Review of *Language City: The Fight to Preserve Endangered Mother Tongues in New York City* by Ross Perlin, Atlantic Monthly Press, 2024. 456 pps.

Ernest Davis
March 27, 2024

> Sometime in the late twentieth century, almost by accident, this became one of the most diverse places on the planet. It all looks very ordinary, but this square mile [in Flatbush, Brooklyn] is home to a Ghanaian evangelical church, a Russian banya, a florist/bar for hipsters, a Juhuri-speaking synagogue for the Jews of Azerbaijan and Dagestan, Dominican hair salons, Pakistani auto body shops, Haitian dollar-van stops, an organization of Darfuri refugees, a Cambodian Buddhist wat, an Albanian mosque, a Panamanian bar, and a restaurant where Uzbek Uber drivers swig bottles of Jameson while savoring free kebabs.
> — from *Language City*

Language City is an extraordinary book. I find it hard to describe. It does not have a single focus or subject matter; rather, it is a tight weave of a number of disparate threads. Likewise, the book evokes in me a complex mixture of emotions: scientific / scholarly / historical curiosity, civic pride, national shame, admiration for the author and the people he describes, inspiration, sorrow, enlightenment, and perplexity. The book is enviably well written and consistently fascinating.

The only way I have found to organize this review is to unweave these threads and lay them out separately. This doesn't do justice to the flavor of the book, but it does enable me to convey its contents.

New York City's languages, especially its endangered languages. There are native speakers of more than 100 different languages in New York City, particularly in a few specific multi-ethnic neighborhoods of Queens and Brooklyn. For some minority languages, the community in New York is comparable in size to the community in its home country, and under less external pressure to assimilate to the surrounding majority. Perlin claims that this is probably the densest collection of widely disparate languages that has ever existed. It presents an unparalleled resource for linguists, and perhaps a rare opportunity for preservationists. The current linguistic diversity of New York City is the central focus of Part I of the book and is a pervasive theme in the succeeding sections.

The many linguistic/ethnic/cultural communities of New York City. Language groups are of course closely, though not perfectly, aligned with ethnic and cultural groups, so the book naturally slides from one to the other, describing distinctive cultural practices — food, music, holidays, and so on — and multi-cultural interactions. At times, this actually gets a little schmaltzy.

> The Yemini Muslim owners of David's House of Brisket in Bed-Stuy, who close for Jummah on Fridays, maintain a Jewish deli complete with pastrami, pickles, and cream soda for a mostly African-American clintele. An African American baker is famed for his Jewish rugelach. An Egyptian man and his Filipina Muslim (Iranun-speaking) wife bought a Bronx ice cream company from its Jewish owner, retooling it to corner the halal ice cream market. In Los Angeles, a Thai restaurant owner became legendary among Mexicans and Central Americans because its poh tak, a sour and spicy seafood soup, happens to taste similar to *caldo de siete mares.*

However, particularly at the current time, there are many worse ways for groups to interact than via schmaltzy cross-fertilization of ethnic cuisine.

A social history of New York City in terms of languages. Going back in time, Part II of the book gives an a history of New York City and environs in terms of the language spoken here, starting

with the Lenape native Americans, and continuing on through Dutch, English, French, African languages, Irish Gaelic, German, Yiddish, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Ukranian, Turkic languages, Haitian creole, and others. Some of these have extensive historical documentation and a large literature written in New York City; others, such as the African languages presumably spoken by the enslaved people who were here in the seventeenth century, have left almost no trace and are purely inferred from the presence of their speakers.

The Endangered Language Alliance (ELA). The Endangered Language Alliance is an organization devoted to preserving and recording the endangered languages spoken in New York City, founded and directed by Daniel Kaufman, a linguist, and Ross Perlin, the author of the book.

Six languages: speakers/activists, home, history, and communities. Each of the six chapters of part III of the book focuses on one particular language and gives an account of the life story of one particular speaker/activist, the language communities in New York City and in its original home, the language's history, and the efforts of the ELA to preserve and record it.

- Rasmina is a native speaker of Seke. Seven hundred people speak Seke. Six hundred of them live a small enclave of five villages in the Mustang region of northern Nepal; the other hundred live in a single apartment building in the Flatbush neighborhood in Brooklyn, known as "380". (Perlin does not identify the street.)

  When Rasmina was seven, her mother moved to New York; Rasmina joined her when she was eleven. She worked odd jobs, and got a college degree. She started work as a nurse just at the outbreak of the Covid pandemic. In addition to Seke and English, she speaks the Mustangi languages Baragaon and Loke, Nepali, Hindi, Urdu, and Spanish. She is an "unpaid, unofficial interpreter between 380 and America." She worked with Perlin and his students recording and analyzing the Seke languages. Perlin travelled with her to visit her home village and the surrounding area doing linguistic/anthropological research, on the endangered languages there.

- Husniya, is a native speaker of X'in (Wakhi) "an endangered Pamiri language spoken by around forty thousand people in the remote high mountain regions where Tajikistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China converge."

  Husniya came to the US when she was twenty-one with $500. She first worked at a Dairy Queen in North Carolina, then at a gas station in Arkansas. Then she came to New York, where she shared an apartment with five other Pamiri girls. She was almost down to her last dollar when she found a restaurant job. After years, she managed to get a green card and a master's degree in early childhood education. She writes children's books in her native X'in. Perlin travelled with her to her native town, as well.

- Boris Sandler[1] was born in 1950 in Bessarabia (now Moldova) in one of the last secular Yiddish-speaking communities in Europe. In 1989 he created a Yiddish-language television show *On the Jewish Street*, which aired on Moldovan television and edited a Yiddish language newspaper. In 1992 he moved to New York, where he joined the staff and soon became the editor of the Yiddish edition of the newspaper *The Forward.* He has written many books, plays, and songs in Yiddish. He was Perlin's mentor in Perlin's own studies of Yiddish.

  Yiddish, of course, is far from endangered; there are something like half a million native speakers among the Hasidic communities in the US and Israel. It is richly documented, with a large literature[2] and extensive linguistic analysis. For the most part, however, the Hasidim have little interest in the literary and cultural traditions to which Sandler has devoted his life, and he fears that he may be the last representative of those traditions.

[1] Perlin gives only his first name, like the other activists, but Sandler is a public figure.
[2] The YIVO library has nearly 400,000 volumes, mostly in Yiddish.

- Ibrahima was born in Kiniebakoro, Guinea (West Africa). He was a native speaker of Maninka. He worked in Saudi Arabia as a fixer for West African pilgrimage groups. When he was about thirty, he was able to move to America, thanks to the help of a driver for the Ivory Coast UN mission whom Ibrahima hed helped out when he lost his passport. He got work, first at a gas station, then at the Lehman Brothers cafeteria, then he and his wife opened an African bistro in Harlem. Ibrahima has been deeply involved in promoting the N'ko language, especially its written form. N'ko is a somewhat artificial composite of the Manding language group, which includes Maninka; the language and script were invented in the 1950s.

- Irwin speaks Nahuatl, an Aztecan language (or language family) with about 1.7 million speakers in central America and the US. Despite the substantial population and its centuries-long survival after the Spanish conquest,[3] it is now felt to be endangered by pressure from Spanish. Irwin grew up in the town of La Resurrection in Puebla, Mexico, where his family had lived since before Cortez. He moved to the US in 2002 and worked as a day laborer in various manual labor jobs — construction, landscaping, etc. He became a labor organizer with the community of immigrant day laborers. He got a job as a chef at a bar in Manhattan. He is involved in promoting Nahuatl as a teacher, a writer, and an organizer.

- The sixth chapter of Part III is the saddest. Karen was a native speaker of Lenape, the language spoken by the indigenous inhabitants of New York City. In the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, the Europeans drove the Lenape people further and further from their ancestral lands, in the familiar sequence of wars, legal and illegal thefts, and treaties promptly broken. There are now three homelands in Ontario, two recognized tribes in Oklahoma, some inhabitants in Wisconsin, and various claimants here and ther. There is believed to be now a single native speaker, in her eighties; Perlin travelled to interview her, but she was not forthcoming. Karen's grandfather was a native speaker but she never heard him speak a word of the language.

  Karen grew up in one of the Ontario homelands. She became the Canadian champion woman weight lifter. She studied the Lenape language in classes taught by the small number of speaker who were still alive then. She then came to New York City, as her ancestral home, to teach language classes. She died at the age of 54 of pneumonia and sepsis.

Self-portrait of the author. The other major character in the book is the author himself. Except in the chapter on Yiddish, Perlin scrupulously avoids making the story about himself; but his interactions are a major part of the tale he is telling, and a fairly clear portrait emerges: A New York Jew, presumably now in his mid-to-late thirties, energetic, bright, deeply committed both socially and scientifically, with a taste for new places and experiences, a gift for languages, and a gift for connecting with all kinds of people. Perlin's previous book was entitled, *Intern Nation: How to Earn Nothing and Learn Little in the Brave New Economy,* which also gives some insight into his interests and his view of the world.

How the other half of the other half of the other half (linguistically) live. Most of the languages discussed here are minorities within a minority language; or even, like Seke and Wakhi, "a minority within a minority within a minority." The monoglot English reader is a litte startled to see Nepali coupled with English, Chinese, Spanish as "killer languages", but so it appears to those who are trying to preserve the Seke language.

> Everywhere they live, Seke speakers are always also inevitably in close contact with ther languages. In Mustang, Baragaon is spoken to the south and Loke is used in the north ...

[3]There is, in fact, a very extensive literature in Nahuatl written in the Latin alphabet, dating from the sixteenth century, and the Collegio de Santa Cruz de Tiateloloco, founded in 1536, taught classes in Nahuatl as well as Spanish and Latin.

> In New York, Seke speakers are part of, but also stand apart from, the larger Mustangi population. ...
>
> To Baragaon and Loke speakers, Seke is a small, strange language if they've heard of it at all. This in turn is how Nepalis and Tibetans see Baragaon and Lokem if they've heard of *those* languages at all. The once-independent kingdom of Mustang, traditionally closer linguistically, culturally, and religiously to the Tibetan world to the north, is gradually being absorbed, politically and otherwise, by Nepal from the south.

The situation with X'in is similar:

> At each stage of her life, Husniya has had to learn and live in a different language.
>
> At home in her family, it was Wakhi ...
>
> Growing up she had to pick up Shughni, the much larger language that broadly i unites Pamiri people ...
>
> Throughout high school, her formal education was all in Tajik, the national language ...
>
> Its close cousin Persian was important to grasp for its poetry, religious texts, and aura of high culture ...
>
> From her neighbors she learned Kyrgyz, a Turkic language which is essential in Murghab, her hometown of several thousand people ...
>
> Then there was Russian ... Now it's English. ... (Not including the German she studied in college and the Turkish she's grasping via Kyrgyz during visits to her sister in Turkey.)

Linguistics and its practice. The book presents, intermittently and haphazardly, a lot of linguistic information about languages and languages, both the featured ones and others, running the range across phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics and social conventions, sociolinguistics, linguistic history and discourse features such as modes of story telling, There are detailed accounts of what is involved in learning, recording, analyzing and preserving an endangered language: how you train your ear to hear the language's new sounds and phonological distinctions; how you interview the speakers of the languages; how you probe them for the language's unique and characteristic features and usages.

Advocacy: Part IV of the book is advocacy: How the city government and other institutions should accommodate, support, and encourage minority languages and the people who speak them.

Other digressions: The book is full of other related digressions, such as a three page discussion of the multi-lingual sources of New York neighborhood names and nicknames in the middle of the chapter on Seke.

The dark side. Sadly but naturally, there is also a dark side to all this. Language preservation unavoidably connects to ethnic language chauvinism and to language wars; and these are by no means limited to majority languages suppressing minority languages. Petty, bitter, internecine wars are all too common in language communities of all kinds.[4] Perlin does not discuss this very much, but it does appear occasionally; for example, the mutual uninterest, verging on contempt, of Boris Sandler vis-à-vis the Hasidim is distasteful reading. (Perlin does not directly disavow his teacher's attitude, but his discussion of the Hasidim later in the chapter makes it clear that he does not share

[4]Often attempts at preserving minority languages give rise to fierce in-fighting between an aging, lower-class, uneducated speakers of actual native speakers, and a younger, higher-class, more educated group of enthusiasts. The latter tend to be self-styled purists, very much opposed to corruption of the minority language by its surrounding majority language, but in fact unaware of many traditional features that are preserved in the language of the former. *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World's Languages* by Suzanne Romaine and Daniel Nettle has an extensive, though somewhat one-sided, account of this.

it.) Minority groups often consider subminorities to be allies of the oppressive majority, wittingly or unwittingly.

A missing thread: *Why* is it important to preserve endangered languages? Perlin is, of course, passionate about the importance of preserving endangered language, both from extinction and from corruption by invasive languages. I agree with him, though I am much less passionate. However, he spends little space explaining *why* this is important. A full discussion of this here would involve climbing down a rabbit hole that I would have trouble climbing out of, and perhaps Perlin feels the same about this sensitive topic. But let me raise four points.

First: Preserving a minority language requires significant deliberate effort. In each new generation there must be a substantial community that learns the language, uses it regularly throughout their lives, and passes it on to the new generation. Protecting the language against corruption by invasive majority language requires even more effort. The burden of that effort often falls on a community that is struggling in other respects. A satisfying justification for this large effort will have to be quite powerful.

Second: I can think of several arguments that might be put forward, but I do not find any of them extremely compelling. There is the Whorfian view that speakers of different languages conceptualize the world differently. However, the strong version of this claim, that the different world views are large or even incommensurable, is now considered false by most linguists, and the weak version of the claim that is considered true amounts to fairly minor differences in cognitive processes. Unusual languages are extremely valuable to linguists in that they illustrate linguistic features that are otherwise unknown. Perlin gives two specific examples: "It matters whether Pirahã does or doesn't do recursion ... or whether nouns and verbs can be distinguished in Salish." However, that mostly matters to professional linguists; it is not clear why it would matter to the community, let alone to the world at large. Moreover it only justifies recording and analyzing the language, not preserving it. Linguistic communities naturally want to preserve their language as part of their cultural tradition; but that is their own choice and it is not clear why it would matter to anyone else. Languages, like the arts and sciences and other creations of the human spirit, are part of the common intellectual and spiritual heritage of the human race, and the history of languages, like other kinds of history, is important scholarship. But it is not clear that those goods are commensurate with the effort needed.

Third: I find it hard to square the desire to preserve the distinctive features of minority languages and to protect them from invasion by majority languages with the view, dogma among linguists, that linguistics is purely descriptive rather than prescriptive and that the usages of native speakers are by definition correct. If it is desirable to preserve the fourteen fricative consonants of Wakhi and the distinctive syntactic features of Seke, why should the language maven who bemoans the disappearance of "whom" and of the subjunctive in English be scorned as an unscientific snob? If the ELA is to be lauded for helping to protect Nahuatl against Hispanification, why should the Académie Française be mocked for proscribing the flood of English loan words?

Finally: How you justify the claim that language preservation is important in deciding which languages and which features are important to preserve, For example, my guess is that if you ask the ELA for their assistance in preserving an invented language such as Esperanto, Quenya, or Lojban, you will get a cold shoulder. But why? These languages satisfy most of the conditions for the justifications I have listed. Esperanto is sixty years older than N'ko and has native speakers. Quenya was the creation of a great literary artist. Lojban has extraordinary linguistic features.

There may well be a convincing argument that the preservation of endangered languages is worth the effort involved that answers all these questions and objections, but, if so, Perlin does not present it.

Bottom line: Despite my reservations and perplexities, I do not doubt that the ELA is by and large doing God's work. And I am certain that *Language City* is a splendid book. It should be valued

reading by most people who are interested in New York City and by everyone who is interested in language.