Linguists at UH Mānoa are working on an extinction problem that, for many people, may mean the loss of their spoken words.

Linguistics Associate Professor Kenneth Rehg says that 94 percent of the world’s population uses a mere 6 percent of its 6,000 ancestral languages. Many of the rest are on the verge of disappearing as globalization and modernization push minority and under-documented languages aside for the more dominant languages. The National Science Foundation estimates that by the end of the century, half of the languages will disappear; other estimates are even more bleak.

“It is likely that linguists of the future will remember this century as a time when a major extinction event took place, as an era when thousands of languages were abandoned by their speakers in favor of languages of wider communication,” writes Rehg in the department’s Language Documentation and Conservation Journal, an open-access journal sponsored by the National Foreign Language Resources Center.

Rehg is an authority on the languages of Micronesia, where he has conducted extensive fieldwork over the past four decades. He has documented the Ponapean language, which is spoken on Pohnpei in the Caroline Islands of the Federated States of Micronesia, and published the Ponapean-English Dictionary and the Ponapean Reference Grammar.

“What is considerably less certain,” he continues, “is how linguists of the future will remember us. Will we be admired for having conscientiously responded to this crisis, or will we be ridiculed for having thoughtlessly ignored our evident duty?”

“Of approximately 7,000 languages in the world, we know virtually nothing about half of them. In this day and age, that’s an amazing gap in scientific knowledge,” says Laura Robinson, who earned her PhD in linguistics through Mānoa’s Language Documentation and Conservation program. The program provides much needed training to young linguists to undertake the essential task of documenting the many under-documented and endangered languages of Asia and the Pacific. With close to half the world’s languages spoken in Asia and the Pacific, the program’s emphasis on fieldwork and the only graduate program in language conservation and documentation in the United States, Mānoa is attracting some of the brightest.

In some programs, people study languages as though they are disembodied things not spoken by real people, Robinson observes. At Mānoa, she combined her interests in language and culture, doing extensive fieldwork. “Fieldwork on an undocumented language seemed quite appealing,” she says.

Robinson says there’s no one right way to document a language and no agreement on when a language is finally
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stories ever since I first arrived as a Peace Corps volunteer—
it’s not so much a matter of fieldwork as it is spending time
with a friend. That’s the best part about fieldwork: being
able to build personal relationships because of a common
interest in language.”

Odango comes from a linguistically diverse heritage—he
speaks Tagalog at home, but his mother speaks Ilocano and
his father, Cebuano. He’d like one day to work with minority
languages in Mindoro, the island in the Philippines where
his parents grew up and went to school.

In addition to fieldwork, students do work at the Language
Documentation Training Center on campus. Run by linguistic
graduate students, the center introduces basic concepts in
language documentation to speakers of under-documented
languages so that they will be able to document their own
language. Each participant is paired with a graduate student
who acts as a mentor, and the projects are added to the
center’s website. Since 2004, the center has gathered infor-
mation on more than 60 languages.

Center Director and PhD candidate Apay Tang is document-
ing a language close to her heart—her own language of

Center. The award-winning program allows at-risk high
school seniors to earn dual high school and college credit.
It boasted a 100-percent graduation rate for participants
by its third year and received the UH Community Colleges’
2008 Wo Community Building Award. Students learn digi-
tal media, culinary arts and computer skills in facilities
that include a recording studio described as “probably
the best on the Big Island,” a kitchen on wheels and a
computer lab.

“A program’s not good unless it can survive by itself,” says
Nahm-Mijo. “I’ve been blessed to find a lot of good people.
It’s been neat to see students who were freshman at Hawai’i
CC working all the way through their master’s and becoming
colleagues in the community.”

The physical demands of teaching dance motivated Nahm-
Mijo to pass that torch onto others, but she continues
to choreograph new works with an activist agenda. She
expects to carry this through in Estonia. “I see this experi-
ence as a continuation of what I started earlier in my career.
I’m hoping to open their country and culture to the arts as a
healing force to improve peoples’ lives.”

Jeela Ongley (BA ’92, MA ’09 Mānoa) is Mālamalama Online editor and web
content coordinator in External Affairs and University Relations

Web extra: Nahm-Mijo talks about the emerging discipline of
expressive arts therapy and her dance-based social activism work
in this video.

Truku, which is spoken in Hualien in Taiwan. Tang sees the
urgency of fieldwork first hand. “There aren’t many people
under 30 who speak our language. Most people speak
Mandarin Chinese,” she says.

In addition to a Truku word list and grammar guide, Tang
has recorded songs and stories that are posted on the
center’s website. “The more I study my language scientifi-
cally, the more I appreciate it and see how beautiful it is,”
she says. Inspired by the immersion schools in Hawai’i, she
would one day like to have a youth center where children
can speak Truku.

Tang was inspired by her grandfather, Yudaw Pisaw, who
told her how important their language was in retaining their
cultural identity. The 83-year-old pastor is passionate about
keeping his language alive. He serves on Tang’s dictionary
committee and teaches the language to anyone who
is interested. “He says we have to care. We have to do it,”
says Tang.

Tracy Matsushima (BA ’80 Mānoa) is an External Affairs and University
Relations publications specialist

Web extra: Listen to a song in Truku.