

Tribal language is reborn

■ As the Tribe strives to revive Chinook Jargon as its Native language, the benefits may do more than bolster Grand Ronde culture.



Jackie Whisler, a student in the Chinook-Wawa language class, goes over some notes with instructor Tony Johnson. Photo by Oscar Johnson

By Oscar Johnson
Staff Reporter

When Tribes from around Western Oregon moved to the Grand Ronde Reservation Chinook Jargon or, more accurately, Chinook-Wawa (talk) soon became the primary Indian language.

It is a mixed language consisting mostly of ancient lower Chinook and neighboring languages with latter smatterings of English and French influences. But long before European explorers came, tribes with different languages throughout the Northwest used this Native pidgin language to talk with one another.

Now there are only a handful of Grand Ronde Elders who speak the old language fluently. But through the efforts of the Tribe's language program things are changing.

It's not impossible to hear an adult or even a child at Grand Ronde greet someone with "q^hata mayka?" (How are you?). If the program works the Tribe will once again speak Chinook-Wawa.

"The most concentrated use of Chinook in recent times was in the Grand Ronde community," says Grand Ronde Language Specialist, Tony Johnson who takes the bitter with the sweet. "Right now is a transitional time, we're losing Elders and we're beginning to create new speakers."

Johnson is a member of the Chinook nation. He began the Tribe's language program nearly one and a half years ago.

His efforts to do what has never been done before — revive a dying

CHINUK-WAWA GREETINGS

Q^hata mayka?
How are you?

Dret łuš san ukuk,
wigna?
It is a really nice day,
isn't it?

Pronunciation (approximate):

Q^h = deep English 'k'

t = pronounced between a 't' and a 'd' sound with no air expelled afterward.

k = pronounced between a 'k' and a 'g' with no air expelled afterward.

ε = as in English 'bet'

ł = Non English sound.

Produced by making an 'l' in the mouth and saying an 'h'

u = as in English 'moon'

š = sh as in English 'shirt'

i = as in English 'beet'

pidgin-creole language — are starting to catch the eye of other linguists.

"That's just never been done before — it's unique. Everyone is following this with interest," says Author and Portland State University Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics, Tucker Childs. He says part of the program's uniqueness is the interest from within the Tribe. "It's

činuk wawa

ʔ	ɪrʔi	a _c	ay _{nayka}	aw	Caq ^w	Ćam
	earth	sister	I/me/my	brother	water	mark/spot
činuk	čux	ε dret	əməknək	hihi	ixt I _{kta}	one what?
Chinook	chip	true	eat/food	laugh/play	e pepa	paper
kəmtəks	k ^h iyutən	k ^w anısəm	k ^{wh} ata	ķaw	k ^w as	
know						
gidəp						
get up	horse	always	quarter	tie	afraid	
lulu	łuš	łap	młayt	nənıç	o lagom	
carry	good	find	stay/live/sit	see/look	pitch	
paya	p ^h ik ^w	pəq	qusax	q ^h ata	qəl	
fire						
bastən						
white person	back	hit	sky	how	hard	
q ^w ınəm	q ^{wh} et	q ^w ət	r lıpret	Skukəm	šuš	
five	hang/wear	knock	priest	strong	shoes	
təmtəm	t ^h at	łalapəs	ulali	uy	wawa	
heart			berry	ıxpuy		
dakta			u	łuk		
doctor	uncle	coyote	broke	close	talk	
Xulxul	X ^w łx ^w ap	Xaləqt	X ^w ıcx ^w ət	ya?im		
mouse	hole	open	black bear	tell		

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a language of the identity of the people in Grand Ronde. That's why I say it has a good chance."

Johnson meets once a week with a group of 10 students committed to mastering Chinook-Wawa. He says the group is more than just a language class.

He expects that in the future they will be role models for using the language and help the program meet its overall goal.

He also teaches Chinook-Wawa bi-weekly to the pre-schoolers of Twah Sunchako school and to youth from Kindergarten to fifth grade at the Tribe's Before and After School Care.

But most of his work involves collecting and archiving every bit of information he can find on Grand Ronde's linguistic history. He is also always looking for fluent Chinook speakers.

He began using a computer database to compile Chinook-Wawa nar-

ratives and catalogue words and phrases.

It took a great deal of research including recording numerous audio tapes of Grand Ronde Elders by Johnson, independent scholar of Northwest tribes, Henry Zenk, and others.

Now at the click of a keyboard he can call up Chinook translations word by word on a computer screen, including multiple variations and cultural expressions that use that word.

The computer program also recalls samples of the word's use in Grand Ronde narratives and even references who said it.

As a work in progress, the more the database took shape the more the alphabet needed to be modified.

"As it grew it became obvious what worked as an alphabet and what didn't," he says.

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