

## Hidden Language Discovered in India

In Arunachal Pradesh, a rugged, hilly region in the northeast of India known for its linguistic diversity, linguists K. David Harrison, Gregory Anderson, and Ganesh Murmu discovered a previously undocumented language called Koro. They have been in the area since 2008 as part of National Geographic's "Enduring Voices" project, researching the two little-known languages of Aka and Miji when they stumbled across this new language. Discoveries of previously undocumented languages are not particularly rare, but if the researchers had arrived even 10 years later, they would not have found nearly as many native speakers as they did. With Koro, it is estimated that there are around 6,910 documented languages spoken in the world, many of which are endangered due to people switching to more dominant languages like English. Linguists estimate that an endangered language vanishes approximately every 2 weeks with the death of its last native speakers.

Koro is part of the Tibeto-Burman language family, a group of around 400 languages. The family includes Tibetan and Burmese. Around 150 languages from this group are spoken in India alone. Koro is considered highly endangered due to its status of only having around 1,000 native speakers, few of whom are under the age of 20. This endangerment is further compounded by the growing influence of Hindi among young people in the region. Impressively, Koro has managed to coexist alongside the more prevalent Aka language without disappearing entirely - an unusual accomplishment which may shed some light on how to preserve linguistic diversity in an increasingly globalized world.

Koro speakers consider themselves to be part of the Aka group, a tribal culture that survives by hunting and farming. They are located at the foot of the Himalaya mountain range near the borders with China, Tibet, and Myanmar. The languages of this group are not well-known, despite first being documented in the 1800s. Indeed, the researchers and the speakers of both languages whom they interviewed had considered Koro to be a dialect of Aka until they began working through word lists and finding substantial differences. Rather than being a dialect of Aka, Koro appears to be a sister language, one more closely related to a language called Tani, which can be found spoken farther to the east.

Related languages tend to have very similar words for common things such as body parts, numbers, livestock animals, common features of the environment ("sun" or "moon"), and other major concepts. Koro and Aka demonstrate substantial differences in these words which reveal their separate-language status. For instance, while the Koro word for pig is "lele", the Aka word is "vo"; and while the Koro word for mountain is "nggo", the Aka word is "phu". In addition, the researchers documented structural differences in how words and sentences are formed and combined. Their findings will be detailed in a paper for a forthcoming edition of the journal *Indian Linguistics*.