

Chinuk-wawa kákwa ntsayka úlman tilixam łaska munk-kámtáks ntsáyka

# Chinuk Wawa Language; Lost and Found?

■ Dictionary is the first of its kind.

By Justin Phillips

Communication is everything. Without it, we wouldn't be here. Until recently, the Chinuk Wawa or Chinook Jargon language was in jeopardy of being lost forever. It is like a person with no voice. With over 30 years of experience combined, Tony Johnson, Tribal Language Specialist and friend Henry Zenk, a consultant in the Northwest, have produced a 2,600 word Chinuk Wawa dictionary.

The dictionary has two main sections: Chinuk Wawa to English and English to Chinuk Wawa.

Johnson started building a database of words and definitions in early 1998.

Zenk wrote his doctoral dissertation on Grand Ronde Chinuk Wawa and on the persistence of the language in Grand Ronde.

"He had given the best description of the language in Chinuk Wawa as used in Grand Ronde," said Johnson.

This dictionary is intended to serve as a reference for finding many of the words and expressions once heard daily in the vernacular Chinuk Wawa of the Grand Ronde Community. Johnson and Zenk also allowed in a few expressions recorded from Indians in nearby related communities.

The dictionary highlights the Chinuk Wawa of Tribal Elders not only with respect to the words and expressions selected for inclusion. The alphabet itself is modeled after the pronunciations of the oldest fluent speakers recorded.

"We have tried to make the alphabet as 'user friendly' as possible, however, recognizing not only that an authentic Indian pronunciation of Chinuk Wawa is difficult to learn, but that one does not have to sound exactly like a fluent Elder of 50 or more years ago to at least to be intelligent in Chinuk Wawa," said Johnson. "We are building this dictionary as is, that is, a first ever dictionary of real Grand Ronde Chinuk Wawa. It is really the first ever dictionary of Indian Chinuk Wawa anywhere."

There have been numerous dictionaries made of Chinuk Wawa, but it is always the language as used by non-Indians in the Northwest. It was originally put together for people coming to the Northwest who had reason to deal with Indians.

"The problem with that is the language doesn't represent the full language, and it surely doesn't represent the sound system we use," said Johnson. "Additionally, they are usually full of all the opinions of the author, as to where the language came from and how it developed, and in most cases, they are far from the truth. Unfortunately, that usually taints people's opinions of the language."

"This is surely not a complete thing," said Johnson. "It never can be complete, but the language cer-

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~ Tony Johnson

tainly fills all the requirements of a normal language."

They are going to be adding more examples of the use of the words. The words will have more sentences associated with them so people will have a better understanding of how to use words in sentences.

"At the point where we feel like we have filled in all the gaps, we will look at publishing it," said Johnson. "Our best interests are that the majority of the proceeds come back here to the Tribe's language program."

In terms of future hope, the program is working on a list of additions to the language because naturally there are all sorts of words we use today that weren't recorded from the Elders; like computers or copy machines.

"Those things we are working on," said Johnson. "Eventually, one addition to this dictionary will be an appendix or perhaps maybe a whole other dictionary just of modern words."

In order to do that, they will form a lexicon committee.

"We talked to some Hawaiians, who are very much successful in revitalizing their language, have similar lexicon committees and recommended that we do the same," Johnson quoted. "That's just a way we can sit down as a group and say we need words for these."

Another addition to this effort in the future could be a dictionary of all Lower Columbia River Chinuk Wawa. Grand Ronde Chinuk is incredibly full of its grammar and how it's used. It is by far the finest variety of Chinuk ever recorded. There is a lot of vocabulary out there in other places around the Lower Columbia River that isn't used around here.

"What we don't like to do is take the vocabulary as they come out of the older dictionaries," replied Johnson. "They just don't represent how the language sounded. There are other real good sources of information on this language like bilinguals and folks who had a better system for writing or were able to find words in some of the better dictionaries and then trace them to their roots."

Soon these will be available in similar format for the Chinuk Wawa classes taught here in Grand Ronde.

"This is something Grand Ronde should be proud of," said Johnson. "This language was used everywhere in the Northwest, from Northern



California to British Columbia. The one place in the world where it survived and probably the place it is finest in terms of impressibility and where it's really used is here in Grand Ronde."

Johnson puts on weekly classes with our 3 and 4 year-old preschool children. He also teaches the University of Oregon sponsored adult classes.

"We have a whole number of different levels of classes that are generally taught together because it is just me teaching," said Johnson. "Besides just the standard language classes that I offer on a regular basis, there is a conversation class that I started last quarter."

Summer will be the start of another conversation class for Johnson and his students.

"That is open to everybody," said Johnson. "Every quarter we have new students. A lot of folks think that if the classes have been going on and have seen people taking them for years that they can't get started now. We really do the basics every class and I usually pull the more advanced to the side and do advanced work."

The language program just finished and submitted a grant application for the funding of a preschool language immersion project. That program would start the kids off at preschool with a full morning of immersion.

"This will be the real answer to saving Chinuk Wawa," said Johnson. "At the point we can do that, I think there will be enough enthusiasm from the results of it, we should be

able to follow the kids and attentively work with them. The demand for language activities continues to grow and grow. We assume we are going to grow with the demand."

Also in the works at a later date is a book that has the first ever grammar of the language.

When asked if anyone that he knew could speak as fluently as he, he replied, "Unfortunately no."

In early April, Tribes in Santa Fe, New Mexico celebrated a renewal of Native languages over a weekend at Santa Fe Indian School, where 185 students, ranging up into adulthood, made presentations in 13 languages, from Cherokee and Comanche to Oneida, Navajo, Apache, Keres and Tiwa.

The Santa Fe-based Indigenous Language Institute sponsored the fair. Of 300 or more indigenous languages, only 175 exist.

"Tribe after Tribe have seen Native languages disappear," said Inne Yang Slaughter, who heads the nine year-old Indigenous Language Institute.

"I believe that all the negative feedback and opinions about the language is contributed by non-Indians," Johnson said. "It's good that we continue to produce things like this (dictionary) that counteract the impressions of our language. When people can see this and truly hear the language, they will quickly realize that we have a pretty fantastic language."

Even though Tribal members can't live forever, our culture, traditions and language can. Don't forget where you came from.