

# Thanksgiving tribe reclaims language lost to colonization

November 21 2017, by Philip Marcelo

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In this Thursday, Oct. 19, 2017, photo Massachusetts Institute of Technology archivist Nora Murphy places a second edition of the Eliot Indian Bible on a table at the MIT rare book collection, in Cambridge, Mass. The second edition of the Eliot Indian Bible, translated into Wampanoag, is dated 1685. Experts have relied on extensive written records in Wampanoag to reclaim the language, including 17th century phonetic translations of the King James Bible. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

The Massachusetts tribe whose ancestors shared a Thanksgiving meal with the Pilgrims nearly 400 years ago is reclaiming its long-lost language, one schoolchild at a time.

"Weesowee mahkusunash," says teacher Siobhan Brown, using the Wampanoag phrase for "yellow shoes" as she reads to a preschool class from Sandra Boynton's popular children's book "Blue Hat, Green Hat."

The Mukayuhsak Weekuw—or "Children's House"—is an immersion school launched by the Cape Cod-based Mashpee Wampanoag tribe, whose ancestors hosted a harvest celebration with the Pilgrims in 1621 that helped form the basis for the country's Thanksgiving tradition.

The 19 children from Wampanoag households that Brown and other teachers instruct are being taught exclusively in Wopanaotooaok, a language that had not been spoken for at least a century until the tribe started an effort to reclaim it more than two decades ago.

The language brought to the English lexicon words like pumpkin (spelled pohpukun in Wopanaotooaok), moccasin (mahkus), skunk (sukok), powwow (pawaw) and Massachusetts (masachoosut), but, like hundreds of other native tongues, fell victim to the erosion of indigenous culture through centuries of colonialism.



In this Saturday, Nov. 18, 2017, photo Toodie Coombs, of East Falmouth, Mass., right, distributes prayer pamphlets written in Wampanoag and English before the "We Gather Together" celebration at the Old Indian Meeting House, in Mashpee, Mass. The Mashpee Wampanoag tribe is in its second year of operating a preschool immersion program where only an indigenous language that had not been spoken for generations is uttered. The tribe also has launched language classes for high school students, tribal elders and tribal families. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

"From having had no speakers for six generations to having 500 students attend some sort of class in the last 25 years? It's more than I could have ever expected in my lifetime," says Jessie "Little Doe" Baird, the tribe's vice chairwoman, who is almost singularly responsible for the rebirth of the language, which tribal members refer to simply as Wampanoag (pronounced WAHM'-puh-nawg).

Now in its second year, the immersion school is a key milestone in Baird's legacy, but it's not the only way the tribe is ensuring its language is never lost again.

At the public high school, seven students are enrolled in the district's first Wampanoag language class, which is funded and staffed by the tribe.

Up the road, volunteers host free language learning sessions for families each Friday at the Mashpee Wampanoag Indian Museum.



In this Saturday, Nov. 18, 2017 photo Jessie "Little Doe" Baird, front right, vice chairwoman of the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe, hugs a member of the audience following the "We Gather Together" celebration at the Old Indian Meeting House, in Mashpee, Mass. For more than two decades, linguists, including Baird, have struggled to reclaim the ancient language of the Wampanoags, the tribe that helped the Pilgrims survive nearly 400 years ago. Now the tribe is in its second year of operating a preschool immersion program and has launched language

classes for high school students, tribal elders and tribal families. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

And within the tribe's government building—one floor up from the immersion school—tribal elders gather twice a week for an hourlong lesson before lunch.

"Sometimes it goes in one ear and out the other," confesses Pauline Peters, a 78-year-old Hyannis resident who has been attending the informal sessions for about three years. "It takes us elders a while to get things. The kids at the immersion school correct us all the time."

The movement to revitalize native American languages started gaining traction in the 1990s and today, most of country's more than 550 tribes are engaged in some form of language preservation work, says Diana Cournoyer, of the National Indian Education Association.

But the Mashpee Wampanoag stand out because they're one of the few tribes to have brought back their language despite not having any surviving adult speakers, says Teresa McCarty, a cultural anthropologist and applied linguist at the University of California Los Angeles.



In this Oct. 12, 2017, photo Wampanoag language students Trish Keliinui, of Mashpee, Mass., left, Toodie Coombs, of East Falmouth, Mass., center, and Kitty Hendricks-Miller, of Mashpee, Mass., right, laugh during a class at the Wampanoag Tribe Community and Government Center, in Mashpee, Mass. The Mashpee Wampanoag are one of the few tribes to have brought back their language despite not having any surviving adult speakers, says Teresa McCarty, a cultural anthropologist and applied linguist at the University of California Los Angeles. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

"Imagine learning to speak, read, and write a language that you have never heard spoken and for which no oral records exist," she says. "It's a human act of brilliance, faith, courage, commitment and hope."

Jessie Baird was in her 20s, had no college degree and zero training in linguistics when a dream inspired her to start learning Wampanoag in the early 1990s.

Working with linguistic experts at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and other tribal members, Baird developed a dictionary of Wampanoag and a grammar guide.

She and others drew on historical documents written in Wampanoag—including personal diaries of tribal members, Colonial-era land claims and a version of the King James Bible printed in 1663 that is considered one of the oldest ever printed in the Western hemisphere.



In this Oct. 12, 2017 photo a child in a combined pre-kindergarten and kindergarten Wampanoag language immersion class removes kernels from an ear of corn at the Wampanoag Tribe Community and Government Center, in Mashpee, Mass. The Mashpee Wampanoag tribe in Massachusetts is in its second year of operating a preschool immersion program where only an indigenous language that had not been spoken for generations is uttered. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

To fill in the gaps, they turned to words, pronunciations and other auditory cues from related Algonquian languages still spoken today.

The work landed Baird at MIT, where she earned a graduate degree in linguistics in 2000 and a prestigious MacArthur Foundation genius grant in 2010.

Nearly three decades on, the tribe is still in need of more adults fluent in the language to continue expanding its immersion school and other youth-focused language efforts—the keys to ensuring the language's survival, says Jennifer Weston, director of the tribe's language department.

The school currently enrolls pre-K and kindergarten-age children but hopes to ramp up to middle school within five years.

"The goal is really to have bilingual speakers emerge from our school," Weston says. "And we've seen from other tribal communities that if you want children to retain the language, you have to invest in elementary education. Otherwise the gains just disappear."





In this Oct. 12, 2017, photo Toodie Coombs, of East Falmouth, Mass., left, points toward household objects lying on a table with other Wampanoag language students as they identify the objects using the language during a class at the Wampanoag Tribe Community and Government Center, in Mashpee, Mass. The Mashpee Wampanoag are one of the few tribes to have brought back their language despite not having any surviving adult speakers, says Teresa McCarty, a cultural anthropologist and applied linguist at the University of California Los Angeles. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)



In this Oct. 12, 2017, photo children in a combined pre-kindergarten and kindergarten Wampanoag language immersion class work on their lessons at the Wampanoag Tribe Community and Government Center, in Mashpee, Mass. A dozen or so adults and dozens of youngsters have gained at least some proficiency in their ancestors' tongue, which vanished as more colonists arrived and displaced the native people from their homelands in what's now Massachusetts and Rhode Island. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

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