

Libraries and Language Preservation: A Defining Generational Moment

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Abstract: This column proposes that schools of Library Science (as well as Museum Studies and related disciplines) can contribute to language preservation and advance their own financial interests by presenting themselves as key collaborators in language preservation to governments and NGOs. By funding such programs, especially in the form of grants and scholarships for minority-language students, Library Science programs can make a significant impact on language preservation, maximizing return on the limited budgets afforded to such projects.

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When I was a child, swing dancing made a comeback. Big band orchestras played on *Good Morning America*, swing classes were offered in every community center, and the zoot suit threatened to become the once-and-future baggy pant. My father laughed that teenagers, who wanted nothing to do with the popular culture of their parents' generation, would happily embrace that of their grandparents. Within a couple of years the fad had run its course and I heard no more about it, largely because I was not a dancer. My wife was, however, and when I met her years later I learned that it had had some enduring consequences after all. While most participants' interest had been superficial, a smaller number of dedicated new dancers had been drawn to swing's sudden notoriety and rallied to preserve the remaining inter- and post-war dance halls, while also seeking out surviving dancers of the time to record their memories. As a result, a wealth of American heritage that would otherwise have disappeared—dances, styles of musical performance, memoirs—were passed on to a new generation, having skipped a generation (or sometimes two) in between.

Just as crucial as their awareness and interest, however, was the fact that young people in the United States during the 1990s had the disposable income needed to institutionalize their enthusiasm at studios, schools, competitions, and conventions. These became stable, publically-accessible repositories for the knowledge they had preserved, allowing their own successors to locate and acquire these traditions even now that the swing craze has faded. Unfortunately, young adults do not now enjoy these same levels of prosperity. Flat wages, rising costs of necessities, austerity policies, and growing instability in employment conspire to discourage grassroots cultural activism, and can make young people more reticent about educating themselves for positions in the cultural and educational sectors. The timing could not be worse for the preservation of minority languages, many of which went into critical decline at about the same time that the old dance halls started to close. Many of these languages are having their cultural moment now, with millennials showing unusual enthusiasm for

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learning and preserving them, as Generation X did for swing. Unfortunately, millennials also face significant economic and occupational hurdles when moving into careers that make use of these skills—particularly librarianship, which plays an important role in language preservation. Since a majority of minority-language speakers are elderly, a failure to move L2 speakers from the millennial generation into cultural curation positions in sufficient numbers over the next decade will threaten many languages' long-term survival.

For example, the Republic of Ireland's language policies have failed to halt the organic decline of Irish in the traditional Gaeltacht areas, but they have made Gaelic a chic intellectual accessory for a certain segment of the young, urban population (Courtney, 2017), leading to a surprising and heartening growth in the use of Irish in Dublin and other cities (Walsh & O'Rourke, 2017). These hip "neo-speakers" (to borrow Grinevald and Bert's phrase) come predominantly from the educated, mobile "creative class" whose members are especially likely to pursue careers in libraries, schools, and other cultural institutions (Grinevald & Bert, 2011). Their presence in such positions could ensconce Irish for decades to come, providing a gateway for subsequent generations into the language by preserving Irish-language access to the country's information infrastructure and by highlighting unique information resources in Irish. Given the path-dependence of linguistic movements, this generational moment is determinative. If millennials do not enter careers in information services in sufficient numbers, there may well be permanent disruption to minority language access and many minority-language resources could sink into obscurity.

The same situation exists on the other side of the Irish Sea. The factors presently driving enthusiasm for the Scots language differ from those making Irish *de rigeur*, most notably in connection with debates about Scotland's place in the United Kingdom and the divergence of Scottish notions of society and citizenship from those in England and Wales. The effect is similar, however, in that

millennials have become eager to cast off the “Scottish cringe” experienced by their upwardly-mobile middle class parents during the Thatcher era. Instead, they often embrace Scots as part of a new conception of modernity, progress, and progressivism. It is notable that libraries have been a leading site of initiative, at least to the extent that the Scottish government and other formal institutions have responded to this trend. In 2015, the Scottish National Library endowed a position for a “Scots Scriever”—a second poet laureate dedicated to raising awareness of Scots and its place in national life. The first Scriever, Hamish MacDonald, used the position two years ago to spearhead a digital library initiative called *Wee Windaes* (<http://wee-windaes.nls.uk>), which opens Scots-language items in the Library’s archives to online access alongside supplemental resources for language study. Such initiatives are not, by themselves, sufficient to stabilize the condition of Scots, but they are important components of a broader effort. Such components are only made possible by the strategic placement of Scots speakers in the country’s cultural institutions. If the present generation of enthusiasts and activists fails to make its way into these same institutions in sufficient numbers, the resulting generational lacuna in Scots preservation is likely to leave future generations without the speaker-base necessary to resume these efforts in more fortunate times. This pressing need for new professionals to enter the field is complicated by late retirements, rising costs of graduate education, diminishing budgets for new positions, and the rise of part-time employment and independent/zero-hour contracting.

These examples come from the British Isles, but the Second World War and the second wave of globalization set hundreds of languages on similar schedules of decline, converging on this moment as a path-dependent watershed. If the present global generation of linguistic revivalists, taking up these languages less now from their parents than from their grandparents (or great grandparents), is not adequately supported and encouraged to enter librarianship and other professions in education and

cultural curation, it is unlikely that many of the world's threatened languages will survive another generational shift.

It is therefore essential that the importance of libraries and archives as part of holistic preservation efforts be made clear to governments, NGOs, and minority language communities themselves. Many current initiatives focus on building speaker base, but without giving particular consideration to the placement of those speakers. While more research needs to be done to determine the precise extent of impact, a strong case can and must be made that funding, such as grants and scholarships, should encourage minority language speakers into librarianship or other public information professions that offer outsized returns to the limited budgets of preservation programs. Partnerships between revival initiatives and schools of library science, museum studies, and similar fields can offer tremendous rewards on both sides as these disciplines look for new ways to articulate their value and secure their financial underpinnings in the 21st century.

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