



Nov 04, 2016 by [Michael Edward Walsh](#)

Endangered Languages in the Pacific Provide Unique Opportunity for American Public Diplomacy ^[1]

According to UNESCO, “half of the 6,000 plus spoken languages today will disappear by the end of the century” if the world fails to take action to preserve endangered languages.

The situation in the Pacific is particularly troubling. According to the Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, well over a hundred native languages are listed as vulnerable or endangered in Pacific ACP (African, Caribbean, and Pacific Group of States) countries. If one considers the larger Pacific Islands Forum region, the number soars to several hundred, with 108 vulnerable and endangered languages in Australia alone.

While the protection of endangered languages was not one of the issues of “urgency and focus” outlined  at the conclusion of last year's meeting in New Zealand, the PIF has very publicly recognized the importance of promoting and protecting the region's cultural identity . Traditional leaders in the Pacific also recognize the loss of their native languages as an existential threat for their local communities.

The problem is that regional and national partners lack the resources to confront this major risk for the region. If Pacific ACP countries hope to prevent the extinction of dozens of their native languages, their best option may be to engage extra-regional partners to support their objectives.

At this moment in history, no country is in a better position to assist than the United States.

Under Hillary Clinton, the Department of State has embraced technology and public-private partnerships as major assets in advancing American diplomatic and development objectives.

American companies have also developed “shovel ready” solutions that could be put to immediate effect to preserve and nurture endangered languages in the Pacific. They simply require requisite funding to put these solutions in the hands of local communities.

The question then is whether the United States delegation will seize upon this unique opportunity to score an easy soft power win at this year's Pacific Islands Forum.

Rosetta Stone' Endangered Languages Program

In 2004, Rosetta Stone (NYSE: RST) founded the Endangered Languages Program (ELP). In conjunction with community partners, the ELP team has “translated, adapted, and customized (Rosetta Stone's proprietary) language learning software to make it culturally and linguistically relevant.” So far, ELP has launched custom solutions for six endangered languages - all

associated with Native American tribes in Canada and the United States.

According to Marion Bittinger, ELP manager at Rosetta Stone, these projects demonstrate that customized language software can serve as an important tool for teaching endangered languages. This is especially true for children, who “do not have a high-level – if any level – of familiarity with their own language” and readily adapt to software-based learning environments.

She points out that the software also helps to generate interest in learning endangered languages: “Encoding a language in technology gives it prestige, particularly among younger generations who are literate in the medium. Suddenly, the language of the grandparents can be relevant in the modern world.” This is of critical importance in communities where the perception of young people is that their native language is no longer useful in their daily life.

So, what does a custom solution from Rosetta Stone cost?

Marion estimates no more than “six figures.” For this reason, she says that her team still “gets lots of inquiries (from local communities) even though the Endangered Languages Program is currently dormant.” This includes “lots of interest in Hawaiian, Chamorro, and other Pacific Islander languages.”

Unfortunately, few local communities are in the position to self-finance such initiatives - even though Rosetta Stone is willing to provide its development services at or below cost. This has forced the project team to effectively disband until new funding sources can be identified. However, Marion says that the team could be quickly reconstituted if new funding became available.

Google’s Endangered Languages Project Website

Rosetta Stone is not the only American tech company working to preserve endangered languages. Google (NASDAQ: GOOG) recently partnered with the University of Hawai’i at Manoa, Eastern Michigan University, and others to launch a new website called [The Endangered Languages Project](#).

The consortium’s website is designed to provide a global interactive repository for sharing information on endangered languages as well as samples in the form of text, audio and video files. It currently features roughly 3,100 endangered languages, including 590 of Austronesian, Trans-New Guinea and Pacific Isolate origin.

Google’s project is unique not only in its scope of endangered languages documented but also in its aim to connect language experts with native speakers from local communities. To achieve this goal, the site enables native speakers to upload their own samples directly into the repository and provides forums where native speakers can provide input on best practices.

According to Jason Rissman, Google’s project manager for the project, the website promises to have important secondary effects on local communities beyond language preservation: “The Endangered Languages Project helps communities engage more with technology. Technology goes hand-in-hand with cultural preservation. It is very empowering.”

While he acknowledges that it might be hard to draw direct correlation between command of endangered languages and economic benefits, he is quick to point out that tech-centric endangered language projects provide technology skills and social networking opportunities to

members of the community. In the long run, these benefits may help to improve local education systems, employment prospects, and overall community health.

From Rissman's perspective, the project does not need more funding for website development. Aside from optimizing the website for low bandwidth environments, Rissman thinks the website already provides a valuable mechanism for local communities to play an active role in the preservation of their languages.

Instead, what the project needs is for partners downstream to create awareness for the site in local communities. Once that is done, they then need someone to provide many of those communities with very basic technology support (computer with internet connection and a digital camera or audio recorder) so that they can access the website and document their language.

If I was a public diplomacy officer at the U.S. embassy in Suva, I think that I would jump at that opportunity!
