What does language death look – or rather ‘sound’ like? In part, it’s the sound of silence and the pain of imperfect communication, crystallised in the expression of my Dutch grandmother, trying so earnestly to explain to me, her English-speaking grandson, what it meant to be an onderdrukt of ‘person in hiding’ during World War II in Amsterdam. It’s also embodied in the look on the face of my wife’s grandmother, a Yiddish journalist who spoke at least seven languages to some level of fluency, as she realised that she would have to write in English, her eighth language, in order to convey her knowledge to a wider audience. How do you prevent a language from dying? Learning to speak it yourself is certainly a first step. I have been working in the Himalayas for the last 15 years, particularly in Nepal – a country of massive ethnic and linguistic diversity, home to over 200 languages from four different language families. Since 1996, I have lived for long periods with the Thangmi community who speak an endangered and until recently, almost entirely undescribed Tibeto-Burman language. For most of these years, I have worked in collaboration with my wife, De Sara Shaideh, a research fellow in social anthropology at St Cartharine’s College, who has written about Thangmi religious traditions and cultural practices. Working with indigenous scholars, Sara and I have been documenting the unique Thangmi language and its associated cultural traditions.

Ever fewer ethnic Thangmi speak the Thangmi language. Many community members have taken to speaking Nepali, the national language taught in schools and spread through the media, and their competence in their ancestral language is rapidly declining. While growing fluency in any national language is of course to be encouraged, and is no small feat for an economically unstable country such as Nepal, this progress can be at the expense of written speech forms. Within one family, it’s quite common to find a monolingual Thangmi grandparent living in the same household as their middle-aged child who is bilingual in Thangmi and Nepali, alongside grandchildren enrolled in a government village school who speak only Nepali.

While this is not an unusual picture, as my own family history illustrates, such complete language shift in the space of two generations (grandparents and grandchildren sharing no common language) is nevertheless a massive rupture for a small ethnic group, and one which can have a profound impact on the transmission of cultural knowledge and history. Communities who may have been multilingual a generation ago, speaking different languages in different social contexts (the home, the local bazaar and elsewhere in the region when trading), are increasingly schooled through the medium of a national language which firmly insuits and reinforces monolingual identities. Even today, multilingualism is often tragically portrayed as an impediment to full citizenship and participation in a modern nation state.

I should confess that it took me the best part of three years to learn Thangmi to a level sophisticated enough to tell a joke, and another year to be able to tell a joke that was actually funny. This underscores the importance of culture in language: while I had become grammatically adult, culturally, I was still a child, with no real sense of what was locally relevant, resonant and meaningful.

Part of my struggle was that I was used to learning languages from books where someone else had taken the time to parse each word out and explain the rules of grammar. With Thangmi, I was faced with decoding a complex and unwritten language with no rulebook to refer to and with no obvious path in. Imagine hearing the phrase ‘Qu’est-ce que c’est que ça?’ for the first time, without knowing how the words fitted together because they had never before been written down, and you’ll understand my problem.

Bilingual Thangmi-Nepali speakers were my first point of contact, and I spent my early months in the field using my existing Nepali language skills to ask increasingly complex questions on the lines of “In your language, how would you say ‘that man over there is my mother’s elder brother’?”, to which I might receive the tired and slightly iritated reply, and then in Thangmi, “I told you already, he’s not my mother’s elder brother but my mother’s elder sister’s husband”, often suffixed with a sotto voce “this light-haired kid learns really slowly”.

My progress really was slow, every triumph eroded by another moment of confusion at the next, more complex, puzzle. The Thangmi verb ‘to be’, for example, has a range of different roots, each contingent on the perceived state of permanence of being and whether the speaker has seen the event with their own eyes and thus verified the occurrence. And motion verbs vary by angle of inclination, so that ‘to come up a hill’ is a completely different and unrelated verb stem from ‘to come down the mountain’. The local mountainous topography is etched into the language and it is inconceivable that a native speaker would confuse the two.

The Thangmi lexicon is pretty compact, with just over 600 words, and not always ones that we would expect. For example, while there are no Thangmi terms for ‘village’,
“table”, “left” or “right”, there are specific verbs to mean “to be exhausted by sitting in the sun all day” and “to be infested with lice”, as well as precise nouns to describe the edible parts which helps us to rebalance the relationship and reflect on the fact that we, as outsiders, can learn about and understand the cultural knowledge and language of their ancestors.

Generations of anthropologists have had the privilege of working with indigenous communities and have recorded volumes of oral literature while in the field, but many of our colleagues have not known what to do with these recordings once they finish analysing them. The World Oral Literature Project can provide a way for the material that has been gathered to be preserved and to be disseminated in innovative ways, where that is ethically and culturally appropriate.

The New Zealand Film Archive has a mission to collect, protect and connect New Zealanders with their moving image heritage. These three verbs also summarise our aims. Collection is the gathering and documentation of oral literature in the field, in an extractive or acquisitive manner, and in a way that is responsible, collaborative and predicated on trust. Protection is its archiving, and curation – doing the best we can to maintain, migrated and reveals a trilingual Thangmi-Nepali-English dictionary in the Devanagari (Nepali) script, providing the first written record of the language in a format that could be used in schools and non-formal education settings.

Our long-time co-researcher and friend, Bir Bahadur Thangmi, spent last summer in Cambridge working with us to transcribe, translate and annotate three major Thangmi ritual recitations as performed by shamans at weddings, funerals and annual festivals. The end product will be a book containing the recitations in the original Thangmi along with Nepali and English translations, accompanied by a DVD showing these events in practice, which we will publish in Nepal. This oral tradition has never before been textually documented, so this book will fill an important gap in the scholarship on the peoples of the Himalayas. In addition, many members of the Thangmi community view the production of such works as the kind of positive agenda. In the past, Bir Bahadur might have been referred to as an ‘informant’, ‘consultant’ or ‘assistant’, but these terms problematic and insufficient. I prefer the term ‘language teacher’ and ‘local researcher’ to describe his invaluable and varied input into our research on these endangered narrative traditions.

To some ears, the term ‘oral literature’ seems a contradiction in terms. Is literature not by definition written? We are accustomed to the scholarly emphasis on languages which have been referred to as an ‘informant’, ‘consultant’ or ‘assistant’, but these terms problematic and insufficient. I prefer the term ‘language teacher’ and ‘local researcher’ to describe his invaluable and varied input into our research on these endangered narrative traditions.

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