

2003

## Thirty endangered languages in the Philippines

Thomas N. Headland  
*SIL-UND*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/sil-work-papers>

Digital Part of the [Linguistics Commons](#)  
Commons

---

### Network Recommended Citation

Headland, Thomas N. (2003) "Thirty endangered languages in the Philippines," *Work Papers of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, University of North Dakota Session*: Vol. 47 , Article 1.

DOI: 10.31356/silwp.vol47.01

Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/sil-work-papers/vol47/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Work Papers of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, University of North Dakota Session by an authorized editor of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [und.common@library.und.edu](mailto:und.common@library.und.edu).

# Thirty Endangered Languages in the Philippines<sup>1</sup>

Thomas N. Headland  
Summer Institute of Linguistics, Dallas, Texas,  
and University of North Dakota

*There are 6,809 languages spoken in the world today. Conservative estimates are that the world's languages are currently dying at the rate of at least two languages each month, and linguists predict that most of today's languages will die out in the next 100 years. Since 1962, the author has been gathering field data on some of the smallest language groups in the world—the Philippine Negritos. This paper will explain why the thirty-plus Negrito languages in the Philippines are endangered, and what the projected future is for these numerically tiny post-foraging societies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The argument will be supported by a review of the population sizes, interethnic human rights problems, and the environmental destruction of the rainforests of these marginalized peoples.*

## Thirty-two endangered Negrito languages

There are between 100 and 150 languages spoken in the Philippines today. A fourth of these languages—thirty-two—are spoken by different Negrito ethnolinguistic populations scattered throughout the archipelago (Grimes 2000)<sup>2</sup>. They are considered to be the aborigines of the Philippines whose ancestors migrated into these islands over 20,000 years ago. In early Spanish times these Negrito peoples numbered 10% of the Philippine population, living by hunting, gathering and trading forest products with non-Negrito coastal peoples. The other 90% of the people were oriental-looking farmers, descendents of the early Austronesians who began migrating into the Islands much later, only about 5,000 years ago. Today the Negrito groups total some 33,000 people, comprising only 0.05% of the present national population. Clearly something has gone wrong with these tiny aboriginal foraging populations in the last 300 years (Bennagen 1977; Griffin and Headland 1994; Headland 1989; Eder 1987). All of these 32 Negrito groups speak endangered languages. Sixteen of these groups live in the Sierra Madre mountain range that extends north and south down the entire eastern side of Luzon Island. Each group speaks its own Austronesian language, which they call *Agta*.<sup>3</sup> Each Agta language (or dialect) is mutually intelligible with one or two of its closest neighboring Agta languages (see the [Appendix](#)). I briefly describe here the story of one of those 16 Agta groups.

---

<sup>1</sup>Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Ninth International Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies, Edinburgh, Scotland, September 9-13, 2002, and at the 101<sup>st</sup> Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, New Orleans, November 20-24, 2002. I am indebted to the following for written critical comments on those earlier drafts: William Bright, Janet Headland, Peter Ladefoged, Stephen Marlett, Mary Beck Moser, Peter Unseth, and Mary Ruth Wise.

<sup>2</sup>The ethnonym “Negrito,” a term the Spaniards introduced into the Tagalog language in the 1500s, is still used in Southeast Asia to refer to several small populations found in West Malaysia, the Andaman Islands, and the Philippines, because of their phenotypically different features: darker skin pigmentation, fuzzy or wooly hair, and smaller body size. The term is not pejorative to the Agta or to Filipinos in general.

<sup>3</sup>Three of these 16 groups refer to themselves and their language by the terms “Alta” or “Arta”, which are cognates of the ethnonym “Agta”.

### The case of the Casiguran Agta

The Casiguran Agta people live in the foothills and seacoast of the Sierra Madre near the town of Casiguran, Aurora Province. They numbered 1,000 people in 1936, and 800 when my wife, Janet Headland, and I began living with them in 1962. In 1977 they numbered 617 people, and in 1984, 609 (Headland 1989). Their population has remained stationary since the 1980s at around 600 (Early and Headland 1998).

The Agta were still hunters and gatherers when we met them in 1962, living in the largest rainforest in the Philippines. As SIL workers with just two summers of basic linguistics under Kenneth Pike, and married just five months when we starting living with the Agta, Janet and I were filled with romantic expectations. Our vision was to learn their language so we could teach them to read it and to translate the Bible into it. As young college graduates, we knew better than to expect the Agta speech to be primitive; but we were still astonished as we discovered the richness of it and how completely different it was from English and from other foreign languages we had studied (Spanish and Greek). It was fun living in the rainforest with the Agta in those days when they were still foragers, getting our protein from the forest: deer, monkey, wild pig, and fish. The Agta seemed fascinating then—with their G-strings, lean-to shelters, and bows and arrows. Many did not even know they lived in the Philippines. As late as 1974, they still scored such low levels on tests of comprehension in the main trade languages of the area, Tagalog and Ilokano, that it was evident they were not able to understand them.<sup>4</sup>

Life is different for the Casiguran Agta today. Although the population decline has stopped, much of their traditional lifeways are gone. Only 3% of their old-growth tropical forest remains, and the game and fish are almost extinct, as are most of the plants and trees important to the Agta. Logging and mining companies, and thousands of Filipino farmer-settlers have taken over Agta lands, where in northern Aurora they now outnumber the Casiguran Agta people by 85 to 1. Instead of living in the rainforest distant from lowland Filipino farming communities, almost all Agta families since 1990 have lived on or near farming settlements where they work as casual laborers for Tagalog lowlanders in exchange for rice, liquor, used clothing, and cash. If they didn't know Tagalog or that they lived in the Philippines when we first met them, the multilingual Agta today can often discuss in Tagalog the latest international news stories, and find their way to Manila on the new government road that reached Casiguran in 1977. The traditional Agta *culture* is not only endangered, but moribund.<sup>5</sup> The Agta have changed today to a post-foraging landless peasant society.

One startling example of the kind of acculturative changes entering the Agta ecosystem by the 1980s was when my wife and I went on November 4, 1983, to visit an Agta camp at Dimagipo, south of Casiguran. Here is a paragraph from our fieldnotes for that day:

When we arrived at the camp at 9:30 that morning, 12 of the 24 Agta adults in the camp were drunk. This in itself was no surprise. What did seem unusual was the mood the Agta

---

<sup>4</sup>Using Casad's (1974) method, we formally tested many Agta adults for their comprehension of several Philippine languages in the 1970s. Results were published in Headland (1975). Casiguran Agta testees scored 73% comprehension in Tagalog and zero in Ilokano. This means they could answer correctly on average 73% of the questions we asked them about simple Tagalog stories we played for each testee on audiotape. That is a failing score. According to the Casad method, testees in a language community should score an average of at least 82% to be considered "bilingual" in the trade language (Tagalog in this case).

<sup>5</sup>Key references describing the present deculturation of the Agta people are found in Griffin 1994, Early and Headland 1998, Headland and Headland 1997, Rai 1990, and most recently in Headland and Blood 2002. A complete bibliography of all scholarly references on the Agta peoples may be found at Headland and Griffin 1997.

were in, including the children. It turned out they had been up all night. One of their former trading partners, a Casiguran townsman, had recently returned from a two-year employment stint in Saudi Arabia. He was sharing his homecoming celebration with his former Agta clients with a complete ‘blowout’—a feast, liquor, and especially a night of watching hardcore pornographic videotapes on his Betamax TV set, which he and his cronies had carried up to the camp along with a generator! Such is an example of culture change among Philippine tribal people today. [Headland 1986:293]

Before we explore further the question of the Agta languages, we need to ask what an endangered language is, why and how fast languages die out, and why we should care about this.

### **What is an endangered language?**

Michael Cahill (1999) states it simply enough: A language is endangered “[when] it is in fairly imminent danger of dying out.” Cahill states two ways to quickly recognize when a language is on its way to death. One is when the children in the community are not speaking the language of their parents, and the other is when there are only a small number of people left in the ethnolinguistic community: “The language dies because the entire people group dies.” This second reason was especially common in the Amazon and in North America in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; and I know of one recent case of this in my own research in the Philippines.

Not everyone agrees on a tight definition of an endangered language. The late Stephen Wurm’s (1998:192) defining characteristic is that it is when a language is moribund (meaning that it is no longer being learned by children as their mother tongue). Wurm’s definition would thus apparently not include Casiguran Agta.<sup>6</sup> But Nettle and Romaine (2000:39) say that “many languages are endangered that are not yet moribund.” David Crystal’s definition is more inclusive than Wurm’s: “spoken by enough people to make survival a possibility, but only in favourable circumstances and with a growth in community support” (2000:20). Michael Krauss’s (1992) definition is yet more inclusive: that all languages with under 10,000 speakers are endangered. That is 52% of the world’s languages, spoken by only 0.3% of the world’s population. Only 600 of the world’s languages (less than 10%) are considered as “safe” from extinction, defined as those still being learned by children (Sampat 2001). Barbara Grimes (2001:45) has documented 450 languages spoken today “that are so small that they are in the last stages of becoming extinct, with only a few elderly speakers left in each one.”

Sometimes, Cahill reminds us, revitalization of endangered languages does happen, where small language groups on the very verge of biological extinction have recovered, along with their languages, at the very last minute. Cahill reviews five such refreshing instances of this in his 1999 paper, four in the Amazon and one in Papua New Guinea. All five of these groups had suffered drastic population declines in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, from thousands of members in each group to less than a hundred. All five groups today have experienced encouraging turnarounds in population growths and language rescues as the result of help from missionaries, NGOs, and government agencies such as FUNAI, as well as a result of the awakening self-determination revival movement among many indigenous peoples today (Bodley 1999:145–169; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). Grimes (2001) reviews eight more cases of language revival, with four of these being the result of SIL programs. And a booklet edited by Richard Pittman (1998)

---

<sup>6</sup>In another place, Wurm (1996:2) says another secondary reason may be when a small language community is overwhelmed by an intrusive language. But even here he says the children in the small weaker culture tend to use the new language of the intruders.

reviews sixteen cases where SIL played a role in not only rescuing moribund languages, but in saving the peoples themselves from tribal extinction.<sup>7</sup>

### Why should we care?

Yes, Why? Most people in America today will argue that it is a good thing that all these confusing languages are finally dying out. Sadly, the majority of lay people in the industrialized world would agree with the economist who said this: “Certainly a single language for all humanity would bring huge economic benefits—and perhaps do more than anything else to unite the world’s quarrelling peoples” (Anonymous 2000).<sup>8</sup> Anthropologists and linguists of course disagree. Here’s what they argue:

Anthropologists bemoan the language massacre, saying that each language is like a soaring cathedral: a thing of beauty, the product of immense creative effort, filled with rich tapestries of knowledge. Interviews with traditional healers, for example, have identified new drugs. And comparing disparate languages reveals clues to the fundamental building blocks of human thought, as well as echoes of what scientists call our “deep history” —the vast, prehistoric movements of peoples across continents and the relation of one tribe to another. [Cook 2000]

So why should the industrialized world care about saving languages? Besides the human rights issue here, every human language contributes new perspectives to both art and science. Even if saving a language is a twilight struggle, “A magnificent human creation like the Mona Lisa or the Sistine Chapel shouldn’t just vanish without being recorded,” said MIT psychology professor Stephen Pinker (quoted in Cook 2000). David Crystal presents five arguments why we should care (summarized from Crystal 2000:32–66):

- a. Because linguistic diversity enriches our human ecology: 6,800 unique models for describing the world.
- b. Because languages are expressions of identity: a nation without a language is like a nation without a heart.
- c. Because languages are repositories of history.
- d. Because languages contribute to the sum of human knowledge: each language provides a new slant on how the human mind works; as we learn more about languages we increase our stock of human wisdom.
- e. Because languages are interesting subjects in their own right.

### How do languages die?

The most salient reasons for language death are ethnocide or linguicide, or even genocide, of an indigenous group. Ethnocide is when a dominant political group attempts to purposely put an end to a people’s traditional way of life. Linguicide (linguistic genocide) is when such a dominant group tries to extinguish the language of a minority group, say by punishing anyone caught speaking it. Languages can also disappear quickly if its speakers die in some natural disaster (a tidal wave, severe earthquake, disastrous famine, or a measles epidemic), or are scattered in a way that breaks up the language community. These were common reasons for language extinctions in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Today, however, minority languages more commonly die “naturally,” rather than by being systematically killed,

---

<sup>7</sup>SIL members have worked in 54 preliterate indigenous language groups that now appear to have fewer than 200 speakers. Eighteen of these 54 languages have 100 to 200 speakers, 32 have 1 to 99 speakers, and 4 are now extinct. (Personal email from Barbara F. Grimes, April 9, 2001.)

<sup>8</sup>I wonder how this anonymous economist would explain the American Civil War, the Russian and Chinese revolutions, or the Korean and Vietnam conflicts, or the most recent conflicts in Ireland?

simply by being overwhelmed by the more passive acculturative processes of the encroaching industrialized world.<sup>9</sup> The Casiguran Agta case is an example of this latter situation.

### **How fast are they dying out?**

The 14<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Ethnologue* (Grimes 2000) lists 6,809 known languages in the world. Half of these have less than 6,000 speakers each; a quarter (28%) have less than 1,000 speakers; 500 languages have less than 100 speakers; and 200 languages have less than 10 speakers. Conservative estimates are that the world's languages are dying at the rate of two languages each month, meaning about one-third of today's languages will disappear in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Most specialists argue that at least half will die in the next 100 years (Crystal 2000:19, Wurm 1996:1, Nettle and Romaine 2000:7, Gibbs 2002), while still others predict half will die in just fifty years (David Harrison, cited in Cook 2000; the Foundation for Endangered Languages in the UK in 1995, cited in Crystal 2000:viii). Other less-conservative estimates forecast that as many as 90% will die out in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Krauss 1992:7, Crawford 2000:52, Maffi 2001, Cook 2000; and Gugliotta 1999). William Sutherland (2003) shows that languages today are more threatened than birds or mammals. Rosemarie Ostler (1999) thinks the world's languages are becoming extinct at twice the rate of endangered mammals and four times the rate of endangered birds, and that "the world of the future could be dominated by a dozen or fewer languages" (p. 16).

### **Is Casiguran Agta an endangered language?**

We come now to the question, is Casiguran Agta an endangered language? I argue that it is. But the answer is complicated. Most of the classic descriptions we read about today of dying languages are not analogous to the Casiguran Agta case (although they are similar to the cases of two other Agta ethnolinguistic groups to be described below). The Casiguran Agta language does not appear threatened at first notice. The children are still speaking it, although by the age of 12 or so they all seem fluent in Tagalog, as well; and even when I was last there in 2002 I did not find any Agta adults who seem aware that their language is dying, or even changing. If the language is at risk, the Agta don't seem to know or care. They are not ashamed of their language, but they show no concern for language loyalty. The question is a non-issue for them. Further, they seem completely unaware of how much their speech has changed since the 1960s when I first learned it.<sup>10</sup> And I suspect that some linguistic experts on endangered languages (e.g., Stephen Wurm) might not include Casiguran Agta in their definition of an endangered language. In any case, the Casiguran Agta language is not at this time moribund. It is in danger not because Agta children are not speaking it, but because it is changing so fast. I anticipate that 60 years from now the descendants of today's Casiguran Agta will probably not be able to pass an intelligibility test of Agta stories that we audio-recorded in the 1960s. This is not necessarily because they won't be speaking "Agta" anymore, but because their speech will be so heavily mixed with Tagalog, Ilokano, and English that it will be a creolized "daughter dialect" of the Agta language their great-great-great grandparents were speaking a hundred years earlier.

One way of gauging the endangerment of a small minority language is to look at the marriage patterns of its speakers. Endogamous ethnolinguistic groups have a better chance of retaining their language than do groups with young people who marry outsiders. Until the 1980s, almost all Agta marriages were to other Agta. Since the mid-'80s, exogamous hypergynous marriages (Agta women marrying non-Agta lowlander men) have become common, to the point where 40% of the new marriages of Casiguran Agta

---

<sup>9</sup>Skutnabb-Kangas's (2000) confrontational book would hardly agree with me here. Her rather militant position is that endangered languages today are not dying naturally, but are being "systematically killed" by State societies.

<sup>10</sup>With a life expectancy at birth in the Agta population of only 22.5 years, most Agta don't live long enough to notice the changes that I have detected in their language since 40 years ago.

women in the last 17 years have been hypergynous, with these women out-migrating when they marry (Headland and Headland 1998). None of the mixed-blood children of these hypergynous unions speak Agta as their mother tongue.

### Two dying Agta languages

To set this argument into a wider context, let us look at the situation of two other Agta languages. During the 1960s and 1970s I made several trips up and down the eastern coast of Luzon and into the Sierra Madre where I collected linguistic data from every Agta camp group I could find. In April 1965, I found one previously-unknown Agta language group, the Dupaninan Agta in eastern Cagayan (see the [Appendix](#); reported in Headland 1975); and in September 1977 I found another hitherto unknown Agta language group on the west side of the Sierra Madre in Aglipay, Quirino Province. This second group, who called themselves Arta (with an *r*, see the [Appendix](#)) numbered only 30 remaining speakers when I contacted them and took a word list in 1977. Linguist Lawrence Reid recontacted them in 1987, in 1990, and in 1992. He reported that the remaining speakers in 1990 were only twelve (Reid 1994:40), “reduced to 11 with the death of another individual in late 1992” (p. 70; see also Reid 1989).

Another Agta language group, the Dicamay Agta (see the [Appendix](#)), recently became completely extinct—both the people and their language (Grimes 2000:599). SIL linguist Richard Roe contacted this group in 1957 and took a word list of 291 words. They lived on the Dicamay River on the western side of the Sierra Madre near Jones, Isabela. Roe told me that there was only one family there then. In November 1974, after talking with Roe and with a copy of his wordlist in hand, I went to Jones to see if I could find the Agta who spoke this language. I was unable to find them. We talked to many Filipinos in the area, but they all said they had not seen any Negritos for several years. Some people whispered to me that migrant Ilokano homesteaders had killed a number of the Agta a few years ago.<sup>11</sup> I did find three Agta people living in town, but when I tried to interview them, none of them spoke or understood any Agta language. I was told that all three were orphans adopted by Ilokanos in early childhood.

So the Casiguran Agta language is not endangered because it is moribund, but because the Agta people today, who number only 600, are surrounded and outnumbered 85 to 1 by some 50,000 Tagalog-speaking lowlander immigrants. Most Agta families now live next door to these Tagalog homesteaders instead of with each other. When lowlanders are present the conversation usually switches to Tagalog. Casiguran Agta speech is threatened because Tagalog, not Agta is the language used in educational, political, and other public situations. No Agta children attended public schools in the 1960s. Today there are elementary schools all up and down the Casiguran coast, and almost all Agta children attend for at least a year or two. Government teachers teach in Tagalog, and almost all of the pupils are Tagalog, with 3% to 4% being Agta. Casiguran Agta is still spoken in the home and it is still the mother tongue of Agta children. But more often than not, as soon as Agta leave their houses they are engaged in interethnic relations with lowlanders, in the Tagalog language. Even when Agta talk with each other today, they are using many hundreds of new words they have subconsciously borrowed from Tagalog, terms needed for today’s serious discussions: work, science, technology, Philippine money, affairs in town, etc. The Casiguran Agta who have been forest-oriented for millennia are today living in deforested brushlands (Headland 1988; Top 1998) and they are now town- and lowlander-oriented. Their changing language reflects that.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup>Janet Headland and I (Headland and Headland 1999) describe elsewhere several cases where outsiders massacred Agta camp groups. None of those refer, however, to the extinct Dicamay Agta people.

<sup>12</sup>I agree with Grenoble and Whaley’s (1998:29–30) explanation of why hunter-gatherer languages are the most in danger of extinction: not only because they are small populations, but more because of the

### The Agta's loss of ethnobiological knowledge

If the Casiguran Agta language is endangered, today, however, it is not for fear that its speakers may be exterminated by outsiders, or even that they will die out naturally—the direction they were moving in the early and middle 1900s (Headland 1989). Nor does it appear that their language is going to die in the near future. Instead, what appears to be happening is that the Casiguran Agta language is *changing*, and changing fast, as a result of intense new daily contact with other languages.

Using a monolingual approach in the early 1960s, my wife and I eventually became fluent speakers of the Casiguran Agta language, developed an alphabet for it that they use today, published a grammar and dictionary, and translated the New Testament into Agta. (Our three children, all born in the Philippines, grew up bilingual in Agta and English.)

We never ceased to be fascinated at the richness and complexity of their language. Agta is a highly agglutinative language, where the typical Agta verb can be stated a few hundred ways by adding to the verb root various combinations of inflectional or derivational prefixes, suffixes and infixes, along with several types of reduplication. Each of the many resulting forms gives different shades of meaning to the verb.<sup>13</sup> Agta grammar is so different from English that most monolingual Americans cannot even imagine it. I remember our amazement when we discovered that Agta verbs and nouns had infixes. We knew what prefixes and suffixes were, but even Ken Pike had not told us about infixes. And we were amazed as we slowly collected their names for varieties of topics important to them, as we watched our word lists grow eventually to include 603 plant names,<sup>14</sup> 127 names for types of fish, 44 for seashells, 14 types of snails, 21 names for types of hunting arrows, 21 names for types of rattan, 46 terms for types or stages of growth of rice, 45 different verbs that mean ‘to fish’, and 14 verbs for ‘to go hunting’, etc. The art and beauty of the Agta language is awesome to behold. I love it. I delight in speaking it, in telling stories in it, and in seeing the mouth-gaping attention I get from Agta people who have never met me when I first talk to them in their own tongue.

As interesting as the grammar and ethnosemantics is of the Casiguran Agta language, it was their ethnoscience, or folk science, that fascinated me the most. Indeed, as we studied their kinship system, folk astronomy, ethnomedicine, and their folk explanations for many other aspects of Agta natural and spiritual life, we came to discover the worldview of the Agta. Krauss is right when he says that each language represents a unique way of looking at the world, and that “every time we lose a language we lose a whole way of thinking” (quoted in Gugliotta 1999). It is as if a whole library has burned down.

This Agta folk science takes us from the art and beauty of the Agta language to our own Western science. Is humankind losing scientific information, as well as artistic beauty, when an unwritten indigenous language dies out? What about the “science” of these tiny undiscovered endangered languages? Does that kind of “primitive” ethnoscience have anything to teach us? The main examples that are quoted in the responses to this question have to do with ethnobotany and ethnomedicine. And I have written before on Agta folk botany (Headland 1981, 1983). But my best example of how the Agta

---

extreme pressure put on them to shift to an agriculturally based economy. The Agta case fits their model well.

<sup>13</sup>For a quick example, take the Agta noun *pana* ‘arrow’. A few of the hundreds of ways this root can appear are as follows: *nagpana* ‘shot [an arrow]’; *pinumana* ‘shot at nothing in particular’; *negpepanaen* ‘kept shooting strenuously’; *pinana* ‘shot him’; *nagpanapana* ‘shot casually several times’; *kinepanaan* ‘accidentally shot [him]’; *nagpapana* ‘shot a toy bow and arrow’; *kapanaan* ‘the place where archery practice is done’; *nagpanaan* ‘shot back and forth at each other’, etc.

<sup>14</sup>I estimated in 1985 that the Casiguran Agta probably have between 700 and 800 names for plants in their language. My wife and I actually recorded, however, only 603 plant terms. See my discussion on this in Headland 1985.



language contributed to science is in how I used my Agta linguistic data to construct a model of Philippine prehistory.

### **Using data from a small tribal language to reconstruct Asian prehistory**

Because the people in the 32 known Negrito populations in the Philippines look phenotypically so different from other Filipino peoples, and since they live so differently, the accepted model of their history until the 1980s was that these Negritos were the aboriginal people of the Philippines for at least the last 20,000 years, until the Austronesian peoples began migrating into the islands some 5,000 years ago. I have no argument with that part of the model. But the accepted model also stated that the Negritos have lived in isolation, separate from the Austronesian-speaking peoples until the last hundred years or so. My 1986 dissertation in anthropology (Headland 1986) presents a history that is the very opposite, that Philippine Negritos, including the Agta, had been living in close symbiotic relationships with Austronesian farmers for at least 3,000 years. Anthropologists in my department (U Hawaii anthropology) were skeptical. One of them who is a good archaeologist but with no background in linguistics said to me, “Headland, there’s only one way you’ll ever prove your thesis! That’s through archaeology.” Anyone who specializes in historical-comparative linguistics must be smiling at that naïve statement. With the help of two Austronesianists, Lawrence Reid and Robert Blust, I used linguistics—data from the Agta languages—to prove my case (Headland and Reid 1989).<sup>15</sup>

My point here is that data from small languages like Agta can be used to test scientific hypotheses about human prehistory, if we can record and archive such data before it is lost forever. So besides the artistic contribution, there is a scientific reason why we need to step up our efforts to find, describe, and archive even the smallest languages in the world, before it is too late.

The Casiguran Agta language today is an endangered language. But it is not a dying language nor is it moribund, since the children still learn it as their mother tongue. I emphasize this point, because it is important to understand that the majority of the endangered languages today are suffering from conditions that are similar to the forces threatening the Agta languages. Only a minority of the small languages today are at risk from the more salient examples found in the literature (genocide, natural disasters). The Agta languages today are endangered not because the people are disappearing or because the children are not speaking Agta, but because their languages are changing. Most of the words in many traditional semantic domains are no longer known by younger Agta. There were hundreds of Casiguran Agta terms used when we were first living with them in the 1960s, when they were still forest-oriented hunter-gatherers, terms that have died out today except in the memories of a few older people. These are words in the following semantic domains that are all but defunct today: names of types of monkeys and deer, names of many forest plants, terms to do with hunting, with the bow and arrow complex, the rattan complex, types of supernatural spirit beings, types and parts of animal traps and of fire-making kits, types of baskets, names of traditional varieties of rice seed, etc. These semantic domain concepts are no longer important in the Agta culture because they are not needed. For example, matches have replaced fire-making kits; cardboard boxes and plastic bags have replaced traditional baskets, and bows and arrows are no longer used since the wild game is almost extinct; commercial western medicines in town have replaced traditional plant medicines, and Christianity has replaced animism. Further, wild forest plants have disappeared because of the destruction of the primary forest, and traditional rice grains have been discontinued in favor of the newer hybrid miracle-rice seeds of the Green Revolution. The outside world has introduced new concepts and ideas that have changed the way the Negritos think in Agta. As their worldview has changed, so has their language.

---

<sup>15</sup>There was almost nothing available on Philippine archaeology at the time to help me in my argument. Recently, an archaeological study by Laura Junker (1999) has confirmed my 1986 model.

The many hundreds of words in those ethnosemantic domains are no longer important to the Agta culture and are no longer talked about, nor even known by younger Agta. This is analogous to the many now-extinct words in American English semantic sets having to do with horses and wagons that our great-grandparents used a century ago before the invention of the automobile, but which probably no one in this room knows today, unless they are Amish, or a real Texas cowboy.

### Appendix: Negrito languages spoken in the Philippines<sup>16</sup>

LANGUAGE NAME	POPULATION SIZE IN 1990s	BIBLIOGRAPHIC SOURCE
Batak, Palawan Island	386	Eder 1987
Mamanwa, Mindanao Island	1000	Grimes 2000
Ati, northern Panay Island	30	Pennoyer 1987:4
Ati, southern Panay Island	900	Pennoyer 1987:4
Ata, Negros Island	450	Cadelina 1980:96
Ata, Mabinay, Negros Oriental	25	Grimes 2000
Atta, Pamplona, western Cagayan	1000	Grimes 2000
Atta, Faire-Rizal, western Cagayan	400	Grimes 2000
Atta, Pudtol, Kalinga-Apayao	100	Grimes 2000
Ayta, Sorsogon	40	Grimes 2000
Agta, Villa Viciosa, Abra, NW Luzon (extinct?)	0	Grimes 2000; Reid, per. com. 2001
<i>Ayta groups of western Luzon:</i>		
Abenlen, Tarlac	6000	K. Storck SIL files
Mag-anchi, Zambales, Tarlac, Pampanga	4166	K. Storck SIL files
Mag-indi, Zambales, Pampanga	3450	K. Storck SIL files
Ambala, Zambales, Pampanga, Bataan	1654	K. Storck SIL files
Magbeken, Bataan	381	K. Storck SIL files
<i>Agta groups of Sierra Madre, eastern Luzon</i>		
Agta, Isarog, Camarines Sur (language nearly extinct)	1000	Grimes 2000
Agta, Mt. Iraya & Lake Buhi east, Camarines Sur (4 close dialects)	200	Grimes 2000
Agta, Mt. Iriga & Lake Buhi west, Camarines Sur	1500	Grimes 2000
Agta, Camarines Norte	200	Grimes 2000
Agta, Alabat Island, southern Quezon	50	Grimes 2000
Agta, Umirey, Quezon (3 close dialects)	3000	T. MacLeod SIL files
Agta, Casiguran, northern Aurora	609	Headland 1989
Agta, Maddela, Quirino	300	Headland field notes
Agta, Palanan & Divilacan, Isabela	856	Rai 1990:176
Agta, San Mariano-Disabungan, Isabela	377	Rai 1990:176
Agta, Dicamay, Jones, Isabela (recently extinct),	0	Headland field notes, and Grimes 2000
Arta, Aglipay, Quirino (pop. was 30 in 1977)	11	Headland field notes, and Reid 1994:40.
Alta, Northern, Aurora	250	Reid, per. comm.
Alta, Southern, Quezon	400	Reid, per. comm.
Agta, eastern Cagayan, Dupaninan (several close dialects)	1200	T. Nickell 1985:119
Agta, central Cagayan	800	Mayfield 1987:vii–viii; Grimes 2000
<b>32 known Negrito languages in Philippines</b>	<b>32,725</b>	<b>= total estimated number of Negritos in Philippines</b>

<sup>16</sup>Compiled by Thomas N. Headland, August 2002.

**References cited**

- Anonymous. 2000. [Review of A History of Language, by S.R. Fischer.] *The Economist*, January 28–February 4. [As quoted in Langscape #15, March 2000, p. 87.]
- Bennagen, Ponciano L. 1977. The Negrito: A Rallying Call to Save a Filipino Group from Cultural Extinction. In *Filipino Heritage: The Making of a Nation*. Manila: Lahing Pilipino Publishing Co.
- Bodley, John H. 1999. *Victims of Progress*, Fourth Edition. Toronto: Mayfield.
- Cadelina, Rowe V. 1980. Adaptive Strategies to Deforestation: The Case of the Ata of Negros Island, Philippines. *Silliman Journal* 27:93–112.
- Cahill, Michael. 1999. From Endangered to Less Endangered: Case Histories from Brazil and Papua New Guinea. *SILEWP* 1999-006. [Online: <http://www.sil.org/silewp/1999/006>]
- Casad, Eugene. 1974. *Dialect Intelligibility Testing*. Norman: Summer Institute of Linguistics of the University of Oklahoma. [repub. (1987)]
- Cook, G. 2000. Vanishing Tongues. *Boston Globe* [newspaper], November 5, p. A01.
- Crawford, James. 2000. *At War With Diversity: US Language Policy in an Age of Anxiety*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Crystal, David. 2000. *Language Death*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Early, John, and Thomas N Headland. 1998. *Population Dynamics of a Philippine Rain Forest People*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Eder, James F. 1987. *On the Road to Tribal Extinction: Depopulation, Deculturation, and Adaptive Well-Being among the Batak [Negritos] of the Philippines*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gibbs, W. Wayt. 2002. Saving Dying Languages. *Scientific American* 287(2):79–85. August.
- Grenoble, Lenore A., and Lindsay J. Whaley. 1998. Toward a Typology of Language Endangerment. In *Endangered Languages*. L Grenoble and L. Whaley, eds. Pp. 22–54. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Griffin, P. Bion. 1994. Becoming Filipino Peasants: Agta Forager Gender Role Changes. In *Hunters and Gatherers in the Modern Context: Book of Presented Papers*, Vol. 1. Linda J. Ellanna, ed. Pp. 234–238. Fairbanks, University of Alaska.
- Griffin, P. Bion and Agnes A. Estioko-Griffin, eds. 1985. *The Agta of Northeastern Luzon: Recent Studies*. Cebu City, Philippines: University of San Carlos Publications.
- Griffin, P. Bion, and Thomas N. Headland. 1994. The Negritos: Disappearing Hunter-Gatherers of Southeast Asia. In *Traditional Peoples Today*. Volume 5 of The Illustrated History of Humankind. Goran Burenhult, General Editor. P. 71. New York: HarperCollins.
- Grimes, Barbara F., ed. 2000. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 14<sup>th</sup> edition, Volume 1: Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics. [Also online: <http://www.ethnologue.com>]
- Grimes, Barbara F. 2001. “Global Language Viability.” In *Endangered Languages of the Pacific Rim, Lectures on Endangered Languages: 2*, from Kyoto Conference 2000. Osahito Miyaoka, ed. Pp. 45–61. [With comments by others on pp. 63–68]. Kyoto: ELPR [Publisher], Osaka Gakuin University. ISSN 1346-082X. [Also online: <http://www.sil.org/sociolx/ndg-lg-grimes.html>]
- Gugliotta, Guy. 1999. A Tribe Races to Teach Its Mother Tongue. *Washington Post*, August 9, p. A1.
- Headland, Thomas N. 1975. Report of Eastern Luzon Language Survey. *Philippine Journal of Linguistics* 6:47–54.
- Headland, Thomas N. 1981. *Taxonomic Disagreement in a Culturally Salient Domain: Botany Versus Utility in a Philippine Negrito Taxonomic System*. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International.

- Headland, Thomas N. 1983. An Ethnobotanical Anomaly: The Dearth of Binomial Specifics in a Folk Taxonomy of a Negrito Hunter-Gatherer Society in the Philippines. *Journal of Ethnobiology* 3:109–120.
- Headland, Thomas N. 1985. Comment [on Cecil Brown]. *Current Anthropology* 25:57–58.
- Headland, Thomas N. 1986. *Why Foragers Do Not Become Farmers: A Historical Study of a Changing Ecosystem and Its Effect on a Negrito Hunter-Gatherer Group in the Philippines*. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International.
- Headland, Thomas N. 1988. Ecosystemic Change in a Philippine Tropical Rainforest and Its Effect on a Negrito Foraging Society. *Tropical Ecology* 29(2):121–135.
- Headland, Thomas N. 1989. Population Decline in a Philippine Negrito Hunter-Gatherer Society. *American Journal of Human Biology* 1:59–72.
- Headland, Thomas N., and Doris E. Blood, eds. 2002. *What Place for Hunter-Gatherers in Millennium Three?* Dallas: SIL International and International Museum of Cultures. Publications in Ethnography.
- Headland, Thomas N., and P. Bion Griffin. 1997. A Bibliography of the Agta Negritos of Eastern Luzon, Philippines. *SIL Electronic Working Papers* 1997-004. Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics. [Online: <http://www.sil.org/silewp/1997/004/silewp1997-004.html>]
- Headland, Thomas N., and Janet D. Headland. 1997. Limitation of Human Rights, Land Exclusion, and Tribal Extinction: The Agta Negritos of the Philippines. *Human Organization* 56(1):79–90.
- Headland, Thomas N., and Janet D. Headland. 1998. Hypergyny: The Outmarriages of Agta Women and the Future of Philippine Negrito Post-Foraging Populations. Paper presented at The 97<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Philadelphia, PA, December 2–6.
- Headland, Thomas N., and Janet D. Headland. 1999. Agta Human Rights Violations: Why Southeast Asian Negritos are a Disappearing People. [Online: <http://www.sil.org/sil/roster/headland-t/agta.htm>]
- Headland, Thomas N., and Lawrence A. Reid. 1989. Hunter-Gatherers and Their Neighbors From Prehistory to the Present. *Current Anthropology* 30:43–66.
- Junker, Laura Lee. 1999. *Raiding, Trading, and Feasting: The Political Economy of Philippine Chiefdoms*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Krauss, Michael. 1992. The world's languages in crisis. *Language* 68:4–10.
- Maffi, Luisa. ed. 2001. *On Biocultural Diversity: Linking Language, Knowledge, and the Environment*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Mayfield, Roy. 1987. *Central Cagayan Agta Texts*. Studies in Philippine Linguistics (Supplementary Series: Philippine Texts No. 2). Manila: Linguistic Society of the Philippines and Summer Institute of Linguistics.
- Nettle, Daniel, and Suzanne Romaine. 2000. *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World's Languages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nickell, Thomas L. 1985. A Partial Stratification Analysis of Eastern Cagayan Agta Language. In *The Agta of Northeastern Luzon: Recent Studies*, P. Bion Griffin and Agnes A. Estioko-Griffin, eds. Pp. 119–146. Cebu City, Philippines: University of San Carlos Publications.
- Ostler, Rosemarie. 1999. Disappearing Languages. *The Futurist* 33(7):16–22. August–September. [Abstract available online: <http://www.wfs.org/as99.htm>]
- Pennoyer, F. Douglas. 1987. Inati: The Hidden Negrito Language of Panay, Philippines. *Philippine Journal of Linguistics* 17(2) and 18(1):1–36.
- Pittman, Richard S. ed. 1998. *Back from the Brink: Sixteen Accounts of Ethnic Renaissance*. Waxhaw, North Carolina: SIL International.

- Rai, Navin K. 1990. *Living in a Lean-to: Philippine Negrito Foragers in Transition*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Museum of Anthropology.
- Reid, Lawrence A. 1989. Arta, Another Philippine Negrito Language. *Oceanic Linguistics* 28(1):47–74.
- Reid, Lawrence A. 1994. Possible Non-Austronesian Lexical Elements in Philippine Negrito Languages. *Oceanic Linguistics* 33:37–72.
- Sampat, Payal. 2001. Last Words. *World Watch* [magazine]. May/June 2001, pp. 34–37, 40.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove. 2000. *Linguistic Genocide in Education—Or Worldwide Diversity and Human Rights?* Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Sutherland, William J. 2003. Parallel Extinction Risk and Global Distribution of Languages and Species. *Nature* 423:276–279. May 15. [Online: [http://www.nature.com/cgi-taf/DynaPage.taf?file=/nature/journal/v423/n6937/full/nature01607\\_fs.html](http://www.nature.com/cgi-taf/DynaPage.taf?file=/nature/journal/v423/n6937/full/nature01607_fs.html)]
- Top, Gerhard van den. 1998. *The Social Dynamics of Deforestation in the Sierra Madre, Philippines*. Leiden: Centre of Environmental Science, Leiden University.
- Wurm, Stephen A. ed. 1996. *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Wurm, Stephen A. 1998. Methods of Language Maintenance and Revival. In *Studies in Endangered Languages*, Kazuto Matsumura, ed. Pp. 191–211. Tokyo: Hituzi Syobo.

Thomas N. Headland  
SIL International  
7500 W. Camp Wisdom Rd.  
Dallas TX 75236

[tom\\_headland@sil.org](mailto:tom_headland@sil.org)