

World Literacy in Danger, Revisited

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Sounding the alarm
Sonner l'alarme

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Article abstract

Last year at the 2153 conference of the Canadian Anthropology Society, a renowned linguist, Leahcim Suark, urged us to document written languages before they disappear. In his now famous speech, titled, “World Literacy in Danger,” Suark brings alarming statistics on the condition of written languages of the world. According to Suark, one written language is lost approximately every two years. By next century, Suark claims, nearly half of the roughly 70 remaining written languages on Earth will likely disappear. The loss of literary languages brings about significant challenges in preserving human knowledge, accessing information, and maintaining linguistic diversity. Yet, in this commentary, I argue that oral traditions present a more productive way to think about knowledge transmission and preservation. Drawing on ethnographic data in Ajyy Sire, the traditional territory of the Ajyy Djono, I show that in a society where oral communication prevails and knowledge is transmitted through oral traditions across generations, information becomes more accessible, irrespective of a person's literacy or computer proficiency. I also show that without the dominance of written (standardized) languages, oral languages and their diverse expressions can still flourish, fostering resilience amidst the global changes facing humanity.

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World Literacy in Danger, Revisited

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Abstract: Last year at the 2153 conference of the Canadian Anthropology Society, a renowned linguist, Leahcim Suark, urged us to document written languages before they disappear. In his now famous speech, titled, “World Literacy in Danger,” Suark brings alarming statistics on the condition of written languages of the world. According to Suark, one written language is lost approximately every two years. By next century, Suark claims, nearly half of the roughly 70 remaining written languages on Earth will likely disappear. The loss of literary languages brings about significant challenges in preserving human knowledge, accessing information, and maintaining linguistic diversity. Yet, in this commentary, I argue that oral traditions present a more productive way to think about knowledge transmission and preservation. Drawing on ethnographic data in Ajyy Sire, the traditional territory of the Ajyy Djono, I show that in a society where oral communication prevails and knowledge is transmitted through oral traditions across generations, information becomes more accessible, irrespective of a person’s literacy or computer proficiency. I also show that without the dominance of written (standardized) languages, oral languages and their diverse expressions can still flourish, fostering resilience amidst the global changes facing humanity.

Keywords: endangered languages; artificial intelligence; oral traditions; Indigenous knowledge

Résumé: L’année dernière, lors de la conférence 2153 de la Société canadienne d’anthropologie, Leahcim Suark, un linguiste renommé, nous a vivement encouragés à documenter les langues écrites avant qu’elles ne disparaissent. Dans son discours désormais célèbre, intitulé « L’alphabétisation mondiale en danger », Suark présente des statistiques alarmantes sur l’état des langues écrites dans le monde. Selon Suark, une langue écrite disparaît environ tous les deux ans. D’ici le prochain siècle, près de la moitié des quelque 70 langues écrites qui subsistent sur Terre auront probablement disparu. La disparition des langues littéraires pose des défis importants en matière de préservation des connaissances humaines, d’accès à l’information et de maintien de la diversité linguistique. Pourtant, dans ce commentaire, je soutiens que les

traditions orales représentent une manière plus productive de penser la transmission et la préservation des connaissances. En m'appuyant sur des données ethnographiques collectées à Ajyy Sire, le territoire traditionnel des Ajyy Djono, je montre que dans une société où la communication orale prévaut et où les connaissances sont transmises par des traditions orales à travers les générations, l'information devient plus accessible à davantage d'individus, indépendamment de leur niveau d'alphabétisation ou de leur maîtrise de l'informatique. Je montre également que sans la domination des langues écrites (standardisées), les langues orales et leurs diverses expressions s'épanouissent, favorisant la diversité et la résilience face aux changements globaux auxquels notre humanité est confrontée.

Mots clés: langues menacées; intelligence artificielle; traditions orales; savoirs autochtones

Introduction

Over the past decade, the disappearance of the world's written languages has emerged as a significant concern among activists, politicians, and scholars. Advocates for literacy in reading and writing have raised alarms about the rapid decline in the world's written languages. There is a growing call for urgent action to document and preserve written languages before they vanish entirely from public knowledge. According to Leahcim Suark (2151), the overreliance on generative artificial intelligence (AI) in lieu of basic literacy skills has left the English language with only a few thousand competent readers. Written French, Russian, Portuguese, and Spanish face similarly startling declines. The trend is by no means limited to the Indo-European language family. Japanese and Standard Chinese are nearing extinction in their written form.

To be sure, we should not be too quick to announce the death of written language as a medium. Still, the Great Erasure of 2142 has most certainly set back efforts to document the world's remaining written languages. The problem is that scientists have been left to try to reconstruct whole writing systems from the few textual and literary fragments that survived the tragic, accidental, electromagnetic pulse that wiped most of our digital archives, databases, and cloud-based backups. All we have to go off now is human memory. As the last "readers" slowly die out, the countdown to the extinction of written language is on.¹

In this brief commentary, I make the case for Indigenous oral traditions as a more sustainable model for knowledge transmission and preservation. While knowledge of written traditions has proven especially vulnerable to technological catastrophe, oral traditions have become essential to the maintenance of linguistic, cultural, and social memory. I will try to make this case as follows. First, I want to wade into the current discourse of “endangerment” appealed to by those who argue for saving written languages. While I am sympathetic to the ultimate goal, the rhetoric that is used to justify the preservation of written languages is unhelpful, insofar as it presents oral language as somehow inferior. In the second half of my commentary, I will make the positive case for oral traditions and their epistemic advantages. Drawing on evidence from ethnographic fieldwork in Ajyy Sire and insights from First Nations on Turtle Island, I will suggest that we should focus our limited resources on increasing proficiency in storytelling, oral histories, and face-to-face communication. Oral communication has not only proven more resilient in the midst of our present technological crisis, it also keeps language use centred on the human, rather than the algorithmic.

Discourses of Endangerment

Arguments to save the world’s remaining written languages can be found in any number of spaces, from university classrooms and state-sponsored events to the advocacy activities of literary groups and ordinary people. Reviewing the current discourse, three points, in particular, are cited as justifying reversing the decline of written languages at all costs: (1) the loss of written knowledge that would result from the extinction of writing; (2) the loss of public access to information; and, (3) the loss of linguistic and cultural diversity in communicative traditions. To open, I want to examine each of these points in turn. What is lost when written languages die? And why should we save them?

The first and most common point that is used to justify efforts to save written languages is the loss of knowledge that would result from their extinction. With the disappearance of literary languages, a vast amount of recorded human knowledge, history, literature, science, and cultural heritage is predicted to be at risk. The prominent anthropologist Znafr Saob (2145), for example, argues that the preservation of written languages is imperative for humanity. Written languages encapsulate the essence of cultural heritage, and their alphabets and lexicography have served as conduits of historical knowledge and artistic expressions for the past several thousand years. Losing a written language

means relinquishing centuries of wisdom, unique narratives, and invaluable insights into the human experience. To allow a written language to vanish, Saob claims, is to erase a piece of the intricate tapestry of global heritage. It is a loss too profound to fathom, even if, before the Great Erasure, most human reading and writing had been delegated to AI.

A second point used to justify the preservation of written languages is closely related, and has to do with the loss of public access to information. Literacy scholars and activists argue that the lack of literary languages would restrict access to formal education, scientific knowledge, technology, and advancements that predominantly rely on written documentation (Johnson 2149, Murphy 2151). Lemons (2148), for instance, warns that this could lead to disparities in learning outcomes, while stunting economic growth and scientific achievement. The tragedy of the Great Erasure, as we all know, is that it reversed what might be called the “democratization of knowledge.” Information was literally at our fingertips. With one click, we could pull up any event, fact, or discovery that had been previously written down. Of course, few people actually looked up such things, since everything we needed to know could be supplied through an algorithm. Still, literacy advocates maintain that lack of public access to written knowledge is a direct threat to human progress.

Third and finally, one often hears proponents of written language talking about the cultural costs of diminished diversity in written forms, specifically, poetic traditions, wordplay, and other literary styles. For example, we mourn the death of Haiku, the Japanese poetic form consisting of three phrases, which is now said to be gone forever with the passing of its last reader. Every written language records a unique way of perceiving, conceptualizing, and expressing the world. Losing even a single written language—its unique grammar, vocabulary, and linguistic features—means losing the entire worldview that this language shapes and informs. Written language can carry the history, traditions, myths, stories, and collective wisdom of a whole community or culture. Ripas Wolf (2145) argues that the loss of a written language diminishes the diversity of human expression, communication, and linguistic structures. In a similar vein, Elten Daniel and Suzan Mane (2150) argue that the disappearance of a language in its written form erases an essential part of a community’s cultural identity and heritage.

In sum, many leading scholars today suggest that the loss of even a single written language would be nothing short of a disaster. I admit to finding many of these arguments to be compelling. Yet I do not find myself siding with the

alarmists. After all, in the grand sweep of human history, written language is a fairly recent technology. Many languages have no written form at all. Even before the Great Erasure, Indigenous communities maintained vibrant oral traditions and cultures—and this, despite centuries of colonization by both Western societies and AI fed by exclusively Western knowledge. In my opinion, what we should be worried about instead is the loss of basic oral competence. The time has come when we need to ask ourselves whether we can survive as a species if we cannot communicate face-to-face with one another.

Restoring Oral Traditions

We have a lot to learn from Indigenous peoples, who have maintained their oral traditions despite the encroachment of written languages and cultures. I say this while also noting the irony, since for many centuries the oral traditions that Indigenous communities have relied upon were deemed inferior to written traditions. But I want to make the case to you now that oral traditions may, in fact, be what saves us. Flipping the script, why do oral traditions have an advantage when it comes to knowledge transmission?

The first advantage, in my view, is that oral traditions and practices rely on talking, listening, non-verbal performance, and other basic communication skills that are, without exaggeration, on the verge of disappearance. Western literary traditions made a grave mistake by farming out most of the primary education system to AI, with the idea that classroom interactions could be automated. We created users and consumers of knowledge, but not protectors or creators.

In Indigenous communities, in contrast, the role of Elders as “knowledge keepers” has ensured that knowledge remains within the community itself. Rather than relying on cloud storage located miles away, knowledge is preserved within the minds of Elders, and is passed down to younger generations through practices including storytelling, songs, proverbs, chants, and other performances. Storytelling in particular is highly valued, specifically because of its intimacy: demanding attentive listening from its audience, clear narratives from Elders, and sometimes even creative inputs, repetitions, and additions to encourage knowledge retention and ownership. Nothing is mechanical. When the Elder speaks, they incorporate non-verbal cues such as tone of voice, body language, facial expressions, and eye movements to infuse vitality into their stories. The embodied elements of verbal storytelling help to ensure that knowledge is not only transmitted, but also remembered.

Let me give you an example drawn from fieldwork in the summer of 2139 with the Ajyy Djono, a Tüрдүү-speaking Indigenous group in Northeast Asia. The Ajyy Djono have several different oral traditions. There are no equivalencies in Western cultures, but roughly, they fall into the categories of oral poetry, improvised songs, epic tales, ceremonial blessings, and tongue-twisters. One practice is especially worth mentioning. It is called “Olokh Yryata,” and is a heroic epic consisting of a long verse form. It tells a story of the Ajyy Djono’s history, beliefs, and traditions, all in a highly improvised manner that encourages its participants to assume collective ownership. In one memorable experience, I remember observing a respected Elder named Erilik initiate the Olokh Yryata simply by sitting down. A semi-circle of interested participants immediately grew around him. Erilik then performed what might be described as a one-person theatre. Every character in Erilik’s story had a different voice, manner of speech, and body language. The story included songs, chanting, and many dialogues, which the audience was sometimes expected to repeat back.

What these ethnographic observations reveal is that in oral traditions, the “knower” is not separate—and indeed cannot be separated—from the knowledge itself. Knowledge transmission is a communicative skill, or performance. Elders, including those of the Ajyy Djono like Erilik, accumulate histories, stories, experiences, which they hold on behalf of their communities, like a living library. But the difference is that to access this library, you have to have a human connection. The Ajyy Djono have a saying expressing the special role that Elders play in their communities that nicely captures this sentiment: “Kyrджаghаһу khaahakhkha ildje syldjan sübeleteller” (“Elders should be carried around in a big leather backpack for their knowledge and wisdom”).

Based on these reflections, I see a second advantage that oral traditions might have over written ones. Simply, oral traditions provide a more grounded means of knowledge transmission. Songs, stories, histories and other oral forms are often intimately rooted in concrete, place-specific, land-based knowledge. They convey practical skills—how to hunt, how to fish, how to care for friends and family, how to build a home—and are transmitted and sustained by communal relationships. Consequently, people feel a responsibility to share what they know with others.

This may sound like a controversial claim. But it is, in fact, an old one. Almost two centuries ago, I am told that the Ahnishinahbæó’jibway philosopher and activist Wub-e-ke-niew (1990s) made a similar point when criticizing what he saw as an “Indo-European” linguistic worldview and its over-emphasis on

the importance of writing. As Wub-e-ke-niew saw it, the danger of language in its written form is that it encourages its users to engage in ungrounded abstractions. Writing is a tool. It is a collection of signs and symbols that we can use to externalize our private thoughts. But when we do this, Wub-e-ke-niew notes, we also are forced to stand apart from those thoughts as if they were no longer our own. We can forget what we write and pretend it is not ours, as if it did not come from somewhere.

It is this last point that, for Wub-e-ke-niew, was the most objectionable, since it encouraged its users to forget their unique, place-based relationships to the land and its people. Interestingly, Wub-e-ke-niew tells us that the Ahnishinahbæó'jibway language and oral traditions promoted almost the opposite worldview. In Ahnishinahbæó'jibway, for example, there are no objects of verbs, meaning that even the most basic tasks, like retrieving water from the lake, get characterized in relational terms. The Ahnishinahbæó'jibway would describe this as “harmoniously meeting the lake” rather than “going to get water.” The language promotes a connection with nature, where lakes are spiritual beings, not resources. We also see this in other Indigenous oral traditions. The Ajyy Djono, for instance, refer to the lake as “Ebe” or “grandmother,” emphasising relations of kinship. You can even observe the Ajyy Djono ‘feeding’ the land and lake by offering fried alaadjy “pancakes” with butter. It is their way of showing respect to the “Ebe” and maintaining a reciprocal relationship with her. Knowledge for the Ajyy Djono is not abstract, rather, it is constructed in connection with human beings, animals and the physical world, all of which exist within kin relations.

This leads me to a third and final advantage of oral traditions over written ones. I would argue that oral traditions provide a way of “crisis-proofing” human knowledge against future technological failures. I do not deny that written language is powerful. But given the devastating consequences of the Great Erasure, I also believe that we should be wary of any approach to knowledge that views communication as nothing more than an instrument or tool—a simple means to an end. If we think of language as nothing more than a tool, or instrument, then it is easy to contemplate replacing it. Indeed, the original movement to outsource most reading and writing to algorithms was done with the goal of making our knowledge transmission through language more efficient. As we know, the result was a catastrophe. Perhaps the most compelling argument for preferring oral traditions is that it cannot be so readily outsourced, in a way that causes us to lose sight of the human.

Charting a Path Forward

I concede that the complete switch to Indigenous oral traditions might not be possible. So much knowledge was lost during the Great Erasure, and so much is yet to be recovered. As an anthropologist, I also recall the twentieth-century historian and literary scholar Walter Ong's (1982) observation that Western literate cultures conceive of an "oral universe" as a mere variant of a "literate" one, making it impossible to contemplate language without its written form. To close, I want to address two misconceptions that stem from this thought.

The first misconception is that oral languages lack the stability—and thus reliability—of written languages. Proponents of written languages, such as Mark Ikates (2150), argue that unlike written information, which can be preserved for an extended period, oral messages can be easily forgotten or distorted over time. But in the wake of the Great Erasure, I would ask: Is this really true? It seems to me that the opposite holds: most of the knowledge that was retained after this technological disaster came to us verbally, through word of mouth, rather than from computer screens or on a page.

A second misconception that has prevented oral traditions from being taken seriously as an alternative to written traditions is the view that the knowledge they hold is somehow less sophisticated. For example, it is often suggested that spoken words lack the considered nuance and refinement necessary to store complex thoughts, arguments, and formulas, especially those of a scientific or technical nature. But nothing about the ethnographic experiences I have shared would support this conclusion. The sheer amount of knowledge that can be conveyed through oral histories and epics, for example, is astounding, and certainly no less nuanced for having been performed, instead of written down. The misconceptions that devalue oral languages often stem from a perspective that fails to comprehend the intricacies of oral traditions. The limitation lies not in the oral languages themselves, but in the capacity of the Western mind to grasp ideas that may be untranslatable or exist outside the confines of its own linguistic structures.

What would the incorporation of Indigenous oral traditions mean for the larger project to revitalise the world's written languages? I cannot say for sure, but I think we should avoid repeating past mistakes. Unlike with delegating learning and thinking to artificial intelligence or machines, oral traditions actively engage our critical capacities for thought and action. They connect us

to the relationships and places that remind us of who we are, and where we come from. In short, they preserve the fundamental aspects of ourselves that make us human.

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Notes

- I There is a special irony in the fact that my comments, which I am delivering verbally in person, are also being recorded and transcribed. Given how few people still know how to read, I am uncertain who else this commentary will reach, besides the people sitting in the room today.

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