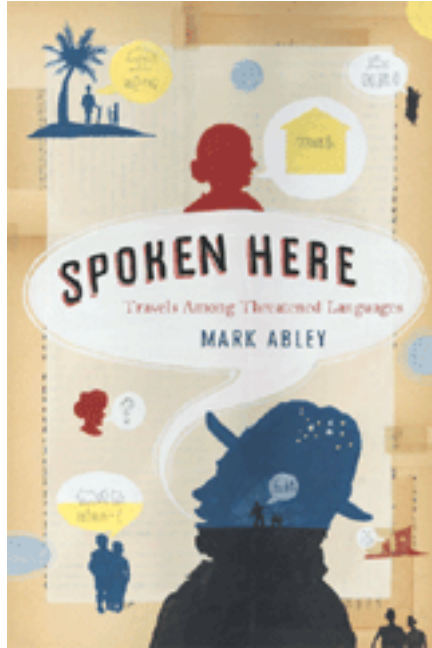


Press Release



Spoken Here

by Mark Abley

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Introduction

Languages are beautiful, astoundingly complex, living things. And like the many animals in danger of extinction, languages can be threatened when they lack the room to stretch and grow. In fact, of the six thousand languages in the world today, only six hundred may survive the next century. In *Spoken Here*, journalist Mark Abley takes us on a world tour — from the Arctic Circle to the outback of Australia — to track obscure languages and reveal their beauty and the devotion of those who work to save them.

Abley is passionate about two things: traveling to remote places and seeking out rarities in danger of being lost. He combines his two passions in *Spoken Here*. At the age of forty-five, he left the security of home and job to embark on a quixotic quest to track language gems before they disappear completely. On his travels, Abley gives us glimpses of fascinating people and their languages:

- one of the last two speakers of an Australian language, whose tribal taboos forbid him to talk to the other
- people who believe that violence is the only way to save a tongue
- a Yiddish novelist who writes for an audience that may not exist
- the Amazonian language last spoken by a parrot
- the Caucasian language with no vowels
- a South Asian language whose innumerable verbs include *gobray* (to fall into a well unknowingly) and *onsra* (to love for the last time).

Abley also highlights languages that can be found closer to home: Yiddish in Brooklyn and Montreal, Yuchi in Oklahoma, and Mohawk in New York and Quebec. Along the way he reveals delicious linguistic oddities and shows us what is lost when one of the world's six thousand tongues dies — an irreplaceable worldview and a wealth of practical knowledge. He

also examines the forces, from pop culture to creoles to global politics, that threaten these languages. *Spoken Here* is a singular travelogue, a compelling case for linguistic diversity, and a treasure trove for anyone who loves any language.

Abley, a winner of Canada's National Newspaper Award, writes for the *Montreal Gazette*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, and other publications. He speaks English, French, and a smattering of Welsh.

A Conversation with Mark Abley

Q) You describe yourself as someone who has a penchant for searching for things on the brink of extinction. Besides language, what have you sought to save? Why are you driven to document these artifacts?

A) A century ago, one of the most sought-after kinds of melon in North America was a big, green-fleshed, aromatic fruit known as the Montreal melon. It would be sent by train from Montreal down to New York and Boston, where a slice cost a dollar in fancy restaurants. But after the Second World War, with urban sprawl wiping out the orchards of Montreal, the melon became rare. By the 1990s it seemed to have vanished. I played a part in bringing the melon back — finding seeds in Iowa, of all places, and having them grown again locally.

I was raised on the books of Gerald Durrell, who founded a zoo in the Channel Islands, off the coast of England, with the aim of breeding and saving endangered species. When I was a boy, my desire was to work in that zoo. I still have trouble understanding why other people don't share my passion for the fate of species like the Mauritius pink pigeon and the Vancouver Island marmot. I guess I always felt that biological and cultural diversity is a wonderful thing. But it took me years to realize it's also a necessary thing.

Some people swoon at progress. Some people are fascinated by new technologies. I'm not a Luddite — I depend on my computer, for instance — but temperamentally, I find that I often focus on things that are passing. The victims of progress tend to interest me a lot more than the success stories.

Q) In your travels to document these endangered languages, you have met many people. Who among them made the biggest impression on you?

A) That's a hard question. But I guess I think first and foremost of a family I met on the Isle of Man. It's a small island in the middle of the Irish Sea, where up until the eighteenth century the daily language was a unique form of Gaelic — related to Irish and Scottish Gaelic, but with all sorts of differences too. England is just a few hours away by boat, and understandably the Manx language began to fade. By 1974 it was widely said to be extinct. You can find several reference books about language that contain a picture of the so-called last speaker of Manx, an old fisherman in a cloth cap by the name of Ned Maddrell.

But I had heard that the rumors of Manx's death were greatly exaggerated. And when I visited the island, I was delighted to find that the language is now being used on a daily basis by young children in several playgroups. It's even being taught in elementary schools.

Ned Maddrell and the other old-timers were able to pass on much of their knowledge and vocabulary to younger people who grew up speaking English. One day I met a very intense and intelligent couple named Phil and Annie. They both learned to speak Manx as young adults. Now they have two children, a boy called Ewan and a girl called Kitty. And these children are being brought up, to a large extent, in Manx. They speak English too, of course. But around the dinner table, conversations will happen in a language that's supposed to be extinct. The amazing thing is that this family lives in the same village, indeed in the same house, where Ned Maddrell lived as a boy 120 years ago.

So the family is a kind of living proof that reference books can be completely mistaken. As Phil said to me that day, "No matter how few speakers you have, it's always worth continuing the fight to save a language."

Q) Why is the loss of a language that serves so few people of such importance? What is lost when that language is extinct?

A) Well, first of all, the potential loss of any language matters hugely to the people who still use it — and to their families and communities. Take the Mohawks, for instance. Almost all Mohawks under sixty speak English as a first language. Most of them have a hard time speaking the Mohawk language with any degree of fluency. But the idea that the language might soon be extinct is something that concerns almost every Mohawk I've met, whether or not he or she speaks it. Time after time, I've been told that a language embodies something very basic about a culture, an identity.

If it were just the Mohawk language that seemed to be on its way out, then perhaps most of the rest of us wouldn't have much reason to care. The problem is that Mohawk — which still has a few thousand speakers — is in a much better position than hundreds, even thousands of other languages. The vast majority of indigenous languages in the United States and Canada may well die out before the end of the twenty-first century. Some linguists say that 90 percent of the world's living languages are in trouble.

This means, in short, that we're living through an extraordinary time in human history. You could argue that despite the technological changes that are all around us, the possibilities of what it means to be human are being drastically reduced. Of course, as Noam Chomsky has taught us, languages have a great deal in common. But there are also fascinating and strange and surprising and perhaps very crucial ways in which languages differ from each other. Every time a language is lost, those differences are lost forever.

Q) Are the values of a society visible in its language? Do you have any examples?

A) I think so. If I can quote the example of Mohawk again, there's an excellent writer and broadcaster in Canada by the name of Brian Maracle. In the past few years he has spent a lot of his time teaching Mohawk to adults. Brian points out that in Mohawk, if you want to get across the idea "John carefully paddled his canoe through the rapids yesterday," the typical sentence structure would go something like this: "yesterday / through the rapids / his canoe / carefully / he paddled / John." So in English the individual comes first. In Mohawk time and place appear first — and the individual comes last. That may be a profound difference. Brian thinks it helps to explain the individualism of mainstream society.

Another kind of example would focus on how pronouns differ between languages. English is

rich in numerous ways, but when it comes to pronouns, it's actually very poor — a word like *they* covers all sorts of people. I visited a town in northern Australia where the common language among the Aboriginal people is called Murrinh-Patha. And in Murrinh-Patha, there are at least eight ways of saying *they*: "those two siblings," "those three to fifteen females," "those more than fifteen males," and so on. If you speak Murrinh-Patha, you have to keep human relationships in mind all the time. There are seven words for what we lump together as *you*. And just as we intuitively recoil from a sentence like "You am happy," a speaker of Murrinh-Patha would recoil from a sentence that used the wrong form of *you*. It's as though the language requires you to think in certain ways.

Q) Is the comparison between endangered languages and endangered animals or plants valid? Does the loss of a language have the same impact as the loss of a plant that might conceivably provide a cure for a disease?

A) I would never claim that the loss of a single language was as important as the loss of, let's say, the blue whale or the mountain gorilla. But it's not really a competition in tragedy, is it? Animals and plants have a right to exist on this earth too, even if most of them don't turn out to be directly useful to us. In the same spirit, I hope that many languages will survive for reasons that go beyond their potential usefulness.

That said, there are all sorts of parallels between the threat that languages face and the threat that so many wild species face. In both cases, the problem is at its worst in the tropics — rain forests are incredibly productive homes for languages as well as animals and plants. And the same forces that are putting species at risk — so-called development, above all, which often means little more than short-term devastation — are also endangering languages.

One further point: we've begun to realize that very often, indigenous peoples have a wealth of medical and pharmaceutical knowledge that, up until now, modern medicine has tended to ignore. We're quick to use dismissive phrases like "witch doctor" and "medicine man." But what if those indigenous healers are actually using plants that could provide a cure for disease? If the languages die out, the ancient knowledge may die out too. On the west coast of Canada there's an endangered language called Halkomelem. I was fascinated to discover that their word for wild ginger, if you translate it literally, means "a device for the heart."

Q) Did you run into any kindred souls on your journey? Are there others out there undertaking the quixotic quest to salvage these tongues?

A) Lots of kindred souls. Lots of people on that quest. Lots of people out there with camcorders and tape recorders and notebooks. But you know, I don't agree with your word *quixotic*. Quixotic implies delusional, hopeless, doomed to failure. The people who are fighting to save a language can't afford to think in those terms. Even if the odds are against them, they have to believe in the chance of success. And sometimes — look at Manx! — their efforts pay off.

Q) Which among them are the most successful, and who seems unlikely to succeed? How do their tactics vary?

A) The tactics vary from place to place — there's no such thing as a six-point recovery plan that applies to every language in trouble. But to generalize for a moment, I found that one

aim is almost always shared: keeping the endangered language alive among children, teenagers, and young adults, not just preserving it as a relic for the old. If you come across a language no longer being spoken by kids, normally it's safe to assume that's a language in pretty bad shape.

One of the most successful minority groups in this regard is the Welsh. Living next to England, having been ruled by England for more than seven hundred years, they've managed to hang on to a Celtic language that has very different sounds and rules and word order from English, not just a different vocabulary. Some of what the Welsh do can be an inspiration for minority groups anywhere: creating highly popular TV shows in their own language; using Welsh throughout the education system, so that you can study Welsh in kindergarten and university alike; making music in Welsh, including rock and country, so the language is not consigned in people's minds to the realm of picturesque tradition.

I don't want to single out a group of people as unlikely to succeed in the fight. Let's just say there are a few examples in *Spoken Here*.

Q) You must have come across some extraordinarily beautiful words and phrases in your travels. Which is your favorite? Are there some stunningly awkward or unpleasant words that come to mind?

A) I love some of the amazing verbs in the Boro language, which is spoken in an out-of-the-way corner of northeastern India. *Onguboy*: to love from the heart. *Onsra*: to love for the last time. *Bunhan bunahan*: to be about to speak, and about not to speak.

I'm also completely fascinated by the Inuktitut language of the high Arctic. The entire culture of the Inuit, including their language, is really a masterpiece of life on this planet. Most people remember the old idea that the Inuit use dozens of words for snow. That's true — but I don't find it especially interesting. To me what's a lot more thought-provoking is that Inuktitut has many different words for *know*. If you mean "he or she is not ignorant of something," you say *nalujunnaipaa*. But if you mean "he or she is no longer unaware of something," then you say *naluanaiqpaa*. Or if you mean "he or she knows from experience," you have to say *utsimavaa*. And so on. Inuktitut encourages its speakers to be very precise about what they mean.

As for stunningly awkward words — no, nothing springs to mind. Unpleasantness, like beauty, is perhaps in the eye of the beholder. I can think of words that seem awkward to me — the German language has tons of examples. But I doubt if they seem awkward to a native speaker of German. We're always in danger of judging other languages and cultures by what happens to seem normal in ours.

Q) Is there an advantage to having more people around the world share a common language and a common set of values? Is globalization creating a new kind of creole culture or something less creative, more neutered?

A) Globalization is such a huge, all-encompassing phenomenon that I don't think anyone can speak about it with confidence. It's true that in some of its aspects it can be incredibly creative. The spread of world-beat music is one example. There are other ways, though, in which globalization is wiping out indigenous cultures and traditions. When most of the movies being shown on most of the screens in most of the countries in the world come from

Hollywood, I think it's hard to consider this a triumph of creativity. A triumph of marketing, maybe.

True, there are some practical advantages to a common language. If you're buying a toaster, let's say, it helps to understand the instructions. But unfortunately, it's hard to separate the practical benefits from everything else that goes along with a common language — and, let's be honest, what we mean here is the spread of English. It's wiping out languages in many countries. When a language goes, so does a whole network of meanings and values. The world is steadily becoming less diverse and more homogenized. As far as I'm concerned, that's a shame.

I also think it's incredibly dangerous to speak of the world benefiting from a common set of values — namely ours. How would you, as an American, feel if somebody from Japan declared that the United States needed to adopt a common set of values: those of Japan? You'd have every right to feel upset. Well, a lot of people are upset with North America right now.

Of course I value freedom and democracy. But those values are not unique to our corner of the world. North Americans have a tendency to assume that our culture and language and values are automatically the best in the world. I think a little modesty is in order.

Q) The situation, as you say, looks pretty dire for many languages. So is this a hopeless book?

A) Not at all! Everywhere I went, I found a tremendous desire to save the local language — a refusal to give up quietly. I hope that feeling comes across in the book. And I also hope that my own love of language — the sheer pleasure I take in it — also shines through. In a strange way, this is a book of celebration.

Glossary of Threatened Languages

What follows are some of the languages and a few of the words that appear in Mark Abley's new book, *Spoken Here: Travels Among Threatened Languages*.

Mati Ke (northern Australia)

nhanjdji marri: the cycad (a tall, palmlike plant common in the region)

a marri: a kind of cockroach that lives in dead cycad fronds

me marri: those people whose totems are the cockroach and the cycad

Nootka (west coast of Canada)

tl'imshya'isita'itlma: "he invites people to a feast" (literally, "boiling result eating those go to get somebody")

Jaru (western Australia)

mangir-djaru: being wise (literally, "having ears")

mangir-gir-mulungu: being unwise (literally, "having no ears")

Kriol (an English-based creole spoken in northern Australia)

Orait, sambala stakmen deya langa dat Kantri deibin maindimbat ola nenigout langa pedik naitaim: "And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night" (a verse from the Christmas story as told by Saint Luke)

Inuktitut (Arctic Canada)

utsimavaa: he or she knows from experience

sanatuuq: he or she knows how to do something

qaujimavaa: he or she knows about something

nalujunnaipaa: he or she is not ignorant of something

nalunaiqpaa: he or she is no longer unaware of something

Lokele (eastern Congo)

liala: a garbage dump

liAla: a fiancée (the *a* sound is spoken with a rising pitch; otherwise, identical to the previous word)

Yuchi (Oklahoma)

dots'ones'ie: my father's sister's child (a word that should be spoken only by a woman)

Manx (Isle of Man, between Britain and Ireland)

s'mie lhiam: I like (literally, "is good with me")

Boro (northeastern India)

anzray: to keep apart from an enemy or wicked company

onguboy: to love from the heart

onsay: to pretend to love

onsra: to love for the last time

khar: to smell like urine or raw fish

Provençal (southern France)

Branda li moustacho en quaucun: to stare defiantly at someone (literally, "to wag his mustache")

Mohawk (eastern Canada and northeastern United States)

Kentskahràke watekhwahratsherotehkwe': "There was a table on the rug" (literally, "What you eat food on stands on the hemp material in the past")

Yiddish (many places where European Jews have settled)

kesheneganev: pickpocket (combining the Polish word for *pocket* with the Hebrew word for *thief*)

Welsh (Wales)

blwyddyn: year

blynyddoedd: years

Praise for *Spoken Here*

"This generous, sorrow-tinged book is an informative and eloquent reminder of a richness that may not exist much longer." — *Publishers Weekly*

"A humanistic approach to linguistics and a scintillating read." — *Kirkus Reviews*