SAVING A LANGUAGE

Chitimachas working to revive their lost tribal language

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CHARENTON — When Carolyn Savage began having children more than 35 years ago, she named them with words from her Chitimacha tribal language she'd learned from older relatives. Savage couldn't use the words in a sentence, but neither could anyone else. The last Sitimaxa speakers had taken their language to the grave.

Today, Savage teaches small children and adults words once foreign to her. At the Chitimacha Tribal School, Sitimaxa is heard on the playground. And, earlier this year, the small Native American tribe received a boost to its efforts to resurrect their native tongue.

Rosetta Stone, which produces learning software for 30 modern languages, reached an agreement with the Chitimacba to produce a Sitimaxa program. Rosetta Stone will absorb about 90 percent of the development cost, said Marion Bittinger, the company's Endangered Language Program manager, and will give software and tech support to tribal members.

For those striving to restore Sitimaxa, this is a godsend.

"To me, Rosetta Stone is like a second miracle," Savage said. "But, the project is not the biggest one."

When Benjamin Paul died in 1934 and Delphine Stouff Decloux died in 1940, no one remained who spoke Sitimaxa even semi-fluently. The tribe did not have its own school until 1932, and Chitimachas who attended public schools were forbidden from speaking it, said Kimberly Walden, the tribe's cultural director.

However, linguist Morris Swadesh had recorded 200 hours of Sitimaxa in the 1930s as part of an extensive study of Native American languages. In 1986, the

Library of Congress mailed the tribe the tapes and Swadesh's field notes. It was a start, but the tapes — the original recordings were on wax cylinders — were hard to understand. The notes provided definitions and pronunciation symbols, but tribe members didn't know enough of the language structure to put it together. Swadesh had died in 1967. It was like having the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle without the picture of what the finished product looked like.

The man who had the picture was living in Florida, unaware anyone was looking for it.

As a high school student with Choctaw ancestry, Julian Granberry had read an article that Swadesh and his wife and fellow linguist, Mary Haas, had written in 1946 about the Chitimacba. He wrote them, beginning a correspondence that made them lifelong friends. Granberry, who went on to study linguistics and anthropology at Yale, said he taught himself Sitimaxa using the information he received from Swadesh and Haas.

"I've worked with a number of Native American tribes, many whose languages have gone," he said. "If you contact them and see
if they're interested in reviving it, they are very - I think logically - wary of an outsider asking that kind of question and offering help. So, I figured, well, I won't pester the Chitimacha. If they want to revive something, perhaps they'll get in touch.

Because of what Savage calls the "first miracle," they did. In the mid-1990s, the tribe was working on a burial site project with the Christopher Goodwin archaeological firm, Walden said. The tribe asked the firm if it knew of any linguists familiar with native languages, and Granberry was recommended.

Granberry visited Charenton in 1997, and about 15 tribal elders 70 and older met with him, Walden said. "He came in, and they were really standoffish, really closed about the whole thing, really didn't see the point in bringing back a language that their parents didn't teach them or that they had been penalized for using, or their parents had been," Walden said. "I tried to break the ice and said, 'Julian, say something in the language.'"

"He started just saying song, words, and tears came to some of the ladies' eyes because they hadn't heard the language since their parents and grandparents were alive. That's when we knew we had the right thing, because they recognized it.

Nothing like English

Sitimaxa bears no resemblance to English and is unlike other American Indian languages, Granberry said. In creating a written version, the tribe chose the Latin alphabet shared by English so that it could be written on standard keyboards, but omits the letters F, L, R and Z because those sounds do not occur. The letter X sounds like the English "sh," C like "ch," and Q is a glottal stop, like a catch in the throat.

In addition to creating a written language, the Chitimacha also had to create words that weren't used when Sitimaxa was last spoken. It's an ongoing project, one whose dictionary is now 704 pages.

"It's been challenging to get up to speed from 1934, especially when it comes to technology," Walden said. "We're trying to bring it up 70 years.

For the past 10 years, Sitimaxa has been taught at the Chitimacha Tribal School, and there have been adult classes. "The kids are starting to get their parents to use it," said Sam Boutte, who teaches Sitimaxa at the school. "People call us sometimes. I had a friend call me at home, 'What does this mean? My child keeps saying this to me. What does it mean?' The kids are using it at home, which is exactly what we want.

Granberry was so impressed with Rosetta Stone - a virtual immersion method that links words with images and uses speech-recognition software so that the learner can say the words and receive correction - that the tribe asked how much it would cost to develop a Sitimaxa program. The answer Walden said, was about $250,000, which made that option seem out of reach.

Chitimachas get help

But, last year, Rosetta Stone decided to subsidize the development of software for two native languages. Twenty groups applied, and the Chitimacha and Navajo were approved. Their goal is to have the software ready in one to two years.

"The Chitimacha story is an amazing one," Bittinger said. "We were very, very impressed by their dedication and the motivation - not just by what they said, but by what we observed and what they have been able to accomplish so far.

"To go from nothing more than documentation, really, teaching a language in the
Maloree Darden, 9, works with teacher’s aide Rachel Vilcan, right, translating English into the Chitimacha Tribe’s language.

One of the challenges in reviving the Chitimacha’s tribal language is creating words that didn’t exist when Sitimaxa was spoken. The language classroom at the Chitimacha Tribal School has labels that identify items, such as this VCR, in the tribe’s language.

Should Sitimaxa be restored, the Chitimacha will be the first North American tribe to revive a language having lost its fluent speakers, Granberry said.

“The only thing I can compare it to most closely is the way Hebrew was revived back in the late 1800s from nothing but a biblical language — no one spoke it at all, even though Yiddish had a lot of Hebrew words in it,” Granberry said. “Now there are almost 5 million native speakers of Hebrew again.”

It’s unlikely there will ever be that many speaking Sitimaxa. The tribe has 1,070 members, about 400 who live on the reservation. But those involved in the project are determined.

“We don’t want it to die again,” Walden said. “We don’t want to lose our language. It was lost when we all grew up. Carolyn had some memories … but the rest of us didn’t have that at all, and we don’t want our kids and grandkids and future generations to go without like we had to. We don’t want it to die.”