

LANGUAGES: ENDANGERED AND NEW

Endangered Languages

Learning Hmong *kwv txhiaj* is part of the education that is very valuable to every member of the Hmong community. We must pass the *kwv txhiaj* from generation to generation as our great grandparents taught us. There are rules to follow in singing *kwv txhiaj*, both in creating the meaning of the *kwv txhiaj* and in creating their structure and order. More than that, there are some words and sounds that we cannot use unless we are singing. These are words that we have in the Hmong *kwv txhiaj* but which we can't use in daily conversation. If we lose the Hmong *kwv txhiaj*, we will lose part of the Hmong language at the same time.

— Pang Xiong Sirirathasuk and T-Bee Lo

The linguist Michael Krauss says that as many as 3,000 languages, comprising half the words on earth, are doomed to silence in the next century. If language is the essence of humanity and poetry is the essence of language, is there an essential part of our humanity that we are losing? The 2001 Gathering looks at language as the imaginative legacy of our species. A variety of panel discussions on language and translation explore the essential relationship between literature and mother tongues. Is the record of the human experience becoming more shallow as languages and oral poetics are lost? What kind of preservation efforts are possible? What is the role of poetry in the preservation of a language? The Gathering looks at Yiddish, Gaelic, Sicilian, American Indian and African languages, among others.

Folk Meets Avant Garde: Imagined Languages

What do Hugo Ball's Dada performances at Cafe Voltaire have in common with the incantatory expressions of traditional, indigenous American healers in the Southwest? To answer that question entails charting a course through the borrowings and influences that have shaped the poetics of our century. And to chart these borrowings gives rise to the profound question of the origin of the poetic impulse. Jerry Rothenberg, considered the father of ethnopoetics, gathers both avant garde poets and practitioners of traditional oral poetics to explore imaginary languages as a source of inspiration.

American Sign Language Poetry

American Sign Language (ASL or Ameslan) is a manual-visual language used by the Deaf community. It is its own language, with a syntax not based on any spoken tongue. It is unlike Signing Essential English, for instance, which uses signs to match the English word order, or British, Chinese and Spanish sign languages.

How does one define ASL poetry? As in literary poetry there are internal and external poetic structures. Internal structures refer to the elements of the linguistic systems, the words and sounds, and in the case of ASL, to the hand configurations. The similarity of handshapes acts as alliteration, and using the same handshape repetitively works as rhyme. Repetition of movement also suggests rhyming.

The external poetic structure in ASL poetry refers to creating a balance between the two hands in the signs they make. For example, if a sign is usually made with the right hand, in a poem it may be made with the left hand to create a more symmetrical use of the hands. Or the poet may create a flow of movement between the signs, so that the end of one sign becomes the beginning of the next.

Signed poetry grew out of an ASL oratory tradition in Deaf clubs throughout the country, where Deaf individuals and their families and friends would congregate for entertainment and to socialize. New forms of technology including TTY-TDD phone and captioned television are changing the way the Deaf community interacts, and recently many of the clubs have been closing down. It is becoming clear to many poets and speakers of ASL that their chosen mode for communicating their deepest thoughts is endangered.