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**Ancestral languages**  
**By Lorraine Mallinder**

“So, you must speak Chinese then?”

It was a question that had started to bug me. Of Scottish and Chinese extraction, most people thought I looked a bit Latina. Or Mediterranean. Or Eastern European. I’d often enjoyed throwing off my passepartout mantle and setting people straight. It was like my ethnic party trick.

Invariably, the reaction would be a squint at my features, followed by a nod of vague recognition and then The Question. When I was younger, it didn’t bother me so much, since I had all the time in the world to learn the lingo. But, in my late thirties with two kids in tow, I began to fear I’d lost something that might never again be found.

Eventually I dragged myself to evening classes with the Confucius Institute at Dawson College. To my surprise, a third of my classmates were Chinese. Not wishy-washy half-oriental like me, but the real deal with two Chinese parents. It turned out that two already spoke dialects and now wanted to learn Mandarin. But, the other two were absolute beginners, just like me.

In this bilingual country, where over 200 languages are spoken, there’s no shortage of statistics scrutinizing our linguistic make-up from every angle. Transmission of so-called heritage languages from immigrants to Canadian-born children has actually gone up in recent decades – from 41% in 1981 to 55% in 2006. But, from the second generation onwards, families struggle to keep their language alive.

There are all sorts of figures, too, on the languages that have survived in exile – Punjabi, Tamil, Korean and Mandarin. And, conversely, on those that are foundering – Hungarian, German and Polish. Common sense has it that more recent arrivals paired with partners from the same community are more likely to pass on their language – generally speaking.

I discuss the subject with Mela Sarkar, a professor at McGill University’s faculty of education, who specializes in heritage language maintenance. This considered, it seems ironic that she never inherited her own language from her Bangladeshi father. Does this bother her? “Some people don’t care. I really do,” she says. “I’ve always regretted it.”

Behind the facts and figures on anglophones, francophones and allophones, it turns out that there are countless stories of regret, of people longing to reclaim their ancestral tongues, a growing queue of wistful punters at this linguistic lost and found office in a country perennially obsessed with language.

The motivations for claiming back a language are as varied as human nature. But, linking everything together is a need to reconnect, sometimes with long-dead forebears from places distant in time and space, often with living relatives just a Skype call away. Invariably, there is a need to find that missing piece of the puzzle we call identity.

## RETRACING THEIR IDENTITIES

### YIDDISH

#### Connecting with a culture: Tamara Kramer, 36, magazine editor and radio host

As a teenager, Tamara Kramer flunked Yiddish. Her parents' decision to send her to a Jewish high school had been a "culture shock". Up to then, her only contact with the language had been a few words and phrases from her Ashkenazi grandparents.

She left secondary school able to "string together a few sentences". "Whenever I would speak in Yiddish, [my mum] would say: That doesn't sound like you're speaking Yiddish. That's because I was talking in English with Yiddish words."

The penny dropped in adulthood after she read an English translation of *Lost in America*, Isaac Bashevis Singer's account of his arrival in New York from Poland in the 1930's. "That's when I understood!" she says. "When I read it, it was like: Oh my God! This was written in Yiddish! It was so juicy."

Three years ago, Kramer started Yiddish and Danish, an exercise in which she visits old Jewish people in their homes, exchanging Danish pastries for Yiddish words and expressions. Their colorful chats are filmed and posted on her online magazine [shtetlmontreal.com](http://shtetlmontreal.com).

The visits provide insights, not only into language, but also into the lives of another era. Discussing *gefilte fish*, an Ashkenazi delicacy literally translated as stuffed fish, unearthed surreal childhood memories of coming home to find a carp swimming in the bath.

It's the sort of imagery that sticks in the mind. Kramer reckons Yiddish and Danish is her best hope of learning the language. "Language is not just a technical thing. It's about connecting with a culture."

### IRISH GAELIC

#### Righting a historical wrong: Claire Cooney, 60, Botanist at McGill University

A century-and-a-half after famine forced her ancestors to flee to America, Claire Cooney is trying to learn the language they were forbidden from speaking.

Her journey began in 2006, on a trip back to the ancestral homeland. "When I got off the plane I looked around and saw people who looked like me. They could all have been my relatives. It was weird."

Visiting a museum in County Clare, she learned about the Troubles. "The thought that they [Irish Catholics] lost their property if they practiced their religion and weren't allowed to speak their language really pissed me off.

"I thought I owed it to my ancestors to learn the language."

Upon returning to Montreal, she immediately enrolled in Irish Gaelic classes at Concordia. Seven years on, she feels she has gained more insight into the Irish mentality. "There's no verb 'to have'. The way they think is different. Sharing is more important," she says.

Cooney says she “kicks herself” for not having asked her grandparents more questions about her ancestors. Now, she is trying to trace her paternal relatives through a genealogy center in Tipperary.

## **KOREAN**

### **Bonding with a faraway family: Christopher Yoo, 29, actor, student and waiter**

Christopher Yoo first went to Korea on a mission. His parents, first generation immigrants who owned a *dépanneur*, had neglected to give him a Korean name. “You know when you’re the last kid? They thought: He doesn’t need one.”

His lack of a name meant he didn’t exist in the family lineage records, traditionally maintained by wealthy Korean clans. Once inscribed, the newly-christened Jong Yul Yoo focused his attention on the 2002 World Cup in Seoul.

Korea reached the semi-finals that year. For the first time in his life, Yoo felt Korean. At school in Montreal, he’d tried hanging out with Korean kids, but they’d mocked him for not speaking the language. “They looked at me like I was a loser,” he remembers.

Nonetheless, it wasn’t until last year that Yoo got round to learning Korean. He was already mid-way through Mandarin and Japanese studies at UQAM when he enrolled for evening classes in Korean at Marianopolis College. In-between, he went to acting auditions and worked long shifts as a waiter.

Suffering burnout at the end of the year, he had a car crash. That’s when he had his epiphany, a sudden awareness of his deep longing to communicate with family in Korea. “I can’t express myself with them,” he says. “I realized I should have put Korean first.”

Now he is trying to learn Korean as fast as he can. “I have to learn my language,” he says. “Saturday night is my only night off. I reserve it for my Korean friends. I only want to be in the Korean world.”

## **CANTONESE**

### **Confronting his identity: Parker Mah, 31, photographer, jazz musician and radio host**

Parker Mah has been battling to reclaim his ancestral language of Cantonese for seven years now. By his own admission, he is suffering a “mental block”. “I feel the burden of my culture on my shoulders,” he says.

It is perhaps this mental block that led to him taking the long way round. After attending French immersion school in Vancouver, he went on to learn, to varying degrees of proficiency, Japanese, Bengali, German and Wolof.

As he puts it, he was forced to confront his Chinese identity after spending a year in Japan as part of his Asian studies degree. “People kept asking me where I came from,” he says. After returning, he started taking Cantonese lessons, the first of several fitful attempts to get to grips with his roots.

“Learning the language of my ancestors isn’t just about taking classes and gaining fluency. It’s being ready to take that step in life. Up to now haven’t felt mature enough to confront the fact that if I go to China, I won’t be accepted.

“That took me a long time.”

Mah's parents, whose own parents spoke different dialects, communicated in English. "They were very Canadianized by the time they met," he says.

He plans to go to China soon, perhaps to Hong Kong, with the aim of immersing himself in the language. "If it isn't enough of a shock, I'll isolate myself in a small village," he says

## **MOHAWK**

### **Getting her life back on track: Cheryl Diabo, 33, student**

Cheryl Diabo, or Kahawinóntie Wakhskaré:wake, remembers her grandparents arguing in Mohawk when she was a child. "They thought I didn't understand," she says. "My grandfather wanted sweet potatoes, but my gran had bought normal potatoes."

As a child, she attended a Mohawk immersion school, but turned her back on her culture after being sent to a high school off the reserve. "I was hanging outside Kahnawake, being a teenager. It took me away from my identity. I was sad and lost, but I didn't realize I was lost."

At 17, she fell pregnant. Now a single mother, she joined the Longhouse in a bid to go back to the traditional ways. She sent her daughter and, later, her son, to a Mohawk immersion school. Now, she herself is studying Mohawk full-time at the Kahnawake Cultural Center.

Diabo and her children now speak Mohawk at home as much as possible. Though, more often than not, it's her children who do the correcting. Diabo describes her spoken Mohawk as "baby language", "always in the present tense."

Ultimately, re-learning the language with her children has been a healing factor. "I felt I had to repair my life," she says. "When I started studying Mohawk, I felt such a familiarity. I felt a relief internally. The language reminds me of when I was little, of my grandparents."

## **HAITIAN CREOLE**

### **Building a missing half: Sophie Gilbert, 43, professor of psychology at UQAM**

Sophie Gilbert had very little contact with Creole, or Kreyol, while growing up. Her Haitian father spoke French, not only with her francophone Quebecer mother, but also with his friends from back home.

"Back then, people didn't have the same relationship with language. Creole was viewed as a street language. Today, it's different. Now, it's viewed as a wealth," she says.

Part of the impetus to reconnect with Creole came from witnessing her Dutch husband passing on his own language to their four children. "I felt that half of me had always been missing, but now it was coming to the surface.

"People see me as being black. They send out this perception that I come from elsewhere. But I felt I had nothing to show to support that half of my identity."

Last year, she started taking lessons at KEPKAA, a Haitian community group, and is now receiving private tuition before her next trip back this summer. "I go whenever I have the opportunity. I want to get closer to the language," she says.

Learning Creole, she has come to realize that her father's French was influenced by the language. In French, for example, a *commère* is a gossip. But, her father uses the word – *kòmè* in Creole – to denote a good friend.

"It's very constructive in terms of identity, she says. Learning your language is important if you want to understand yourself better, if you want to live in harmony with yourself."

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