SIL International
Partners in Language Development

Équipe pour mettre les langues en valeur
Colaborando en el desarrollo de los idiomas autóctonos

语言发展合作伙伴

Партнёры по развитию национальных языков

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SIL International: Partners in Language Development™

SIL International® is a faith-based nonprofit organization committed to serving language communities worldwide as they develop the skills and capacity necessary to preserve and revitalize their languages. As an international nongovernmental organization (INGO), SIL actively participates in networks and partnerships—with government organizations, local groups and other INGOs—which are vital to the support of minority language communities in their own language development efforts.

SIL International grew out of one man’s concern for people speaking ethnolinguistic minority languages that lacked written alphabets. William Cameron Townsend started SIL in 1934 as a small summer linguistics training program with two students. It has expanded into an organization of more than 5,500 people coming from over 60 countries. SIL has conducted linguistic analysis in more than 2,590 languages spoken by 1.7 billion people in nearly 100 countries.

SIL’s field linguists work in partnership with minority language speakers to collect, analyze, organize and publish language and culture data. SIL workers serve as technical advisors, teachers, consultants and facilitators. As an international advocate for ethnolinguistic minority language speakers, SIL is dedicated to supporting ethnic minority peoples worldwide in their efforts to preserve their languages and cultural identities in the 21st century.

SIL makes its services available to all without regard to religious belief, political ideology, gender, race or ethnic background.

Language is fundamental to one’s identity and to a sense of community and personal value.

SIL believes that every person has worth, and that worth can be affirmed through language development.

In many ways, we are the language or languages we speak.
Language Development

Language development is a series of ongoing, planned actions that a language community takes to ensure that their language continues to serve their changing social, cultural, political, economic and spiritual needs and goals. To assist in this process, SIL supports community efforts to produce written descriptions of its language, develop a dictionary, create written literature—including graded reading materials for use in schools—and establish education programs that enable learners to build both a strong foundation in their home language and a good bridge to the language of education.

SIL also works alongside minority ethnolinguistic communities to research endangered languages and cultures. SIL facilitates the publication of research in linguistics, anthropology and ethnomusicology and makes its own published research available to libraries, governments and international agencies.

Bilingual Dictionary Documents Mother Tongue

“The Timugon Murut language will be in danger of dying out along with other ethnic minority languages if we do nothing to preserve it.” A Malaysian minister spoke these words at a local ceremony to celebrate the first Timugon Murut-Malay dictionary. Timugon is one of the Murut people groups, a major ethnic group in Sabah, Malaysia.

Published after two decades of meticulous research by many, the bilingual dictionary contains 3,700 word roots. The project began while SIL field linguists were working with mother-tongue speakers to document Timugon linguistic and cultural data. The Finnish High Commission provided financial support for the publication costs. During his address, a high-level official in the Prime Minister’s Department stated that the dictionary’s successful completion signified a major achievement in the effort to preserve the mother tongues of the people of Sabah.

The minister also noted that this dictionary was another step toward providing teaching materials in the event that the language might one day be taught in Malaysian schools. The minister pointed out that the government is sympathetic to the proposal of mother-tongue education in schools if, in the future, teaching materials and staff are available.
Strategic partnerships between SIL, national governments and nongovernmental organizations provide a network of expertise and resources that serve the world’s linguistic minority communities. SIL also networks worldwide with academic institutions and local organizations—as well as with local communities and religious institutions—to equip members of minority language communities for leadership roles in language development and multilingual education. The use of the mother tongue in both formal and nonformal educational programs as well as in the distribution of vital information is also promoted through partnerships.

As a nongovernmental organization, SIL has special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and formal consultative relations with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Such affiliations provide a platform for SIL to contribute to the global dialogue on language development and multilingual education.

Partners in Battle Against HIV/AIDS

In Equatorial Guinea, SIL has joined with language communities, the government and local and international businesses to produce and distribute health information brochures in four languages—15,000 focusing on HIV/AIDS and 15,000 addressing infant dysentery. These full-color brochures were printed by SIL in the country’s two official languages—Spanish and French; and in two local languages—Fang and Kome.

The six-page HIV/AIDS brochure was adapted from a booklet designed by SIL and approved by the Faculty of Medicine of the National University of Equatorial Guinea. Hospitals, clinics, pharmacies, schools and churches in the continental region distribute the brochures. The national Ministry of Mines, Industry and Energy, and several international corporations provided funds for the project.

SIL also works together with Consejo de Investigaciones Científicas y Tecnológicas* (CICTE) in language research and development. At the request of UNICEF, SIL and CICTE submitted a proposal to produce 100,000 more HIV/AIDS brochures in seven languages of Equatorial Guinea for distribution in 110 communities. Education in the local languages is viewed as key to reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS across Africa.

*Council of Scientific and Technological Research
Capacity Building

Ethnolinguistic minority communities are developing the skills and expertise needed to conduct and sustain their own language development and education programs. As technical consultants, SIL personnel work alongside local communities in this capacity-building process by conducting language-related workshops to train community leaders. SIL also helps community leaders to establish partnerships with other supporting agencies and to develop the community infrastructures necessary to sustain their programs.

SIL, in partnership with educational institutions and other organizations, offers courses for language work at more than 20 locations around the world. Participants in these training programs develop technical expertise in linguistics, translation, literacy, educational and intercultural development, program management, communications and technology.

A STEP Toward Local Language Education

Papua New Guinea (PNG) has over 800 language groups scattered across its 452,840 square kilometers (288,000 square miles). The government faces a major challenge to provide mother-tongue educational materials for so many languages.

Initially developed by SIL, the STEP* literacy training course equips Papua New Guineans to serve their own communities by initiating and sustaining mother-tongue education and literacy programs for all ages. STEP course participants learn the main components of a successful literacy program—including materials production, community involvement and advocacy.

STEP is now directed by a local nongovernmental organization, the Bible Translation Association of Papua New Guinea, and SIL continues to provide staff for the two-year course which consists of five one-month classroom modules. After each classroom module, course participants return to their communities to complete assignments to practice the concepts and skills they have learned.

“STEP has helped my community with many new things as a result of the assignments I was given to do in the village,” said Philip Poingi, a teacher from the Ngaing language, Madang Province.

Many STEP graduates have become community leaders, and some have become teachers in the national bilingual education system. Two STEP graduates currently supervise sixteen classes serving 960 children in the Ramaainai language of East New Britain Province. They have trained 23 teachers and also support the PNG government’s elementary education program through training and material production.

*STEP= Strengthening Tokples Education in Papua New Guinea
Tokples = ‘mother tongue’ in Melanesian (Pidgin) English

INDONESIA—Capacity building includes competence, confidence, creativity and credibility. During a community development seminar led by SIL fieldworkers, participants gained new skills, including building musical instruments and creating new songs in their own language.

PERU—Students from many countries attend SIL language development courses at Curso Internacional de Lingüística, Traducción y Alfabetización (CILTA), an SIL training program at Universidad Ricardo Palma in Lima.

PHILIPPINES—SIL aviation staff works alongside Filipino nationals in the daily operation of the aviation program.

ADADEMIC TRAINING http://www.sil.org/training
Literacy and Multilingual Education

Lifelong education enables minority language communities to gain the knowledge and skills they need to meet their needs and achieve their goals. A primary activity for SIL is to support communities in their efforts to develop education programs that enable children and adults to become fluent readers and writers in their own mother tongue and also to gain fluency in a language of wider communication.

Through multilingual education, minority language communities build positive bridges with dominant local languages without sacrificing their heritage, language and culture. Multilingual education also opens the door to new information and new avenues for communication. SIL responds to requests from local, regional and national agencies to assist minority language communities in developing culturally appropriate basic literacy, bilingual and multilingual education programs.

Tapestry of Linguistic and Cultural Diversity

There was silence. The crowded schoolroom was full of parents and grandparents sitting on tiny stools and wooden benches. After what seemed like a long time, one of the oldest men present spoke.

"Since this literacy project began, I have observed two main changes. First, our children now enjoy going to school. Second, they now have confidence to perform in front of others. No words can express how grateful we are!"

This meeting preceded the fifth year of the nine-year Dong bilingual education pilot project in Zaidong village, Guizhou Province. In this project, children build a good educational foundation in oral and written Dong in two pre-primary years. Beginning in Grade One, they transition into oral Mandarin Chinese, China’s national language. In Grade Two, a gradual transition begins into written Mandarin. This transition process continues through Grade Six.

The idea for this bilingual project was conceived in October 1998, and has been promoted under the leadership of Professor Long Yaohong, a Dong man who is a college principal at the Guizhou Institute for Nationalities and also a representative at the annual People’s National Congress in Beijing. SIL provided consultant help for the project.

The goal is to help Dong children become literate in their own language and learn Mandarin, enabling them to participate meaningfully in wider Chinese society. Another significant goal is the preservation of Dong heritage in the 21st century. This contributes to the colorful tapestry of the linguistic and cultural environment in China and the world.
Linguistics

Through its fieldwork, SIL helps to document the undocumented languages of the world. SIL linguists provide quality research and mentor others to produce linguistic descriptions: phonologies, grammars and dictionaries. SIL’s field linguists work in partnership with minority language speakers to collect, analyze, organize and publish language data.

Applied linguistics has traditionally been the foundation for SIL’s work in literacy and translation. Working together with a community to analyze and document its unique language affirms the value of the language and its speakers. Developing a body of written literature and using the language in education raises the status of the language and sustains it as a means of communication within the community.

Dictionary for An Endangered Language

Over 50 years ago SIL fieldworkers began working with the Seri people of Mexico. At that point there were 215 Seri speakers. Their lives were evolving from a desert hunter-gatherer society to one based on commercial fishing. As key Seri people participated in developing a writing system and producing reading materials in their language, their once vulnerable linguistic heritage was reinforced.

The SIL team helped Seri speakers create a written history and booklets of local stories and translated other materials into the Seri language. Subsequent Seri literature led to improvements to their writing system, which encouraged Seri speakers to learn to read and write the language. In 1985, a Seri publication on ethnobotany provided new data for the worldwide scientific community.

During the early years of language development, a small dictionary was printed; but in 2005 the Seri community—now numbering over 800—can boast of a 950-page trilingual dictionary (Seri-Spanish-English). Many older members of the Seri community who still have knowledge of a fast-disappearing world were directly involved in the dictionary project. Funding partners included Universidad de Sonora, the Sonora State Government, Instituto Sonorense de Cultura and the United States National Science Foundation.

Individuals from the international scientific community, interested in the unique flora and fauna in the Seri environment, also contributed to the project. Various specialists provided important help on plants, insects, reptiles and amphibians, fish, mammals, mollusks and birds. The daughter of the SIL couple working with the Seri—who had grown up in the Seri community and learned the language as a child—created over 600 illustrations for the dictionary.
Creative Strategies

In a changing world, SIL joins with partner organizations to create innovative approaches that support many ethnic minorities in their linguistic analyses and literature development. The availability of cutting-edge technology at the grassroots level results in added input and discoveries from local communities.

One language revitalization method—the cluster approach—involves a consultant team working alongside teams from several related languages. This strategy takes advantage of these languages' linguistic and cultural similarities, enabling each language team to make more efficient progress toward its language development goals. New software and networked computers during workshops facilitate the sharing of expertise and discoveries.

Another innovative strategy is the “shell book,” a computer-aided concept that enables local workers to insert translated text and culturally appropriate illustrations into a template—or shell—of an existing publication. This shell book process can supplement locally created literature and provide a way to gain access to valuable information.

From Africa to Guatemala

Through the use of shell book technology, the true-to-life story of an African girl, Kande, is impacting lives in many communities by presenting the important message of HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment in a culturally appropriate story form. In this five-book series, 12-year-old Kande struggles to raise her younger brothers and sisters after their parents’ death from HIV/AIDS.

During an SIL-sponsored workshop in Guatemala, speakers of two Ixil dialects locally adapted this story of a young girl’s struggles as an orphan/parent. A Shellbook Publishing Systems® (SPS) trainer visited two Ixil villages to introduce the Shellbook® method and computer software to local community leaders. To make the Kande Shellbooks applicable to the Ixil culture, digital photos were taken of local people acting out the story in their own surroundings. Line drawings were then created from the photos, and inserted into the Shellbooks. When the Ixil see the illustrations of people that look similar to themselves, the message of the story becomes more relevant to them.

“In one day we actually completed one book and started another,” exclaimed one workshop participant. “Now we’ve begun dreaming of additional ways we could expand the use of this tool and allow more people to understand the possibilities.”

When communities themselves adapt emotionally compelling information, such as vital health information, they take ownership of the concepts and lives change.

*Shellbook Publishing Systems is a private corporation, not part of SIL

SHELLBOOK®  http://www.shellbook.com
Language Technology

Lack of access to computer technology hinders some minority language groups from communicating with the global community. This limited worldwide connection impacts not only speakers of unwritten languages, but also those whose written scripts are not yet available on computers.

SIL researches and develops computer software solutions needed to facilitate the study of languages and the publication of literature in a variety of writing systems. Further software development for non-Roman scripts is an urgent need.

Complex Scripts Meet Computer Technology

With a shared desire to preserve the world’s linguistic heritage, SIL continues to work with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to formulate and promote policy that will help guide the production of complex scripts.

The earliest computer applications used the Roman alphabet with a predictable left-to-right reading pattern. Later, computer software was developed to handle right-to-left scripts. Implementing top-to-bottom scripts is an ongoing goal for the future. An additional technological challenge is to develop scripts for other languages that are derived from the major script families but require additional characters not yet implemented on computers.

To help solve the display problems of complex scripts, SIL developed a technology called Graphite. For example, if a script has a single consonant with four distinct forms, Graphite instructs the computer to select and display each form in its proper context. In some scripts, vowels may need to be alternately inserted atop or below the consonant, or several accent marks or other diacritics may need to be stacked above a character. Graphite handles these and other complex rules and orderings automatically.

SIL shares its linguistic expertise and knowledge of script behaviors with the Unicode Consortium, with the goal that the Unicode Standard will eventually support all of the world’s writing systems. Through ongoing dialogue and partnerships with computer industry leaders, SIL encourages an inclusive multilingual global information society.
PAPUA NEW GUINEA—Experienced language development workers guide workshop participants in translation projects. Participants interact with others, then take their work back to their communities, gather input and make needed corrections.

Sustainability

SIL is committed to building capacity among members of minority language communities who want to achieve and sustain their own language development goals. A sustainable language development program begins with a holistic look at all aspects of the social fabric: culture, language use, institutions, religion, environment and local aspirations. Ongoing language development fully incorporates the life of a society and becomes so completely integrated into existing social activities that it is no longer perceived as a separate activity.

GUATEMALA—Dramatized audio productions in many local languages are recorded and edited at Viña—a Guatemalan audio-video organization and partner of SIL.

PHILIPPINES—Lifelong education enables minority language communities to gain the knowledge and skills to meet their needs and achieve their goals.

EAST AFRICA—Speakers from six language groups from the Bantu language family consult together for the production of literacy materials in their own languages and unique dialects.

SENEGAL—The kora—a 21-stringed harp-lute instrument—is unique to Senegal and The Gambia. SIL promotes the documentation and research of ethnic music and advocates its use to meet contemporary needs within a society.

CHINA—The bilingual education project in Dong communities, supported by SIL consultation, equips local teachers to teach in their mother tongue.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA—Experienced language development workers guide workshop participants in translation projects. Participants interact with others, then take their work back to their communities, gather input and make needed corrections.
Language Counts

The Ethnologue™ is an encyclopedic reference work cataloging all of the world’s 6,909 known living languages. With language descriptions organized by continent and country, the Ethnologue is regarded as the most comprehensive listing of information of its kind.

Begun by SIL staff over 50 years ago, the Ethnologue continues as an active research project, now involving thousands of linguists and researchers around the world. The Ethnologue is available as a one-volume hardcover book and as an online resource for browsing. The sixteenth edition includes complete indexes, 208 color language maps and statistical summaries, and is updated to match the ISO 639-3 three-letter language identifier codes.

A Three-Letter Code for Every Language

A standardized code for identifying language names is the first step in organizing language materials. In 2007, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) designated ISO 639-3 as the standard, providing over 7,500 three-letter codes—one for every known language, past and present. SIL International serves as the Registration Authority, posting the latest version and processing change requests.

http://www.sil.org/iso639-3/
Funding

SIL International is a nongovernmental, nonprofit organization operating on contributions from individuals and organizations interested in various aspects of language development. Major contributors include affiliated member organizations of Wycliffe International, which have a goal of promoting the translation of Christian Scripture into the world’s languages where appropriate.

SIL International acknowledges the responsibility entrusted to it to spend funds effectively and to be accountable to its contributors. Copies of the audited financial statements are available upon request from SIL International.

Bibliography

The SIL International Bibliography lists more than 40,000 references to books, journal articles, dissertations and other academic papers written by SIL personnel in their work among nearly 2,000 minority languages and cultures. The Bibliography also has references for written materials from those languages, such as literacy and basic education books and translated works from Christian Scripture, along with folk tales and storybooks.

Entries in the SIL Bibliography are divided into academic and vernacular works. A portion of the total bibliography is available to view from our website, and inquiries are welcome by contacting the SIL International Corporate Bibliographer at sil.bibliographer@sil.org.