African, Middle Eastern, and South Asian Languages in Peril (01:013:305)

Course Syllabus

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Short Description

Introduction to the value of local languages and the threat posed by their disappearance, with a focus upon the endangered languages of Africa and Asia.

Long Description

The vast majority of human knowledge is stored not in books, or computers, or even Wikipedia, but rather in the minds of ordinary people the world around. In many cases, the languages in which this knowledge is encoded are spoken by as few as a dozen people, and will almost certainly be lost with the passing of these languages and their speakers. By some estimates, fully 90% or more of the world's languages will have disappeared by the end of the century.

This course will employ a multidisciplinary approach to address the impending disappearance of the world's linguistic and cultural patrimony, which is one of the greatest challenges facing mankind in the 21st century. The discussion of these general issues will be illustrated with case studies of endangered languages and the traditions that they represent: three from the Middle East, three from South Asia, and three from Africa.

Course Learning Objectives

We will address:

- the importance of linguistic diversity, and the ways in which the cultural knowledge encoded within language shape our experiences of and perspectives on the world;
- issues of language policy and linguistic rights across local and global contexts; and
- the methodology and technology of documentary linguistics, and how it can be employed to document our disappearing linguistic and cultural patrimony.

By the end of the semester, students will be familiar with value of "local" non-standard forms of language, and the critical threat to intellectual diversity posed by their disappearance, as well as the philosophical and other theoretical issues surrounding the topic of language endangerment. They will learn about the importance of traditionally orally-transmitted knowledge, both as witnesses to a specific tradition and more broadly within the context of human knowledge, and the importance of documenting these before the languages in which they are transmitted vanish.

Core Learning Objectives

013:305 fulfills Core goals "21st Century Challenges" [21C] and "Cognitive Skills and Processes: Information Technology and Research" [ITR]. During the course of 013:305, students shall

- [21C] Analyze a contemporary global issue (language endangerment) from a multidisciplinary perspective;
- [ITR] Employ current technologies, such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and the Endangered Languages Project, to access information, to conduct research, and to communicate findings.

Assessment Plan and Grading

Student progress towards these learning goals will be assessed through participation in weekly discussion sections on Sakai, three assessment exercises, and a final project. The final project, which will be the cumulative result of these assessment exercises, will involve adopting an "orphan" endangered language from one of the three regions represented by the department and filling its profile on the Endangered Languages Project (endangeredlanguages.com) and Wikipedia (en.wikipedia.org).

- **Weekly Discussion Sections** will take place in a discussion forum on the course Sakai website. In 10 of the 14 weeks of the duration of the course, the professor will open a discussion thread Friday afternoon, with a question related to the material covered in the week's reading and lectures.

  To achieve the full grade for participation, students must submit an answer to the discussion question (typically 150–200 words) and one response to another student's response, in time for the following discussion thread **[20 POINTS];**

- **Assessment Exercise 1** consists of a bibliography of references related to the orphaned languages, derived from Google Scholar, JSTOR, Academia.edu, etc. **[20 POINTS]**;

- **Assessment Exercise 2** consists of a language profile including metadata concerning the language, such as name(s) for the language, location(s) spoken, number of native speakers, size of the ethnic population, variants and dialects, language codes (International Organization for Standardization (ISO 639) or otherwise) **[20 POINTS]**;

- **Assessment Exercise 3** consists of a portfolio of resources uploaded to Google Drive. These might include sketch grammars, wordlists, vocabularies, dictionaries, information about the traditional writing system, videos, and any other information that might be relevant to the study of the endangered language **[20 POINTS]**;

- **The Final Project** consists of a fully-hyperlinked Wikipedia page, incorporating the information already uploaded to the Endangered Languages Project **[20 POINTS]**.

Academic Integrity

As defined by the university's Academic Integrity Policy (http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/files/documents/AI_Policy_2013.pdf), plagiarism is "the use of another person's words, ideas, or results without giving that person appropriate credit." To avoid even the appearance of plagiarism or cheating, kindly identify all direct quotations and even paraphrases from other people and other sources with an appropriate citation. This is especially critical for the assessment exercises. Due to their public nature, the theft of another person's original words or ideas has ramifications beyond the classroom.

Other Useful Information

Prerequisites: None.

Other Requirements: To participate in this class, you must have a Google Account, which you can acquire freely at http://accounts.google.com. This is necessary to upload resources to the Endangered Languages Project.

Required Text: Harrison, K. David. *When Languages Die: The Extinction of the World's Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge* (Oxford: OUP, 2007)

Readings: All other readings for the course can be found on the Sakai course website, under "Resources."

Absences: If for any reason you are unable to participate in the weekly discussion sessions or submit an assignment in a timely manner, please make use of the Rutgers Self-Reporting Absence Website, https://sims.rutgers.edu/ssra/ to keep me updated about your participation in the course.

Office Hours: Every Wednesday at 5pm, I will be available in the chat room on the course website on Sakai to take your questions and elaborate further on the material covered during the lectures on a one-on-one basis. I am also available at other times, online and in my physical office (Lucy Stone Hall B310 on the Livingston Campus) by arrangement.

Course Schedule

Prerecorded lectures (typically 20-30 minutes in length) will be made available through the course website on a twice weekly basis. In addition to the course readings, which should be read prior to consulting the lectures, most weeks will also have either a discussion question or assessment exercise assigned, to be completed by 5:00pm Friday.

Week 1:

Lesson 1: What is Language Death?
Read: Crystal, *Language Death*, 1–26

Week 2:

Lesson 1: The Crisis of Language Endangerment, I
Supp'l Lecture: Finding Resources Online for Language Study
Read: Dixon, "Today's Priorities"

Lesson 2: The Crisis of Language Endangerment, II
Read: Baker, *The Atoms of Language*, 1–50

Discussion Question: Why should we care about the extinction of local languages?

Week 3:

Lesson 1: Language Diversity
Read: Harrison, *When Languages Die*, 3–22

Lesson 2: The Spread of Hegemonic Languages
Read: Abley, "Dont Vori Bi Khepi"

Discussion Question: What are the potential advantages to the global spread of English and other Hegemonic Languages? What are the potential disadvantages?

Week 4:

Lesson 1: Language as the Primary Interface with the World, I
Read: Abley, "Constructing the World;" Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 1–24

Lesson 2: Language as the Primary Interface with the World, II
Read: Ong, "Writing Restructures Consciousness"

Assessment Exercise 1 Due on Friday

Week 5:

Lesson 1: Local Languages and Natural Sciences, I
Supp'l Lecture: Metadata and the Endangered Languages Project
Read: Harrison, *When Languages Die*, 23–60

Lesson 2: Local Languages and Natural Sciences, II
Read: Conner, *A People's History of Science*, 26–41; 84–107

Discussion Question: In what ways does the extinction of local languages threaten the study of the natural world?

Week 6:

Lesson 1: Local Languages and Time Reckoning, I
Read: Harrison, *When Languages Die*, 61–100

Lesson 2: Local Languages and Time Reckoning, II
Read: Aveni, *Empires of Time*, 1–10; 147–62

Discussion Question: Drawing upon Harrison, Aveni, Lakoff, and Johnson, discuss the origins (both natural and cultural) of human systems of reckoning time.

Week 7:

Lesson 1: Local Languages and Geography, I
Read: Harrison, *When Languages Die*, 101–40

Lesson 2: Local Languages and Geography, II
Supp'l Lecture: Using Google Drive to Create a Portfolio of Resources
Read: Heckewelder and Reichel, "Names," 227–33; 273–74

Discussion Question: What can place names tell us about a geographic area and the people who live there?

Week 8:

Lesson 1: Oral Legends and Verbal Arts I
Read: Harrison, *When Languages Die*, 141–66

Lesson 2: **Case Study:** Mahra and the Modern South Arabian languages
Read: Liebhaber, Sam. "The Diwān of Ḥajj bir ʿĀlī Dākōn" *Yemeni Update.*

Assessment Exercise 2 Due on Friday

Week 9: NO CLASS (SPRING BREAK)

Week 10:

Lesson 1: Orality in Literacy
Read: Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 1–16

Lesson 2: **Case Study:** Neo-Mandaic
Read: Häberl, "The Demon and the Damsel"; id., "Flights of Fancy"

Discussion Question: "Oral literature" is a paradoxical and problematic term. By what standards, if not literary ones, do we measure orally-transmitted texts?

Week 11:

Lesson 1: Lost in Translation
Read: Shackle, "From Gentlemen's Outfitters to Hyperbazaar"

Lesson 2: **Case Study:** Kalasha
Read: Di Carlo, "Take Care of the Poets! Verbal Art Performances as Key Factors in the Preservation of Kalasha Language and Culture"

Discussion Question: Is it ever truly possible to translate a work from one language to another? What, if anything, is lost in translation?

Week 12:

Lesson 1: The Kalasha (Cont.)
Watch: *The Kalasha* (1991).

Lesson 2: Local Languages and Number Systems
Read: Harrison, *When Languages Die*, 167–204

Assessment Exercise 3 Due on Friday

Week 13:

Lesson 1: Lexicography and Worlds within Words, I
Supp'l Lecture: Creating Wikipedia Pages for Endangered Languages
Read: Harrison, *When Languages Die*, 205–36;

Lesson 2: Lexicography and Worlds within Words, II
Read: Abley, "The Verbs of Boro"

Discussion Question: To what extent is a language reflected by its vocabulary?

Week 14:

Lesson 1: Language Policies
Read: Haig, "The Invisibilisation of Kurdish: The Other Side of Language Planning in Turkey"

Lesson 2: Language Revitalization
Read: Brett and Fentress, *The Berbers*, 271–82; Rodrigue, "The Ottoman Diaspora: The Rise and Fall of a Ladino Literary Culture"

Discussion Question: How does government policy influence the survival of a language? What other (e.g. civil society) measures might influence its survival?

Week 15:

Lesson 1: Long Distance Reconstruction and Population Movements
Watch: "Dene-Yensieian Workshop 2012, Edward Vajda"
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7M0QnAqQUmw

Lesson 2: **Case Study:** Andamanese
Read: Blevins, "A Long Lost Sister of Proto-Austronesian?"

Final Project due on Friday.