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Launch of the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project

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Launch of the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project

Lisbet Rausing

In this speech I want to thank many people. Let me start with my parents, Hans and Märit Rausing, whose exceptional generosity to and trust in their children has made this project possible. I also want to thank my co-trustee and husband, Peter Baldwin, together with Barry Supple, our advisor on academic donations, for their enthusiasm and wisdom in advising this project. And I want to thank everyone here at SOAS, for generously in giving the Endangered Languages Project a home. And lastly, I want to thank Lord Rothschild, for his friendship and for introducing us to Barry Supple, and more widely, to England.

One motto of the Endangered Languages Project is “What’s on His Mind? You May Never Know.” Indeed you may not. Take just one example: the twenty-odd indigenous languages still spoken in Amazonian Bolivia. There are five language families, and seven language isolates. Now the good news: two of them are only “potentially” endangered. The bad news is that eighteen of them are classified as “endangered,” “seriously endangered,” “moribund” (less than ten speakers, and that categorizes a quarter of these languages), and — remember these are very remote areas — “possibly extinct.”

Working together we can do only a little. But we can do something. And now, here at SOAS, with the Endangered Languages Project, the infrastructure is in place to allow other donors to help document endangered languages effectively and inexpensively.

We have a distinguished academic panel to evaluate documentation applications, consisting of field linguists Johanna Nichols from the University of California Berkeley, E. Annamalai at Mysore University and former Director of the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Yolanda Lastra from the Autonomous National University of Mexico, Bill Foley from Sydney University, Tony Woodbury from Austin Texas, Gerrit Dimmedal from Cologne University, Barry Supple as our panel chair, and as a former professor of history at Oxford and former head of the Leverhulme Trust, and finally, most recently from the University of Melbourne, and now as a professor at SOAS and Director of the Endangered Languages Academic Programme, Peter Austin.

SOAS and my family are tremendously happy and honoured that Peter has joined SOAS. I won’t tell you much of his distinguished career — his publications are dauntingly technical to a lay person — but I do want to tell you one small story that epitomizes what we will now do at SOAS. Peter is an expert, among other things, of Australian Aboriginal languages. There were some 250 of them when Captain Cook first arrived in Australia in 1770. Just 15 are still being learnt by children, some 200 years later. 95% have disappeared — often, tragically, with their people.

In 1978, Peter sat down with Jack Butler, a 73-year-old station worker and the last living speaker of Jiwarli. Jack Butler was born in 1905, in the bush. Least anyone still today might think bush life was primitive, note that he spoke four languages — apart from English.

Jack Butler is now dead. But as he wanted, his language and memories are recorded for humanity and for his descendents, and this thanks to a young field linguist, Peter Austin.

We need many more Peter Austins, because there are many more Jack Butlers. Even languages we might see as big and secure are under threat. Navajo has 200,000 speakers. But precious few of these speakers are children. Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, has over a million speakers, but in isolated rural fragments. Even Balinese, with a 1,000 year tradition of literacy, is less and less heard in the cities of Bali. In Tanzania, Swahili replaces Digo. In Nigeria, Hausa replaces Goemai. In Ghana, Twi replaces Buli. Around the globe, higher-prestige languages replace micro-languages — sometimes voluntarily, but often by duress, whether political or economic.

The variety of the applications to the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme that we received, from all over the globe, illustrate this. Thus, among the many applications to record undocumented, or only fragmentarily documented, languages we had, in our first year

- Languages in the Amazon basin, with, respectively, three, five, 25, ten and two speakers.
- A village in Dagestan, with a unique language, and 800 people.
- Nomadic reindeer herders in Siberia, whose children are taken away, to monolingual Russian boarding schools, when they are seven.
- A group of languages from a province in Papua New Guinea, where in an area the size of Wales there are 15 language families and six isolates.
- A people of hunters and fishers in Peru, several days upriver from the nearest road, and an linguistic isolate.
- The Aleut people from Alaska, where some 150 elderly speakers are left, although the language is also sung, in Orthodox church services.
- The Ofayé, a people of less than 30, from Mato Grosso do Sul, deported at the behest of cattle ranchers.
- The Assiniboine people of the northern great plains of the US, where some hundred elderly speakers are split over seven reservations.

- The Veddas in Sri Lanka: some 200 hunters driven out of a national park, whose children are given Sinhalese names when starting school.
- The Maku'a of West Timor. They may all have died in the recent pogroms, but there are hopes of finding the last seven or eight speakers, all over seventy, in the refugee camps.
- The Budugh of Azerbaijan, who live in one village, above 1,800 meters.
- The Barupu of coastal New Guinea, whose community — one village strong — was halved when a tsunami swept over their home in 1998.
- And the Eastern Penan in Malaysia, forest hunters you may have seen on TV, throwing themselves in front of the logging companies' bulldozers.

These languages are scientific treasure troves. They help us to understand both the amazing capabilities of the human mind, and our ancestral history, which is to say, ultimately, the history of the great migration of humankind out of Africa.

But language documentation is not a matter for scholars alone. It is a matter for these communities. It is a matter of their future, their self-understanding and their history. If it is to function at all, the Endangered Languages Project must function as a partnership between these highly marginalized people and the field linguists. Take this letter, from one small community in Vanuatu, supporting an application to document their language. (Vanuatu was once the most language dense area in the world. It still has some 96 languages for just 200,000 people).

“Today our language is alive, but now there is a lot of influence from Bislama [the national language, an English lexifier pidgin] . . . The children's schooling is in English and some meetings and parts of church services are held in English. Due to these reasons, we are afraid that it won't be long before our language is lost ... Before she [the linguist] came here there was no orthography for our language, but she has developed one and now some people are starting to learn how to write in [our] language. We really want her to continue with her work and make a dictionary and some books of stories for us. [Our] people really support language work because we realise that it will benefit us and especially our children in the future ... We who sign this letter represent the chiefs, the women, the Bible translation group, the school teachers and the field workers”