

Cultural Comorbidities: Acceleration of Living Language Loss in Quarantine, The Case of Occitan

In the past twelve months since the initial appearance of COVID-19, human contact has been drastically reconfigured. From the macro effects of halted global travel to the micro practices of personal hygiene every social action has been scrutinized for risk of transmitting the novel coronavirus. Entire business districts lie vacant while ICU wards and morgues overflow. We have yet to reckon with the totality of our economic, cultural and personal losses. Many things will never be the same and perhaps even ancient behaviors like the handshake will be discarded. Much of pre-pandemic conduct will come to be regarded as quaint and perhaps foolish in retrospect.

Shortly after my birth, I was toted along on my parents' annual return to family and friends in a village in the south of France. There we spent a month each year among the peasants who had taken in my father in his youth. This year, of course, no such trip was possible and our visit was replaced by phone calls to our elderly friends. According to them, the greatest hardship during the first wave of quarantine was the closure of the Caussade bird market. In a secular country where most churches' doors were locked a few decades ago, the most important social event outside the larger cities was the weekly regional agricultural market (Azémar et al. 79).

Every Monday the town of Caussade hosts the bird market for the area's breeders of the mullet duck which is grown primarily for foie gras production. The core of the business caters to industrial purveyors of duck byproducts, but local farmers stop by to sell or buy brood stock and their wives peddle eggs from straw-filled baskets. Simultaneously, the downtown streets are filled with mobile vendors of produce, meat, fish, bread and cheese. Most everyone within a half hour drive, particularly the older folk from the surrounding countryside, will wander through the

offerings, buying a few items for the evening meal. But mainly they are there to bump into their acquaintances; to linger chatting over the week's events and to arrange a gathering later for an apéro or lunch out. The entirety of their discourse together is conducted in the ancient tongue, Occitan.

The Occitan language dates back to the time of the Romans and was spoken in Occitanie, the region bordered by the Massif Central to the north, the Atlantic to the west, the Pyrenees to the south, and the Alps to the east. In the department of the Lot, as recently as forty years ago, the first language of a child born to peasants would have been Occitan patois. Only when she entered kindergarten did she learn French. In fact, the eldest woman in the village of Escamps, nearing 100, still speaks no French to this day. All of the local seniors speak patois among themselves, shifting to French only when a non-speaker enters the group.

The French regional markets are the primary loci for the perpetuation of patois usage, not only in the southern Occitan region but also in the northern areas that still practice their local antique languages. Common market ads throughout the country claim that during the event, patois is the national language of the day (“Traditions Challandaises”; “Marché au Fort”).

Though its speaking population, numbering around half a million, is aging, Occitan is still a living, vital tongue. But all languages are destined to die, and new research indicates that the pandemic is accelerating the loss of marginal languages and traditions. Perhaps more important is that COVID is hampering field research and documentation for linguistic preservation.

The first, most obvious danger posed by the current situation is the disproportionate rate of COVID deaths among elderly speakers. Given that, community elders are often the main, if not only, resource available to the researcher of endangered languages, this poses grave and

immediate danger to preservation efforts. In the recent months of the crisis, there has been little academic discussion of the virus's sociolinguistic ramifications. However, a short review of the pandemic's possible effect on endangered language was published in May 2020 in the IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences. In their analysis, the authors illustrate how COVID might pose a substantial threat to endangered languages and dialects in communities where only the older, at-risk, generations speak the language (Khalid et al. 10). They focus particularly on the question of whether the then unprecedented (May 2020) number of deaths in Italy endangered the survival of local dialects and minority languages, citing late 1990s research on the fragility of certain Italian patois (11). Additionally, they posit that marginal Native American languages are in greater peril as a direct result of high COVID deaths among older generations. Concluding that COVID-19 should be considered a novel factor in language death, alongside the known causes of language shift, war and other anthropogenic disasters (10).

In the six months since this article was published, the concerns raised by Khalid et al. have proven to be apt predictions, particularly with respect to the sociolinguistic consequences of COVID faced by Native American communities. The media have reported the disproportionately higher devastation of COVID in the Navajo Nation. University of New Mexico doctoral student and award winning journalist Sunnie Clahchischiligi writes about the loss of elder Navajo women and its lasting effect on culture in a November 2020 article. Clahchischiligi reports that the inordinate rate of death among Navajo women represents an immense cultural loss to the traditionally matriarchal Navajo society, as women and particularly elder Navajo women, who are most susceptible to the disease, are the designated oral historians of Navajo culture. A significant part of the transmission of this oral heritage is the Navajo language itself (2).

While the pandemic's direct threat to speakers is grave, it is not the only factor affecting endangered languages. The study of language often necessitates close human contact, therefore lockdown becomes an obstacle to preservation efforts. Because travel has been restricted in the effort to slow the spread of the virus, linguistic field research has become infeasible in many cases. A September 2020 study, published in the *Linguistics Vanguard* journal, discusses pandemic-appropriate methods of conducting field research and their limitations. Using a combination of smartphone audio recording software and teleconferencing programs, several virtual interview methods were conducted, with interviewees being polled on their comfort with the virtual data collection process (Leemann et al. 4.1). According to the authors, there appears to be much overlap in how in-person and virtual research participants perceive the interview (4.1). With reference to a particular study concerning differences in dialects of Swiss German in which the virtual method was used, Leemann et al. argue that the virtual methods of fieldwork were more than adequate substitutions for in-person interviews in that specific study. However, in discussing the comparative advantages of the method, the authors make two important critiques. The first is that where nonverbal cues are significant, unstable video quality creates the risk that such data might not be accurately recorded. Slow internet speed as well as certain technical limitations of the software may make the virtual "field-work" inapplicable to some studies (4.2.3). The second, more important limitation with respect to the virtual study of endangered language is the problem of participant computer illiteracy (4.2.4). Here, the difficulty might be insurmountable. As many of the world's unique languages and dialects owe their continued existence mainly to the lack of modern influence, virtual methods of data collection are of doubtful utility in efforts to study or preserve such languages. While participants may not always be tech illiterate, the virtual approach has its practical shortcomings when computer

literacy is a requirement. Like much of global human activity during the course of this pandemic, hands-on linguistic research is on standby.

At this point one might debate whether the importance of mere cultural preservation is not overshadowed by the existential threat of the pandemic. Academics are often perceived as frivolous esthetes who make a habit of eschewing pragmatism in the intellectual pursuit of worthless data. As recent months have shown, many seemingly indispensable social norms have been razed by the crisis. If the handshake and la bise (French greeting kiss) have fallen into disuse, then why must such obscure sociolinguistic concerns be addressed now? Without risking a reductionist view, one could argue that historical and anthropological lessons prove that war, plague and other abrupt sociocultural disruptions function as small extinction events in which the particulars of a society, its customs, art, knowledge, language and other extraneous artifacts are destroyed and forgotten. The current health crisis is obviously a similarly devastating event and therefore might necessitate an even higher level of vigilance with respect to the study of endangered and moribund languages.

The debate over language preservation, however, did not begin with the novel coronavirus. There are some who maintain that language follows the Darwinian path of deference to the dominant dialect and culture, and that the extinction of language is a natural consequence of linguistic interrelation (Mufwene, *Language Contact* 41). Furthermore, the argument that language preservation is necessary solely because of the inherent value of the language's culture is a position that does little to convince the utilitarian. Rather than founding preservation purely on cultural reasons, many linguists argue that languages are more than inert cultural artifacts. In addition to the evident relationship between language and culture, language can also function as a repository for a wealth of arcane and irretrievable human knowledge. In

her paper *Endangered Languages, Endangered Knowledge*, linguist Luisa Maffi illustrates how the extinction of a language means the loss of its potential use as a database, not only in linguistics, but also in studies of anthropology, psychology, ecology, astronomy, and prehistory (391). Although a significant amount of attention is given to the cultural element of oral tradition, there can exist an equally rich amount of information encoded in the structure and lexis of the language itself. Grammatical rules can be closely tied to environmental contexts, and unique botanical and medicinal lexicons may exist in the language that exhaustively describe the physical world of the speaker. Geographic and environmental landmarks such as natural springs, shelters and game trails may be similarly fundamental vocabularies.

Here, we may be reminded of the snowclone myth originating from the 19th century anthropologist Franz Boaz concerning the Eskimo and their supposedly large vocabulary for forms of snow. Despite the shortcomings of this bit of trivia, the concept that there exists an intimate connection between language and environment is a validated linguistic phenomenon (Maffi 388). Eastern Cherokee, a language critically endangered yet still spoken natively in North Carolina, is a polysynthetic verb-based language. This grammatical organization means that verbs are conjugated accordingly with the thing acted upon. This, combined with the ecological and geographic context of the Eastern Cherokee language, allows for single-word (verb) conveyance of geographically specific information that would require multiple sentences in English. For instance, the conveyance of whether or not something is downhill, uphill, downstream or upstream, along with other precise clauses can be specified simply by modifying the verb suffix (Scancarrelli 16). Distinctive linguistic traits like these of Eastern Cherokee are significant because they provide a psychologically novel template of human perception. Furthermore, the language itself is inflected by its environmental context and as such, is

inseparable from its physical geography in a technical, rather than a merely cultural fashion.

Although culture is a crucial motive for studying endangered languages, the value in preservation or revitalization is not limited to an intangible cultural element. The discipline strives to document the greater project of recording the cosmos of human cognitive processes.

In that sense, language, like wine, is a product of terroir. It arises geocentrically from the endeavors and environment of its speakers. Situated a little over an hour outside of the Occitanie capital of Toulouse, the small sleepy village of Escamps sprawls out among the fenced lots of scrub oak forests and truffle plantations. The inhabitants embody their patois. Not only do they speak it, it speaks them. Their surnames are often the lieux-dit, the place names, of the geographical features that surround them. The village is divided by a cleft in the limestone where springs rise out of the ground. North of the divide is the Mas de Fraysse, a hillock of ash trees (“fraysse” is Occitan for the French “frêne” or ash) and is the ancient home of the Fraysse family who bear the name of their ash-covered domaine. The aforementioned hundred-year-old doyenne who speaks no French is the last survivor of that lineage.

The few paved arterials and numerous gravel roads are bordered by sagging drystone shepherd’s walls made up of the last millenia’s accumulated limestone plow tailings. Locals say that little grows in the Lot department, save for truffles and rocks. Here, every well, house and field has its legend. The south end of town is called Mas de Rebelou or the Farmhouse of the Rebel. The descendants of these clans still hold a grudge for slights dating back to feudal times. Peace was partially restored nearly a century ago when the young Mademoiselle Fraysse fell for the cocky scion of the rebel clan and bore him a dozen offspring.

On the outskirts of town, down a haunted stonewalled path whose name is the record of a crime lost to memory, “lou Camin deu Viòl,” (path of the rape), lives the local firewood cutter,

Gabriel. His family name, Puech, is the Occitan word for knoll and places the origins of his tribe at the village high point. He, and his tractor, are seldom home. Should one scour the forest paths enough however, the 83-year old can be seen yet plying the trade of his ancestors, felling the gnarled oaks, carefully sawing them into meter lengths and splitting the hard stringy rounds. Gabriel and others of his vintage are of the last bilingual generations whose maternal language is the Occitan they speak among themselves on market day. But, more frequently, with newcomers and the young they use the language of the TV, French. Within the last thirty years the frequency of language use has been reversed; back then, it was French that was spoken only about once a week.

From a layman's perspective, there may be an assumption that bilingual speakers possess equal levels of proficiency in both languages, but research has systematically shown that this is not the case. In a 2011 study of whether first language (L1) attrition in bilinguals is affected most by aging or by dominance of a second language, we find parallels with Gabriel's case. This research compares sets of highly functional bilingual participants, with two age groups being represented in each set. Each set is tested for relative fluency in the first and second languages (Hebrew and English), with the results being compared across age groups (Goral et al. 3). In explaining the significance of the results, the authors remark that while difference in relative proficiency between the older and younger bilinguals cannot be determined, the results confirm the finding of prior studies that bilingual speakers who are more immersed in their second language often display significant proficiency loss in their native language (9). Even though this may not appear particularly troubling, when applied to the situation of bilingual speakers of endangered languages, the slow attrition by way of a speaker's immersion in her second tongue becomes consequential. Now the risk to the vitality of Occitan becomes apparent. Not only is the

language threatened by the greater death toll of the pandemic among its elderly practitioners, but occitanophones like Gabriel are losing their fluency during quarantine as opportunities to speak dwindle. As France's nationwide lockdowns have effectively terminated the only regular occasions in which Occitan is spoken, it has gone from being a weekly feature of village economic and social expression to functioning only as a moribund relic. The eventual demise of any language is indeed certain; but if the pandemic continues enforcing the isolation of its practitioners and the heightened grim reaping of elderly speakers much longer, then the acceleration of the loss of patois will be readily apparent.

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The casualties of COVID have only begun to be enumerated. Only over the next few years will the tally start to diminish. The human toll will be reported as data accrues but the collateral damage will take years to assess. Most human behavior developed over eons of sparse population density, much of which may not be sustainable under present day conditions of global crowding and warming. In particular, pandemics arise and deploy universally with great facility in overpopulated settings. The model of monocultural agriculture, and urban creep into previously wild areas, is a laboratory for the hazards of cramming vast numbers of members of the same species in the least possible space. It presents an analogous attempt in the concurrent development of monoglot societies. Already the horizons of diminishing returns of both experiments are being recorded.

The consequences of the loss of linguistic diversity are not as compelling as the life-threatening ramifications of the loss of biodiversity. But the preservation of the cognitive and social systems encoded in language that allow the human species to thrive in various environments is a worthy attempt to catalog the collective cairns along the mind's journey. As

the diversity of life remaining in the Amazon rainforest is said to be a repository of undiscovered molecular compounds of untold potential for medicine and technology, so the record of diverse languages is a trove of varied human experience and adaptation.

As new journalism, linguistic research, and this case of Occitan have shown, the pandemic poses more complex dangers to minor languages and dialects than simply speaker mortality. These unforeseen effects of COVID are hastening the demise of minor languages through the weakening of the social practices that sustain them and of the efforts to study and preserve them. If we, as a global community, hope to minimize catastrophic loss, steps must be taken now to understand these impacts and to adapt for them.

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