



The Tailenders

Exploring the Complexities of Language

Activity:

1. Ask students to raise their hands if they can speak more than one language. Explain that there are a little less than 7,000 languages in the world, but that a prominent linguist predicts that about half of the languages spoken today won't be spoken in 100 years time. Have students explain whether or not they think that is a bad thing or a good thing.
2. Have students read P.O.V.'s interview with linguist Dr. Rosemary Beam de Azcona (www.pbs.org/pov/pov2006/tailenders/special_languages2.html). Based on the interview and their own experiences, what do students see as the relationship between language and cultural identity? How do economic, political and social forces influence whether or not a language survives? What are the consequences of losing a language?
3. Next, explore how meaning changes as it crosses language, culture, borders and economic divides. Show students two related clips (see links to the right) from the film, *The Tailenders*.* Explain that an evangelical organization named Global Recordings Network translates Bible stories into thousands of languages as part of its missionary efforts. In the first clip, [Translating to Mixteco](#) (length: 3 minutes, 15 seconds), students will see a missionary, Philip Young, speaking in Spanish to Mario Gracida, who is helping to translate a story from Spanish to Mixteco, an indigenous language in Mexico. Ask students to watch for which Spanish words do not translate well into Mixteco. (The clip begins at 24:25 with "We are recording..." and ends at 27:23 with the sound waves of the final Mixteco edit.)
4. Following the clip, point out that Mixteco has no words for "sin" or "punish." Ask students to imagine and describe the kind of community or culture that would develop a language without such words. What would the world lose if such languages disappeared?
5. Next, show the clip, [Checking a Translation](#) (length: 50 seconds) where Philip works with a man to check the translation of a recording. Ask students to watch for what error is found. (The clip begins at 32:41 with Philip sitting with Flemon Chofas Rubio, a volunteer checking a translation and ends at 33:35 with "...not understanding the material.") Ask students what could happen to the group's missionary efforts if such errors are not discovered? Are mistakes in translation inevitable? Explain.
6. Then show students the clip, [Translation Telephone](#) (length: one minute, 10 seconds) that illustrates a game of "telephone," where the message, "Air carries the vibration to the recording device" is translated from English to Hindi to Nepali to Manipuri to Tangkhul to Manipuri to English. (The clip begins at 40:21 and

ends at 41:36.) How well did the message get communicated across so many languages?

7. Conclude the activity with students responding in writing to these questions: How might the complexities of language affect the reputation and relations of the United States with non English-speaking countries? How can language issues affect relations within the United States?

* P.O.V. documentaries can be taped off-the-air and used for educational purposes for up to one year from the initial broadcast. In addition, P.O.V. offers a lending library of DVD's and VHS tapes that you can borrow anytime during the school year — FOR FREE!

Additional Resources:

- **On Endangered Languages**
www.pbs.org/pov/pov2006/tailenders/special_languages.html
Linguist Dr. Peter Ladefoged talks about why languages disappear and how a few are being revived.

Related Standards:

- Geography, Standard 4: Understands the physical and human characteristics of place.
- Geography, Standard 10: Understands the nature and complexity of Earth's cultural mosaics.
- Language Arts, Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.
Level IV, Benchmark 9: Understands influences on language use.

Source: "Content Knowledge" (<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>) by McRel (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning)