

August 3, 2012

Tribe Revives Language on Verge of Extinction

By **KIRK JOHNSON**

SILETZ, Ore. — Local native languages teeter on the brink of oblivion all over the world as the big linguistic sweepstakes winners like English, Spanish or Mandarin ride a surging wave of global communications.

But the forces that are helping to flatten the landscape are also creating new ways to save its hidden, cloistered corners, as in the unlikely survival of Siletz Dee-ni. An American Indian language with only about five speakers left — once dominant in this part of the West, then relegated to near extinction — has, since earlier this year, been shouting back to the world: Hey, we're talking. (In Siletz that would be naa-ch'aa-ghit-'a.)

“We don't know where it's going to go,” said Bud Lane, a tribe member who has been working on the online [Siletz Dee-ni Talking Dictionary](#) for nearly seven years, and recorded almost all of its 10,000-odd audio entries himself. In its first years the dictionary was password protected, intended for tribe members.

Since February, however, when organizers began to publicize its existence, Web hits have spiked from places where languages related to Siletz are spoken, a broad area of the West on through Canada and into Alaska. That is the heartland of the Athabascan family of languages, which also includes Navajo. And there has been a flurry of interest from Web users in Italy, Switzerland and Poland, where the dark, rainy woods of the Pacific Northwest, at least in terms of language connections, might as well be the moon.

“They told us our language was moribund and heading off a cliff,” said Mr. Lane, 54, sitting in a storage room full of tribal basketry and other artifacts here on the reservation, about three hours southwest of Portland, Ore. He said he has no fantasies that Siletz will conquer the world, or even the tribe. Stabilization for now is the goal, he said, “creating a pool of speakers large enough that it won't go away.”

But in the hurly-burly of modern communications, keeping a language alive goes far beyond a simple count of how many people can conjugate its verbs. Think Jen Johnson's keypad thumbs. A graduate student in linguistics at Georgetown University, Ms. Johnson, 21, stumbled onto Siletz while studying linguistics at Swarthmore College, which has helped the tribe build its dictionary. She fell in love with its cadences, and now texts in Siletz, her fourth language of study, with a tribe member in Oregon.

Language experts who helped create the dictionary say the distinctiveness of Siletz Dee-ni (pronounced SiLETZ day-KNEE), or Coastal Athabascan as it is also called, comes in part from the unique way the language managed to survive.

Most other language preservation projects have a base, however small, of people who speak the language. The [Ojibwe People's Dictionary](#), for example, which went online this year, focuses on one of the most widely spoken native languages in Canada and the Upper Midwest.

The 12 other dictionaries financed in recent years by the [Living Tongues Institute](#), a nonprofit group, in partnership with the National Geographic Society — which helped start the Siletz dictionary project in 2005 and now uses it as a blueprint — are all centered on languages still in use, however small or threatened their populations of speakers may be. Matukar Panau, for instance, an Oceanic language of Papua New Guinea, has about 600 speakers remaining, in two small villages.

Siletz, by contrast, had become, by the time of the dictionary, almost an artifact — preserved in song for certain native dances, but without a single person living who had grown up with it as a first language.

There were people who had listened to the elders, like Mr. Lane, and there were old recordings, made by anthropologists who came through the West in the 1930s and 1960s, but not much else. Mr. Lane wants to incorporate some of those scratchy recordings into future versions of the dictionary.

What can also bridge an ancient language's roots to younger tribe members, some new Siletz learners said, is that it can sound pretty cool.

“There are a couple of sounds that are nowhere in the English language, like you're going to spit, almost — kids seem much more open to that,” said Sonya Moody-Jurado, who grew up hearing a few words from her mother — like nose (mish), and dog (lin-ch'e') — and has been attending with a grandson Siletz classes taught by Mr. Lane.

“They’re trailblazers, showing the way for small languages to cross the digital divide,” said K. David Harrison, an associate professor of linguistics at Swarthmore who worked with the Siletz tribe and the other partners to build the dictionary. Professor Harrison said he went to Colombia recently, talking to indigenous tribes about preserving their languages, but when the laptops opened up, the Siletz dictionary, with its impressive size and search capabilities, was the focus. “It’s become a model of how you do it,” he said.

When settlers were streaming west in the 1850s on the Oregon Trail and displacing American Indians from desirable farmland, government Indian policy created artificial conglomerates of tribes, jamming them into one place even though the groups spoke different languages and in many instances had little in common.

The Siletz people were among the largest bands that ended up here on this spit of land jutting into the Pacific Ocean. By dint of their numbers, their language prevailed over other tribes, and their dances, sung in Siletz, became adopted by other tribes as their cultures faded.

“We’re the last standing,” Mr. Lane said.

But the threat of oblivion was constant. In the 1950s, the tiny tribe was declared dead by the United States — a “termination” from the rolls, in the jargon of the time. The Siletz clawed back — clinging to former reservation lands and cultural anchors in songs and dances — and two decades later, in the mid-1970s, became only the second tribe in the nation to go from nonexistence to federally recognized status. The [Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians](#) now have about 4,900 enrolled members and a profitable casino in the nearby resort town of Lincoln City.

School was also once the enemy of tribal languages. Government boarding schools, where generations of Indian children were sent, aimed to stamp out native ways and tongues. Now, the language is taught through the sixth grade at the public [charter school](#) in Siletz, and the tribe aims to have a teaching program in place in the next few years to meet Oregon’s high school language requirements, allowing Siletz, in a place it originated, to be taught as a foreign language.



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