

# PRESERVING IDENTITY

by Julie Irvine (Editing and Publishing '23)

Over 7,000 languages are spoken in our world today, but each year, nine of those languages become extinct, meaning they are no longer spoken.<sup>1</sup> When this happens, the world loses a wealth of history, knowledge, and culture. To help with preservation efforts, BYU linguists work with Indigenous communities to document their languages and provide sustainable language learning and teaching resources for future generations.

“Language is essential to a community’s sense of self,” says Associate Professor Dirk Elzinga (Native Languages of Utah). Because many Indigenous groups have oral cultures (meaning knowledge, history, and language are passed from generation to generation orally instead of graphically), language is an essential factor in preserving their culture and shared identity.

Elzinga studies the phonology of the Ute language and recently started language documentation projects with the Ute Mountain Utes in southwestern Colorado. His research has concluded that fewer

<sup>1</sup> [languageconservancy.org/language-loss/#](https://www.languageconservancy.org/language-loss/#)

than one out of five tribal members are speakers of their heritage language. For these communities, “language has become an endangered part of their identity,” Elzinga explains.

To aid in preserving that identity, Elzinga documents languages by conducting recorded interviews and distributing questionnaires. This process enables him to develop a picture of the language’s sound and grammar systems. He analyzes how speakers of the language “make words, how words come together to form sentences, the parts of a traditional story, and how the speakers organize a conversation.” The Native communities then use the resulting materials in ways that best serve their needs—whether those needs include



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teaching materials, language acquisition research, dictionaries, or online resources.

Another linguist, Associate Professor Chris Rogers (Language Documentation for Historical and Typological Research), says, “People realize they’re part of a global community—they have to use a global language like Spanish, English, or Mandarin—but they also have this unique identity. And it connects them to their past in ways that other things can’t.”

Rogers serves Indigenous communities in Central and South America where there are as few as four living speakers of the language. He works alongside Iñapari speakers in Peru, Wichí speakers in Ar-

## UTE

[ˈjuːt]

lyanam nüm  
uruhnikas Nuuchiu.  
[ijænəm nɪm  
urɪnɪkʰæs nuːtʃiu]  
↳ “We, the Ute People,  
are still here.”

Nuuch, Nuuchiu  
[nuːtʃ, nuːtʃiu]  
↳ “Ute person,  
Ute people”

Nuu’apagap  
[nuːʔapapap]  
↳ “Ute language”

maykw tügüvün  
[majkʰ tɪɣivʰɪn]  
↳ “Hello, friend”

## XINKA

[ˈɪŋka]

ayaalha [aˈjaːʰa]  
↳ “woman”

huurak [huːrak]  
↳ “man”

mento [mento]  
↳ “hello”

map’u [ˈmap’u]  
↳ “tortilla”

üylhüw’a [ij’ɪw’a]  
↳ “honey”

Chumu: [ˈtʃumu]  
↳ “indigenous person”

tz’uulhi: [ts’uːɪ]  
↳ “non-indigenous person”

## IÑAPARI

[iɲaˈpaɾi]

hirimatiri [hirimaˈtiri]  
↳ “tiger”

anawá [anaˈva]  
↳ “canoe”

anáwa [aˈnava]  
↳ “they/them”

anawá [anaˈvã]  
↳ “catahua tree”

ahi: [aˈhi]  
↳ “person” as a general term,  
but this is always bound  
by specific suffixes:  
*ahichi, ahitu, ahina*

“Language is essential to a community’s sense of self.”



Photo by Jaren Wilkey / BYU Photo

gentina, Xinka speakers in Guatemala, and others. To document their languages, Rogers first records interviews with native speakers, then he determines the system their language follows and notes the interesting qualities. Rogers applies his research based on the goals of the community. For example, the Iñapari had already created a written system to preserve their language, so Rogers assisted their documentation efforts by creating a dictionary to supplement the existing materials.

The College of Humanities is the home of all languages taught at BYU, where over 70 are offered regularly. However, while students often fill Spanish or Mandarin courses to capacity—often because of their relevance

in business—lesser-known language courses may only have a handful of students per semester. “BYU is a linguistically diverse community,” Rogers says, “but we need to recognize that these smaller languages are valuable and worth our time.”

We learn languages to connect with and respect cultures and people outside of our limited experiences. In doing so, we can both support efforts to preserve lesser-known languages and cultures and also see others as fellow brothers and sisters whose perspectives expand our understanding. 📖