The meaning of language revitalization in a digital age: A Tunica Case Study

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From extinct to reawakening: working with online gatekeepers of language status

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Background

- Tunica language
  - *A language of the Tunica-Biloxi Tribe*
  - *Linguistic isolate*
- Documentation
  - *Three linguists (Gatschet [1886], Swanton [1900s], Haas [1930s]) worked with Tunica speakers (William Ely Johnson, Volsin Chiki, Sesostrie Youchigant, and others)*
- Last known native speaker, Sesostrie Youchigant, died in 1948
- Kuhpani Yoyani Luhchi Yoroni (Tunica Language Working Group)
  - *Collaboration between the Tunica-Biloxi Tribe and Tulane University*
  - *Language is reawakening*

Gatekeepers of Language Status

- Who decides whether a language is alive?
    - *Community?*
    - *Gatekeepers?*

- Gatekeepers (Ethnologue, UNESCO, ELCat)
    - *First point of reference for the public (and large swaths of academia)*
    - *Their databases can determine accepted wisdom*
    - *Can bolster or inhibit expansion of the language into certain online domains.*

Goal:

Work with gatekeepers to accurately reflect Tunica's status online.

Benefits

- Improve accuracy

- Affect language attitudes both inside and outside the tribal community

- Increase chances of partnerships with institutions wary of working with "dead languages"

Examples

Results

- ELCat
  - *Straightforward and fast*

- Ethnologue
  - *Slow, got there eventually*

- UNESCO
  - *No change to status. Added my name as a contributor*

- Wikipedia
  - *Long, multi-tiered process*
  - *Multiple organizations involved.*