



## The Resource Center for Documentation and Revitalization of Endangered Languages and Cultures

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Linguists predict that if nothing is done, then by the end of the twenty-first century or shortly thereafter, 90 percent of the world languages will face extinction. This phenomenon has a direct impact on intangible cultural heritage in that such a loss may lead to all local wisdom and knowhow being lost. Linguists at Mahidol University have, therefore, established the Resource Center for Documentation and Revitalization of Endangered Languages and Cultures to preserve and revive Southeast Asian languages and cultures in crisis and on the verge of extinction. The center operates on the assumption that linguistic and cultural diversity are the heritage for all humankind and deserve to survive for future generations. The Center started operation on 29 July 2004 with the original mission to document and revitalize fifteen severely endangered languages of Thailand. Subsequently, the center's operations were extended into other domains, both geographically and thematically. This has given rise to new developments in applied linguistics and new challenges in applying an interdisciplinary approach to documenting and revitalizing languages at various stages of crisis.

The goal and mission of the center is not limited to documenting and revising languages alone. The center's members also train community activists to collect and locally produce vernacular literature and local knowledge. Success is evident in the number of ethnolinguistic groups that have undertaken the revitalization program using the Mahidol Revitalization Model, which focuses on putting community members at the heart of revitalization efforts through involvement at almost all steps of the revitalization process, such as orthography development, creation of local vernacular

literature, collection of local knowledge, and instruction of the language to the next generation of speakers. This model has been implemented with the cooperation of twenty-five language groups and the support of the Mahidol research team. The community-based language revitalization and maintenance model that has emerged from these efforts incorporates basic principles of reversing language shift (Fishman 1991), yet is sensitive to the distinct needs of each individual community language.

The model consists of eleven component activities that are adapted to best fit the unique contextual needs of individual communities.

**Activity One** The first step in the model is preliminary research, which consists of assessing the morbidity of a language in an area, surveying the literacy of the people, and performing a linguistic analysis.

**Activity Two** Once the linguistic situation is understood, awareness-raising activities such as seminars, discussion groups, and study visits are arranged to mobilize partners in the effort.

**Activity Three** After partnerships have been established, a writing system is developed for the language.

**Activity Four** With a writing system that has been deemed acceptable by the community, literature production commences; local authors create stories for big books, small books of different stages, and dictionaries that the language speakers compile themselves.

**Activity Five** The next step is to introduce the language into formal schooling. For small, seriously endangered languages, such as Chong, Nyahkur, and So (Thavung), the language is taught in local schools. This involves developing a curriculum and instructional materials, lesson planning, and teacher training. For the bigger language groups or languages that the children still speak, such as Patani Malay, Northern Khmer, Hmong, and Lavua, a mother tongue-based bilingual education is conducted to address the language identity crisis or cultural conflict and to raise students' achievement in school.

**Activity Six** A way to strengthen the presence of the local language and culture is to establish a community learning center or local museum where cultural information can be provided, cultural activities can take place, new literature can be produced, and community business can be conducted.

**Activity Seven** Language classes are established in the communities. These classes include a pre-kindergarten form called Language Nest for young Bisu children as well as a master-apprentice class. Elderly people pass on knowledge of Kasong, which is now endangered.

**Activity Eight** Of fundamental importance is the use of the language to document oral literature, such as folktales, songs, and poems as well as local knowledge to transfer wisdom related to using forest plants for herbal medicine and food to learn about weather patterns..

**Activity Nine** All these activities are continuously monitored and evaluated, with facilitation as necessary.

**Activity Ten** It is essential to network within and outside the community, nationally and internationally, to promote the revitalization efforts and the maintenance of the local language and culture.

**Activity Eleven** The eventual goal is to influence the national language and educational policies to protect ethnic minority languages and promote them alongside national and international languages. Ultimately, it aims to ensure government support for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage and people's rights "to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language" (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Article 14 Section 3).

### References

- Fishman, Joshua A. (1991). *Reversing Language Shift*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- United Nations. (2008). United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Article 14 Section 3.



Urak Lavoc ship-craft for boat floating ceremony © Aaree Pacak