

When the Internet says  
you're dead:  
Language revitalization  
and the digital  
resurrection of Tunica

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# Outline

- Description of Tunica
- Revitalization efforts
- Why is language revitalization important?
- Language status & its importance
- Gatekeepers of language status
- Benefits of accurate language status
- Efforts at getting Tunica's status changed
- Results
- Lessons learned

# Description of the Tunica Language

- Linguistic isolate
- Living near the Mississippi in 1500s, gradually move southward
- Tribal lands now in Marksville, Louisiana (since late 1700s)
- A heritage language of the Tunica-Biloxi Tribe
- Documentation
  - *William Ely Johnson, Volsin Chiki, Sesostrie Youchigant, and others worked with three linguists (Gatschet [1886], Swanton [1900s], Haas [1930s])*
- Last known native speaker died in 1948

# TUNICA TRAIL

From the Central Mississippi Valley to Marksville, La

Calpista  
Tanico  
Palisema  
Casqui  
Pacaha  
Quipana  
Anoxi  
Tutillcoya  
Aqui jo  
Quizquiz  
Utiangue  
Quigate  
Taguanate  
Aminoya  
Tutillpinco  
Anilco

1541  
de Soto encounter

Yazoo  
1682-1706

Angola  
1706-1751

Trudeau  
1751-1764

Marksville  
1790-present

Gulf of Mexico



# Revitalization efforts

- Tribal efforts
  - *Working with Haas's published materials*
  - *Language and culture summer camps (1990s)*
  - *Newsletter (1990s)*
  - *Most of these efforts spearheaded by one family*
- Kuhpani Yoyani Luhchi Yoroni (Tunica Language Working Group)
  - *Collaboration between the Tunica-Biloxi Tribe and Tulane University (2010-present)*
- Tunica-Biloxi Language and Culture Revitalization Program (2014-present)

# Revitalization efforts

- Online dictionary
- Forthcoming textbook
- Children's books
- Weekly children's language classes
- Week-long language and culture summer camp
- Full-time staff linguist
- Three-year mentor-apprentice program

# Why is language revitalization important?

- Hill (2002) – Discourses of universal ownership, hyperbolic valorization, and enumeration, as well as human rights.
- Mufwene (2017) – Language endangerment and loss (LEL) as a rational cost-benefit analysis
- Fitzgerald (2017) – LEL as deleterious to the well-being of the society that speaks/spoke it; language revitalization as a protective factor.
- For the purposes of this paper, community desire for language retention or revitalization is what makes it important.

# Language status & its importance

- Categorization of a language on a vitality scale based on a rubric
  - e.g.: *Fishman's EGIDS (Ethnologue), UNESCO, etc.*
- Commodifies language (Dobrin et al 2009)
  - *“More subtle and pervasive kinds of commoditisation – that is, reduction of languages to common exchange values – abound, particularly in competitive and programmatic contexts such as grant-seeking and standard-setting where languages are necessarily compared and ranked.”*



Language Vitality / Endangerment Schemas				
Krauss (1997, 1998)	Grenoble & Whaley (2006)	UNESCO Expert Group (2003)	Bauman (1980)	Fishman (1991)
Class A	Safe	Safe	Flourishing	↑
•	•	•	•	•
•	•	•	•	Stages 6-1
Class A-	At Risk	Unsafe	Enduring	•
•	•	•	•	•
•	•	•	•	•
Class B	Disappearing	Definitely Endangered	Declining	•
•	•	•	•	•
•	•	•	•	•
Class B-	•	•	•	•
•	•	•	•	•
•	•	•	•	•
Class C	Moribund	Severely Endangered	Endangered	Stage 7
•	•	•	•	•
•	•	•	•	•
Class C-	•	•	•	•
•	•	•	•	•
•	•	•	•	•
Class -D	•	•	•	•
•	•	•	•	•
•	•	•	•	•
Class D	•	•	•	•
•	•	•	•	•
•	•	•	•	•
Class D-	Nearly Extinct	Critically Endangered	Critical	Stage 8
•	•	•	•	•
•	•	•	•	•
Class E	Extinct	Extinct	Sleeping/Extinct	•

From McCarty (2013)

# Gatekeepers of Language Status

- Who decides language vitality?
  - *Community?*
  - *Gatekeepers?*
- Gatekeepers (Ethnologue, UNESCO, ELCat, Wikipedia)
  - *First points of reference for the public*
  - *Their information 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”
  
- Expand domains
  - *Kornai (2013) – Online vitality scale*
    - Community size, prestige, identity function, functional domains [software support], Wikipedia

# Examples

- ELCat (University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa)
- Ethnologue (SIL)
- ISO 639-3 (SIL)
- Atlas of the World’s Languages in danger (UNESCO)
- Wikipedia
  - *English language Wikipedia*
  - *Creation of Tunica language Wikipedia*
  - *TranslateWiki*

# Results

- ELCat
  - *Straightforward and fast*
- Ethnologue
  - *Slow, got there eventually*
- ISO 639-3
  - *Even slower, but got there*
- UNESCO
  - *No change to status. Added my name as a contributor*
- Wikipedia
  - *Strong adherence to the status quo*
  - *Tunica language Wikipedia*
    - Long, multi-tiered process
    - Multiple organizations involved.

# Lessons learned

- Personal connections help (ELCat)
- Patience required (Ethnologue, ISO 639-3)
- Get used to disappointment (UNESCO)
- Resistance to change (Wikipedia, TranslateWiki)
- Knowledge of policies and procedures is important (Wikipedia)
- Digitally-accessible evidence of revitalization is crucial
- Importance of SIL as a primary gatekeeper
  - *ISO 639-3 relies on Ethnologue*
  - *Wikipedia relies on ISO 639-3 and Ethnologue*
  - *TranslateWiki relies on ISO 639-3*

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