

## LANGUAGE MATTERS

### Synopsis

*Each language is a vision of the world. Each language says something different about what it means to be human compared with any other language. And every language that is lost is a loss of a fragment of that vision.*

David Crystal  
Linguist

### **ACT ONE: AUSTRALIA**

*If we lose our language, we lose our future.*

Solomon Nangamu  
Aboriginal Songman

Bob Holman flies to the Australian outback, meets Charlie Mangulda, an Aboriginal songman (read “poet”), and listens to him sing in Amurdak. Charlie is the only person left on our planet who speaks Amurdak. When Charlie is gone, except in the notebooks and recordings of the linguists, Amurdak will disappear with him. Through Charlie, we begin to understand the poignancy of language loss.

With Australian linguist Nick Evans, Bob flies to Goulburn Island off the coast of Darwin in Northern Australia, where he meets a community of 400 people speaking ten languages, many endangered, all vulnerable. Nick introduces Bob to Goulburn Islanders who speak five or six Aboriginal languages. The community on Goulburn is small, but multilingualism thrives. As Evans says, “People here naturally learn a lot of languages and if you have this sort of diversity, it enshrines a certain type of respect for others.” This celebration of differences is highlighted in an animation of an Aboriginal creation myth – the story of Warramurrungunji, ancestress of Aboriginal people - which underlines the idea that language marks identity, and that language is at the heart of culture.

Nick explains that before the Europeans arrived in the 18th century, half a million Aboriginal people lived in Australia speaking more than 300 different languages. But, decimated by small pox, measles and other diseases, dispossessed of their land, slaughtered and harassed by the settlers, the Aboriginal population rapidly dwindled and most of their languages have disappeared or are seriously endangered.

Nick shows Bob how aboriginal languages are intimately connected to the natural world, and how they are an encyclopedia of botanical and zoological knowledge – how language is a survival kit. The way in which language knits the various strands of Aboriginal culture together becomes clear at a corroboree, an Aboriginal festival, where Aboriginal traditions and languages are preserved by songmen like Solomon Nangamu: “I give [my song] to my grandchildren. And my grandchildren pass it on to their own children. It goes on like that, and on and on.” Musicologist Reuben Brown says, “It's lovely to know that these song traditions are really, really strong and that people are so passionate about passing that on through the generations. Maybe if

you're the last speaker of a language that's a little bit more difficult to do, because who are you going to communicate with?"

## ACT TWO: WALES

*The dominant mode of the Welsh language is survival. We know how to be when the odds are right against you because really the Welsh language shouldn't survive. I'm amazed that it has.*

Gwyneth Lewis  
Former National Poet of Wales

Act Two takes Bob to Wales, where *Language Matters* explores the humor, rage, and lyricism of the Welsh people, who have brought their language back from the edge of extinction. Today, although a Welsh population of three million lives directly alongside England's 50 million English speakers, Welsh speakers have been holding their own: "Today, you can go to school in Welsh from pre-K to post grad, road signs, government forms and menus are bilingual, and you can watch Welsh television 24 hours a day."

The act begins on the outskirts of Cardiff, where Bob joins 150,000 people at Wales' National Eisteddfod, an annual weeklong literary contest, all in Welsh. The Eisteddfod dates back to the 12th century, and testifies to how the bardic tradition has played an important role in maintaining Welsh against the advancing tide of English. Bob enters a poetry slam competition called "The Stomp" – and sets about writing a poem in Welsh. But first he has to learn Welsh.

He turns to Dewi Pryor, a novelist, poet, and songwriter, to help him. Bob also learns how the Welsh language was suppressed for centuries by England. The renowned linguist David Crystal explains that after the English conquest of Wales, "Welsh was considered to be a gutter language, a language of the uneducated. A language that was of no value."

For centuries, English was the dominant language, spoken in the schools and in the halls of government. But in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the number of Welsh speakers falling, Welsh language activists like Dafydd Iwan, an activist leader and singer/songwriter known as the Woody Guthrie of Wales, led a movement to reclaim the Welsh language. "It was a radical movement," Iwan says, "like many others started in the 60s. But here in Wales the language was central." While American demonstrators were marching for the civil rights of African Americans and against the war in Vietnam, in Wales, language activists demonstrated to put Welsh on an equal footing with English – and won.

Today, Welsh children can choose to go to school in Welsh. Bob listens to Welsh storyteller Siân Teifi mesmerize school children with an ancient Welsh tale about a witch named Ceridwen; he joins a group of Welsh musicians, who write and sing their songs in Welsh, including hip hop; and he visits with Gwyneth Lewis, a former

National Poet of Wales, who describes how her poem, written with some lines in Welsh and some in English, was carved into the structure of the national center for the performing arts in Cardiff, a testament to Welsh's equal status with English. Meanwhile, with the help of his Welsh friends, Bob finishes his poem and delivers it in Welsh to an appreciative audience at The Stomp.

Wales is a success story, and a useful model for other endangered language speakers to follow.

### **ACT THREE: HAWAII**

*The Hawaiian language was connected to everything... whether it was the name of a wind, a whispering sea, a rain that fell, a star that streaked across the sky... These things all connected you to place and were filled with spirit... And the moment that we severed their ability to speak their language, we separated them from a knowledge. From a spirit. From an identity, who they are as a people.*

Kepa Maly

Lanai Culture and Heritage Center

The struggle to preserve one of the world's most mellifluous, subtle, and elegant languages is front and center in the program's last act. *Ōlelo Hawai'i*, a language once spoken by hundreds of thousands of people, was nearly wiped out after Hawaii became a territory of the United States in 1898: Hawaiian was banned from schools and English became the official language of government. In 1983, fewer than 50 children spoke Hawaiian. But a small group of educators were determined to do something about it.

They began by creating language immersion schools for pre-kindergarten children. They called them *punana leos* - language nests. The *punana leos* soon evolved into pre-Kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade schools, where every subject was taught in Hawaiian. On the Big Island, Bob visits one of the largest and most comprehensive, Nawahi, a school with 300 children from pre-K through high school. If Hawaiian has survived into the 21st Century, it is because of Hawaiian schools like Nawahi. Bob talks to Nawahi principal Kauanoe Kamana, language activist Professor Larry Kimura, and one of the first *punana leo* teachers, Lolena Nicholas. Lolena grew up on the island of Ni'ihau where a small Hawaiian population continued speaking Hawaiian in daily life and could teach the children with the ease of a native speaker.

Hawaiian is a poetic language, and like all poetry, its words resonate with subtle nuances and buried layers of history. As Kepa Maly, the director of the Lanai Cultural and Heritage Center explains, Hawaiian words evoke centuries-old connections between the Hawaiian people and the natural world. There are hundreds of names for the rain and wind. Puakea Nogelmeier, a Hawaiian language activist and professor at the University of Hawaii at Manoa elaborates, as he gives Bob a lesson in Hawaiian: "It takes a different mindset to step into speaking Hawaiian. You have to come into a different world view."

Most everyone has seen the hula, but few people know that the hula is in fact an extension of the Hawaiian language. Hawaiians dance the hula to a *mele*, a chant. Keali'i Reichel, singer, songwriter, and hula master explains: "Hula cannot exist without the chant. It is one of the very few dance forms that require words." Nowhere is the Hawaiian spoken word more powerfully felt than in the *mele*. As Hawaiian has grown stronger, chanting has grown strong along with it.

If words reflect and shape our experience of the world, what happens when words are lost? Former American poet laureate and twice winner of the Pulitzer Prize, WS Merwin has lived on the island of Maui for decades, and is deeply concerned with both the natural world and endangered languages. Merwin tells Bob: "As language dies away in culture after culture, the connection with the meaning goes. And when that goes you can never bring it back. When we lose [a language], we're losing part of ourselves."

If a language is going to survive, children have to speak it. But to enroll your children in an Hawaiian immersion school is a huge commitment, as Kauai Sai-Dudoit, Director of the Hawaiian Language Newspaper Archive, tells Bob: "What I heard a lot was, 'Why are you doing that? They're not going to make a living out of that.' But it's not the reason I put them there. I put them there to learn the language of their ancestors so they would have an easier time understanding who they were. For their identity... But when only 5% of us - or 2% or whatever some measly percent of us speak this language, we are far from out of the woods. We are so far from out of the woods yet."

With languages all over the world in danger of extinction, Bob concludes by reflecting on language and its profound connection to our humanity:

"Just as the physical ecology of the earth depends on a healthy interaction among plants and animals, many endangered, there is an ecology of consciousness, an interdependence of knowledge, culture and wisdom we find in and through our languages. Language is a lens through which we see the world. Through language, we become more fully ourselves."