A FINAL SAY? THEY HOPE NOT

MATRIARCH: *Washo tribal elder Ramona Dick, 74, speaks at the Woodfords Indian Education Center near South Lake Tahoe. Dick is working with linguist Alan Yu to document the Washo language, which is spoken by only a handful of people.*

Endangered language

Only about 20 or 30 people can speak Washo fluently and many of them are clustered in the tribe's traditional territory near Lake Tahoe. Efforts are underway to document the language.

Some Washo words

English	Washo
one	lak'a'
two	hesge'
three	helme'
four	ha'wa'
five	dubaldi'
six	dubaldi' ida lak'a'
seven	dubaldi' ida hesge'
eight	ha'wa'wa
nine	ha'wa'wa ida lak'a'
ten	lak'a' muc'im
red	ilelegi
blue	ilp'ilp'ili
yellow/green	ilc'ac'imi
black	ilc'ic'ishi
brown	ilshoshongi

Source: Professor Alan Yu, University of Chicago. Graphics reporting by LARRY GORDON

LORENA IÑIGUEZ *Los Angeles Times*

Tribal elders are helping a linguist compile an online dictionary of Washo, a language close to extinction. More than just words are at stake.

By Larry Gordon, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
September 21, 2007

WOODFORDS, CALIF.—In a classroom amid the dusty hills southeast of Lake Tahoe, an unlikely duo sit across from each other and conjugate the verb “to sleep.” They are working in Washo, a language with, at best, an uncertain future.

Elshim, to sleep. *Lelshimi*, I am sleeping. *Elshimi*, he is sleeping. *Shelshimi*, they are sleeping.

On one side of a yellow plastic table sits Ramona Dick, a 74-year-old elder of the Washo tribe, a great-grandmother and retired cook whose formal education ended at the eighth grade but who has a deep knowledge of the Native American language she learned as a child.

Facing her is Alan Yu, 30, a Hong Kong-born linguist who immigrated to California as a teenager, earned a doctorate at UC Berkeley and now is an assistant professor at the University of Chicago.

Despite differences in age, culture and education, the two have bonded in a way that they hope will bring lasting results.

What brings them together is their mutual interest in Washo, a tongue that tribe members estimate is spoken fluently by no more than 20 or 30 people. The big picture is even grimmer: Half of California’s 100 Native American languages no longer have fluent speakers, and many of the rest have just five or six hanging on, experts say.

Attempts to document, if not revive, many of those languages have been going on for years. The goal is to preserve more than just conversation and literature; a vital part of cultural identity—what it means, for example, to be a Washo—slips away when a language becomes extinct.

Now, Yu and Dick are part of newer efforts applying contemporary technology worldwide.

Last year, Yu received a $160,000 federal grant to compile an online dictionary of 5,000 Washo words and phrases, complete with digitally recorded pronunciations by Dick and other Washo elders. Scheduled to be finished in 2009, the dictionary is designed partly as a tool to help younger Washos learn the language—even if just a few words, such as *da’aw* (Lake Tahoe), *gewe* (coyote)and *gu’u* (maternal grandmother).

"It's going to be lost, I think, if nobody tries to teach them," Dick said of Washo, which had no written form until 20th century scholars began transcribing it phonetically. "If the young people could learn, maybe they can tell their children down the line a bit that it's important to our tribe. Because we are not a very big tribe."

Washo (some spell it Washoe) leaders estimate that there are about 1,500 tribal members, mainly in the eastern Sierra on both sides of the California-Nevada border. Dick lives in Woodfords, in an isolated Washo community known as *Hung-a-lel-ti* (Southern Washoes) on rolling ranchland with stunning mountain vistas. Its 350 or so residents can walk to the lime-green education center, where Yu and Dick meet, but must drive 10 miles north into Nevada for most shopping.

During his summer and vacation-time visits to the Washo towns, Yu said, he tries to avoid the paternalistic attitudes that strained some past relationships between nonnative researchers and Native Americans. Yu, who spoke only Cantonese until he started elementary school, stressed that his goal is to document Washo, not to save it.

"I think the consensus these days is for a language to be revitalized," he said. "It's really a community effort. It's something that an outsider can't come in and force it onto people."

The Washos have a better chance at revitalization than many other tribes, scholars say. About 60 adults and teens attend several Washo language classes, and teachers introduce Washo words and phrases to young children in pre-kindergarten and after-school programs. Besides, Yu said, it is a "gift" to meet fluent—and vibrant—volunteers for the dictionary project like Dick, her cousin Steven James and his cousin Eleanore Smokey.

Nevertheless, everyone agrees it will be an uphill effort against assimilation and English-language television. Another formidable obstacle: the educations of many middle-aged and elderly tribe members, who were sent away from Washo-speaking homes to government boarding schools that discouraged the use of Washo.

Dick learned the language from a grandmother and great-grandmother, neither of whom had a full grasp of English. A widow, Dick says that none of her own five children, 18 grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren really speak Washo, although some are trying to learn and most understand when she speaks at home or at a class she is leading.

Lynda Shoshone, the tribe's language and cultural preservation coordinator, said she could "kick myself in the rear for not paying more attention" as a child when her grandmother spoke Washo. Shoshone said she knows Washo words but has trouble putting sentences together. However, her 22-year-old son, she said, attended a now-defunct immersion school and is quite fluent. So, she said, the language has a shot at survival.

James, 74, is pessimistic. “There’s too much competition from the present-day world,” said the retired electrical construction worker from Dresslerville, Nev. “Everyday living, your job, just trying to survive in this world is difficult.”

Still, he and Dick are willing to spend long days, sometimes from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., answering Yu’s detailed lists of questions. The elders’ responses about nouns, adjectives, verbs and sentences are captured on a digital recording device, and Yu’s graduate students splice them and upload them online.

On a recent day, Dick visited the classroom leaning on the cane she now requires and sat in front of the microphone. A full-faced, vivacious woman with a graying ponytail and gold hoop earrings, she paused only when she was unable to pull a word from the memory of her late grandmother’s kitchen or when her voice got “froggy” from overuse. After all, “Dr. Yu,” as she calls him despite his pleas for informality, “comes from far away, and when he does, it’s always nice to sit down and talk with him.”

Wearing jeans, a pullover shirt, sneakers and squarish glasses, Yu queried her in a low-key and respectful manner, like a grandson fishing for a family story. But he also was persistent and, for accuracy, asked the same thing in various ways. Taking lots of handwritten notes, he wanted equivalents of English words and inquired about Washo words or sentences he had picked up from other sources.

“Do you know how to describe someone who has a big tummy?” Yu asked. “Have you ever heard people talk about *Ngalbuli*?”

“It means he’s got, like, a pot belly,” Dick responded, chuckling.

They tackled other verbs after “sleep.” How would you say, “I’m laughing?” Yu asked. *Lasawi*.

How about a lot of people laughing? *Sasawi*. Can you say that one more time? *Sasawi*. To swim? *Yeem.* I’m swimming? *Diyeemi*. He’s swimming? *Yeemi*.

Sometimes Dick gently corrected Yu’s backward word order or mangled pronunciations. Sometimes Yu pushed her into shades of meaning, such as the difference between shooting something and trying to shoot it.

Then came nouns: paternal grandmother (*ama*), maternal grandfather (*elel*), maternal grandchildren (*gu’yi*).

What about shrimp? She shook her head, drawing a blank. The word for fish is *atabi*, but apparently there is no word for shrimp. “There was no shrimp around here,” she later explained, “until white men brought them into markets.”

Yu has posted a preliminary Washo pronunciation guide online at *http://washo.uchicago.edu* and has compiled about two-thirds of the words he needs before he makes the dictionary and its voicing technology available to the public late next year. That progress is "very impressive," said Douglas Whalen, a program officer at the National Science Foundation's program known as Documenting Endangered Languages. The program, which also involves the National Endowment for the Humanities, is funding Yu's dictionary and similar work in about 60 other languages worldwide.

"Language is part of our human heritage," Whalen said. "It's part of what makes us human. Not having any record of what's gone on in a language is regrettable."

The rate of world language extinction is alarming, a study sponsored by the National Geographic Society warned this week. Of the world's 7,000 languages, two are disappearing every month, and half may be gone by century's end, including scores of Native American tongues in the Southwestern U.S., researchers said.

To an English speaker, Washo sounds difficult, with frequent glottal stops that change meanings and a throaty "ng" sound (*ngawngang* is child). Verbs change prefixes as they shift among "I, he, we, they," and verbs also have several forms for the recent or distant past. Its oddities include some double-negative expressions, such as "I don't not know."

Washo is very unlike the other Native American languages—Miwok, Maidu and Northern Paiute—that surround it, according to William H. Jacobsen Jr., a professor emeritus at the University of Nevada, Reno, who conducted groundbreaking linguistic research on Washo starting in the 1950s and published a basic grammar guide in 1996.

The tribe's linguistic isolation fed into a sense of cultural distinctiveness in the Indian world, even as white settlers took over traditional Washo fishing and hunting territory for silver mining, ranching, lake resorts and casinos in the 19th and 20th centuries, Jacobsen said.

Jacobsen said he too is compiling a Washo dictionary, albeit a print one. But he is gloomy about Washo's future, although he said he hopes his work, language classes and Yu's dictionary will help young people learn a few words and phrases.

"Even though they don't know the language or the grammar, there is some value in this," he said. "It gives them some identity and they can say, 'I'm a Washo.' "

Internet dictionaries are the latest tools for language survival but are not the sole answer, said former UC Berkeley linguistics professor Leanne Hinton. Tribes showing some success have put special effort into classes for children and for adults, such as the Pechangas, who are working to revive Luiseño in communities near Temecula, and the Yuroks in northwestern California, said Hinton, an expert in tribal languages.

Those and other tribes have people “who don’t want to go down without a fight, so to speak,” said Hinton, who has helped organize the biennial “Breath of Life—Silent No More” conferences at UC Berkeley that seek to revive endangered Native American languages in California.

Yu, one of Hinton’s former students, became fascinated with Washo when he was assigned to help out at one of the conferences. Hinton described Yu as a good match for the Washo elders: “He is extremely competent as well as being good with people. He is a very patient person.”

Besides Cantonese and English, Yu can speak Mandarin and has a rudimentary knowledge of Turkish and Russian. He has a grasp of some Washo vocabulary and grammar but is not fluent.

“I am picking it up slowly. In general, I’m not a very good language learner. That may seem odd for a linguist to say, but linguists are not necessarily polyglots,” said Yu, whose new book on linguistics was recently published by Oxford University Press.

Last month, the Chicago professor went public with his own Washo abilities. The tribe held a luncheon for anyone involved in learning the language. Yu prepared a brief speech in Washo but was clearly nervous.

So he first ran the speech past Dick: I’m happy to be here today*. Wading ebe dihamu’ angawi wa’ le’iga’ a’alu*. . .

As I do not speak Washo very well. *Washiw diwagay’angaweesinga*. . .

Eat well and drink well. *Gemlu’angaw geme’angaw*.

Dick gently brushed up Yu’s pronunciations here and there and sought to calm his concerns about the lunch crowd’s reaction: “They can’t expect to hear you talking like a lawyer.”

That afternoon, about 20 people attended the baked chicken and salad luncheon in the education center. Melba Rakow, who teaches Washo classes in Nevada, offered a blessing and urged the tribe, she later translated, “not to throw our language down.”

Yu initially hung back a bit before screwing up his courage. Then, clutching his notes, he seemed to carry off the speech flawlessly, finishing up with “Di’nga *ledinga*” (“That’s all I’ll say.”) The audience applauded, and Dick declared: “I think he did real well.”

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