Kanien’kéha, more widely known as Mohawk, is just one of many indigenous languages throughout the world that are in danger of becoming extinct. Five hundred years ago, an estimated 300 languages were spoken across North America. Today, however, only about 25 of them are spoken by children, and 150 are poised to disappear with the current generation of speakers. Worldwide, more than 50% of the world’s more than 6,000 languages are endangered, according to UNESCO.

Numerous organizations, foundations and academic programs are working to document and archive language materials before living resources disappear. Most indigenous language revitalization programs, however, struggle with a lack of adequate economic, human and classroom resources as they seek to restore language use.

Kanien’kéha (Mohawk) Level 1 language-learning software was released in April 2006 by Rosetta Stone’s Endangered Language Program. Development of the software is part of a wider initiative to recover Kanien’kéha fluency in the Mohawk community located near Montréal, Québec, and was sponsored by Kanien’kehaka Onkwawén:na Raotitiohkwa, the recognized Mohawk language and cultural center of Kahnawake. Developed in partnership with the Kahnawake community language teams, the software will be used in schools, homes and workplaces, and online in an effort to secure the status of native languages.

“While documenting languages is valuable,” says Ilse Ackerman, manager of the Endangered Language Program at Rosetta Stone, “more effort is desperately needed to preserve languages alive rather than on paper or electronic media. We believe the best way to preserve a language is through

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teaching and learning, keeping it a living language in the hands of the people to whom it belongs.”

“While technology is often seen as an accomplice in language decline,” she continues, “we have an opportunity to subvert that paradigm. Interactive language software can support community language initiatives, multiplying the efforts of educators where human resources are limited. Language-learning software can provide unlimited exposure to fluent speech, patient and tireless feedback and an individually customized learning pace.”

Several native communities have turned to the Endangered Language Program to develop language-learning software for their language revitalization efforts. Indigenous communities are now using this approach to language acquisition as a tool to promote use of their threatened languages.

An idea takes root

The Endangered Language Program was founded when groups seeking ways to revitalize native language use in their communities noticed the company’s innovative immersion-based software. The company’s language-learning software is offered in 30 major world languages and sold in more than 150 countries. Under an alternate development model, Rosetta Stone began accepting software development contracts from indigenous groups who wanted to take advantage of the company’s methodology for use in their language revitalization programs. The Endangered Language Program currently has four development projects in progress and receives inquiries from indigenous groups around the world.

The company’s “Dynamic Immersion” approach to language learning uses thousands of real-life color images to convey the meaning of the spoken and written phrases in the program. Its carefully sequenced structure, use of native speakers and ability to provide instantaneous feedback teach a new language without memorization, translation or grammar drills. Immersion helps users develop everyday proficiency by associating new words with real-life meaning. Target language words are never equated to English words. This ensures that words do not lose the many aspects of their meaning in the process of language acquisition.

A language nearly lost

Kani’enkéha is the language spoken by the Kani’enkéhaka (People of the Flint) nation. The story of the language’s decline is a typical one in North America, but the story of its revitalization is not. Between 1892 and 1969, thousands of Native American children in Canada and the United States, including many Kani’enkéhaka children, were not allowed to speak their native languages. As part of the United States and Canadian government policies, Native American children were required to attend residential schools where only English was allowed. The schools ranged from small day schools on

off reservations to larger industrial and boarding schools in distant towns and cities. Many children attended the schools for a short time, while others were enrolled for their entire schooling, according to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation. This residential schooling program had a devastating impact on native language and culture.

The threats to indigenous languages continue today, but in different forms. The impact of modern technology and globalization reaches even the most remote of native communities and has been profoundly detrimental for minority languages. The predominance of the English language in the North American media and education has meant that younger generations hear and speak English more and their heritage language less. According to UNESCO, 90% of the world’s languages are not represented on the internet. In addition, Kahnawake’s location just 20 minutes from downtown Montréal places it squarely in an urban environment without the advantage that geographic isolation sometimes offers for more remote communities seeking to increase exposure to indigenous languages.

Community action

The community decided to take action to reverse language decline and implemented several language mandates to be administered by Kani’enkéhaka Onkwawén:na Raotitoihkwa. The nursery-school immersion school program established in Kahnawake in the 1970s was the first Aboriginal language immersion program in Canada and has become a model for other communities. It has been instrumental in reestablishing Mohawk language within the youngest generations, whose parents have become the “lost” generation of speakers.

“It is not uncommon in Kahnawake to hear people conversing with their grandchildren in Mohawk, then switching to English to speak to their own children,” says Michael Hoover of McGill University in his study of language use in Kahnawake. Hoover notes, however, that the Mohawk language remains a central part of the Mohawk cultural identity, regardless of one’s age or ability to speak it.

Currently about 10% of the 8,000 residents in the community of Kahnawake are fluent in the Mohawk language. Kani’enkéhaka Onkwawén:na Raotitoihkwa is working to expand this number through its comprehensive community-wide language-learning initiative.

“Language is in our DNA. It is who we are,” says Dr. Kaherakwas Donna Goodleaf, executive director of Kani’enkéhaka Onkwawén:na Raotitoihkwa. “In response to the needs and demands of the community, Kani’enkéhaka Onkwawén:na Raotitoihkwa offers various Kani’enkéha language courses and produces two television shows that are aired in the Kani’enkéha language on Kahnawake’s local cable television network. As well, the cultural center offers a nine-month intensive Kani’enkéha Ratiwennnahni:rats Adult Immersion Program. This program has successfully graduated over 50 students since 2004.”

The Kani’enkéha software project is one of Kani’enkéhaka Onkwawén:na Raotitoihkwa’s most recent initiatives to comply with its directive to achieve a 30% language fluency rate among government
employees. The software will be made available in computer labs, homes and workplaces to supplement a variety of other elements that are already in place. Kanien’kehaka Onkwawén:na Raotitióh- kwa has recently created a computer lab facility to host the new language-learning software program for the community. The Kanien’kéha language software is available for purchase or distribution only through the Mohawk sponsoring group.

A community-based project

Creation of the Mohawk software was a two-year endeavor. In addition to Rosetta Stone’s in-house project managers, software developers, audio engineers and photographer, more than a dozen Mohawk native speakers from the Kahnawake community worked as translators, editors, project managers or voicers to customize the software to meet the community’s needs.

Photographs taken on location in Kahnawake help to make the software uniquely Mohawk. The familiar faces and places in the software provide relevant, real-life context for the learners.

The Mohawk language component of the software was reviewed by a sequence of professional Mohawk language educators, translators, editors and reviewers, and was recorded by native language speakers who ranged in age from young adults to elders. The company’s team of experts worked remotely with Kahnawake’s language team throughout the project, but training, photography and audio recording took place onsite in Kahnawake.

Mohawk is a language of the Iroquoian family and displays the linguistic characteristics such as polysynthesis and singular, dual and plural number categories that typify that family. For the most part, these characteristics posed no problems for the Rosetta Stone pedagogical approach, which, because of its natural immersion learning philosophy, is highly versatile and adaptable. Since grammar is taught intuitively, explicit explanations of Mohawk’s unique structure were unnecessary.

Minor adjustments were needed in the software to accommodate the unusual length of the words, but a writing system based on the Latin alphabet avoided font issues. Recommendations published after a 1993 conference that concentrated on standardizing Mohawk’s orthography and establishing guidelines for forming new words meant that spelling controversies were minimized.

The company currently has three other similar software development projects in progress, all of them with North American native groups. Current program development projects include Inuititut language-learning software for the Labrador Inuit Association, Miccosukee for the Seminole Tribe of Florida, and Iñupiaq for the Northwest Arctic Native Association (NANA) of Alaska.

 Turning the tide

While a software tool can be used to help turn the tide of language decline, the software by itself cannot preserve a language. But by using the software as part of an integrated language program, children and adults alike can be exposed to the language and begin learning it in a variety of settings. An effective language-learning tool, the ability to culturally “localize” the software for clients’ needs, and a desire to contribute to maintaining linguistic diversity have all meshed in this project with the community’s effort to contribute to language revitalization. 

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