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Saving Endangered Languages

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Jessie Little Doe Baird (left) began the Wampanoag Language Reclamation Project to preserve the tongue of the Native Americans who took part in the first Thanksgiving meal.

By Juliette Blevins

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We are living in the middle of a global language crisis: Every two weeks, a language dies. Half of the world's 6,700 languages are in danger of disappearing within the next 100 years.* If not reversed, the loss will be tragic: A recent United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report

argues that languages embody the identity of individuals and groups and exemplify their intangible cultural heritage.

Thanks to a long history of human habitation and widespread immigration, the United States has one of the world's most linguistically diverse populations. Even so, many languages, particularly indigenous ones, are endangered. Over the past 500 years, more than 100 languages native to North America have died, and many are moribund with only a few elderly speakers. It thus is especially important that languages indigenous to the United States are being revitalized, preserved, documented, taught—in some cases, written—and most importantly, spoken by many individuals.

Some of the most noteworthy individual language reclamation efforts are made by Native Americans whose languages have been dormant for some time. Every United States schoolchild is taught the story of the first Thanksgiving, where pilgrims and Wampanoag (Wôpanâak) Indians feasted together in 1621, but few learn that Wampanoag and other Eastern Algonquian languages disappeared very shortly afterward. By the time of the American Revolution, all that was left of the language was a handful of elderly speakers, some wordlists and a translated Bible. Thanks to

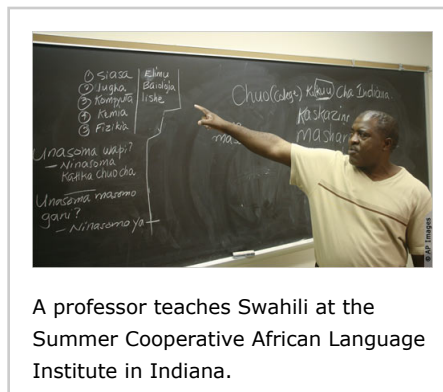
these materials, and what was known of other closely related languages, a near miracle occurred. In 1997, Jessie Little Doe Baird, a Wampanoag, and a graduate student in linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who dreamed of speaking her tribal language, began the Wampanoag Language Reclamation Project. Today, Wampanoag classes are offered and a dictionary of more than 9,000 words is being compiled.

Another extraordinary effort is the work of Daryl Baldwin, linguist, Miami Tribe member and current director of the Myaamia Project. Daryl began to teach himself Miami, an Algonquian language of the Midwest, as a young adult, though the language was no longer spoken when he was born. Due in large part to his efforts, the language is now used by a small but growing number of people, and is an integral part of Miami cultural revitalization, which includes a children's language curriculum, studies of ethnobotany, and publication of traditional Miami stories.

In addition to remarkable individual efforts of this kind, many tribes have begun their own revitalization, preservation and documentation projects. Though Navajo (or Diné Bizaad), with 170,000 speakers, is the most widely spoken indigenous language north of Mexico, the number of Navajo who do not speak the language is increasing faster than the number of speakers. Forty years ago, 90 percent of children entering school were Navajo-speaking; the rate is now less than 30 percent. To keep the language strong, Diné College, located in Tsaile, Arizona, now has a Navajo Language Program to prepare students to become Navajo language teachers, interpreters and translators. While many Americans are familiar with Navajo from its role as the language of U.S. Army "code talkers" during World War II, few are aware of its structural richness or cultural power. Navajo, like other Athabaskan languages, has one of the most complex word-structures of any language, with a string of up to 11 prefixes preceding the verb stem.

One of the most successful efforts to revitalize a language indigenous to the United States has given new breath to the Polynesian language, Hawaiian. In the 19th century, there were 37,000 native speakers. Through the Hawaiian language, they passed along traditional stories, songs and religion. But by the 20th century, fewer than 10,000 remained, very few of them young.

In 1983, language nests, preschool language programs ('Aha Pūnana Leo), were started in Hawaii, the only state with a designated native language. Language nests offer a total language immersion environment for infants and preschool children, and are one of the most natural methods to ensure language transmission from one generation to the next. The nests were very successful and soon more Hawaiian schooling was needed. After the Hawaii State Constitution mandate to promote the study of Hawaiian culture, language and history in 1987, the state Department of Education opened Kula Kaiapuni, Hawaiian



A professor teaches Swahili at the Summer Cooperative African Language Institute in Indiana.

immersion primary and secondary schools. Currently there are more than 1,500 students (kindergarten through high school) in the Kula Kaiapuni program. The number of Hawaiian speakers has grown to 8,000 and dozens of new publications are now available in Hawaiian.

Linguistic diversity in the United States is further enhanced by the vast number of languages brought to the country by immigrants. An estimated 800 languages are spoken in New York City's 305 square miles, making it one of the most linguistically dense and varied places in the world. While many of these languages are in good health, at least half are either endangered or seriously threatened.

Within the past few years, linguists, language activists and community leaders have united in New York and other major U.S. cities to identify, document, preserve and teach threatened minority languages. The Endangered Language Alliance in New York City, for example, is a not-for-profit organization that works to identify, record and preserve languages at risk of becoming extinct. These include Maasalit and Zaghawa, spoken by Darfurian refugees; Xochistlahuaca Amuzgo, Ayautla Mazatec and dozens of other indigenous languages of Mexico and Central America; endangered languages of the Caucasus region, including Svan and Mingrelian; and a wealth of threatened languages from West Africa. Strong grassroots support for this young organization, which is staffed by dozens of hard-working volunteers, is just one demonstration of the great value Americans place on linguistic and cultural diversity.

Far from major U.S. cities, new "language centers" are being launched. Organized to serve the local needs of language communities, centers can serve many functions, from training community members in language documentation and description, to offering language classes, creating dictionaries, or producing maps with local indigenous place names. One of the oldest is the Alaska Native Language Center, established in 1972 by state legislation to document and cultivate the state's 20 native languages. Other centers include Sealaska Heritage Institute in Alaska, Three Rivers Language Center in Indiana and the Navaho Language Academy in Window Rock, Arizona. In contrast, urban centers tend to house language centers maintaining heritage languages spoken by large immigrant groups. New York, for example, is the home of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, which is one of the world's major resources for Yiddish language studies.

Across the United States, tribes, community groups, government agencies, charitable organizations, universities, professional organizations and individuals continue to revitalize languages and to preserve U.S. linguistic diversity.

* While there is a lengthy discussion of when a language is considered endangered, two primary factors are taken into account. The first is the number of remaining speakers. The second and more significant factor is the age demographics of the speech community. A language can have hundreds of thousands of speakers, but if they are mostly over the age of 40, then this is an indication that the language is no longer being passed along to children, and that within a generation or two it could

disappear.

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