

# Lost languages mean lost cultures

## How an ASU professor and students are helping Native American communities in the Southwest revitalize their languages

By Kristen LaRue-Sandler, ASU News  
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By Alyssa Arns and Kristen LaRue-Sandler

What if your language disappeared?

Over the span of human existence, civilizations have come and gone. For many, the absence of written records means we know little about their languages, knowledge systems or ways of life.

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### Join us for an oral history event with speakers of Kwevkepaya

At noon Tuesday, April 15, the ASU Humanities Institute hosts the presentation, “há t'ámchoo 'úme: A Kwevkepaya Language Oral History of the Orme Dam,” featuring research by Tyler Peterson and members of the Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation. Through a series of interviews and dialogues conducted in the Kwevkepaya language, guests will experience the unique history, insights and narratives of the Orme Dam events from the community’s perspective — one that is lacking in the received history of the Orme Dam project.

Those who did leave traces — like the Sumerians and ancient Egyptians — have inspired our imaginations. But not only that — the knowledge that these cultures amassed in some cases has even become the bedrock of later innovations.

While it's unlikely that the English language will disappear anytime soon, other languages are not in as fortunate a position.

[Tyler Peterson](#) is an assistant professor in the [Department of English](#) at Arizona State University whose work focuses on the documentation, revitalization and maintenance of endangered languages, especially those of Native North America and the Southwest U.S.

According to Peterson, language revitalization benefits both the specific language community and nonspeakers alike. It deepens cultural understanding and enriches education for everyone.

“Language is a vessel for historical memory — it holds place names, cultural values, ceremonial knowledge, and the stories of resistance and survival.”

Indigenous languages around the world are disappearing at an alarming rate, with the [United Nations estimating](#) that a language goes extinct every two weeks.

“There are hundreds of Indigenous languages spoken in North America,” said Peterson. “Most of these languages are critically endangered, some with only a handful of fluent speakers, often elderly. Without sustained revitalization efforts and programs, that number could drop to a dozen or fewer within our lifetimes.”

**Read more:** [Internship teaches ASU students the skills of language documentation; group works with Native communities to maintain languages](#)

In addition to cultural loss, the problem has implications for community health, scientific research, ecological knowledge — and even national defense. Many Americans are now familiar with the [Navajo Code Talkers](#), who developed an unbreakable military code based on their Native language during World War II. Their work is credited with helping the Allies win the war.

## **In the community, for the community, with the community**

Peterson does not do this critical language work alone — or in a silo. He collaborates closely with several Native American communities in the Southwest, including the [Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation](#), the [Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community](#), the [San Carlos Apache Tribe](#), and the [Pueblo of Santa Ana](#), supporting the development of their language documentation, reclamation and education initiatives.

Peterson follows the tribes' guidance on their priorities, whether it's building an archive of oral histories, developing pedagogical materials or co-authoring scholarly work.

Last summer, for example, Peterson partnered with the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community to co-lead a local gathering of [CoLang](#), the biennial event put on by the Institute on

"This isn't just a historical exhibit — it's a living, breathing language reclamation effort shaped by community members," Peterson said.

[Register for the event.](#)

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Collaborative Language Research. ASU and Scottsdale Community College [hosted](#) the world's leading Indigenous language activists, community scholars and students to provide training in language documentation, technology and collaborative practices in June 2024.

The focus of CoLang 2024 was on the two languages spoken in the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community: Piipaash (Maricopa) and Pima. Through a series of intensive workshops, ASU students and participants from around the world had the special opportunity to work one-on-one with speakers of these languages, thus raising the visibility of language revitalization work at ASU and the fruitful partnerships the university has with its tribal neighbors.

Through a fellowship from the [ASU Humanities Institute](#), Peterson was able to deepen his relationships with Native American community partners in the Southwest. An outcome of these enhanced community ties was the development of a writing system for Tamayame, the language spoken in the Pueblo of Santa Ana, New Mexico, of which there are less than 100 living speakers.

The Humanities Institute funding also supported Native American collaborators and language consultants for their time and expertise, enabled sustained fieldwork, helped build accessible archives and community resources, and provided training opportunities for students.

Using this as a foundation, Peterson was awarded funding by the Administration for Native Americans — a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services — the [National Science Foundation](#), and the [U.S. Department of Agriculture NextGen program](#) to further the research and language reclamation efforts on Yavapai and Tamayame.

## **Student participation and professionalization is key**

The federal funding also enabled ASU students to attend CoLang 2024 and to develop research projects on Piipaash, Yavapai and Tamayame languages. Five graduate students in [ASU's linguistics and applied linguistics program](#) were given the opportunity to work with Peterson and the Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation on a linguistic oral history project.

In addition, there is now considerable interest among the undergraduate students in taking up the cause of Native American language documentation and community work. As part of the NSF grant, summer fellowships for undergraduates will be offered during summer 2025 to work with the Cocopah language, spoken in the Yuma area.

"Locally, these projects help sustain intergenerational knowledge transfer, support community-based education and affirm the cultural sovereignty of Indigenous nations," Peterson said.

Peterson added that linguistic-historical synthesis also creates opportunities to re-evaluate and add accountability to the analysis of historical events. Finally, language preservation provides pathways for students with linguistics training to work for tribes and their language programs, showing how a linguistics degree can be put to meaningful use in the real world.

Linguistics graduate student William "Bill" Hartt is completing a [mentored research project](#) with Peterson this semester. Hartt is helping document the [Yavapai](#) language, a system with several dialects spoken exclusively by Arizona tribes, including Fort McDowell.

“Learning about the structure of language is extremely important, and the vast majority of what we as a society learn about human language is learned from languages which are underdocumented,” Hartt said.

The [Tamayama Language Resources Project](#), funded by the [National Endowment for the Humanities](#), is a direct outgrowth of the project funded by the Humanities Institute. This project is a collaborative initiative with the Pueblo of Santa Ana aimed at documenting and revitalizing the Tamayame language by supporting the creation of a digital, community-based archive of recorded texts, lexical and grammatical resources, and culturally grounded teaching materials.

Designed in close partnership with tribal leadership, the project aligns with intergenerational language transmission goals within the community.

However, funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities was revoked in early April as part of the Department of Government Efficiency’s cuts to that agency.

“Without funds to sustain these efforts, languages and the cultural worldviews they carry are put into further precarity,” said Ron Broglio, director of ASU’s Humanities Institute. “Nevertheless, I’m proud of our faculty and the Native American communities that persist in the work.”

*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



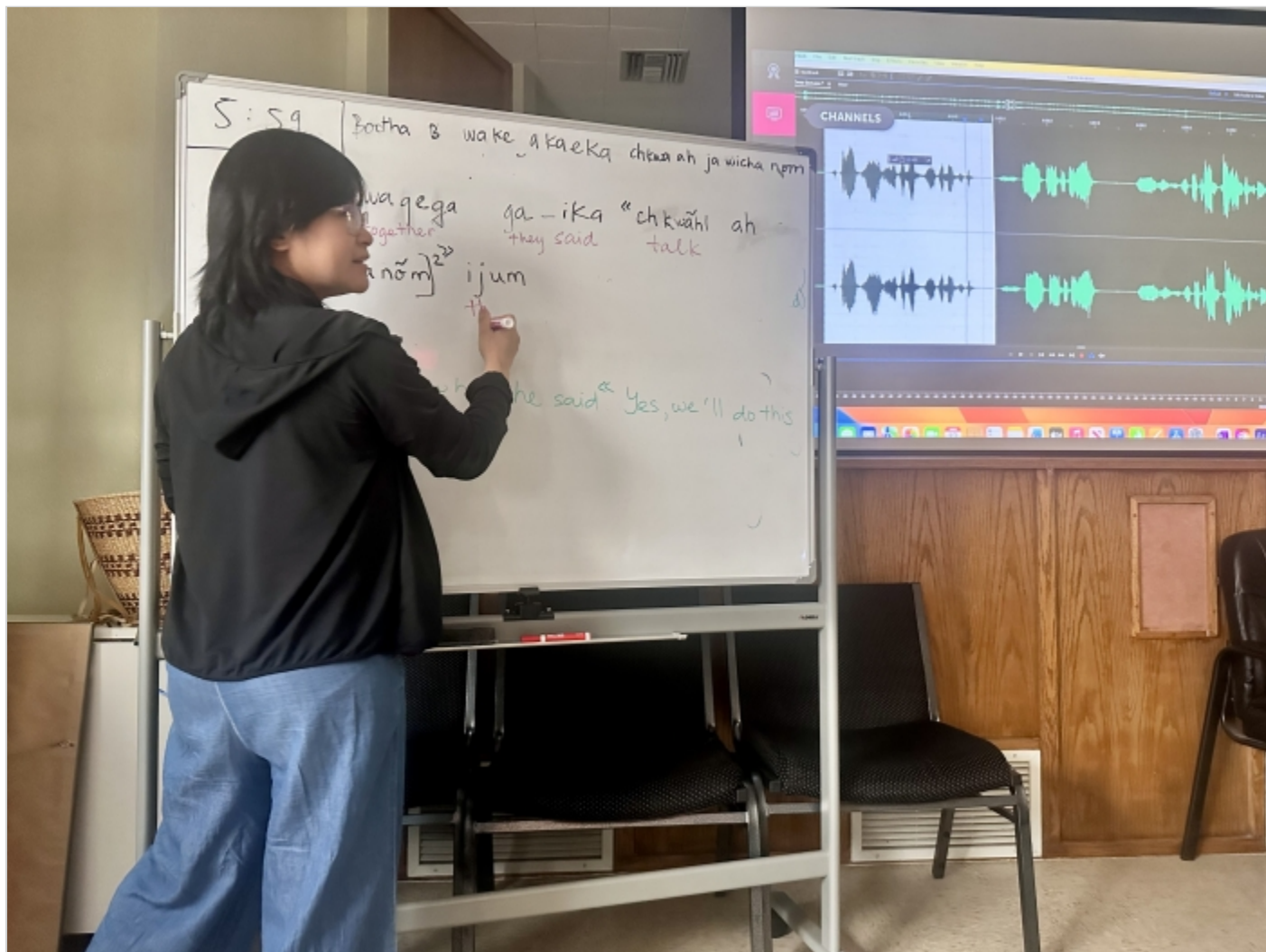
Tyler Peterson is an assistant professor in the Department of English at Arizona State University whose work focuses on the documentation, revitalization and maintenance of endangered languages, especially those of Native North America and the Southwest U.S. Photo by Deanna Dent/ASU News

**Text image(s)**





[An Sakach](#) (left), an assistant teaching professor of Vietnamese in the School of International Letters and Cultures and a graduate student in linguistics and applied linguistics at ASU, sits with Clissene Lewis, director of the Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation's [Cultural Center and Museum](#), to work on a language activity. Photo by Tyler Peterson/ASU



ASU graduate student An Sakach completes a linguistics exercise while working with the Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation. Sakach is completing her PhD research on the Yavapai language. Photo by Tyler Peterson/ASU