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How Translation Brought a Language Back to Life

Posted by [Nataly Kelly](#) on November 24, 2011 12:00 in the following blogs: [Translation and Localization](#)

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Why should we be grateful for translation? We often write about translation in the context of its business value – as a global revenue enabler, as a way to reach untapped markets, and as a way to improve relationships with existing customers. We also write about the market for language services – how big it is, how diverse it is, and how important it is for the many industries that depend on it. But translation can also have a profound effect on the lives of individuals and communities. It can even help revive a language.

Consider the case of the Wampanoag (Wôpanâak) of Massachusetts, whose language died out in the mid-19th century. For 150 years, there were no native speakers of this language. But that's changing, thanks to translation. The tribes of the Wampanoag Nation started the Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project, collaborative project to reclaim the language in 1993.

Spearheaded by a heroic and determined woman by the name of Jessie Little Doe Baird, the project has led to a language revival. In great part, the language was revived because of the existence of a large corpora of texts in Wampanoag, which enabled Jessie to re-construct a grammar and a sizable dictionary. Of course, the fact that other languages in the Algonquian family are still around helped, but the existence of translated texts played a major role in the language's revival.

"Small" languages – those that are truly near extinction – are the ones that often need the most support and could benefit from language industry attention. No matter where you are based, we can assure you that you have an endangered or a low-demand language sitting right in your own backyard. How can you help?

Look around. Find out which languages are endangered in your local area. What are the languages that were spoken by the native people? Are there any refugee groups for which you've had a hard time recruiting translators

or interpreters? Assign someone on your team the task to find a language near you that you can support.

Build relationships. Once you've identified a language you'd like to support, find the groups that represent these speakers, and ask them how you can help. Perhaps a donation will benefit them most, or perhaps there are other services you can provide.

Support a university. Nearly every language has someone who studies it. Can you give them a terminology management tool or show them how to use translation memory? Better yet, can you hook them up with native speakers from your existing network in order to facilitate collaboration?

Offer educational support. Often, one of the most important ways to support an endangered language is to empower its speakers – by giving them the knowledge and tools to empower their communities. Consider offering a scholarship for someone entering the field of translation. Or, if you have in-house translators, consider offering an internship to a translator for a less common language, so that they can learn skills from others on your team.

There are many ways to show your gratitude for endangered languages – these are just a few. How are you supporting languages of limited demand? [Tell us your thoughts.](#)

You can learn more about the incredible story of Wampanoag in this film from Anne Makepeace. [Read our interview](#) with her in this article at the Huffington Post.

Keywords: [High-demand and low-demand languages](#), [Language policy](#), [Translation](#)

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