

Language Planning

Giving The Language Status:

Tribal leaders and organizations must regularly emphasize their commitment to language preservation and revitalization. There should be a long range plan that will encourage language programs in the schools and some degree of language use in tribal government offices and programs.

Changes, Additions, and New Directions

Sometimes Tribes must plan for changes in the language itself. There may not be ancient vocabulary for the activities, events and words of the present. In addition, most Tribes never had alphabets or writing systems. These must be devised simply but thoroughly to provide a base on which to build text based systems to accompany audio/visual teaching media and keep a record of conversational classroom progress. Alphabets and phonetic spelling are also necessary to create text for dictionaries, and to examine the language for grammatical structure. This becomes more important if the Tribe has only a few fluent speakers and the future of the language is in jeopardy. In these circumstances, the programs are often in a race against time to preserve enough language to be able to secure the intimate details necessary to insure its survival.

Keeping the enthusiasm and commitment of a Tribe's fluent speaker(s) and a Tribe's fluent "understanders" is often difficult. They may remember when the language was vital and alive. For those Tribes at the brink of language extinction, these Elders may be easily discouraged or depressed about a program's progress. Remind them of the important reasons why some language, even if it is only a shadow of what they remember, is important to the Tribe. Point out how future generations may have more interest than present ones, and that the value of their knowledge will only increase over time. The measurement of true language survival is when enough language can be taught and accepted that that language resumes its place as the first language of the Tribe. This may seem a monumental and unattainable goal—yet it has been accomplished where

success is measured in a multi-generational plan. The Mohawk people of Kahnawake in Quebec, the Maori people of New Zealand, and the Hebrew language in Israel have all resurrected their languages. For every ten that try, one may succeed. Be that one!

There are a number of necessary steps to preserving and revitalizing a language.

1. Speak it. Speak it. Speak it. Speak it.!
2. Record as much on audio and video tape as you can. Every word, every phrase, every conversation and every story is important.
3. Develop an alphabet and phonetic spelling as soon as possible. Stick to it. Only make changes for simplicity or corrections.
4. Someone must study the language for grammar, sentence structure and analyze how it is constructed. The fluent speaker(s) must be encouraged to help in this study as much time will need to be taken to seriously determine the components of the language.
5. Speak it. Speak it. Speak it. Speak it.!
6. Once the program curriculum has been determined, audio visual aids prepared, text materials organized and handouts ready—then community classes may proceed.
7. Once enough basic speakers are capable, no-english immersion classes should be offered to the children of the Tribe.
8. Incentives for mothers and fathers with young children to study the language should be offered by the Tribe. Language in the home is essential to its survival.
9. And finally—speak it.