



July 30, 2013

Rosetta Project Preserves Key to Endangered Languages

by Mike O'Sullivan

There are about 7,000 languages in the world, and half of them could disappear by the end of the century. An effort called the "Rosetta Project," however, is preserving a key to understanding them for future generations.

These two American linguistics students can speak multiple languages, including French. They are among a dozen taking part in a summer internship with the Rosetta Project - working with professional linguists to expand a digital record of endangered languages. It's inspired by the Rosetta Stone, which contained an ancient inscription in Greek and two different Egyptian writing systems - providing scholars with the first key to understand Egyptian hieroglyphics.

Started by a nonprofit group called the Long Now Foundation, the project is creating an online archive and is also preserving parallel texts on an optical disc - a kind of Rosetta Stone for linguists in the future. The small hand-held disc is etched with tiny print and plated with nickel. There are 13,000 pages, sampling 1,500 languages in microscopic text, according to the foundation's Alexander Rose.

"A single parallel text, a description, a map of where it's from, these types of things that just give you enough that you can compare to another language that you know or have studied or scholars have figured out, you can start pulling parallels between the two and reconstruct the basics of a language," said Rose.

A recent demonstration of endangered languages sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington featured the Hawaiian language and other vanishing tongues, including Tuvan, which can still be heard in southern Siberia.

Many languages like this are spoken by small groups, said Rosetta Project director Laura Welcher.

"They're spoken by thousands of people or even smaller-sized groups, and a lot of those languages are in remote parts of the world. They haven't been well documented," she said.

Linguists at universities and research institutes are in a race against time to record these languages before they die out.

Welcher said that linguists and students at the Rosetta Project are doing their part.

"The idea is to purposely create a massively parallel linguistic collection that is broadly representative of all of our human languages, that can be that kind of secret decoder ring for human languages and what we leave for the future," she said.

And it may be the key to helping reconstruct today's dying languages.

<http://www.voanews.com/content/rosetta-project-preserves-key-to-endangered-languages/1713317.html>