

## **Background**

AILDI has had a long-standing interest in determining the value of language assessments to Native American communities. In 2013, AILDI received funding (NSF #1316698) to host a national conference (June, 2013) titled “Revisiting the State of Indigenous Languages.” The conference goal was to consider the effect that the Native American Languages Act (NALA) has had on the state of indigenous languages. AILDI convened Native American language speakers, educators, activists, students, linguists and others for reflection and dialogue. The conference provided an opportunity to engage in a critical examination of the history of U.S. indigenous languages, the existing documentation related to language vitality and the methodologies used to assess it (or not). Among the outcomes was the recognition that, since the establishment of NALA, there is no “silver bullet” for to halt language loss or deter language shift. (April Counciller June18, 2013). [Click here to see featured speakers from the conference.](#)

In 2014, AILDI held three Arizona focus-group sessions: July 18, 2014 in Phoenix, July 23, 2014 in Tucson and September 19 in Yuma. These meetings brought together representatives from 16 of the 22 Arizona tribes to discuss their interest in participating in a statewide survey and to gather their thoughts on the need for a national assessment. These include Quechan, Pascua Yaqui, Yavapai (3 reservations), Apache (White Mountain and San Carlos), Hopi, Hualapai, Chemehuevi, Mohave, Tohono O’odham, Akimel O’odham (Gila River) and Maricopa (Salt River), Cocopah and Navajo. The structure of and questions raised for the meetings were modeled after the Inuit Circumpolar Council’s project 2012), “Assessing the Vitality of Arctic Indigenous Languages Workshop.” Participants were asked to consider the following relevant questions for discussion:

- What are your/your community’s experiences with language assessments?
- What are your priorities regarding the use and development of a language vitality assessment?
- What do you see as a benefit of a language vitality assessment?
- How do we make sure that a national language vitality assessment would be useful and relevant to Native communities?

The discussion yielded insight on two clear points: *First*, a number of communities were or had engaged in surveys of their own (some of these were related to ANA funding and some to the voter-enacted Arizona initiative of “First Things First,” a statewide early childhood program). Five communities attending these meetings shared their experiences with community-based assessment tools and strategies (Gila River Indian Community, San Carlos Apache, Ak-Chin Indian Community, Camp Verde Yavapai, and Hopi). *Second*, there was *overwhelming* agreement that a national survey was needed. However, while statistics may prove beneficial to funding agencies and some tribal communities and organizations, many of the participants felt they did not know how to make good use of such survey results. Input from these communities will inform framework development, the creation of assessment tools, and the needed information-collecting protocols. The attending tribes agreed that they would benefit from a statewide and national assessment in that they would:

- Give validity and integrity to efforts at the local level.
- Lend support to more than just language efforts. The assessment could inform ongoing political struggles regarding land claims, tribal recognition claims, controversial issues over place names, The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and related issues of artifact ownership encoded in language and, of course, the need for more language-focused funding.
- Document Indigenous perspectives in terms of defining the discourse around culturally distinct knowledge.
- Provide comparative data collection that would lend itself to identifying very specific language issues that impact language and culture efforts, and assessing their efforts toward development and growth of language programs (aimed at both the documentation of indigenous languages and specific pedagogical concerns).

Based on the feedback from tribal representatives, AILDI submitted a proposal to the National Science Foundation in 2014 to pilot the development of an Indigenous informed assessment tool that was not funded. A revised proposal that was submitted and funded in 2016 comprises the current Language Vitality project.