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Language Sustainability Toolkit

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Introduction

This Language Sustainability Toolkit was created as a collaborative project between Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages and Wikitongues. Living Tongues Institute is one of the world’s leading research organizations focused on documenting endangered languages. The Institute conducts linguistic fieldwork, releases scientific papers, runs digital training workshops to empower language activists, and collaborates with speakers to create online language learning and preservation tools such as Talking Dictionaries.

Wikitongues is a global volunteer movement that expands access to language revitalization. The organization helps speakers document and promote their languages online, safeguarding them for the next generation. Contributors to Wikitongues record and caption oral histories in video, raise awareness about language sustainability in their communities, and help support special projects.

Both organizations share the goal of sustaining and revitalizing languages for future generations of speakers. With those common aspirations in mind, both organizations pooled their human resources together to create this toolkit for language sustainability. It is a roadmap that helps identify where languages are on the endangerment continuum and what strategies and approaches are available to help revitalize their languages. It also provides examples of success stories that may inspire endangered language activists around the world.

What is Language Sustainability?

In a general sense, language sustainability means that a language lives on for generations to come, through community transmission and regular use by speakers in physical spaces, and possibly in virtual spaces as well. Sustainability implies that there are long-term pathways for accessing the language and using it with other speakers. That may require the creation of tools, learning resources and media content to help preserve and elevate the language in the private and public spheres.

1 Throughout this toolkit we use the colloquial term ‘speakers’ to refer to users of all languages, including users of both visual-manual modalities and auditory-oral modalities.
Sustainability may also mean taking steps towards making sure the language enjoys respect on a fundamental level, and fostering a feeling of pride and well-being associated with speaking it. Depending on its historical context and current circumstances, each language has its own challenges and hurdles in this regard. In many circumstances, it may be a case of encouraging content creators and cultural stakeholders to take a leap away from dominant languages and create books, films, music, and other works in the language itself. In some cases it may require getting official recognition from those in power to help the language become accepted and respected.

While language sustainability may look and feel different for each community of speakers, it usually means that there is a general goal of ensuring that children, adolescents, adults, and elders are able to speak the language with some degree of fluency, and have the ability to use it on a regular basis. Having young children embracing and learning the language helps ensure the continuity of the language for years to come.

Creating access to immersive environments where people can use the language is essential for speakers of all ages to have a connection to their language and experience the cultural heritage that is interwoven with it. For example, Mrs. Dora Manchado, the last fluent speaker of Tehuelche (aonekko a’ien), worked with linguistic anthropologist Javier Domingo (University of Montreal) in the final years of her life to record her knowledge of her language and culture. Upon her passing, Domingo wrote, “Dora knew perfectly well that language not only means interaction, but also trust, complicity... intimacy. She proved to me that language means sharing, and company. Thanks to the recordings she made, the rest of the community members now have, if they want, the possibility of affirming their past and reconstructing their identity.”

Step 1. Find Your Team: Identify Their Skills and Interest Level

The language revitalization steps in this toolkit can be done by individuals; however, we have found that language sustainability movements gain more momentum when a core team is in place. Working in teams increases longevity and allows for brainstorming, the creation of more ideas and increased productivity in the long run. Building a team also helps with maintaining energy and reaching a larger audience by connecting with various networks.
To build your team, you first need to locate other like-minded people who can join your language revitalization plan. Ideally, you form a core group of two to four other people to begin with, each from different age ranges and occupations. Fluency in the language is not necessarily important at the start; you are looking for people who are excited about the language in question and want to be a part of the project. It would be good, however, to have a plan to eventually connect with at least one person (if such a person exists) with an advanced level of fluency so that language learning goals can be attained in the long run. The advice that this Toolkit offers is applicable to language activists who live in close proximity to others, and also to those who live far apart but aim to connect with other like-minded people online.

How can you find potential collaborators? You can start by:

- Searching for other speakers on Facebook, WhatsApp, and WeChat groups.
- Search via hashtags on Twitter and Instagram.
- Reach out to teachers at local schools involved in the teaching of your language.
- Find related cultural organizations.
- Contact local universities for students to collaborate. Having a varied age range within your core team is also helpful for ensuring longevity in the project by training a younger steward. Keep in mind in some locations, there might be a disconnect between local university researchers and community activism.
- Contact Living Tongues and Wikitongues to see if they have any contacts for language activists who are working on revitalizing your language.

When you have created your initial team, you should then:

- Determine amongst the team the best way for communication; can you all easily access Facebook, do you prefer Slack, would WhatsApp be the most accessible?
- Plan regular weekly or monthly meetings to share ideas and keep each other updated on progress. Having meetings on your calendar keeps momentum flowing.
- Delegate organizational tasks to team members (see step 2 for inspiration).
- Establish what resource materials exist in your language (see step 3).
- Decide what goals you want to tackle in the short-term and long-term (see step 4).

Step 2. Language Health: What Roadblocks Are You Facing?

Every language has profound cultural value to its community of speakers. It is an emblem of ethnic identity and a storehouse of community history. Every language represents a unique
way of interpreting and conveying the human experience in its own specific cultural and environmental context. Your language is important and worthy of passing down to future generations.

Language endangerment is related to the loss of ancestral identity, resulting from the long-term impacts of colonization, systematic oppression, and cultural assimilation by dominant groups. A language becomes endangered when speakers stop speaking it, and “shift” toward using other dominant languages (such as English, Spanish, Russian, Mandarin, Arabic, and many others) in their everyday life. Language shift is a complex process that plays out differently depending on history, geography, and socioeconomics, so each community will face different challenges when it comes to the revitalization of a language.

Some of the common roadblocks that you might be facing are listed here with potential solution options (there might be other roadblocks and solutions that impact you also):

- **Speaker demographics**: there are very few fluent speakers of your language left, and many of them may be elderly and need assistance to record and transmit the language. **Potential solution**: you can interview and record elders and other fluent speakers and then post the content online and share it with your network. That act alone may inspire others to join you, as well as provide content for future generations of speakers to keep revitalizing the language. You can start your own video channel on the platform that works best for your community. **Example**: Wikitongues’ Youtube channel is an excellent source of inspiration.

- **Internalized shame**: people resist or refuse to speak your language because they feel embarrassed about it. They may feel discriminated against because of the history of oppression and government policies aiming to erase the language. **Potential solution**: Have private conversations with like-minded individuals to determine safe spaces where the language might be used, where speakers can restore a sense of pride in using it. **Example**: West Frisian activists in Leeuwarden, Netherlands led community language flash mobs, social media campaigns with local celebrities, and encouraged stores to give discounts for people who came in speaking West Frisian to build community pride in using the language.

- **Distance**: you are not in close proximity to any other fluent (or semi-fluent) speakers. **Potential solution**: As suggested earlier in step 1, use the power of the Internet to connect with other learners like yourself and find out what revitalization initiatives
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might exist that you can contribute to. Example: users of Black American Sign Language (BASL), geographically located far from each other, use a private Facebook group for discussing their language, speaking with each other, and creating new signs.

- **Funding:** there is very little public support for your language, and you have trouble finding other funding sources that might help sustain documentation, archiving, and language programming. You may not yet know what grants are available in your region for your particular language. **Potential solution:** See the last step in this document for a list of funding agencies and foundations that may be able to assist you financially. Note: You may (or may not) need to team up with a scholar, a non-profit organization, a federally recognized tribe or another entity to be eligible for certain grant applications. We recommend looking closely at many different grant guidelines and seeing what is the right fit for you.

- **Orthography:** for some languages, there might not be a standard writing system yet. There might also be technical issues involving certain special characters that aren’t easy to use on computers or mobile devices yet (see step 4’s “Digital Technology” section for a longer discussion on that topic). For some languages, there may even be multiple competing orthographies. Example: In the Sora language (India), there are five competing writing systems. They may be associated with different religious or political factions. Resolving the issue of standardizing the orthography should come from within the community and may take patience and negotiation. It may be the case that various orthographies co-exist and are used in all the language resources to be fair to people’s preferences.

- **Dialectical variation:** some languages have many dialects. Example: Catalan has two standard variants (Catalan and Valencian), each with its own vocabulary and grammatical nuance. The best course of action is to examine dialects from an early stage in your revitalization project. Which dialect do you want to focus on? It might be the case that two or more dialects can all be subsumed under one project, or it might be the case that each dialect requires the development of its own resources. Examples: The Yanesha’ language (spoken in the Peruvian Amazon) has two dialects, upriver and downriver. Yanesha’ speakers have decided that the two dialects are similar enough that they can all share the same educational resources such as dictionaries. Dialectical differences are identified in the materials. Alternatively, the ɨshir language (spoken in Paraguay) has two dialects: awoso and ebitoso. They are different enough that the community decided to keep documentation resources
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Separate for each dialect.

- **Bilingual education**: it is difficult to find any educational resources in your language such as curricula, ABC readers, storybooks, dictionaries, grammars and other important materials. **Potential solution**: Work with local artists and educators to create building blocks for learning materials. Organizations like Nabu help boost children's literacy by creating books in many mother tongues from around the world. Example: in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kihunde language activist Hangi Bulebe rallied his community to introduce Kihunde in primary schools despite the absence of government recognition for the language (in the D.R.C., the official languages are French, Lingala, Kikongo, Swahili and Tshiluba).

- **Recognition**: it may be the case that there is little to no official recognition of your language by local or state authorities. **Potential solution**: this is a really tough one since solving it might entail extensive legal and logistical work, which is of course very expensive and time-consuming. Contact a local law professional who might be able to give you an outline of the petitions you need to apply for to get your language recognized. Some of this legal work may be available *pro bono* too. It does not hurt to ask.

Depending on your specific context, some or all of these factors listed above may be contributing to why the language is fading away. It would be difficult for a single individual to be able to resolve many of these longstanding issues in one lifetime. That’s where your team comes in. By working together, you can identify where your strengths are, and what angle each person might be able to focus on. That is how you develop the resilience and strength that can fuel a long-term community effort. Language survival therefore means facing and deconstructing some of the difficult issues that caused the language to be abandoned in the first place. It is necessary to confront these challenges in a meaningful way in order to restore the use and transmission of the language.

Talking about these issues with your core group or community might be the first way to find a breakthrough and make a small difference. Can your language be seen or heard in the streets, or in online spaces? Remember that you might be the first ones to bring the language back into the public eye, and future generations of speakers will be grateful for the difficult groundwork that you and your team might accomplish in this realm.
Language Health: A Brief Assessment

If you are spearheading a language revitalization program for your community, it is worth it to reflect on the topic of language health at an early stage in your strategizing. For languages where there are very few speakers left, and very little documentation, remember that it is important to prioritize the creation and preservation of audio and video recordings so that future speakers may use those materials to reawaken the language at a later time. In cases such as Tutelo-Saponi, Cornish, Tunica-Biloxi, and Wendat, speakers have relied on legacy recordings to revive their languages from (near) dormancy.

The general degrees of language health / endangerment are:

- Healthy
- Threatened
- Endangered
- Highly Endangered
- Moribund
- Dormant
- Extinct

In the table below, various states of language health and endangerment are briefly explained. Remember that these categories are merely constructs that help us understand what is happening over time to the language on the ground. Languages can easily shift from one category to another in the space of one generation. We believe there is potential to reverse the tide of endangerment with the right groundwork and community support in place. We stand committed to helping communities access the funding and resources they need to reverse the tide.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Status</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Healthy / Thriving</strong></td>
<td>There is a stable or growing community with speakers of all generations. This means the language is being used by the youngest members of a community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Threatened</strong></td>
<td>There is a small but semi-stable community of speakers. This category is also known as “demographically threatened” since the population is small. There are still younger people learning the language. Note also that a language can be socio-politically threatened even if it has a large speaker community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Endangered</strong></td>
<td>No children speak the language at all. That means that they are learning a different language when they begin to speak.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Highly Endangered</strong></td>
<td>The youngest speakers are over the age of 40.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moribund</th>
<th>The youngest speakers are over the age of 60.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dormant / Awakening</td>
<td>There are no more fluent living speakers left, but some social uses of the language still remain, or there is a heritage identity associated with the use of the language. Some communities prefer the term “awakening” when there are efforts in place to bring back the language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extinct</td>
<td>There are no more fluent living speakers left, no remnants of the language are being used at all, and there remains no sense of heritage identity associated with the language. For example: Sumerian is an extinct language.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The next step is to find out what materials already exist in your language. Then you can download them, bookmark them all in one folder, or make a folder in cloud storage (for example on Dropbox or Google Drive) so that everyone on your team can access them. Through this process, you will see what has been done, and what remains to be done. If you need assistance with this “gathering materials” step, one way you can seek help is to ask educators in your region to see if there is anyone who can collaborate with you in this process.

Here is a short list of free websites that you can use to get started on your journey to downloading free language resources:
- [ELCat](https://www.elcat.org) (Endangered Languages Catalog)
- [Glottolog](https://www.glottolog.org)
- [OLAC](https://www.olac.info)
- [Wikitongues](https://www.wikitongues.org)
- [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com)
- [PARADISEC](https://www.paradisec.org)
- [ELAR](https://www.elar.org)
- [DoBeS](https://www.dobes.org)
- [First Languages Australia](https://www.firstlanguagesaustralia.org)
- [AILLA](https://www.ailla.org)
- [Living Tongues Educational Resource Page](https://www.livingtongues.org)
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Language Materials: What’s out there?
It is important to determine what is already available in your language, so that you can continue sharing and building upon existing material. Looking for resources also creates an opportunity for potential collaboration with other speakers and activists, and is a source of inspiration for new materials you might want to create in the future. Here is a short list of materials and tools that can help you sustain your language. When researching what is available, work through this list, noting where resources are lacking.

✔️ Language Materials Checklist ✔️

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Print dictionary</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Online Talking Dictionary</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Educational grammar used to make curriculums</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Audio recordings of words, phrases, natural conversation, and interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Video recordings of oral histories, daily activities, interviews with fluent speakers</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Musical recordings with lyrics</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Educational materials for K-12</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stories (recorded and written in text, when available)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>An ISO code (for digitization and browser recognition)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Glottocode (for academic/archival recognition)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>UNICODE recognition (for digitization)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fonts for your language's script, if your language uses a script</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Access to a keyboard in your language</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Advanced Digital Tools such as spellchecker and predictive text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comprehensive grammar (optional)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Step 4. Determine Your Language-Related Goals

Community Goals
Take a moment to answer the following questions regarding your language revitalization project. This can be done individually or with your core team:

- What kind of events could be good settings for the language to be used?
- Does your community want to produce new speakers? How many?
- Can you use the Internet to locate other speakers of your language? Would using a radio station to make a call-out be a better option, depending on your location?
- Can you and your team find ways to organize immersion events in person or using social media? Example: Cornish activists used Facebook groups to organize in-person events at local pubs and restaurants.

Cultural and Linguistic Media
Media are a great tool for promoting your language, teaching your language and sharing your language. If your language lacks media, take a moment to consider which channels and platforms are most relevant to your community. What do people like, and what do they have easy access to?

Examples of media include:

- **Recorded music.** The Peruvian rapper Liberato Kani produces music in his ancestral language, Quechua, rather than Spanish.


- **Television, animation and movies.** Members of the Haida language movement produced a feature film entirely in their language: SGaawaay K'una, or “Edge of the Knife”. Also, check out the Amazonimations series: a collaborative research project that brings together anthropologists, animators, artists and indigenous people who speak
various languages.

- **Online videos.** In addition to editing Wikipedia in Basque, Aiora Probaxtoa manages a [Basque-language YouTube channel](https://www.youtube.com/) to engage younger speakers of their language.

- **Only text feeds.** Telegram and Twitter feeds are easy ways to publish in your language on a daily basis. For example, [L'Office du Jèrriais](https://twitter.com/) uses Twitter to promote the Jèrriais language online by posting memes, language facts and other engaging content. With about 1500 followers, almost a third of the entire Jerriàis speaking world is online.

- **Wikipedia.** In 2001, Catalan activists became the first to publish on Wikipedia into a language other than English. In 2020, the Nyoongar language activist Ingrid Cumming is translating Wikipedia so that young people in the community can learn in their own language, rather than English.

- **Interactive websites.** [This website teaches vocabulary](https://example.com) in the Marra language.

- **Video games.** [Mushroom 11](https://www.mushroom11.com) allows people to play in Algonquin, Inuktitut, and Anishinaabemowin. Singuistics is a singing game that [released a Gwich'in edition](https://www.singuistics.com).

- **Books and poetry.** [WriteOurWorld](https://www.writeourworld.com) encourages kids to publish e-books in their language.

- **Comic books and graphic novels.** Far Lombard are translating and publishing graphic novels in their language rather than Italian. [Kiyindou Yamakasi](https://www.kiyindou.com) created a comic book in Nigerian Pidgin, exploring Yoruba mythology.

- **Performance art and dance.** The Xakas language theater performances in Khakassia (Russia) were some of the only sanctioned ways that local people could engage with their native language. Another great example is the popularity of the [Haka dance](https): it is a type of ancient Māori war dance traditionally used to showcase pride, strength and unity.

- **Traditional Sports:** Many indigenous sports are making a resurgence in the public eye. Learning terminology related to the sport, or traditional game, may be a great way to access the languages. Example: [World Indigenous Games](https://www.worldindigenousgames.com).
Digital Technology

Note: This section is about the necessary first steps for expanding digital technology to support your language. If you're interested in creating media for popular use, see the cultural and linguistic media section above.

Are you able to easily use your language online or on your devices? Here is a preliminary set of questions to help you identify steps to advance your language's digital self-determination.

1. Does your language have an ISO 639-3 code? The UN-affiliated International Standards Organization maintains three-letter codes for over seven-thousand languages. Web and software developers use these codes to teach computers and other devices to recognize different languages. Search the ISO 639-3 code set for your language. If your language doesn't have an ISO 639-3 code, apply for recognition here.

   Why does this matter? If your community is digitally active, it is important to have the ability to use your language on your devices. Without an ISO code, it is impossible to translate operating systems and software interfaces, or even get support for tools like Google Translate. An ISO code creates the opportunities to achieve this support.

2. Is it easy to type your language? Even if your computer doesn't have your language's writing system pre-installed, it is possible that there are fonts for your language. Start by searching for your language on Google Noto, a multilingual font supporting more than 500 writing systems. If your language does not have a standardized font, consider contacting Debbie Anderson at the Script Encoding Initiative for help getting started.

   Why does this matter? When people are unable to type in their language, it is common for them to slowly shift to another language. For example, in Ethiopia, most devices don't come with the Ge'ez script pre-installed. As a result, there has been a slow shift toward using the Roman alphabet online, which, among young people, has

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2 Script choices are always a political act, and this is very much true among minority languages in Ethiopia. The issue is more complicated than just availability of keyboard ease of use. The rejection of the Ge'ez script in favor of the Roman alphabet is in part motivated by rejection of Amhara/Amharic ethnolinguistic hegemony by State actors over the minority groups, and in part fostered by evangelical missionaries who favor the Roman script. These facts do not detract from the truth that ease of access to a script online does also play a significant role in such decisions.
caused a language shift toward English. The ability to type and text in your language is central to keeping it alive in the digital age.

Further Reading: [https://openlt.org/](https://openlt.org/) is a manifesto for open language technology. If you want to get started advocating for your language's inclusion in digital technology, this is a great place to start.

Step 5. Immersion Techniques

Immersive environments are an excellent way for speakers of all levels to connect to each other and to the language. You don't need to be 100% fluent to start an immersion group; lack of fluency sometimes stops people from creating a small program that can help young learners learn basic vocabulary, but it doesn't need to! Here are some options for ways to immerse yourself and members of your community:

**Individual or Small Group Immersion**
- Listen to legacy audio and video recordings of speech
- Connect with another speaker in person or online
- Online teaching opportunities; sign up to teach/share your language (websites such as iTalki and Verbling support language tutors)
- Locate or create a master-apprentice program
- Increase your literacy skills in your language
- Send text messages and emails in your language; for example, you can use WhatsApp, Telegram, WeChat groups to share your language
- [Smileys India](https://smileysindia.com) sent a different sign in Indian Sign Language (IPSL) every day for a year over WhatsApp to grow awareness of IPSL

**Community Immersion**
- Language nests for toddlers: recruit someone with teaching skills to help facilitate
- Active immersion through weekly informal meet-ups
- Language programs for families
- Language, poetry, and music contests for people of all ages
- Watching films in the language - or creating one!
- Listening to albums in the language - or recording one!
- Culinary usage of language: discussing and making food in your language.
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Signage, Media and Promotion of the Language
- Radio shows can help disseminate content your language
- Podcasts can store and promote stories and discussions in your language
- Tools for mobile and social media
- Street signs can help reveal elements of the original linguistic landscape of a place
- Maps in local languages can reinforce their relationship with the homeland
- Fashion shows can showcase local talent
- Memes can promote humor and cultural-specific jokes
- YouTube channels can help elevate your language online
- Facebook groups can connect speakers in a private setting
- Is there a “Twitter community” for your language? If not, create a Twitter account, start tweeting in your language, and add a hashtag with the name of your language!
- Is there a Wikipedia in your language? Wikipedia advances learning in your language and sets the stage for its use in academic and non-fiction literature

Economic opportunities associated with language
- Tourism and cultural experiences
- Participating in digital development of the language (apps, games, websites, etc)
- Translation (in the health, legal and educational fields)
- Publishing books; ebook opportunities
- Releasing music, TV, film with transferable tech skills

Step 6: Funding Sources
Many endangered language communities need resources to get their programs off the ground and stay sustainable. We put together a handy list of organizations and foundations that offer grants for language documentation and revitalization: we will continually update this page.