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Language Reclamation: Four Case Studies

Wôpanâak

Our mission is to restore the Wôpanâak language within the Wampanoag Nation as a vital expression of our birthright and spiritual interconnectedness. Reclaiming our language nurtures intergenerational healing and deepens our bonds with the land, waters, creatures, and each other. Through language reclamation, we exercise our sovereignty, empower our community to embrace our Ancestors' wisdom and strengthen our Wampanoag identity.

— Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project (n.d.)

Wôpanâak is an Algonquian language historically spoken by the Wampanoag people of Cape Cod in the northeastern United States. It experienced drastic decline under colonial pressures, including dispossession, displacement, demographic loss, and English-only educational mandates. Wôpanâak is also known as Wampanoag, Massachusett, Massachusee, and Natick: by the 1990s, the language had been unspoken since the 1860s (Little Doe Baird, 2013, p. 19). The Wampanoag and neighboring Massachusett peoples were among the earliest Indigenous communities in North America to encounter English settler colonialism, and among the first to bear its most enduring consequences.

The Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project, initiated and directed by Jessie Little Doe Baird in 1993, was to bring together the Mashpee, Aquinnah, Assonet, Herring Pond, and Chappaquiddick Wampanoag tribes in a sustained collaborative effort to reconstruct the language for everyday use (Kauanui & Baird, 2018, p. 1). Baird, a social worker at the time, formalized her work through graduate study in linguistics at MIT, where she found a crucial collaborator in Kenneth Hale, one of the foremost Algonquian linguists of his generation. In the documentary *We Still Live Here — Âs Nutayuneân* (Makepeace, 2011), Baird recalls recurring dreams in which ancestral figures spoke in an unfamiliar but recognizable language. They directed a phrase at her and asked her if she knew what it meant, and would not release her until she responded. Her best guess was 'we are still with you.' Years later, having learned Wôpanâak from the seventeenth-century archive, she understood: "We have been killed with the yellow thing."

As Baird writes, the survival of Wôpanâak "lay, ironically, in the fact that John Eliot, a Congregationalist missionary from England, supervised the translation of many religious documents into the language" (Little Doe Baird, 2013, p. 19). Eliot, who arrived in New England in 1631, learned the language with the help of his Wampanoag teacher and servant Job Nesutan, who was also one of his helpers in translating the Bible into the Natick dialect of Wôpanâak, though the contributions of Native collaborators went largely unacknowledged. The Eliot Bible has proved a foundational resource not only for Wôpanâak reclamation but for related Algonquian reclamation efforts across southern New England, among them Nipmuc and Mohegan, as well as providing comparative grammatical data for the closely related Narragansett. Eliot came to believe that the Native Americans were one of the Lost Tribes of Israel: "These naked Americans are Hebrewes, in respect of those that planted first these parts of the world" (Eliot, 1660, p. 17). This fired up his zeal to convert the native populations and to bring widespread literacy in Wôpanâak, which was to result in a sizeable corpus of writing from members of Wampanoag communities. In a 1650 letter to Edward Winslow, the Plymouth Colony's representative in England, Eliot wrote: "for their own Language we have no book; my desire therefore is to teach them all to write, and read written hand, and thereby with pains taking, they may have some of the Scriptures in their own Language" (Eliot, 1650, as cited in Pilling, 1891, p. 127).

Eliot followed his Bible translation with a grammar, *The Indian Grammar Begun* (1666). Roger Williams' *A Key into the Language of America* (1643) focused on the closely related Narragansett language. Wayne State University Press reprinted the book in 1973, and Goddard evaluated the work as: "Topical and broad-visioned, rich in ethnographic detail, and a unique monument to the extinct Narragansett language, it bears reading and rereading by scholar and layman alike" (Goddard, 1981, p. 344) Yet Goddard also notes that *A Key into the Language of America* reflects "Narragansett as he knew and used the language and not as directly taken down from native speakers" (Goddard, 1981, p. 353), a reminder that even the most celebrated sources in the archive must be read with care.

The historical record posed a further problem: word-level stress was inconsistently marked in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century documents, whether written by native speakers or English missionaries. Where diacritics appeared — as they occasionally did in John Eliot's

grammar — they might indicate stress, or vowel length, or both. Norvin Richards found an unlikely solution in Eliot's 1685 metrical translation of the Psalms: by mapping stressed Wôpanâak syllables onto the strong beats of the iambic meter in Eliot's Wôpanâak version, he was able to infer the language's stress system from the inside out.

Josiah Cotton's *Vocabulary of the Massachusetts Indian Language* (1707), focusing on the Plymouth-region dialect, added a further vital layer to the archive. Organized in thematic sections — Of Arts, Of Beasts, Of Birds, Of Rational Creatures — it also laid out important grammatical features. Adapted spellings of Cotton's words were incorporated into Wôpanâak. Devising an orthography for the reclaimed language was itself a substantial part of the project, and the forms below, drawn from Little Doe's 2000 MIT thesis, reflect an early stage of that ongoing work (Fermino, 2000; published under her name at the time, Jessie Little Doe Fermino).

Cotton (1707)	**Little Doe (2000)**	**Meaning**
musshoan	mush8n	boat
annum	anum	dog
Mohkissonash	mahkusunash	shoes
Appuonk	ap8ôk	chair
Misseet	Museet	someone's foot

James Hammond Trumbull's *Natick Dictionary*, completed in the closing years of his life and published posthumously by the Bureau of American Ethnology in 1903, brought systematic lexicographical order to the accumulated archive, drawing on Eliot, Cotton, and related sources to produce the most comprehensive single resource available to the Wôpanâak reclamation project (Trumbull, 1903).

But the archive held another layer entirely: the voices of the Wampanoag peoples themselves. In the late twentieth century, Ives Goddard and Kathleen Bragdon published *Native Writings in Massachusett* (1988), a monumental two-volume scholarly edition of Wampanoag-

authored documents from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.Unlike the missionary corpus, these documents preserve the language as its own speakers wrote it: wills, deeds, letters, petitions that yield kinship terminology and land-related vocabulary that the missionary record alone could never have supplied. Their linguistic richness is such that, as O'Meara observed in his review of the volumes, Massachusett is now better described than some Algonquian languages that never fell silent (O'Meara, 1991, pp. 856—867).

Drawing on an accumulated archive of liturgical texts, vocabularies, and Wampanoag-authored documents, the Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project assembled a dictionary of over 9,000 words, developed pedagogical materials, and trained community members as language teachers. Among the project's most remarked outcomes has been intergenerational transmission: Baird's daughter grew up as the first native speaker of Wôpanâak in over a century. In 2010, Baird was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in recognition of the project's work, bringing it sustained national attention.

palawa kani

So, some twenty years on, isn't it wonderful that we can honour the memory of the original languages and their speakers — our Ancestors — by bringing back into use those words that have until recently been resting.

— Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (n.d.)

palawa kani — the name means 'Tasmanian Aborigines speak' — is the only Aboriginal language of Lutruwita/Tasmania today, and among the most challenging reclamation projects in the world. It is a composite language, retrieved from the remnants of the many original languages of the island. Between eight and sixteen of those languages may originally have been spoken across Tasmania. Many tribes were destroyed by contact disease before full-scale British invasion. Their languages fell silent (Reynolds & Sainty, 2023, p. 950).

The survivors were systematically removed from the Tasmanian mainland by George Augustus Robinson, who, as Harold Koch tersely summarizes, was engaged in "the removal of the indigenous inhabitants of Tasmania to offshore islands, making the land safe for colonial British settlers" (Koch, 2020, p. 1). The irony at the heart of the *palawa kani* project is that it was within these conditions that the most substantial linguistic record was made. Robinson traversed the island between 1829 and 1834 coercing Aboriginal people onto boats to offshore islands, then served as the commandant at the Wybalenna death camp. He was also the most prolific recorder of their languages (Reynolds & Sainty, 2023, p. 953). The jailer was the archivist.

Others had recorded before and alongside him: fragmentary wordlists, partial vocabularies, notes made in passing. "Remnants of many of those original languages were written down in wordlists by more than twenty different European recorders, starting from Cook's visit in 1777 right through the colonial period" (Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, n.d.). The spoken record is almost entirely absent. The only audio trace is Fanny Cochrane Smith's phonograph recordings, made in recording sessions in 1899 and 1903 at the rooms of the Royal Society of Tasmania: some barely audible sounds on wax cylinders (Watson, 2011/2012, p. 1).

By the twentieth century, what remained in living memory was modest but not negligible. "We were able to collect over two hundred words, phrases and song fragments from the memories of over thirty Aboriginal people throughout the twentieth century," notes the TAC, adding that "many of these duplicate each other, across different families and time periods" (Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, n.d.). A question and its answer were remembered independently across both the Bass Strait island families and the family of Fanny Cochrane Smith: *nina tunapri mina kani?* ('Do you understand what I'm saying?') and *putiya tunapri nina kani* ('I don't understand what you're saying.') One of Fanny's daughters still remembered them at the age of eighty-three in 1942 (Reynolds & Sainty, 2023, p. 951). And yet: "those treasured pieces of remembered language are only fragments. It was necessary to reclaim the bulk of our language from other sources" (Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, n.d.).

Those sources converge, primarily, in N. J. B. Plomley's *A Word-list of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Languages* (1976), the most extensive single collation of recorded Tasmanian vocabularies, drawing on Robinson and the twenty-odd other colonial recorders. It is indispensable, but unreliable, containing transcription errors, and reproducing uncritically the recorders' often mistaken claims about which language vocabularies belonged to (Reynolds & Sainty, 2023, p. 952). The deeper problem, however, is what happens when the wordlist is consulted without understanding the unreliability of the recorders themselves. A phrase sometimes used as a greeting — *yah! tahwattya* — turns out under scrutiny to be a word for catarrh, a respiratory illness the colonizers brought with them. Recorded five times by surgeon Joseph Milligan at Wybalenna, with translations lurching between 'woe's me', 'cough', and 'greeting', it most probably meant something like 'Hello, I'm sick.'

The Tasmanian Aboriginal Language Project, initiated in 1993 under the auspices of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, was among the first programs in Australia in which Aboriginal people themselves acquired the linguistic methods required for retrieval work (Reynolds & Sainty, 2023, p. 952). A community workshop led in 1994 by linguist Terry Crowley reached a difficult but necessary conclusion: no single original language was sufficiently documented to be revived intact. The community agreed to retrieve what could be recovered from all documented original languages combined — a composite that, as Reynolds and Sainty note, "also honours all

the tribes whose languages would not otherwise be spoken again as none of their members survived" (Reynolds & Sainty, 2023, p. 952). One language, retrieved from many.

The first analytical task was a systematic evaluation of every colonial recorder's reliability. Robinson was the subject of a dedicated comparative study, his transcriptions of Port Phillip languages set against other recorders and against existing audio, to identify which Aboriginal sounds he could and could not hear, and the characteristic shapes of his failures (Reynolds & Sainty, 2023, p. 954). These profiles accompany every word retrieved. Reconstruction then follows a rigorous procedure: "The most likely sounds of each word are determined by comparing the spellings of all the recorded versions of that word. All the possible spellings are transcribed into the International Phonetic Alphabet… Those sounds are then written in the *palawa kani* sound and spelling system" (Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, n.d.) — a purpose-designed orthography, built on community-agreed principles of authenticity, consistency, and simplicity.

The grammatical picture, too, proved less ruined than first expected. Earlier linguists, working from small samples, had concluded that little original grammar could be recovered. Reynolds and Sainty point out (2023, p. 956):

> It was first believed that the revived language would need to rely upon grammatical features of English, as almost no evidence was thought to remain of original grammar. This was an assessment of some earlier linguists, based on small samples of records in word lists. Also, later records from Wybalenna show English word order and sentence patterns creeping into use, the plural 's' and other English forms added to words, complicating revival for the unwary.

Sustained word-by-word examination of the full corpus, however, revealed otherwise: consistent patterns for marking plurality, word orders with adjectives following rather than preceding their nouns, a range of suffixes with identifiable functions, and traditional mechanisms of borrowing and compounding that the speakers themselves had already been extending during the colonial period (Reynolds & Sainty, 2023, p. 956).

Two editions of the *palawa kani* dictionary have now been published and are distributed exclusively within the Aboriginal community. "Aborigines of all ages can now speak *palawa kani* and three generations of children have learnt it from infancy" (Reynolds & Sainty, 2023, p. 950). The language appears in award-winning film, in officially registered Aboriginal place names, on a major Antarctic icebreaker — always, in the TAC's words, "subject to Aboriginal community approval and control" (Reynolds & Sainty, 2023, p. 957). The words that were resting have been woken. They are being carried forward, the TAC says, by children who "tunapri kani" — who understand language — with "accomplishment and pride" (Reynolds & Sainty, 2023, p. 957).

Sakhalin Ainu

"I ask you this: When the last speaker of a language is gone, does the language itself vanish? Or does a path remain open for its life to continue?"

— Murasaki (2012, p. 3)

The Sakhalin Ainu language, also known as Enchiu, was once spoken across the southern half of Sakhalin Island and nearby regions of Hokkaido. It had several dialects, among them Rayciska, Aniva, Usoro, Maoka, and Taraika (see Dal Corso, 2022). Ainu is often treated as a single language, though its internal variation suggests something closer to a small language family—*Ainuic* or *Kurilic*—comprising three regional forms: Hokkaido, Sakhalin, and Northern Kuriles. The Ainu language family is a language isolate: no apparent genetic relation with any other language family has been established. Of its regional forms, Northern Kuriles Ainu fell out of use soon after the forced relocation of its speakers to Shikotan Island in 1884, and Sakhalin Ainu declined following the postwar evacuation to Hokkaido. Further displacement and integration into Japanese society accelerated language shift, and intergenerational transmission broke down. Hokkaido Ainu has persisted the longest, but only in a weakened form: a small number of semi-speakers remain, alongside a growing group of learners and revival speakers of varying fluency, with no sustained intergenerational transmission (Janhunen, 2015, pp. 59–60).

"With the death of Take Asai (1902–1994), Sakhalin Ainu was left without speakers and thus became extinct" (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science [JSPS], n.d.).

The first Japanese–Ainu dictionary, *Moshiogusa* ['seaweed', a classical metaphor for writing and textual compilation] (1792), was compiled by the Japanese interpreter Uehara Kumajirō and co-authored by the administrator Abe Chōzaburō. Initially hand-copied and circulated among officials, the work already reflects internal variation within Ainu languages and dialects. It marks lexical variation across regions, reflecting broader dialectal divergence, using the symbol (<▲>). At the same time, it does not specify which dialects its entries represent, leaving these distinctions to be clarified through comparison with later sources (Fukazawa, 2019, p. 2027). "In 1804, the first mass-produced woodblock print of Uehara's *Moshiogusa* appeared,

which now targeted a larger user group including shogunate representatives who were planning and implementing a 'Teach the Ainu the Japanese language' campaign in Ezo [The Ainu territories of Hokkaido, Sakhalin, and the Kuril Islands]." (Hansen, 2014, p. 553).

The *Moshiogusa* was not reducible to a tool of administration alone. It contains lists of commands and imperatives in Ainu compiled for the use of Japanese authorities (Kindaichi, 1925, pp. 404–405). It also contains *Yukar* — the great oral epic poetry of the Ainu, ancient, elegant, irreducible. An instrument of colonial control that, in the process, became one of the earliest archives of Ainu oral literature.

Russian documentation runs parallel to the Japanese record: a wordlist of 218 words compiled by Nikolai Rezanov during the first Russian circumnavigation of the Earth (1805), a Russian–Sakhalin Ainu dictionary of 1,987 entries by Gavriil Davydov (1812), and some 400 lexical items recorded by Nikolai Rudanovskiy, a Russian naval officer and Sakhalin surveyor (1860) (Majewicz, 2022, p. 108). The first substantial dictionary, Mikhail Dobrotvorskiy's Ainu-Russian dictionary of 1875, has recently been translated into Japanese by Yoshitaka Terada and Setsuhiko Yasuda (2022), making it newly accessible as a central reference for the reclamation project.

A new and decisive layer of documentation emerged in the early twentieth century through the work of the Polish ethnographer Bronisław Piłsudski, who made wax-cylinder phonograph recordings of Ainu speech around 1903–1904. A total of 62 cylinders were later rediscovered in Zakopane, Poland, and restored in 1983 through a joint Japanese-Polish research project at what was then the Research Institute of Applied Electricity at Hokkaido University (Murasaki, 2012, pp. 5–6), now known as the Research Institute for Electronic Science. These recordings are considered the oldest audio documentation of the Ainu language and its oral traditions. Their restoration, in Murasaki's words, 'splendidly shattered' a nine-year silence in fieldwork (見事に破られました; Murasaki, 2012, p. 5). It led Murasaki directly to Take Asai (1902–1994), the last fluent speaker, whose decade of recorded testimony now forms the core archive for reclamation efforts.

On the Soviet side of the archive, in the immediate postwar period, researchers such as linguist Nikolai Yakovlev and historian-archaeologist Boris Zherebtsov conducted some of the first systematic studies of the Sakhalin Ainu, assembling linguistic, demographic, and ethnographic data (Roon, 2021). This work was abruptly curtailed during the late Stalin period. Scholars involved in Ainu studies were removed from academic institutions; Yakovlev was dismissed in 1951 on the stated grounds of "systematic failure to fulfil the plan" and "unwillingness to align his work with Stalin's pronouncements on language" (Roon, 2021, p. 239), and after failed attempts to reinstate himself was confined to a psychiatric hospital. On 7 February 1953, Glavlit Order No. 418s prohibited the publication of any information about the Ainu in the USSR, effectively suppressing research and limiting access to collected materials (Roon, 2021, pp. 239–240). As a result, photographs, field notes, reports, and census data were removed from archives and, according to Roon, remain inaccessible to this day.

The question Murasaki raises at the opening of this case study, whether a path remains open for a language's life to continue after its last speaker is gone, shapes the reclamation project she envisions. Full revival as a spoken vernacular is not a realistic goal: three generations have passed without transmission, and there is no community in Japan where Sakhalin Ainu would need to be used (Murasaki, 2012, pp. 9–10). What she proposes instead is custodianship: seminars, place-name research, the careful organization of audio materials. In her closing words: "as long as there are people who cherish the language, especially those of its blood, the life of the language will continue" (Murasaki, 2012, p. 10).

Tai Ahom

"We revive, we survive."

— Ban Ok Pup Lik Mioung Tai

The Ahom people entered Assam in 1228, when a group of warriors from the east (likely Upper Burma) established rule in the region. Their kingdom endured for nearly six centuries, ending with the British invasion in 1826 and the final annexation in 1838 (Saiki, 2004, pp. 8–9). Tai Ahom ceased to be spoken sometime in the late eighteenth century. The Scottish surveyor and botanist Francis Hamilton, during his survey of Assam in 1808–1809, noted that it "is now a dead language, and is only studied by those who follow the old worship" (Hamilton, 1814/1940, p. 7). To aid in the study of religious manuscripts, Tengai Pandit, a member of an Ahom priestly clan, compiled in 1795 the *Bara Kakot Homung Puthi*, a Tai Ahom–Assamese dictionary (Barua & Phukan, 1964, p. viii). Written on Sanchi bark (*Aquilaria agallocha*), the manuscript comprises approximately forty folios (around eighty pages), each containing eight to nine lines of text (Barua & Phukan, 1964, p. iii).

By 1837, Terwiel notes, even specialists from the Ahom priestly clans no longer had a reliable grasp of Tai Ahom grammar. Referring to the first published English translation of excerpts from the Tai Ahom Cosmogony (Jenkins, 1837), Terwiel writes:

> Firstly, when confronted with words whose meaning was unclear, the Ahom priests appear to have augmented their incomplete knowledge by some spirited guesswork. Secondly, when providing conjectural solutions, they seem to have been guided to some extent by cosmological ideas found in some Hindu and Christian works. Thirdly, the translators apparently had no inkling of the basic grammatical rules in Tai languages (Terwiel, 1989, p. 126).

The translation thus reveals as much about the priests' interpretive frameworks as it does about the text itself: a cosmological vocabulary filling the gaps left by a grammatical one.

A substantial collection of manuscripts survives, and Tai Ahom continues to be used in religious rituals. Yet most manuscripts remain untranslated: the language is no longer generally understood by their custodians, many manuscripts have not been photographed or otherwise made available for study, and the loss of ritual knowledge has rendered certain references impossible to interpret (Morey, 2015, p. 40). There is a further, structural problem. Tai Ahom was a tonal language, as all members of the Tai family are. But the Ahom script does not record any of the tones or vowel lengths (Terwiel & Wichasin, 1992, p. 19). Morey (2018, p. 441) identifies the problems of inferring Tai Ahom tones as one of the greatest obstacles to reclaiming the language, laying out three possible approaches, though finding each of them wanting.

Researchers could reconstruct the original Ahom tones from historical evidence, the most demanding path. The language could instead model its tonal patterns on a related, still-spoken Tai language. Or it could move forward without tones altogether, reconstructed in a simplified, non-tonal form. This last option, Morey cautions, would introduce a problematic homophony and ambiguity: Because most words in the language are just one syllable long, a single written word can carry up to twenty different meanings (Morey, 2021, p. 217). Several smaller Tai groups (Aiton, Khamti, Khamyang, Phake, Turung) migrated to Assam between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries; their languages remained more or less mutually intelligible with Tai Ahom (Morey, 2018, p. 438). Among the related Tai languages, Tai Phake—still actively spoken, though severely endangered—has played a particularly important role in Tai Ahom reclamation, serving as a practical model for reconstructing features such as tone, while other languages like Aiton are considered potential but less frequently used reference sources (Morey, 2018, p. 441).

Terwiel, one of the foremost outside scholars of Ahom culture, has been less sympathetic about Tai Ahom language reclamation. In a section he titles "The Origin of a Pseudo-Ahom Language," he concludes that

> the priests did what they could, searching for clues in the annals, with the aid of dictionaries coining Ahom phrases, and, it is claimed in this paper, creating new ceremonial elements virtually out of thin air, thus producing a make-believe ancient ritual. (Terwiel, 1996, p. 289)

What makes the Tai Ahom language reclamation movement historically distinctive is its depth as well as its timing. Morey notes that the 1795 bilingual Assamese–Ahom dictionary was already “the first in many stages of a community-driven language revitalization” (Morey, 2018, p. 439). The modern institutional phase followed with the founding of the Tai Historical and Cultural Society of Assam at Patsaku in 1954 (Terwiel, 1996, p. 278), the All Assam Mohan Deodhai Bailung Sanmillon in 1962, and the North Eastern Tai Literary Association in 1981 (Hati Boruah, 2024, p. 99). Organized community reclamation efforts were thus underway here decades before the global wave of Indigenous language revitalization conventionally associated with the 1990s.

By 1994, the reclamation movement had gathered enough force for the Assam government, then headed by a Chief Minister of Tai Ahom heritage, to introduce Ahom as a subject in government primary schools across seven districts and appoint two hundred teachers for it (Morey, 2018, p. 442). Dibrugarh University had already offered a Tai Ahom language course since 1974. Digital resources, language workshops, and an expanding body of published lexicons followed. Morey’s assessment remains cautious. Interest in and general awareness of Tai Ahom have increased considerably over the past two decades, even if speakers of revived Tai Ahom have not yet reached the levels of fluency found in some other revitalization contexts (Morey, 2018, p. 444).