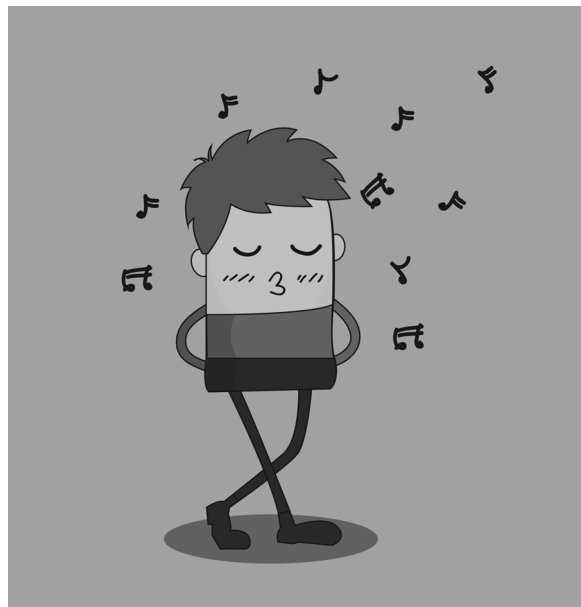


### Whistled Language Echoes Around This Island

1 Sitting atop a cliff in the Canary Islands, Antonio Márquez Navarro issued an invitation — “Come over here, we’re going to slaughter the pig” — without speaking a word: He whistled it. In the distance, three visiting hikers stopped dead in their tracks at the piercing sound and its echo bouncing off the walls of the ravine that separated them. Mr. Márquez, 71, said that in his youth, when local shepherds rather than tourists walked the steep and rugged footpaths of his island, his news would have been greeted right away by a responding whistle, loud and clear.



- 2 But his message was lost on these hikers, and they soon resumed their trek on La Gomera, one of the Canary Islands, a volcanic archipelago in the Atlantic that is part of Spain. Mr. Márquez is a proud guardian of La Gomera’s whistling language, which he called “the poetry of my island.” And, he added, “like poetry, whistling does not need to be useful in order to be special and beautiful.”
- 3 With its 18, it’s easy to see why whistling came into use on the Canaries; on most of the islands, deep ravines run from high peaks and plateaus down to the ocean, and plenty of time and effort are required to travel even a short distance overland. Whistling developed as a good alternative way to deliver a message, with its sound carrying farther than shouting — as much as two miles across some canyons and with favorable wind conditions.
- 4 In 2009, La Gomera’s whistled language, officially known as Silbo Gomero, was added by UNESCO to its list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. But with whistling no longer essential for communication, Silbo’s survival mostly relies on a 1999 law that made teaching it an obligatory part of the island’s school curriculum.
- 5 Interpreting a whistle isn’t always easy but making the correct sounds can be even harder. Most whistlers insert one bent knuckle into the mouth, but some use instead the tip of one or two fingers, while a few use a finger from each hand. “The only rule is to find whichever finger makes it easier

to whistle, and sometimes unfortunately nothing works at all,” said Francisco Correa, who is a fluent whistler. “There are even some older people who have understood Silbo perfectly since childhood, but never got any clear sound to come out of their mouth.”

- 6 As is the case in many languages, whether whistled or not, there is a generation gap on La Gomera. Ciro Mesa Niebla, a 46-year-old farmer, said he struggled to whistle with a younger generation trained at school because, he said, “I’m a mountain guy who learned at home to whistle the words our family used to farm, but I don’t have the vocabulary of these kids who learn salon whistling, which is a bit too fancy for me.”
- 7 The students don’t always have much opportunity to practice Silbo outside of school. In the class of 6-year-olds, only five of 17 raised their hands when asked if they had a chance to whistle at home. “My brother actually can whistle really loudly, but he won’t show me, because he is either on his PlayStation or out with friends,” complained one of the youngsters, Laura Mesa Mendoza. Still, there are teenagers who welcome the chance to chat without many of the adults around them understanding. Some had parents who went to school before acquiring Silbo became mandatory, or who settled on the island as adults.
- 8 However much she is attached to her cellphone, Erin Gerhards, 15, is another example of someone keen to improve her whistling and help safeguard the traditions of her island. “It is a way to honor the people that lived here in the past,” she said. “And to remember where everything came from, that we didn’t start with technology, but from simple beginnings.”

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