

## **Preface**

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Our Native American languages have been oral since time immemorial. Some of them have been written only in the last three centuries. We must remember this oral tradition when we teach our languages.

We sometimes negate this oral tradition by blindly following the only model for language teaching we know: the way we were taught the English language with its heavy emphasis on grammar. Teaching our languages as if they had no oral tradition is one factor which contributes to the failures of our Native American language teaching programs so that we now have what amounts to a tradition of failure.

Probably because of this tradition of failure, we latch onto anything that looks as though it will preserve our languages. As a result, we now have a litany of what we have viewed as **the** one item that will save our languages. This one item is usually quickly replaced by another.

For instance, some of us said, "Let's get our languages into written form" and we did and still our Native American languages kept on dying.

Then we said, "Let's make dictionaries for our languages" and we did and still the languages kept on dying.

Then we said, "Let's get linguists trained in our own languages" and we did, and still the languages kept on dying.

Then we said, "Let's train our own people who speak our languages to become linguists" and we did and still our languages kept on dying.

Then we said, "Let's apply for a federal bilingual education grant" and we did and got a grant and still our languages kept on dying.

Then we said, "Let's let the schools teach the languages" and we did, and still the languages kept on dying.

Then we said, "Let's develop culturally-relevant materials" and we did and still our languages kept on dying.

Then we said, "Let's use language masters to teach our languages" and we did, and still our languages kept on dying.

Then we said, "Let's tape-record the elders speaking our languages" and we did and still our languages kept on dying.

Then we said, "Let's video-tape our elders speaking and doing cultural activities" and we did and still our languages kept on dying.

Then we said, "Let's put our native language speakers on CD-ROM" and we did and still the languages kept on dying.

Finally, someone will say, "Let's flash-freeze the remaining speakers of our languages so when technology catches up these speakers can be thawed-out and

revived and we will have ready-made Native American languages speakers” and we will do that and these thawed-out speakers will awake to a world in the distant future where they are the only speakers of their languages because all of the other speakers of their languages will be gone and no one will understand them. In this litany, we have viewed each item as the one that will save our languages — and they haven’t.

Of course, resorting to cryogenics and flash-freezing are desperate measures. The point is that despite the advances in teaching methods and technology and our increasing dependency on them, our languages are still dying. Also part of their dying is caused by the steady attrition of Native speakers. Our languages have few means, like birth, for replenishing Native speakers, and even birth is failing because we are not teaching our newborn how to speak their native languages.

Other American languages are perpetuated by the periodic influx of immigrants into the United States. Our languages do not have the luxury of this influx because nowhere else in this world, for instance, is Athabascan Gwich’in spoken. This lack of an influx puts our languages in a unique but highly vulnerable position. They are unique because they represent a microcosm complete with its own linguistics, world-view, spirituality, ethos, and community of speakers. They are vulnerable because they exist in the macrocosm of the English language and its awesome ability to displace and eliminate other languages.

To reverse this influence of English, families must retrieve their rightful position as the first teachers of our languages. They must talk our languages every day, everywhere, with everyone, anywhere. But if they are going to relinquish this teaching responsibility to the schools then they must be supportive. They must make sure the schools use teaching methods which are oral-based. We must use all of the items (except flash-freezing) in the litany to preserve our languages instead of pinning all of our hopes on just one.

That means that we must know where each item is appropriate. Knowing the appropriate place is often dependent on knowing the amount of language loss that has occurred in the group which speaks that language. For instance, a language spoken only by people ages 60 years or older may no longer be viable as a language immersion program. The reason is that the stamina required to teach the language may be too much for this age group.

This foregoing example shows why we must keep discussing the issues surrounding Alaska Native/Native American language preservation efforts. The issues are ever-changing and we must keep abreast of them in order to maintain a high level of effort at language preservation.

We must get beyond the self-victimization stage and quit pointing fingers at the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the mission schools, the media, and the public schools as the causes of the loss of our languages. Even though we are right when we blame the loss of our languages on these organizations, the stark fact remains that they are not going to help us restore, revive, or preserve our languages. They have no stake in these language preservation efforts. In fact, they nearly succeeded in accomplishing where they had a stake: killing our languages.

## *Stabilizing Indigenous Languages*

So the responsibility for saving our languages is ours and ours alone; we are the pivotal generation because we are probably the last generation of speakers who can joke, converse about highly technical topics, articulate deep, psychic pain, and also discuss appropriate healing strategies without once resorting to the English language.

### **Conclusion**

Our Native American languages are in the penultimate moment of their existence in this world. It is the last and only time that we will have the opportunity to save them. We must continue to promote the successful programs throughout Alaska and Indian Country.

We must quit endlessly lamenting and continuously cataloguing the causes of language death; instead, we must now deal with these issues by learning from successful language preservation efforts.

So if we do nothing, then we can expect our languages to be dead by the end of the next century. Even that time-line might be an optimistic, if we do nothing to preserve our languages.

A great void will be left in the universe that will never be filled when all of our languages die.

*One horrible day 1,600 years ago, the wisdom of many centuries went up in flames. The great library in Alexandria burned down, a catastrophe at the time and a symbol for all ages of the vulnerability of human knowledge. . . .*

*Today, with little notice, vast archives of knowledge and expertise are spilling into oblivion, leaving humanity in danger of losing its past and perhaps jeopardizing its future as well. . . .*

*[When] a language disappears, traditional knowledge tends to vanish with it. . . .*

— E. Linden, *Lost Tribes, Lost Knowledge*.  
*Time*, September 23, 1991