



Rescue Mission

[American Indian tribes across the United States are working to revive their lost languages.]

The Shinnecock and Unkechaug tribes on New York's Long Island have not spoken their native tongues in more than 200 years.

But now, the two Native American nations and Stony Brook University are trying to revive the tribes' lost languages, using yellowed documents like a vocabulary list that Thomas Jefferson wrote during a visit in 1791.

The goal is to resuscitate the Shinnecock and Unkechaug languages and get tribe members comfortable speaking them, according to the tribe and researchers involved in the effort.

Chief Harry Wallace, the elected leader of the Unkechaug Nation, says that for tribal members, knowing the language is an integral part of understanding their own culture, past and present.

"When our children study their own language, they perform better academically," he says. "They have a core foundation to rely on."

The New York effort is part of a wave of language reclamation projects that have been undertaken by Native Americans in recent years. For many tribes, language is the cultural glue that holds a community together, linking generations and preserving a heritage and values. As one official involved in the effort said, language is "the DNA of a culture."

Historically, language loss occurs for two reasons, says Robert D. Hoberman of Stony Brook University's linguistics department. Some groups voluntarily give up their languages for economic reasons, like immigrants who come to America and learn English. Others, like African slaves and Native Americans, were virtually forced to give up their mother tongues.

In the 1870s, the federal government set up boarding schools to assimilate Native American children, who were often punished for speaking Indian languages. That came on the heels of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which required Indian tribes to leave their ancestral lands and relocate west of the Mississippi River, eventually to reservations. When older generations of speakers died, there were no new speakers to keep the languages going.

Of the more than 300 indigenous languages once spoken in the U.S., only 175 remain, according to the Indigenous Language Institute, which tracks the status of endangered languages. It estimates that without restoration efforts, no more than 20 will still be spoken in 2050.

Primary Sources

Language reclamation is a two-step process, according to Hoberman, who oversees the New York project.

"First we have to figure out what the language looked like," using primary sources: remembered prayers, greetings, sayings, and word lists like the one Jefferson created, he says. "Then we'll look at languages that are much better documented . . . short word lists to see what the differences and what the equivalencies are, and we'll use that to reconstruct what the Long Island languages probably looked like."

The likelihood of failure is great, however, given the relatively small number of potential speakers and the difficulty in persuading a new generation to participate.

But there has been progress. Daryl Baldwin is working to revive the dormant language of the Miami Nation in the Midwest. He taught himself Myaamia entirely through old documents like Jefferson's, and has taught his children to speak it fluently. He now directs the Myaamia Project at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, a joint effort with the Miami tribe.

Mary Tippmann, 23, started learning Myaamia at age 6 from her grandmother. But to become more fluent, she studied at Miami University, where Baldwin's program is based.

"It's helped me to get a better understanding of my heritage," says Tippmann. "It's one thing when you read about it; it's another thing when you're actually living it."

Farther east, Stephanie Fielding, a member of the Connecticut Mohegans, has devoted her life to bringing her tribe's language back to life and is compiling a dictionary and grammar book.

'Funny Accents'

Now in her 60s, Fielding knows firsthand just how tough it is to sustain a language effort over time. She says she is still not fluent.

"For a language to survive," she says, "it needs people talking it."

The task is particularly difficult for the Shinnecock and Unkechaug in New York because few records exist. But their languages belong to a family of eastern Algonquian languages, some of which have both dictionaries and native speakers, which the team can mine for missing words and phrases, and for grammatical structure.

The Massachusetts language, for example, which is also undergoing reclamation, will be an important resource for the New York project because it is well documented, with dictionaries and Bible translations.

"When we have an idea of what the language should sound like, we'll then introduce it to people in the community," Hoberman says. He adds that approximating the sound of the lost languages was possible because the dictionaries were transliterated into English.

"Would someone from 200 years ago think we had a funny accent?" Hoberman asks. "Yes. Would they understand it? I hope so."

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