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Rosetta Stone & Navajo Language Renaissance: Collaboration for Revitalization

Abstract

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In August 2010, the language-learning software company Rosetta Stone, through its Endangered Language Program (ELP) and in partnership with the nonprofit organization Navajo Language Renaissance (NLR), launched two levels of its well-known software for the Diné Bizaad (Navajo) language. Significantly, control over the sale and distribution of this software was placed entirely in the hands of NLR, a group of Navajo language educators dedicated to preserving their language. This policy – the same policy adopted by the Rosetta Stone ELP for all its projects – provided the NLR with both autonomy in determining who could access their language and 100% of the profits made from sales. It was a unique moment in the history of language revitalization work. Since then, NLR has strived to see the Rosetta Stone software made available in every school within the Navajo Nation as well as in every chapter house. In addition, efforts are underway to create ancillary materials for use with the software in schools, and a Rosetta Stone-correlated test will soon serve as a Navajo language assessment for the prestigious Chief Manuelito Scholarship.

This presentation recounts how the Navajo Rosetta Stone project came to fruition, including various challenges encountered along the way, their solutions, and the lessons learned from them. One challenge was how to customize content and pedagogy designed for large commercial markets to better reflect the needs and culture of a local language community. Because ELP projects are primarily community-driven collaborative efforts, another challenge was to incorporate and balance input from a variety of sources in the community – politicians, immersion language educators at the primary and secondary levels, educators in higher education, professional linguists, speakers of different dialects, native-speaking voice actors, etc. As to the language itself, the team wrestled frequently with decisions concerning choice of lexicon, prompting a collaborative decision-making approach that helped to mediate conflict among stakeholders. One final language-related issue was how to teach a language with extremely complex verbal inflection, including rampant morphophonological changes and a system of classificatory verbs, with only the L2, a core tenet of Rosetta Stone's pedagogy. The team's solutions to all of these problems will be proffered as potential guidance for other language teams likely to encounter similar problems.

Finally, as with any language revitalization project, assessment is crucial to understanding what language revitalization strategies worked well, and which fell flat, so that other language communities (as well as ourselves) can learn from our successes and failures. Although it is still much too early for any kind of thorough assessment of this project's impact, this presentation ends with a look at some of the early results and impacts, in the hope that this unique collaboration will eventually give life to a new Navajo language renaissance.