

# Xibe Language Revitalization and Documentation Project

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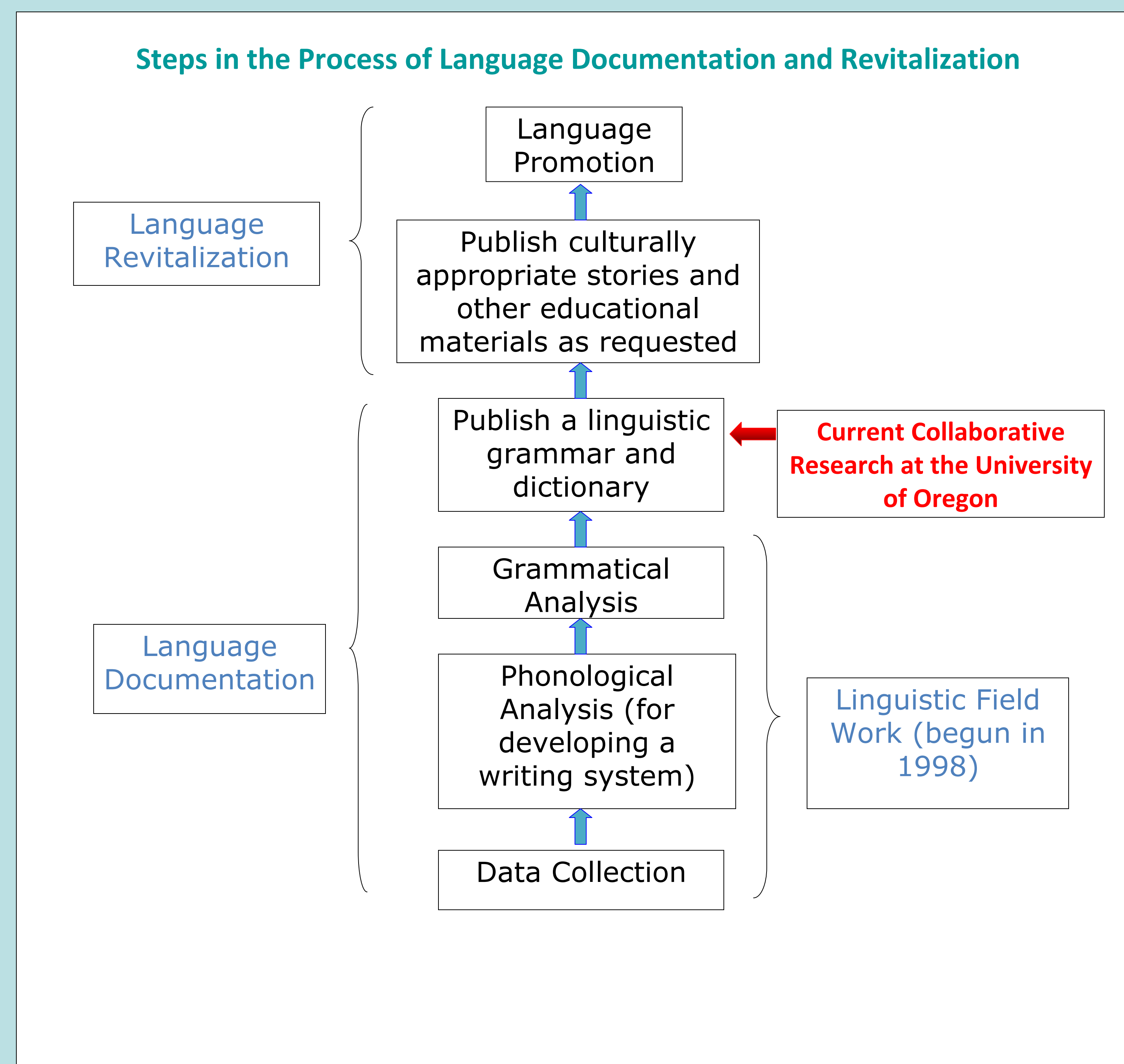
## INTRODUCTION

Xibe (also Romanized as Sibo, Xibo, and Sibe) is a Manchu-Tungus language spoken by approximately 40,000 individuals in Northwestern China (Xinjiang Uygur [Uighur] Autonomous Region), and is one of the 56 recognized ethnic minorities in China. Xibe of Xinjiang is the only currently viable member of the Southwestern branch of the Tungusic language family, and is closely related to the nearly extinct Manchu language. The Tungusic languages are completely unrelated to the modern majority language, Chinese. Xibe possesses a rich literature employing a slightly revised version of the Manchu script, as represented in the title bar of this poster.

The current collaborative project involves morphological and syntactic analysis leading to a linguistic grammar, a dictionary, and a collection of indigenous Xibe stories in support of indigenous Xibe language description and documentation goals. The products of this research will contribute to the continued use and vitality of the Xibe language and culture.

## METHODS

This project employs traditional methods of descriptive linguistics (field recordings of natural discourse, followed by transcription, translation and close linguistic analysis), augmented by recent developments in computational applications.



## SELECTED RESULTS TO DATE

In a large corpus of oral folkloric narratives, Xibe exhibits four grammatically distinct dependent clause constructions: 1) Action nominalizations 2) participial clauses, 3) converbal clauses and 4) "semi-final" clauses. The study concludes that even as there is a non-absolute correlation between syntactic form and syntactic function, so there are non-absolute, but discernible, correlations between syntactic form and semantic function. In particular, we find that there is a *tendency* for the syntactically highly dependent structures (those we term action nominals and participles) to impose strong constraints on possible semantic relations between propositions (interpropositional relations), while syntactically more independent structures (converbal and semi-final clauses), impose fewer or looser constraints. These findings help native speakers compose, edit and translate oral texts idiomatically in a way that speaks clearly to modern Xibe speakers. They also provide evidence for a principle that syntactic dependence tends to parallel semantic dependence (e.g., Haiman and Thompson 1984).

Semantic relations expressed by four dependent clause types in Xibe (+ indicates the presence of a semantic relation, and - indicates its absence)

Dependent clause types		Action Nominalizations	Participles	Converbs	Semi-final clauses	
Semantic Relations	Explicit	Aspectual - Basic (perfective, imperfective)	+	+	+	+
		Aspectual - Expanded (progressive, punctual)	-	+	+	+
	Inferred	Temporal (sequence, simultaneity, overlap)	-	-	+	+
		Causal (means, manner, purpose)	-	-	+	+
		Shift in modality (evidentiality, validationality)	-	-	-	+
		Discourse juncture (continuity/discontinuity)	-	-	-	+

## REFERENCES

Haiman, John, and Sandra A. Thompson. 1984. 'Subordination' in universal grammar. In Claudia Brugmann and Monica Macauley (eds.), *Proceedings of the Tenth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* 510-523. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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## CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Though no language will survive unless speakers themselves want it to, descriptive linguistics is an essential component of any program of language documentation and preservation. The mere existence of a good dictionary and grammatical description confers a certain status on a language that may have previously been considered to be of little importance, by speakers and non speakers alike. Furthermore, the products of descriptive linguistic research constitute part of the reference material necessary to develop indigenous educational materials and written literature. Good linguistic research communicates to minority language speakers and to surrounding groups that the minority language is worthy of respect.

Xibe is a language in transition. It's future hangs in the balance between intense desire of the community to preserve their cultural and linguistic heritage, and the demands of modern economic life. As the graphs below show, most completely fluent speakers at this point in history are over 60 years old. As the elder generation passes away, younger speakers are finding fewer opportunities to learn and use Xibe, as they increasingly assimilate into the majority Chinese culture. Classical written Xibe is already seriously endangered, and spoken Xibe is clearly in decline.

