces Juan Carlos. The fire crackles and hisses. The rain continues, staccato.

"Rain," Gabriela adds.

I sit quietly, smoking my way through their Samuel Beckett dialogue.

"Not many baskets," Francisco says, offering his full report.

I wonder if I should ask them to speak Kawesqar, but I don't want to intrude. I want to get a sense of when they naturally converse in their language. Later, Juan Carlos tells me that the elder Kawesqar feel awkward speaking their moribund language around me. It's a combination of embarrassment and a sense that they don't want to make me feel uncomfortable. As the rain pours down, I light up a cigarette. My very presence here to observe this thing, difficult to see, has made it disappear.

The Kawesqar are famous for their adaptation to this cold, rainy world of islands and channels. The first Europeans were stunned. The Kawesqar and the other natives of the region traveled in canoes, naked, oiled with blubber, occasionally wearing an animal skin. The men sat at the front and hunted sea lions with spears. The women paddled. The children stayed in the sanctuary between their parents, maintaining fire in a sand pit built in the middle of the canoe. Keeping fire going in a land of water was the most critical and singular adaptation of the Kawesqar. As a result, fire blazed continuously in canoes and at the occasional landfall. The first European explorers marveled at the sight of so much fire in a wet and cold climate, and the Spanish named the southernmost archipelago the land of fire, Tierra del Fuego.

When Charles Darwin first encountered the Kawesqar and the Yaghans, years before he wrote "The Origin of Species," he is said to have realized that man was just another animal cunningly adapting to local environmental conditions. But that contact and the centuries to follow diminished the Kawesqar, in the 20th century, to a few dozen individuals. In the 1930's, the remaining Kawesqar settled near a remote military installation -- Puerto Eden, now inhabited mostly by about 200 Chileans from the mainland who moved here to fish.

The pathology of a dying language shifts to another stage once the language has retreated to the living room. You can almost hear it disappearing. There is Grandma, fluent in the old tongue. Her son might understand her, but he also learned Spanish and grew up in it. The grandchildren all learn Spanish exclusively and giggle at Grandma's funny chatter.

In two generations, a healthy language -- even one with hundreds of thousands of speakers -- can collapse entirely, sometimes without anyone noticing. This process is happening everywhere. In North America, the arrival of Columbus and the Europeans who followed him whittled down the roughly 300 native languages to only about 170 in the 20th century. According to Marianne Mithun, a linguist at the University of California at Santa Barbara, the recent evolution of English as a global language has taken an even greater toll. "Only one of those 170 languages is not officially endangered today," Mithun said. "Greenlandic Eskimo."

Without the revitalization of youth, a language can go from being alive to endangered (declining speakers among the young), then moribund (only elderly speakers left alive), then dead (the last known speaker dies) -- all linguistic terms of art. William Sutherland, the author of a study in *Nature* magazine last spring, compared the die-off to an environmental catastrophe. According to Sutherland, 438 languages are in the condition of Kawesqar, that is, with fewer than 50 speakers, making them "critically endangered" -- a category that in the animal world includes 182 birds and 180 mammals. Languages "seem to follow the same patterns" as animals, Sutherland told a reporter for Bloomberg News. "Stability and isolation seem to breed abundance in the number of bird and animal species, and they do the same for languages." Conversely, the instability and homogenization of the global economy is creating a juggernaut of monoculture, threatening plants and animals. But, Sutherland makes clear, the one life form even more endangered is human culture.

According to Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine, authors of "Vanishing Voices," the last time human language faced such a crisis of collapse was when we invented farming, around 8000 B.C., during the switch-over from highly mobile hunting and gathering to sedentary agriculture. Then the multitude of idioms developed on the run cohered into language families, like Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan and Elamo-Dravidian. The difference this time is that with each language gone, we may also lose whatever knowledge and history were locked up in its stories and myths, along with the human consciousness embedded in its grammatical structure and vocabulary.

One often hears the apocryphal story about the Inuit and their 40 words for "snow." True or not, it acknowledges the inherent human sense that each language, developed over a certain time and geography, is a revelation of what we call "a sense of place." To let languages die out, en masse, is to permit the phrase "terra incognita" to creep back onto our environmental maps. One organization of linguists, biologists and anthropologists, known as Terralingua, is working to keep languages alive by highlighting what gets lost when they fade away. "I remember when I was doing fieldwork in Mexico," said Luisa Maffi, Terralingua's president. She encountered a man whose native Mayan was already blurred with Mexican Spanish. He had traveled with his 2-year-old daughter to a health clinic because she was sick with serious diarrhea. "He no longer knew the word for yakan k'ulub wamal," she said, using the Mayan term for a plant long known to cure the problem. "It was probably growing in his backyard."

A handful of linguists dismiss salvage efforts like Terralingua's as futile exercises. They say languages just die, as spoken Latin did, and then are reborn as French, Spanish and Italian. No big deal. Or more bluntly, all this sentimentality about dying languages is just another symptom of academe's mewling, politically correct minority-mongering. In the magazine *Prospect*, the writer Kenan Malik summarized this position in an essay titled "Let Them Die." "There is nothing noble or authentic about local ways of life; they are often simply degrading and backbreaking," Malik argued. "What if half the world's languages are on the verge of extinction? Let them die in peace."

Linguists counter that yes, there is a natural process of language death; but the order of magnitude of the current die-off is what should create concern. What's happening with human culture now, they say, should shock people the way the Cuyahoga River catching fire in 1969 radically changed how many thought about the environment.

To general linguists, the dismissive position is just deliberate ignorance. But they also argue that the utilitarian case is too narrow. In peril is not just knowledge but also the importance of diversity and the beauty of grammar. They will tell you that every language has its own unique theology and philosophy buried in its very sinews. For example, because of the Kawesqar's nomadic past, they rarely use the future tense; given the contingency of moving constantly by canoe, it was all but unnecessary. The past tense, however, has fine gradations. You can say, "A bird flew by." And by the use of different tenses, you can mean a few seconds ago, a few days ago, a time so long ago that you were not the original observer of the bird (but you know the observer yourself) and, finally, a mythological past, a tense the Kawesqar use to suggest that the story is so old that it no longer possesses fresh descriptive truth but rather that other truth which emerges from stories that retain their narrative

power despite constant repetition.

"There was once a man and a woman who killed a sacred deer," Gabriela began, translating into Spanish a Kawesqar tale told in the mythological tense. "Afterward a great flood came. The waters rose until they were standing in it up to their waist. Everyone died but the man and the woman." Then, in time, she went on, from just these last two Kawesqar, they figured out a way to endure, repopulate the land and revive the life of the Kawesqar among the channel islands.

Outside, the rain kept coming down.

The rhythm of Puerto Eden became easier after a few days. The fishermen headed out in the morning, and the rest of us made social calls. In time, I got to hear some actual Kawesqar spoken, and it sounded a lot like Hollywood's generic Apache, but with a few unique and impossible sounds. I learned to say "*Æs ktæel sa Jack, akuókat cáuks ktæel?*" ("My name is Jack, what's yours?") That second word, *ktæel*, means "name" and is (sort of) pronounced *ka-tull*. It happens entirely in the back of the mouth, in a really challenging way. But during these visits, always and constantly, dominant-culture television hollered at us from a corner. Besides meeting the Kawesqar in Puerto Eden, I have to say, I caught up on a lot of missed episodes of "MacGyver" and "Baywatch."

Later in the week, Juan Carlos and I spent more time at his sister's house, and there the evidence of European culture insinuating itself deeply into the minds and habits of the Kawesqar was everywhere.

Maria Isabel is a few years older than her brother. She was sick as a child and was raised in Punta Arenas, on the Chilean mainland. She studied and lived in metropolitan Santiago. She never had a Kawesqar youth and can't speak the language.

"I am Kawesqar," she told me in Spanish, as if to acknowledge the inexplicable tug identity has on all of us. When I asked her if she intended to learn her mother's language, she insisted that she would. "I hope next year," she said, unconvincingly.

I spent a lot of time with Maria Isabel because her husband, Luis, was installing their first flushable toilet. When we weren't talking about Kawesqar, we were measuring holes, figuring out how to run a sewer pipe into the bay and reading the toilet-assembly instructions (helpfully printed in five dominant languages). Eventually, the hole was properly centered, so we set down the beeswax ring, lifted the porcelain carefully and pressed it into its permanent location.

Does anything say Western dominance quite like the flush of a private john?

Well, maybe one other thing. In our intimate chats and smokes, Juan Carlos told me about his own three children. He lives with them back on the mainland, in a house where two other adults speak some Kawesqar. One is Juan Carlos's brother, Jose, a professor of anthropology at the Universidad Arcis Magallanes in Punta Arenas. And the other is Oscar Aguilera, a linguist at the university. He's of Spanish descent, but he has devoted his life's work to the language of the Kawesqar.

Aguilera arrived in Puerto Eden from Santiago in 1975 with the simple intention of "describing" the language as a linguist. There he met a people nearly cut off from the outside world. Among the little contact they'd had, oddly, was with NASA. The space agency came to the village in 1959 to conduct experiments on the ability of humans to withstand extremely cold temperatures. An elderly villager told Aguilera that the NASA scientists

asked one Kawesqar man to sit naked in a cold tent with his feet in a bucket of water. He fled in the middle of the night.

Aguilera befriended Gabriela's in-laws and knew Gabriela's husband well. He got to know her two young boys, and when they were teenagers, Aguilera took them to Santiago, where they finished school and went to college. Now they all live together in Punta Arenas with Juan Carlos's three young children, who use the affectionate term for "grandfather" with Aguilera.

When I visited the home for dinner one night, the three children ran up to greet me. They attend the local British school -- and so were taught in Spanish and English. One little girl proudly read me last night's homework: "I played in the yard," and "I rode my bicycle." She beamed. It's cool speaking the dominant language.

Later, I asked Juan Carlos why they didn't speak Kawesqar at home. Wouldn't it make sense, since the children were at that magic language-acquisition stage of youth?

"We are going to teach them later," he said. Juan Carlos added that they needed the proper books. Of course, Aguilera is the man who compiled the grammar and teaching manual for Kawesqar and is working on a dictionary with Jose. But government funds for these projects are spotty, and Aguilera admits it will be years before they are completed.

Their answers revealed just how difficult language resurrection is. Learning a language, even your mother's, requires enormous motivation. Plus, Juan Carlos and Jose say they are "semi-speakers" -- in part because they were taken away from home so young to be educated in Spanish-dominated schools. Even the fluent Kawesqar speakers in Puerto Eden have occasionally asked Aguilera, the lexicographer, to remind them of a certain word.

"Some days," Aguilera told me when we were alone for a while, "I think that I might be the last speaker of Kawesqar."

Among linguists, the sorrowful story of the "last speaker" is practically a literary genre. The names ring out, like a Homeric catalog. Ned Maddrell, the last speaker of Manx, died in the village of Cregneash on the Isle of Man in 1974. Tevfik Esenc, the last speaker of Ubykh, died in Turkey in 1992. Red Thunder Cloud, the last speaker of Catawba, died in 1996. More are coming. Marie Smith-Jones in Alaska, the last speaker of Eyak, is 83 years old.

Farther south from the Kawesqar, I learned, lived the last speaker of Yaghan. Many people urged me to visit Puerto Williams and its native settlement, called Ukika, because of that intriguing notion -- that all of Yaghan now dwells entirely in the mind of one elderly woman, Cristina Calderón.

Right away, though, I discovered that the "last speaker" of Yaghan is accustomed to charging passengers from the cruise ship that arrives each week for the privilege of taking her picture or hearing a few of the last words in her unusual-sounding language. From me she wanted impossible sums of money. When I tried to sneak in early one morning for a quick interview, word traveled in the village so fast that within minutes her granddaughter/booking agent was through the door and a screaming match broke out (not in Yaghan).

That night, Aguilera and I decided to pursue a rumor that there was in fact another Yaghan, a penultimate speaker named Emelinda, who hadn't mastered the cruise-ship racket. We managed to get inside Emelinda's house without attracting attention.

She was a kind old woman whose Yaghan, according to Aguilera, was authentic. Our conversation was brief and brittle. When I asked Emelinda what could be done to keep Yaghan alive, she said she was already doing it, as if a formal program were under way.

"I talk to myself in Yaghan," Emelinda explained in Spanish. "When I hang up my clothes outside, I say the words in Yaghan. Inside the house, I talk in Yaghan all day long."

I asked her if she ever had a conversation with the only other person in the world who could easily understand her, Cristina Calderón, the official "last speaker" of Yaghan.

"No," Emelinda said impatiently, as if I'd brought up a sore topic. "The two of us don't talk."

After returning from Chile, I learned that the last-speaker hustle isn't new. Remember Red Thunder Cloud, the last Catawba speaker? Actually, he was Cromwell Ashbie Hawkins West, the son of an African-American druggist in Newport, R.I. According to Ives Goddard of the Smithsonian, West was "a great mimic and fast learner." He quickly mastered the language, donned some turquoise jewelry and, until his death in 1996, worked the last-speaker circuit. Usually, he could be found at county fairs, hawking Red Thunder Cloud's Accabonac Princess American Indian Tea -- "fresh from the American forest to you."

There's a paradox in those last-speaker stories. After all, what is driving these languages off the cliff but sheer economics? It only makes a kind of poetic sense that in their death throes their speakers would resort to economic ploys. But this is also where the environmental metaphor of endangered languages falls apart. Getting down to a few in number is irreversibly the end of, say, a fern or a tiger. For humans, it's often the beginning of politics.

The very success of English as a global language is prompting a revival of ancestral tongues. Compared to the die-off now in progress, it's a drop in the bucket. Still, many native American languages have reacted against these near-death experiences. The Miami in Oklahoma and the Mohawk straddling the Canadian border have full-scale programs for language revival. Native Hawaiian, also written off only a few decades ago, has 18 schools teaching a new generation in the original language of the islands.

Partly with money from government lawsuits -- the Catawba received \$50 million in 1993 after suing over land claim disputes dating to 1760 -- and partly with revenue from casinos, many of these tribes are rushing to get the programs up and running before the last of the speaking elders die. The Tuscarora tribe near Niagara Falls, N.Y., is down to Howdy Hill, the last speaker who grew up learning the language at home. But now a revival program claims as many as 25 new speakers.

Other languages are long past the last speaker, yet revival is still not out of the question. Stephanie Fielding is the great-great-niece of Fidelia Fielding, the last speaker of Mohegan, who died in 1908. Fielding is currently enrolled in M.I.T.'s linguistics program. She is 58 and devoted to resurrecting her ancestors' language, largely from her aunt's diaries. The academic degree to which she aspires has not yet been accredited. A master's with a concentration in "language reclamation" will be available from M.I.T. at the earliest by 2005 or 2006, according to Norvin Richards, an associate professor of linguistics.

"The number of people who contacted us in the last year is about 20, which in linguistics is a bit largish," Richards said. M.I.T. will have to compete with the University of Arizona and the University of Alaska Fairbanks, which already offer reclamation degrees.

Most of these language-revival movements model themselves on the national language of Israel. For more than two millennia, Hebrew was found almost exclusively in Scripture and rabbinical writings. Its retreat was nearly complete -- out of the public square, into the house and finally into the scrolls of the Torah. But the early pioneers of what would become Israel faced a politically charged question: which of their languages should dominate? Ashkenazi Yiddish? Russian? German? Sephardic Ladino? The commonly agreed-upon answer was supplied by Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the Jewish linguist who used the stiff, formal language of the Bible to conjure into existence a modern version -- now the main language of 3.6 million people. (Of course, Hebrew's comeback has helped drive Yiddish and Ladino into "endangered" status.)

Language revival as a means of identity politics may well be the way of the future. The big fight in linguistics over the past two decades has been about English First. But first is no longer the question. Now the question is, What will be your *second* language? In America, the drift in high-school curriculums has always been toward a second dominant language -- French, Spanish, German, maybe Chinese if you're a rebel. But what if the second language could be that of your ancestors?

That possibility is already proving to be quite popular with many people. As their initiatives succeed and become more visible, they will drive into the open a question for English-speaking Americans, the owner-operators of the dominant linguistic ecosystem. Do we want to dwell in a society that encourages linguistic revival and cultural diversity, knowing that with it may come a lot of self-righteous minority-pitying? Or, shall we just sit contentedly amid a huge cultural die-off, harrumphing like some drunk uncle at the family reunion angrily spilling his beer and growling, "Let 'em die"? Keep in mind that if the actuarial tables are correct, it means that once the languages start to die off in earnest, there will be a "death of the last speaker" article in the papers, on average, every 12 days.

The other paradox of this gathering twilight is that while the grown-ups are having their arguments about what we should and shouldn't do -- and after the linguists have compiled their dictionaries and put together their grammars -- the future of all these resurrections will depend on teenagers.

Will it become cool to speak and live and sing and groove in, say, Mohegan? It depends.

Twenty years ago, the distinct language of Welsh was in intensive care, destined to die. Now 21 percent of the people in Wales speak it regularly. Gaelic in Ireland has failed, by comparison. Maybe 3 percent of the people in Ireland speak Gaelic regularly today. Some argue that Wales needed something extra to distinguish itself from the English up the road, while the Irish live on an island. But other observers, like the author David Crystal, point to the influence of the kids. In his book "Language Death," he cites a small scandal that broke out in 1998. The Welsh band Manic Street Preachers promoted a new album in Cardiff by hanging an enormous banner written in the old tongue. When he saw it, Peter Hughes Griffiths, a professor at Trinity College in Carmarthen who teaches the language, condemned the banner for using slang.

"You would have thought the group would have made the effort to make sure the poster was grammatically correct," he fumed to an English newspaper. "Standards are not being kept up."

The professor was quickly hooted down by newspapers and by the Welsh Language Board. He had missed the point: kids would propel the language, not him. Kids -- with their mistakes, bastardizations, slang, import words and poor syntax -- will be the ones who breathe new casual life into old formal syntax. That said, there always remains the other possibility -- that the next generation will decide that the native tongue is preposterous, and poof.

On my last day in Puerto Eden, we didn't have the proper glue to connect the lengths of PVC pipe. So we improvised, building small fires beneath each end until the plastic softened enough to slip one pipe over the

other. Problem solved, we went inside for a celebratory cup of tea. Luis and Maria Isabel have one child, a daughter, Maria José, 15. She was visiting her parents from the mainland, where she's in school.

"I am Kawesqar," she said, just like her mom. But where Mom made solemn promises that one day she'll learn the language, Maria José swears to it while laughing. She had on a tight sweater and elephant bell-bottoms, and she had attached the bottom of each pant leg to the sole of her shoe, with tacks, to create a perfect flare on each leg. While we spoke, she watched the television set where a top-hits show blasted techno music beamed in from dominant-culture HQ some 10,000 miles away. She danced along. I lighted my last cigarette.

"Fire!" she shouted in perfect English, pointing to my match. She burst out laughing. "I speak Kawesqar!" Her mother laughed and leaned over to tell me that the Kawesqar word for "match" is precisely the English word "fire" -- dating back to when the first British explorer handed a Kawesqar nomad a box of matches. Maybe it was Darwin himself; maybe that moment was the beginning of the end for this old language.

Or the beginning of a new Kawesqar. Maria José looked directly at the TV, carefully mimicking the latest moves, dancing and giggling out of control. "Fire! Fire! Fire!"

Jack Hitt is a contributing writer. His last article for the magazine was a profile of a spam entrepreneur.

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