



Arts and Culture

Saving language with a Record-A-Thon

By STEVEN SHORT on July 27, 2011 - 4:51pm



Record-A-Thon logo courtesy of the Rosetta Project



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The Bay Area is so diverse, that walking down the street or sitting on BART, you might hear a number of languages being spoken. Some you might recognize, like Spanish or Mandarin. And then there's Arabic, Italian, and French.

But linguists are predicting that nearly half of today's languages will be extinct within the next hundred years. Languages such as that of the Wintu tribe here in California is endangered, and in northern Australia, there were only 10 fluent speakers of the Wageman language as of the year 2000.

But, as KALW's Steven Short reports, one group in San Francisco is working to make sure these languages don't disappear without a trace.

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STEVEN SHORT: Poet and lecturer Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Language is the archives of history." And Laura Welcher, director of the [Rosetta Project](#) at the [Long Now Foundation](#) in San Francisco, agrees.

LAURA WELCHER: Well, languages represent human culture. And with 7,000 languages, we have at least 7,000 different human cultures on planet Earth. And when any one of those languages disappear, you lose a culture that has been developing for thousands of years.

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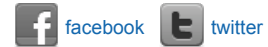


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Over 100 of those 7,000 languages – 112 to be exact – are spoken here in the Bay Area, according to the latest U.S. Census figures. That makes this the fifth most diverse language region in the country.

While that's a lot of languages in a small region, Welcher says most world tongues have never been documented, and won't be, before they disappear.

WELCHER: We can document maybe, say, 500 of them, in the foreseeable future, but the languages are disappearing so quickly – especially these smaller languages – that we really need to figure out some way to scale this to about 5,000 languages. Really the only way I can see to do that is by broadening the effort, and allowing everybody to participate in language documentation.

Which is why she conceived of the [Record-A-Thon](#) at The Internet Archive building in San Francisco.

WELCHER: The recordings are going to end up in the Internet Archive, and both the Rosetta Project and the Internet Archive have a commitment to long-term preservation of those resources and also making them open and publicly available.

While linguists such as Laura Welcher are saddened by the speed at which languages are evaporating, they're also heartened by the possibility of new ones evolving. Take English, for example.

WELCHER: Just think about all of the varieties of English that you hear spoken in the world today. There's actually a whole bunch of different varieties of world Englishes, that are quite different from each other, and you will get speakers of these different varieties who can not understand each other.

Welcher says participants in the Record-A-Thon don't need to worry about sounding professional. Just come ready to tell a story, recite a recipe, or a moment in family history – before your language

college”

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becomes history.

In San Francisco, I'm Steven Short for Crosscurrents.

For our listeners: the excerpts you heard in this report are from the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human rights, read in Greek, Urdu, Hindi, Hebrew, and American English.




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