

UC Berkeley Press Release

Conferences focus on saving native languages

By Kathleen Maclay, Media Relations | 04 June 2004

BERKELEY – Chochenyo, the language of the Muwekma Ohlone people, has been silent since the 1930s, but a handful of tribal members working with mentors from the University of California, Berkeley's linguistics department are bringing it back to life.

Today, Chochenyo is being heard once again in conversation and song, and can be seen in written communications and a guidebook being prepared to help teach others.

Tribal chair Rosemary Cambra and Monica Arellano, co-chair of the Muwekma Ohlone Language Committee, will share the Muwekma Ohlone success story at the "Breath of Life: Silent No More" conference at UC Berkeley as it opens this Saturday, June 5. The five-day program is for California Indians determined to revitalize their dormant and endangered languages.

"I feel very privileged to have been allowed the opportunity to be a part of the awakening of our native Chochenyo language. It has truly been a very fulfilling experience," said Arellano, also vice chair of the Muwekma Ohlone tribe.

"The Chochenyo experience gives us all great hope," said Juliette Blevins, a visiting professor and researcher at UC Berkeley's Department of Linguistics, who has been leading weekly Chochenyo lessons with Muwekma Ohlone hailing from Richmond to San Jose.

Leanne Hinton, chair of the linguistics department, which is in the College of Letters & Science, said she is always excited by the Breath of Life conference, which every year draws more interest. This year's conference is attracting approximately 60 people from about a dozen tribes from throughout California - others were turned away as organizers were unable to accommodate everyone interested.

Beginning Thursday, June 10, over 300 language educators and others will attend the four-day "Language is Life: the 11th Annual Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Conference" that also is being held on campus.

The Muwekma Ohlone, the indigenous people of the San Francisco Bay Area, will be featured guests at both conferences. At the second event, they will offer a Chochenyo welcome to conference attendees from across the United States and Canada, and as far away as Taiwan and Australia, who want to learn more about how to revitalize indigenous languages in their states and countries.

An important chapter of the Muwekma story got underway in Blevins' undergraduate course, "Languages of North America." Student Jon Rodney wanted to translate a Chochenyo song on a recording from the Smithsonian Institution. To do so, he relied on linguistics anthropologist J.P. Harrington's field notes, replete with information about California Indians, including Spanish and English translations of their languages as spoken around the beginning of the 20th century. When Rodney finished his paper, he shared it with several Muwekma Ohlones.

"He got a wonderful response, saying they just started a language committee and wanted to revive Chochenyo," Blevins said, "And, could he help?"

"The recordings of Chochenyo contain only songs, many without words," she said. "So, when this all started, there was a very hard question to answer: What does the spoken language actually sound like?"



Professor Juliette Blevins, shown wearing a Yurok cap, is working with members of the Muwekma Ohlone tribe to revive their language, Chochenyo. (Photo by J.P. Blevins)

To help put the puzzle together, Blevins tapped Harrington's notes, his good ear for language and penchant for phonetic detail, and listened to all of his Chochenyo recordings. Blevins then listened to all Miwok and Yokut recordings available at the Berkeley Language Center, because their sounds and structures are believed to be similar to Chochenyo. To develop a concrete sense of Harrington's phonetic symbols for Chochenyo sounds, she compared these with the ones he used for another California Indian language, Yurok, which she knows well. Like most indigenous languages, Chochenyo never had its own written system - until last year, when the Muwekma Ohlone Language Committee adopted the new Chochenyo alphabet.

Another important resource in the Chochenyo saga is The Bancroft Library, repository of some of the oldest written records about such Coastanoan languages as Chochenyo, Mutsun and Rumsien. The library has original manuscripts from the 1800s, including Father Felipe Arroyo de la Cuesta's impressive transcriptions of hundreds of Mutsun sentences.

Blevins and Rodney officially launched their language lessons last spring at a Muwekma Ohlone cultural campout at Del Valle Regional Park near Pleasanton, sharing a Chochenyo word list and giving simple group language lessons.

"There was a lot of enthusiasm after that, and the tribe asked if I would give weekly language lessons," Blevins said. "I agreed, but only by insisting that we were in this together, that we would all be learning together."

Those lessons began in July 2003, and are still going strong. Five to eight dedicated students attend the weekly three-hour evening sessions, with attendance at quarterly tribal language workshops ranging from 30 to 50.

"I think they've made amazing progress in terms of being able to speak the language," said Blevins. "Everyone has basic conversation skills, and some have more. They can talk about their family and home life. Because of the gaps in vocabulary, what you'll often hear is a Chochenyo sentence with a few English words mixed in, but with the appropriate grammatical structure for Chochenyo."

The Chochenyo database being developed by the tribe contains from 1,000 to 2,000 basic words. To fill in vocabulary gaps, the Muwekma Ohlone Language Committee is creating new words. An example is the new Chochenyo word for minute, "ikka," formed with their own word for "dust" and used for a small unit of time.

The next step, Blevins said, is to expand outreach in the Muwekma Ohlone community, possibly through language classes in area schools and community centers.

Through the Master Apprentice Program conceived through UC Berkeley's Linguistics Department and the Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival, a California native organization devoted to revitalizing the state's indigenous languages, about 70 teens have learned approximately 25 native Californian languages. They've had help from mentors working with them 10 to 20 hours a week over the past three years.

Of the 175 indigenous languages in the United States, children are speaking fewer than 20 of them at home, said Hinton, and the demand for help to save endangered languages is outpacing the resources.

"Speaking a heritage language isn't just a form of communication," she said. "It's a deep part of a person's identity and view of the universe."

There also is an increasing awareness among tribes of the resources available - like those at UC Berkeley - to help save endangered languages, said Hinton.

"Interest in language revitalization is something that's growing around the world," said Hinton, author of "How to Keep Your Language Alive" (Heyday Books, 2002). "Nationalism and globalization are constant and growing threats to the existence of indigenous societies, and partly as a response to that, there is more and more movement by indigenous people to maintain their identities and not get melted into the big melting pot."

The Muwekma Ohlone say it this way:

"Mak-muwekma mak-noono ya roote 'innutka, mak-'uyyaki_,
Nuhu, mak pekre ne tuuxi,
'At mak roote 'innutka hu_i_tak."

"Our culture and our language are the way to our past,
From it we embrace the present,
And follow the road to the future."

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