

# MIT Indigenous Language Initiative

## Overview

The Department of Linguistics and Philosophy plans to create a Master's degree program in linguistics for speakers of endangered or indigenous languages. Graduates of the program will be able to use their linguistic knowledge to help their communities keep their languages alive.

## Why have this program?

### The world's languages are dying out

In the world, approximately 6,000 languages are spoken...

...of which only about 600 are confidently expected to survive this century.

In this country, 165 Native American languages are still spoken<sup>1</sup>.

- 74 almost extinct (handful of elderly speakers) (45%)
- 58 with fewer than 1,000 speakers (35%)
- 25 with 1,000-10,000 speakers (15%)
- 8 with 10,000+ speakers (5%)
  
- largest Native American language is:
  - Navajo 148,530 speakers
- (just for comparison:)
  - Danish 194,000 speakers in this country
  - Tagalog 377,000 speakers in this country
  - Hungarian 447,497 speakers in this country

### How this is different from language loss historically

Ken Hale (*Language* 1992):

“[T]he process of language loss throughout most of human history, i.e., the period prior to the development of large states and empires, has been attended by a period of grammatical merger in situations of multilingualism, in geographically confined areas, and among quite small communities [...]. By contrast, language loss in the modern period is of a different character, in its extent and implications. It is part of a much larger process of LOSS OF CULTURAL AND INTELLECTUAL DIVERSITY in which politically dominant languages and cultures simply overwhelm indigenous local languages and cultures, placing them in a condition which can only be described as embattled.”

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<sup>1</sup> All these data are from the Summer Institute of Linguistics' *Ethnologue* (<http://www.ethnologue.com/web.asp>).

## Language loss in specific communities

As awareness of language loss increases, there is a great need for trained tribal linguists in the indigenous communities of North America and elsewhere. At a recent advisory conference held at MIT and attended by tribal leaders and language workers from around the country, it was agreed that this Master's degree program would help to meet the growing need for trained tribal linguists and language teachers. (There is one other program of this type in the USA, at the University of Arizona. At the advisory conference, people agreed that our indigenous linguistics degree program would be especially beneficial to tribal people from the Eastern part of the continent.)

By training students in linguistics and awarding them the credential of a Master's degree from MIT, this program will:

- Give students the skills needed to run language programs in their communities – teaching classes, doing linguistic research on their languages, managing large-scale language projects.
- Give students the experience and credential needed to apply for and receive funding from granting institutions.
- Prepare graduates for the demands of running a tribal language program where they will often be required to “wear many hats” as they work to maintain or re-claim their languages.

Language revitalization programs make a significant difference in the way the community values its language and, even more, its entire culture, as Jessie Little Doe Fermino (SM, MIT 2000), has said about her tribal language program:

“Language is part of us and part of our genetic structure. Not to acknowledge a part of you is breaking a spiritual law. [...] Learning our language gives us a basis for why we view the world the way we do.” She feels “honored to be reading documents of my ancestors, to be able to pray in my own language, and to be able to do something as silly as putting Wampanoag on my answering machine — it sure cuts down on the sales calls.”

[...] Fermino says the enterprise has helped her “better understand where I came from and my place in the circle,” adding that “the best revenge is to be able to use the documents that attempted to separate us from who we were to further ground us in who we were. It tickles the heck out of me.” (*MIT Spectrum*, Spring 2001)

## Why care?

As Ken Hale put it in the *Whole Earth Review* Spring 2000 issue, there is great cultural importance in saving languages:

“The loss of a language is like the loss of a cherished museum or library: a language bears, in its lexical and semantic features, in its ways of saying things, a significant measure of the civilization of its speakers. The loss of Damin, for example, the initiates' language of the Lardil people of Mornington Island, North Queensland, amounts to the loss of a tradition of semantic relations comparable to that embodied in the very best thesaurus, or in the entire output of the anthropological tradition of componential analysis of the fifties and sixties.

“While languages are being lost at an alarming rate, this is not a time for pessimism. Many local language communities are mobilizing to maintain and foster their linguistic traditions, and there are successes, including among many others the immersion programs of Maori, Hawaiian, and Mohawk, the Irish of Belfast, and the language reclamation project of the Miami-Illinois people of Indiana.”

Leanne Hinton, in *The Green Book of Language Revitalization in Practice* (2001), identifies three major reasons to care about language preservation:

- *Scientific study*  
“Linguistic theory depends on linguistic diversity...The study of historical linguistics, language universals and typology, sociolinguistics, and cognitive linguistics has been driven by the study of the very indigenous languages whose existence is threatened.”
- *Loss of culture*  
“The loss of language is part of the loss of whole cultures and knowledge systems, including philosophical systems, oral literary and musical traditions, environmental knowledge systems, medical knowledge, and important cultural practices and artistic skills. The world stands to lose an important part of the sum of human knowledge whenever a language stops being used. Just as the human species is putting itself in danger through the destruction of species diversity, so might we be in danger from the destruction of the diversity of knowledge systems.”
- *Human rights*  
“The loss of language is part of the oppression and disenfranchisement of indigenous peoples, who are losing their land and traditional livelihood involuntarily as the forces of national or world economy and politics impinge upon them.”

### **Ken Hale’s solution: the “native speaker linguist”**

The late Ken Hale believed in training native speakers of endangered languages to do linguistic work in their own communities.

- more powerfully motivated than “outsider linguists”
- more likely to be trusted by the community in which they work
- more willing to spend their lives in the community

### **Why MIT?**

MIT’s Department of Linguistics and Philosophy has a history of endangered language work (see document “Recent Endangered and Indigenous Language Projects”). One important recent example is the department’s involvement with the Wampanoag nation in the Wampanoag Language Revitalization Project. Begun in 1996 by Ken Hale and Jessie Little Doe Fermino, the project continues today under the direction of Fermino, with contributions from Professor Norvin Richards. Richards is experienced in and committed to this area of work, as are a number of the graduate students in the program.

# The Proposal

## **1. *The Ken Hale Memorial Master's Degree Program***

### **The students**

The program would initially be open to a small number of Master's degree (SM) students per year (number dependent on funding). These students could be from any indigenous group, from any part of the world. Ideally, a given community would send more than one student at a time; this would help both to reduce culture shock and to distribute the overwhelming burden of work involved in future language revival programs.

In addition, two (or more) Ph.D. students would work with the Master's degree students on their projects, contributing language research, tutoring, and providing assistance as needed. These students could be funded as teaching assistants. Through this work, Ph.D. students would gain experience with fieldwork and endangered language revitalization, areas in which many of our Ph.D. students have already expressed an interest.

### **Integration into Department**

Master's degree students will be fully integrated with other graduate students in the department. They will take first-year graduate courses with the Ph.D. students and will participate in the colloquium series and other department events, just as all graduate students do. This integration will benefit both the Master's students and the other graduate students in the linguistics department. From our past experience, the interaction between a Master's student doing language reclamation work and students in the Ph.D. program can have a profound impact on the Ph.D. students, in the past inspiring several students to pursue research on endangered or indigenous languages and also raising awareness of the issue among the general population of the department. It will also benefit Master's students by giving them colleagues to collaborate with on joint coursework and research projects, as happened during the Wampanoag tutorial courses held at MIT in 1998/1999.

### **Entrance Requirements**

(1) A native speaker's knowledge of an indigenous or endangered language OR commitment to learning it as a second language (i.e. demonstrated commitment to the community in the area of language revitalization)

(2) Demonstrated ability and interest in scholarly and practical work in or out of the community (or both) relating to the language. Preference will be given not only to individuals who are able to demonstrate their capabilities to us but also to individuals who have demonstrated their ability in concrete ways recognized as valuable within their home communities.

In some cases admission will require a liberal interpretation of the provision that candidates for graduate study at MIT must have a Bachelor's degree or its equivalent.

The ideal candidates will have, within their communities, achieved a level of learning and competence corresponding to a college degree in the Angloamerican framework, if not in fact beyond that level. If we were to restrict our attention to persons holding the B.A., then we would defeat the very purpose of the program -- namely, to engage the most talented and capable potential indigenous language scholars. The conferral of a degree upon successful trainees will greatly facilitate both their eventual hiring and their employment in serious language-related educational work within their home communities. The importance of this latter consideration was very evident to Ken Hale and others in past efforts to train native speaker linguists.

### **Program requirements**

The Master's degree program will have the following requirements:

#### *Courses*

Introduction to Linguistics (24.900)

Tutorial in Linguistics and Related Fields (independent study) (24.921)

- Taken for two semesters in the first year
- Tailored to the particular needs and interests of the students. (For example, if the student is working with a language that is no longer spoken at all, the contents of this course may focus on working with archive material and reconstruction. If the student is working instead with an endangered language, the course may focus more on teaching methods and ways to encourage current community use of the language.)

Language Acquisition and Pedagogy

- Course targeted at future teachers/language learning experts
- Includes units on first and second language acquisition
- Includes units on teaching methods (i.e. creating a syllabus, evaluation methods, structuring a course)

*plus any two of:*

Introduction to Phonology (24.961)<sup>2</sup>

Introduction to Syntax (24.901)

Introduction to Semantics (24.970)

#### *Master's thesis*

Students will produce a Master's thesis, generally a grammatical sketch of their indigenous language or an in-depth investigation of a grammatical issue in their language. Supervision of the thesis will be done by the student's advisor, generally the faculty person in charge of the tutorial for that student.

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<sup>2</sup> It may also be possible to substitute upper-level undergraduate courses for some of these, depending on the educational needs of the student.

### **Student support**

With funds from outside sources, the Indigenous Language Initiative will offer full fellowships to all students, including tuition, healthcare, and a stipend for living expenses.

### **Outcome of the program**

The program prepares individuals to be familiar enough with the concepts and methodology of linguistics to work effectively with other professionals in the field as well as being capable of doing significant scholarly and practical work on their own languages.

In order to help graduates of the program be able to continue their language work after graduation, the Master's degree program will include the goals of:

- Finding and establishing connections with funding sources while students are still at MIT
- Training in fundraising techniques to ensure that graduates have the skills to apply for new grants after leaving

### **Physical Location**

Since it may be difficult for many potential students to be physically located at MIT continuously over the course of two years, requirements on physical locations for the program are flexible. The MIT Department of Linguistics will work with students to determine optimal coursework schedules based on the students' individual needs.

For students in New England or within driving distance to MIT, for example, it may be possible for the Department of Linguistics to schedule class meetings so that students can spend two nights a week in Boston and the rest of their time in their home community (e.g. travel to Tuesday, classes Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, travel home Thursday evening). After the first year of participation in the program, since students will mainly be conducting independent research for their theses, it may be possible for them to come to MIT only one or two days a week to meet with their advisors and research groups.

Another possibility is to offer some courses online, allowing students to earn course credit without having to be physically at MIT for all of their coursework. This will not be possible for all courses. Students will have to spend at least some amount of time physically at MIT and in classes, but online coursework would significantly reduce the amount of time away from their communities, should that be a problem for them.

### **Language Rights**

MIT respects the wishes of the language community when it comes to use of a language outside of the tribe. Members of the MIT linguistics department who work with native speakers will follow pre-established guidelines about publishing, discussing, or speaking the language of study.

Agreements about publicizing language materials will be discussed and formalized before work begins for each graduate student, since employees and students of MIT must adhere to certain restrictions on public disclosure of research. Certain categories of work, such as doctoral dissertations and Master's degree theses, are in the public domain and cannot be subject to a non-disclosure agreement, although this does not necessarily mean that the work will be widely publicized.

## **2. The MIT Indigenous Language Resource Center**

The Indigenous Language Resource Center will exist to promote connections and enable research on indigenous/endangered languages among interested groups and individuals. The Center will be available to all people who need information or consultation about language revitalization.

The Resource Center is staffed by a PhD linguist (currently Andrea Rackowski), whose job it is to coordinate the operations of the entire MIT Indigenous Language Initiative and to provide linguistic information to interested groups. The linguist is also in charge of forging connections among community language programs, professional linguists, and graduate students.

The center will work to promote and enable research on indigenous/endangered languages by MIT students and faculty.

## **Collaborations with other institutions**

Cross-registration with nearby schools (Harvard, Lesley, Boston University, Boston College) and with programs like the American Indian Language Development Initiative (AILDI) may be possible in certain circumstances.

## **Contact**

Initiative Website: <http://web.mit.edu/linguistics/www/mitili/>

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