

The Dutch god of language

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For the past 20 years George van Driem, 48, from the Netherlands, has spent up to nine months a year traversing the Himalayas, leading his multinational team of researchers on its mission to record previously undocumented languages. These languages, from one of the world's linguistically richest regions, are typically regarded as subordinate to, and, as a result, are threatened by, Nepali, Hindi, Urdu, Chinese and English.

As each language offers a unique way of seeing the world, van Driem says it is imperative that these vanishing languages be documented for posterity: "A language holds the key to the culture, history and prehistory of the region. Not only does the Himalayan Languages Project supply this key, we also use it to open the door."

The Himalayan Languages Project has an impressive record of tangible results, with 11 grammars and glossaries already completed, including Dumi, a language spoken by fewer than a dozen people, and Bumthang, the main regional language of central Bhutan. An additional 19 grammars are being finalised, while minor studies are constantly being undertaken, often revealing fascinating oddities and intricate grammatical rules. Bahing, for example, a Kiranti language native to the Okhaldhunga District of eastern Nepal, has four different pronouns for "we", depending on whether two people are implied or more, and whether the person being spoken to is included or not.

The project aims to document in detail 100 of the Himalayan languages. A professor at the Department of South and Central Asia at Leiden University, between Amsterdam and Rotterdam, van Driem stands out from traditional linguists in that he believes in a holistic approach to language documentation, enabling his team to provide a complete and reliable record of endangered languages. The data he and his researchers collect consist not only of word lists, paradigms and short phrases, but also traditional texts such as myths and legends, personal experiences and conversations.

His Himalayan Languages Project has brought him into contact with hundreds of languages, including Dakpa, spoken by two young brothers in eastern Bhutan. One of van Driem's colleagues, Jean Robert Opgenort, presented a Wambule-language grammar to the president of the Wambule Society of Nepal.

"Each language needs to be described in its own terms, rather than imposing individual language concepts whose primary motivation comes from another language, as currently applies to traditional linguistics," explains van Driem. "We ask questions in the contact language - such as Nepalese in the case of Nepal, Dzongkha for Bhutan - and write down the answers phonetically, persevering to capture each nuance of meaning. Basically, one has to listen to the language with a child-like ear, without any expectations."

Van Driem says preconceived "moulds" would also fail to capture fundamentally different ways of seeing the world. "All languages are expressive, but you really don't express the same meanings in the different languages that you speak. Language lives through us, and linguistics is actually more fundamental than philosophy. Most philosophical issues are just problems created by language." The very way in which people perceive the world around them is strongly influenced by their language.

"In Dzongkha, for example," van Driem explains, "the choice between tenses does not so much hinge on where an event takes place in time, such as the past or present, but focuses rather on the epistemological status of the information. A Dzongkha speaker spontaneously chooses between different ways of saying something like 'Karma ate rice', depending on the context: if [the speaker]

knows this through his own direct observation; or if he did not observe the event but merely infers that this is so on the basis of other things that he does know by direct observation; or if he just assumes or has only heard reports to the effect that the event took place. This choice between epistemic “tenses” is as automatic for a Dzongkha speaker as our choice of whether to use a singular or a plural ending on a noun.”

Van Driem’s ability to think outside traditional linguistic traditions is perhaps the result of his refusal to be a traditional armchair linguist. He and his team of 21 researchers take the notion of “fieldwork” to another level, criss-crossing the often treacherous Himalayan terrain and immersing themselves in the lives of the villagers they are studying. “To describe a language holistically requires three qualities: ambition, perseverance and comprehensiveness.”

And van Driem leads by example: “Travelling to the Gongduk areas in central Bhutan on horseback for four days in the spring of 2001 with my freshly broken leg in a cast was not the most comfortable of journeys. At places the trail is as steep as a ladder, and I would have to dismount and be hoisted up. Despite the discomfort, I had to keep going: the language we had found has the most unusual lexicon from the comparative point of view - flamboyant conjugations, with the verb agreeing with both subject and object for person and number - and represents an entire branch unto itself within the language family.”

So would van Driem describe himself as the Indiana Jones of linguistic research? “No, more of an Odysseus. Discovering language is a kind of mental odyssey.”

But the physical travails are exacting too. The men and women who undertake the research as part of their Ph.D. studies must be prepared to conduct fieldwork in villages that are often small, isolated and lacking in the comforts of western civilisation - an aspect that van Driem believes changes the researchers’ lives fundamentally.

Dr Jean Robert Opgenort, a Dutch researcher studying the Wambule language, struggled with his first field assignment, but later began to appreciate his long stays in the hills of eastern Nepal. “I actually lived in the houses of the people whose language and culture I was studying...one of the greatest experiences in my life so far. George is one of the most inspiring and talented linguists working today.”

Van Driem is driven by an ardent desire to save languages. “If people cannot be taught in their mother tongue, they lag behind socio-economically. The grammars and lexicons produced by members of the research team are used by the local communities to prepare educational materials for mother-tongue education, by local authorities to inform language policy, and by native academic institutions to compile dictionaries. A written grammar bestows status and prestige on a minority language, and renders its teaching possible.”

Since being chosen as an Associate Laureate, van Driem has published a two-volume compendium, “Languages of the Himalayas” (Brill, 2001), charting more than 2,000 languages and linguistic communities of the Himalayas. Though these languages have now been mapped, the documentation of most is still limited.

“The Himalayan massif shelters a mosaic of different, often archaic and very little studied languages,” says van Driem. “Some languages were discovered for the first time by the Himalayan Languages Project. Even neighbouring tribes did not know about the Black Mountain Monpa and Gongduk languages, since their speakers protected themselves by passing themselves off as members of larger language communities or ethnic groups. The greater Himalayan region is, ethnolinguistically, the most diverse part of Eurasia.”

Van Driem’s odyssey has given him fluency in almost a dozen languages. Born in the United States in 1957, he learned Dutch from his parents, English at school, studied Russian at university, picked up Czech from a girlfriend, learned Hindi by reading detective novels at a fellow student’s house, and is fluent in Nepalese, French, Portuguese, German, Afrikaans and Urdu.

JEAN ROBERT OPGENORT

It is hardly surprising that in the only remaining Buddhist Himalayan kingdom - Bhutan - the people call him Geshê Jam'yang Öz'er, the enlightening god of language. Fuelled in no small part by the publicity and awareness raised by his Rolex Award, van Driem's Himalayan Languages Project is today spanning outwards to include India, China, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma, Thailand and Cambodia.