Do you have the Choctaw fonts installed?

I overheard our Senior Project Manager ask our DTP specialist this, and it was an unusual sentence to overhear, even at a language services company. I had been reading about dying languages and wandered into the PM office to ask about it.

Choctaw is a Native American language, now spoken by roughly 7,000 people in Oklahoma and surrounding areas. In recent years, insurance companies have been compelled by law to provide their benefits information in any language that makes up 5% of their service area. Tembua translates a significant volume each year for the insurance industry, sometimes into languages as diverse as Somali and Navajo. I had studied the Dakota language during my undergrad years but knew little about Choctaw.

Our PM told me that when our client first reached out for Choctaw, she was a bit hesitant. Tembua hadn’t handled Choctaw before, and because quality is our primary operational objective, assigning the translation to someone who had just a passing interest in the language wasn’t an option. But after 22 years in business, our networking in the language community is rich and deep and our lists are long.

One of our working teams referred us to a group in Oklahoma, where we made the acquaintance of a skilled linguist who had taught the Choctaw language for years as part of a team to revive the language. Her contributions include work on a Choctaw dictionary and evening classes for children.

A review of her resume and references won her the job, and her team began work. We are accustomed to accommodating other cultures, but we have no control over either the weather or ceremonial obligations, and we had to be patient as a snowstorm took down phone and power lines and an event took our team out of their offices for several days.

I discovered that the phone was the preferred manner of communication, so I took the time to meet our linguist that way. I learned about her work with the young people of her community and how difficult it was to express certain concepts in a language where insurance had been a foreign concept for generations. This, of course, is not unusual. Whenever a language lacks vocabulary, the translator must either create words (done very infrequently, for obvious reasons) or use phrases to explain the terms. A translator who is embedded in the culture is an absolute necessity.

We ran into the Choctaw font issue when the translation was ready for delivery. Our PM had found several font options, and the chosen fonts were supposedly embedded in the file we received from the linguist. For quality control, however, we created a PDF, embedded the fonts, and sent it off to the linguist for a final check. Her response was an emphatic no—the text was not displaying correctly.

Working together, our CTO and our DTP expert learned that the fonts our team used were proprietary and belonged to the organization the team works with. Special settings prevented embedding of the fonts in either an MS Office program or a PDF. In other words, we could not move the translation from the linguist team to our client.

Luckily, a past experience presented a solution. Many years ago, I worked with a gifted linguist who refused to touch a computer. He typed out his work and sent it to me by mail for editing and proofing. We requested a hard copy from our Choctaw translator, and within two days we had it in hand.

Once our DTP specialist could view the letters that weren’t displaying properly, she was able to pull characters from other alphabets and modify an open-source font to create a proper document. Hopefully the people for whom the translation was designed will find value in it.

During one of my conversations with our linguist, she said something that gave me pause. “You know, Patricia, when my generation dies, no one will be able to read Choctaw. The younger generation think it’s fun for the first few lessons and then lose interest. We elders will take the language to our graves.”

I thought about my grandfather refusing to speak his native German to his children during the two World Wars. He taught me, but none of his children spoke the language well.

Across the globe, roughly 6,000 languages are spoken. More than half of them are endangered and may disappear within 50 years unless we take steps to preserve them.

Why should we care? Wouldn’t it be easier if everyone spoke the same language? Of course, a universal language would simplify travel and commerce, but people don’t think alike. Each language represents a unique view of the world and the geography in which it developed. Some are oral only, moving stories and histories from generation to generation. Some are found in poetry that expresses the world in a singular way.

Do you think we should care? Email me with your opinion!

If you have never studied another language, dip into a course online. Learn how some languages delete the first person pronoun to direct attention away from the speaker; how others use ever more complex forms of passive voice to remove responsibility from the speaker; how verb tenses can be used to place a sentence in the concrete past or in a possibility; and so, so much more.

[Click here to learn more about dying languages.](http://www.pri.org/stories/2015-01-26/language-apocalypse-coming-and-many-tongues-are-already-all-dead)