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## Researchers Look To Save Disappearing Languages Online

By SHEILA RILEY

Posted 11/09/2004 03:00 AM ET

Academics are creating repositories of information in cyberspace -- and making the ivory tower more democratic in the process. Preserving endangered languages is one example. Researchers look to catalog languages that are rarely spoken, so that the tongues won't be lost to the ages. "People whose languages have ceased to be spoken have come to appreciate them afterward," said Doug Whalen, a linguistics researcher at Haskins Laboratories, affiliated with Yale University in New Haven, Conn. A record of the language, particularly a spoken record, is invaluable -- especially if a tongue is disappearing. Whalen says efforts to revive languages can be difficult because the communities that spoke them -- mostly indigenous peoples -- are often scattered. Online access to materials is critical for academics studying languages and people who are trying to recover lost languages, he says. The University of California, Berkeley, is working to get its endangered-language print and audio archives online for that reason. Preserving languages has a huge societal benefit, according to Leanne Hinton, head of UC Berkeley's linguistics department. The alternative would lead to losses at many levels, she says. "When we lose a language in the world, we're losing a lot more than a set of words," Hinton said. Grammatical systems, thought systems and knowledge systems all disappear. At least half the world's 6,700 languages are endangered, Hinton says. American Indian languages, which have dwindled from 300 to 175, are a case in point. UC Berkeley has a century's worth of endangered language archives collected by anthropologists and linguists. Until now, accessing them meant going to the campus or requesting that copies be put in the mail. Recent federal and private grants will let the university digitize the materials, making them accessible to anyone interested. Berkeley will get help developing digitization methods from the San Francisco-based Rosetta Project, cyberspace's largest language archive. The Rosetta Project includes written examples of languages, audio files, and grammar and sound descriptions in languages ranging from Apache to Zulu. At last count, it had 1,761 languages online -- and plans to add the rest. The project hopes to get contributions from academic researchers and members of endangered-language communities. Laura Buszard-Welcher is curator of the ambitious effort, which has \$1 million in grants from the National Science Foundation. The goal of digital archiving is to have materials where people can get to them, she says. That means they aren't collecting dust in a professor's office. In her office, Buszard-Welcher has stacks of material made by missionaries cataloging the language of the Potawatomi -- a tribe in the Midwest, Great Lakes region and Canada. She spent years working with tribal elders making audio recordings and creating a dictionary and written grammar of the Potawatomi language. "The result of it is that I have a rather huge collection of materials sitting in my home office," rather than having it available for the world to see, Buszard-Welcher said. That's the way it is for many linguists, but it's a practice that needs to change, Buszard-Welcher says. Linguistics isn't the only discipline redefining itself via the Web. George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., is making history in cyberspace. Academics there have collected 150,000 online "objects" from ordinary people -- including stories, e-mails, audio recordings, PDF files and images -- about Sept. 11, 2001. The project, called the Sept. 11 Digital Archive, will go to the Library of Congress. The work is managed by the university's Center for History and New Media. It's democratic in a broad sense, says Roy Rosenzweig, the center's director. "We're making these primary materials of history available to people across the country," he said. The Sept. 11 Digital Archive lets ordinary people -- not just historians -- write history, Rosenzweig says. Projects such as George Mason's were considered on the academic fringe just five years ago, but are becoming more common, he says. They share similarities with the tech world's open-source movement, Rosenzweig says. In open source, any and all contributors can make additions to freely available software code. The Linux operating system is the most famous example. Those in the humanities are taking note, Rosenzweig says. "It's partly because we're not really in business," he said. "Our business is the social good." That's what makes open source an attractive concept, he says. "A model of giving things away, of participation, is a very appealing one," Rosenzweig said.

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