



Myaamia Language Revitalization

nipwaayoni

For the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, language revitalization is part of a larger, complex community-driven renewal effort characterized as *Myaamiaki Eemamwiciki* 'The Miami Awaken.' This larger endeavor is driven by a shared vision that provides a strong community and cultural context necessary for supporting, encouraging, and promoting language in contemporary settings.

At the core of this community vision is a recognition that our survival as a unique cultural group hinges on our ability to strengthen our kinship ties in positive and supportive ways around a shared knowledge and value system. This kin-based knowledge and value system is referred to as *Myaamia nipwaayoni iisinaakosioni* 'Myaamia ways of knowing and being.'

Therefore, language revitalization emerges more specifically, as a primary thread within a multi-faceted community revitalization effort. Language development at the individual level is experienced first as a source for shaping Myaamia identity and secondarily, with increased proficiency, as a means of communication. It is understood that language and culture are the most efficient and effective means of communicating and expressing *Myaamia nipwaayoni iisinaakosioni*.

Myaamia language revitalization efforts are archive-based due to the loss of speakers during the mid 20th century. Working with archives as a sole source for language requires extensive linguistic analysis, reconstruction, and archival development. Archive-based revitalization efforts significantly slow language development, making language revitalization an intergenerational effort.

Manuscripts documenting *Myaamiaataweenki* 'Miami language' spanning nearly 270 years (from the late 1600s through 1960s) constitute extant language entries that are analyzed and used to expand the repertoire of available terms. Working from archives that serve as the sole source of linguistic information require different tools and approaches than would be necessary if speakers were available. Information gaps are common in the records and greater understanding of language and cultural knowledge must be achieved over time before attempting to fill these gaps with new language. Cultural shifts also occur over time and semantic shifting is a necessity for expressing aspects of life that have changed since the time of the

documentation. For a language to be useful for present day activities it has to grow and be applicable with terms for concepts and mechanisms that have changed from past times. The requisite research and development of appropriate terminology is another necessary component of this approach.

Although there are challenges inherent in this effort, presently, everyday terms and expressions, such as *aya* 'greetings' and *neewe* 'thanks', are now familiar among many tribal members. Although small, these are indicators of the language effort beginning to take a root at the community level.

Language learning opportunities for members who are interested has taken on a variety of community program formats, including:

- Summer Youth Educational Experiences, such as Saakaciweeta ('emerge') for ages 6-9 and *Eewansaapita* ('sunrise') for ages 10-16, are held in Oklahoma and Indiana. These programs focus on goals of having fun while simultaneously building connections to language, culture and other participants. Themes tied to various aspects of knowledge building (e.g. Earth and Sky, Song and Dance, Living off the Land) rotate over summers intertwining the associated language integral to each theme. Approximately 80 participants annually in all youth programs.
- Classes at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio for Miami Heritage Award Program recipients include required studies throughout their time in school including explorations of tribal history, ecology, culture, and language. Approximately 30 students annually.
- Outreach workshops for diasporic community members (e.g., in Kansas, Washington, Indiana) introduce language by infusing applicable terms into information about history and culture. Approximately 75 participants annually.

The *Nipwaayoni* Acquisition and Assessment Team (NAAT) was initially created to describe the impact of language and cultural learning on youth identity formation. More recently, the assessment team is creating qualitative measures that look specifically at language practices among learners and will ultimately

deepen our understanding of the role of language in the community today.

Although 'immersive moments' do occur on occasion among those who maintain a higher proficiency, achieving high levels of language fluency across a broader community is not a goal at this time. For this community, language will emerge more slowly and broadly from a strategic approach to education that contextualizes language within cultural and community domains created by the individual, sometimes in the home, and among the community during regular gatherings and events. The NAAT will continue to report on these developments as their work progresses.