

50

How can you keep languages in a museum?

Amelia C. Murdoch

What would there be to see and learn in a museum of language? Is there such a place?

As a matter of fact, such a place does exist. It's called the National Museum of Language, located in College Park, Maryland, a Washington, D.C. suburb, and it opened its doors to the public in May 2008. What a unique institution! Everyone is familiar with museums where you see (and sometimes touch) physical objects like airplanes, paintings, bleached bones and antique coins. But language, you might think, is mainly sounds and words and books. Don't libraries already exist to store and display them? What'll you do in a language museum? And why?

Language is a subject most of us want to know more about: how it developed, how languages differ, how the body works as a language machine. The Museum's purpose is to answer such questions. It will make clear why language is important; it'll demonstrate what we know about language and how we know it; and it'll give you a chance to explore linguistic knowledge—enjoyably.

The Museum's Allen Walker Read Library is the nucleus of what is intended to become America's most comprehensive collection of information about language. Some of that information will be in the form of printed books and journals, but much

of it will be online—accessible wherever you are on the planet. Especially noteworthy will be the library's collection of speech samples—recordings of hundreds of languages and many dialects. This collection—aimed eventually at having a sample of every language in the world—will be an extraordinary resource for language research.

The Museum will also feature interactive multimedia displays of language-related objects and information. You'll see and hear how the science of speech analysis evolved from rudimentary techniques, which used gas flames, to today's digital voiceprint technology. You'll be able to take home an image of your own speech from a sound spectrogram. Or learn how speech synthesizers work—from those annoying telephone voices to important devices that allow physically challenged people like Stephen Hawking to speak. You'll be able to talk with a computer and see how well it does in understanding and creating speech.

There'll be an interactive wall-sized map showing where each of the world's languages is spoken. You'll see how languages develop and change. How they differ. How they spread over space and time. And how they die.

Complementing the world map, there'll be an interactive display using sound bites and video clips to demonstrate the linguistic heritage and diversity of America—including not only the dialects of American English but also the aboriginal tongues and the languages of centuries of immigrants. English-speaking visitors will even get a chance to see where their own dialect fits into the big picture.

There'll be an animated model of the human speech apparatus, showing how the lungs, vocal cords, lips, teeth, and tongue work together to create the infinite variety of sounds in thousands of languages and dialects.

And you'll see what we know about how language is acquired—the way babies learn their first language, and the considerably different ways children and adults learn additional languages later in life.

Fascinating displays will trace the development of the Roman alphabet and other writing systems, with texts in each system and the tools used to produce them.

Other exhibits will explore the role of language in society, reaching back to the beginnings of civilization. One topic will be the many ways in which language study and the law are intertwined, such as forensics and questions of access to justice in multilingual societies. Others will be the importance of language in commerce, government, and technology—all demonstrated with historic documents, radio and television programs, and exhibits explaining things like how linguistic analysis can solve codes and ciphers. Language and religion have interacted with each other for many centuries, as will be shown in exhibits illustrating the role played by missionaries in the study of languages and linguistics.

You'll hear and see the story of dictionaries, from the earliest glossaries to the monumental *Oxford English Dictionary*. Paired with descriptions of the books themselves will be accounts of the lives of their makers—from learned scholars like Dr. Samuel Johnson (that 'harmless drudge') to the numberless, often anonymous men and women whose work makes modern dictionaries possible. The Museum will trace the history of translation and interpretation and will demonstrate how translators and interpreters practice their profession in the worlds of business, diplomacy and intelligence.

Yet another important subject is the preservation of *endangered* languages. Universities and other institutions in the U.S. and other countries—as well as the U.N.—devote considerable effort to collecting information on such languages. But there needs to be a coordinating point where all this information is brought together. The Museum's organizers see it as a candidate for fulfilling this role—as a central repository for preserving ethnic cultures through preservation of their languages.

In 2011 the Museum launched two long-term exhibits: 'Writing Language: Passing It On', and 'Emerging American Language in 1812'. There will be much, much more. Even in its current limited space, the Museum has welcomed enthusiastic visitors from

around the world, and negotiations are in progress for a larger facility to expand into.

This is only a peek at what the Museum eventually will become. As it grows, the National Museum of Language welcomes the ideas and participation of everybody to whom language is important—and that includes you. Why don't you help it grow by becoming a member?

About the author

Amelia C. Murdoch, Ph.D., founder and President Emerita of America's National Museum of Language, is a retired U.S. government linguist. She began her professional career as a specialist in Medieval French; after joining the federal government, she ventured into the Semitic languages. Over her long career she became convinced that the field of language had to be expanded from the academic and educational worlds into the cultural mainstream. Her experiences in guiding the creation of a seminal exhibit on language provided insights that persuaded her that a museum of language was an ideal means to lead that expansion.

Suggestions for further reading

In this book

The Museum of Language covers a range of subjects similar to that of this book. A sampling of chapters that may be of special interest to eventual Museum goers includes 3 (world language survey), 38 (languages of the U.S.), 27 (language death), 28 (language rescue), 37 (language teaching technology), 47 (interpreting and translating), and 49 (forensic linguistics), as well as Chapters 52–65 on individual languages.

Elsewhere

Comrie, Bernard, ed. *The World's Major Languages* (Oxford University Press, 1990). An authoritative presentation of the most interesting facts of the major languages of the world.

Crystal, David. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (Cambridge University Press, second edition 1997). An invaluable comprehensive, indeed essential, reference treating all aspects of language.

McWhorter, John. *The Story of Human Language* (The Teaching Company, 2005). An outstanding series of 36 lectures (30 minutes each, available on DVD, videotape, or audio CD) on the history and development of language.

Wade, Nicholas, ed. *The Science Times Book of Language and Linguistics* (The Lyons Press, 2000). A collection of very readable essays. The topics, organization and style correspond to the approach of the National Museum of Language.