

Looking Back at the Year of Indigenous Languages (2019) and Forward to the Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032)

By Amy Lyons-Ketchum, M.A. in Applied Linguistic Anthropology

The United Nations declared 2019 the [International Year of Indigenous Languages](#) with the goal to “preserve, revitalize, and promote indigenous languages and improve the lives of those who speak them.” The year was filled with incredible events starting, with the official launch event at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, France, high level events in New York City; and various conferences, seminars, and meetings across the world. Over 40% of the world’s 6,000-plus languages are endangered, and these high-profile events brought much needed public attention to the crucial role language plays in the culture, identity, sovereignty, and traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples. The aim of the IYIL was to reinforce the basic universal human right to speak one’s mother tongue.

I was fortunate enough to attend a local gathering honoring the IYIL in November 2019 at the [Chickasaw Cultural Center](#) in Sulphur, Oklahoma co-hosted by the [International Indian Treaty Council](#), [Chickasaw Nation](#), [Seminole Nation of Oklahoma](#), Global Indigenous Languages Caucus and [Yuchi Language Project](#). Oklahoma is designated a [Language Hotspot](#) due to the high levels of linguistic diversity and language endangerment, and the event was attended by tribal language programs, community members, native linguists, educators, and activists from across the state. As an advocate for endangered language revitalization, I was able to bring a group of students to the event. Consequently, they were able to participate in cultural events, listen to an array of speakers, share their experiences as language learners with the group, and gain a newfound appreciation for the difficult work of preserving their languages; an amazing learning opportunity.

Due to the lockdown, university classes went online, tribal language program offices closed, and important annual events like the [Oklahoma Native American Youth Language Fair](#) were cancelled. The coronavirus devastated Native American communities across the country including the [Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians](#), [Navajo Nation](#), and many communities here in [Oklahoma](#). With the untimely passing of elders, the status of endangered indigenous languages has become even more perilous. Despite these challenges, many aspects of language preservation have persevered. Several language revitalization workshops such as the [Northwest Indian Language Institute](#) (NILI) Summer Institute, [Breath of Life](#), and [CoLang 2020](#) offered virtual meetings. Student language revitalization projects were completed through email and Zoom, resulting in more digital resources for their languages.

After realizing a single year dedicated to indigenous languages barely scratched the surface, the UN declared 2022-2032 the Decade of [Indigenous Languages](#) with the goal of empowering the speakers of indigenous languages. According to UNESCO, “In its strategic recommendations for the Decade, the [Los Pinos Declaration](#) emphasizes indigenous peoples’ rights to freedom of expression, to an education in their mother tongue and to participation in public life using their languages, as prerequisites for the survival of indigenous languages many of which are currently on the verge of extinction.” The Los Pinos Declaration also highlights the importance of using indigenous languages in legal systems, the media, and government programs such as health services and employment. It also discusses the potential of digital technologies in supporting the use and preservation of endangered Indigenous languages.

During the pandemic, the start of the Decade of Indigenous Languages in 2022 seemed far away, but the world keeps turning, and it will be here very soon. In the meantime, podcasts like [Motherfoclóir](#), [Language Keepers](#), [Word Up](#), and [The World in Words](#) inspire me to continue working hard. My students are eager to continue and expand the projects they started in quarantine, and I hope to see them bring their languages with them into this new world. I look forward to seeing them create TikTok language lessons, making memes in their languages, and expanding the reach of indigenous languages on social media. As technology continues to evolve, indigenous languages should be represented in this evolution as well. What better way for indigenous people to adapt to the “new normal” than with the gift of language passed down by their ancestors!