

The Kawaiisu language revitalization effort in southern California

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1. Introduction

This paper is an exploration of the language revitalization efforts of the Kawaiisu in southern California. The language is highly endangered with only three fluent native speakers, all over the age of 60, the fourth having passed away in January 2013. Recently there has been a renewed interest in the language and culture leading to an expansive revitalization movement characterized by (1) a focus on the interrelatedness of language and culture for the community; (2) a push to get the language spoken in the home and used by the youngest members of the community in daily life; (3) attentiveness to the success of the neighboring language communities' revitalization efforts; and (4) the integrated use of technology as a tool to assist the revitalization effort and to bridge the geographical barriers separating speakers from potential language learners. Drawing on publications, in-person interviews, e-mail interviews, and in-depth analysis of available web materials and media coverage, this paper outlines the process, goals, and components of their revitalization program and expands on these four characteristics. Though the issues and challenges the Kawaiisu face may not directly apply to all minority language communities, their example through action reflects the hope, even in a seemingly desperate situation of critical language endangerment, which proponents of many language renewal efforts hold deeply at the heart of their work.

2. Background of the language

Kawaiisu is a Southern Numic language of the Uto-Aztecan language family, which includes other languages such as Hopi, Panamint Tümpisa Shoshone, Tübatulabal, and Serrano (Lewis 2009). It was traditionally spoken in the Tehachapi and Paiute Mountain areas of Kern County. The Kawaiisu call themselves *Nuwa*, meaning 'the People,' and consist of approximately 250 tribal² members (KLCC 2010:Home). A grammar and dictionary of Kawaiisu were published in 1990 (Zigmond et al.) based on fieldwork conducted by Maurice Zigmond between 1936-1940 and 1970-1974. Zigmond also conducted an ethno-botanical study of the language (1981). Further documentation of

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² The term "tribe" is used by many Native American communities to refer to themselves as an autonomous entity and is not used pejoratively. The term is defined by Leap (1981) as referring to a Native American community which is federally recognized, but this definition actually excludes many groups, including the Kawaiisu, who for various reasons do not have federal recognition (KLCC, 2010).

the language was carried out by Sheldon Klein in the late 1950s and in 1981-1984, but he passed away in 2005 with only some of the material published (Klein 1959; 1988; see Golla 2011). Fortunately, much of the material from his fieldwork was donated to UC Berkeley by his wife and is stored in their archive. The recently completed *Kawaiisu Practical Grammar* is forthcoming.

The Kawaiisu language situation is critical. At the time of writing, there are three fluent native speakers and they are all elders, siblings in their 60s and 70s. Pauline Gallegos lived to be in her 90s but, sadly, passed away during the final editing process of this article. Her elder sister, also a fluent speaker, passed away in March 2009 at the age of 96 (Julie Turner and Luther Girado 2009, pers. comm., 07 August; Julie Turner 2013, pers. comm., 29 January). Much of the revitalization effort centers around Bakersfield and Tehachapi, which are a two-to-three hour drive north of Los Angeles, but the Kawaiisu tribal membership is scattered over a large geographical area, making participation impractical for many members who would otherwise like to be involved in language maintenance (Lawrence 2009). The Kawaiisu were relocated in the late 1800s by the United States Government, which led to the loss of many “traditions such as dress, music, songs and knowledge of sacred sites,” but the community has maintained the “language, traditional stories, and [their] survival skills” (KLCC 2010:Home). According to Julie Turner (director of the Kawaiisu Language and Cultural Center) and her father, Luther Girado (one of the remaining fluent speakers), the loss of the language occurred primarily in Girado’s parents’ generation. He and his two sisters, Betty Girado Hernandez and Lucille Girado Hicks, were born when their parents were in their 40s. They were the only children of that time to be taught the language in the home, largely due to the will of their mother, who stressed its importance in the family. Causes of language shift to English and Spanish during that time included influence from the churches, a perceived lack of necessity, and widespread attitudes that it was shameful to be “Indian” and better to be Mexican and speak Spanish (Julie Turner and Luther Girado 2009, pers. comm., 07 August). Now however, there are several members of the community who are striving to become Kawaiisu speakers, bringing with them optimism for the renewal of intergenerational transmission and the maintenance of the language (KLCC 2010:Home). In an in-person interview, Luther Girado shared his perspective on the future of the language, “There’s light at the end of the tunnel. It’ll make it. It’s not hoping. You know it will, now that you’ve got the younger generation that’s taken it over” (Julie Turner and Luther Girado 2009, pers. comm., 07 August).

3. Process

One thing which must be made part of successful revitalization movements is input from the many different voices of those who might be involved. Holton (2011:373) emphasizes the importance of including elders in the process of developing revitalization projects, particularly those involving technology. The Ojibway developed a research questionnaire in order to get feedback from teachers and members of the community before undertaking the creation of their language-learning CDROM related to hockey (Williams 2002:222). Similarly, the Kawaiisu hosted a series of potluck dinners which were open to all those “with an interest in Kawaiisu language and cultural revitalization,” in order to generate discussion about ways of strengthening the language and to administer a survey about the community’s needs (KLCC

2010:Programs). The Kawaiisu have also been working in partnership with the Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival (AICLS), which has been working since 1992 to support language maintenance efforts throughout California. Their trainings and workshops have been extended by the Kawaiisu, who themselves offer training to other endangered language communities in strategies for using the language in the home in structured sessions making use of daily-life activities, as well as in immersion techniques (KLCC 2010:Services). These models are based on Hinton's (1990/1991) recommendations that adults should spend time learning their ancestral language, overcome inhibitions about making mistakes and playing with language, and aim for immersion rather than translation.

4. Goals

The stated goals of the Kawaiisu Language and Cultural Center are to ensure the maintenance of their culture, teach traditional skills, and revitalize the language (KLCC 2010:Home; Lawrence 2009). The goals of the Kawaiisu Practical Grammar project are to attract more second language learners of Kawaiisu, and to increase the conversational proficiency of learners (KLCC 2010:Projects). They dream of having the language spoken in the community once again (KLCC 2010:Home) and hope to have a large base of second language speakers and new teachers to help future generations learn their language (Lawrence 2009). In order to achieve those goals, the Kawaiisu have undertaken a number of projects in support of their language revitalization effort. These are discussed below.

5. Projects

The Kawaiisu Language and Cultural Center (<http://kawaiisu.org>) was formed in 2003 and became a 501(c)3 non-profit in 2007 with an 11-person Board of Directors (Lawrence 2009). It is what Holton (2011:387) describes as a *web portal*, "a website which provides a single point of access to a wide range of related resources." At the moment, the web site is monolingual in English, but could one day provide access in Kawaiisu as well (p.388). It serves the functions of keeping members "fully apprised of project activities and reminding members of specific things they could do, at home or in the community, to provide language skills development," which Leap (1981:225) maintains is essential to successful revitalization movements. It also reaches more potential language learners (Lawrence 2009), offering immediate access to language learning materials such as the Kawaiisu interactive game, which is a multimedia memory game that matches photos of animals with recordings of each animal's spoken Kawaiisu name (KLCC 2010:Projects).

There also is a media exchange page, which provides a list of audio and video media created for learning the language along with associated lesson plans. These include media focused on traditional culture, such as creation myths, uses of plants, and the process of building a traditional summer house (known as a *havakani*), as well as media focused on at-home language usage (KLCC 2010:Media Exchange). Any materials can be ordered through a downloadable order form and prices for the materials are included next to each item. This project is the culmination of many smaller projects which involved community participation. The materials for the media on building a *havakani* came out of a workshop held at a traditional village site in Walker Basin during which

Luther Girado taught a group of men from the community how to build the *havakani* out of willows (KLCC 2010:Projects). Three of the traditional stories were recorded as part of a project which also included illustrations done by Christine Corcoran and music by Luther Girado for each. The DVDs which were created from these projects include separate chapters with English subtitles, which is a step towards Holton's suggestion that multimedia products which include any form of time-aligned text should "provide the user with the option to view accompanying text in the target language, a translation language, both languages or neither" (2011:377). The media used for at-home language situations follow the advice of Brandt and Ayoungman (1989) not to teach the language, but rather to simply talk with children using the language, guiding them through how to function in natural daily situations.

In September 2009, the Kawaiisu Language and Cultural Center undertook a 24-month joint project funded by the Administration for Native Americans to develop the Kawaiisu Practical Grammar with lessons. The project was designed to meet a need in the community, as the linguistic grammatical description of the language was not easy to use or understand for most second language learners (see Reyhner and Tennant 1995:13). It involved three of the four fluent speakers, two linguists, and six to ten project students all working together on the creation of the curriculum and grammar (Julie Turner 2012a, pers. comm., 06 April). This is an example of what Watahomigie and Yamamoto (1987) would describe as a successful partnership of "action linguists working with curriculum developers, tribal elders, tribal young adults, and teachers," as a model in contrast to previous models of anthropologists and linguists studying "languages for purely academic and professional reasons that had little or no benefit to Indian people," which has been a very real issue in California (Reyhner and Tennant 1995:16). Another publication is the *Handbook of the Kawaiisu* (Garfinkel and Williams 2011), which devotes an entire chapter by Julie Turner and Jon Hammond to the Kawaiisu language, includes terms in the Kawaiisu language wherever possible, and is paired with a DVD of Kawaiisu language materials in a pocket in the cover (Turner and Hammond 2011; Garfinkel and Williams 2010:Introduction). Because the remaining speakers are all elders, there has been an increased focus on documenting them over the last two and a half years for the project. Recently the Kawaiisu have been awarded a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant to record and transcribe elders speaking the language in traditional situations, and to transcribe archived recordings from the 1950s and 1980s, including a recording of the mother of the three remaining speakers made by Sheldon Klein in the 1980s that her children and grandchildren were unaware existed (Julie Turner 2012b, pers. comm., 08 April). In addition, they are currently working on digitizing the grammar and dictionary of the language, with the hope that it can be made available in an accessible format for use on iPads, like the Chumash iPad dictionary (Julie Turner 2012a, pers. comm., 06 April). A further digitization project is called Voices in Your Pocket (see KLCC 2009), which encourages elders and young people to work together creating digital audio and video recordings of the language and about the culture, which can then be put on iPods and used as a language practicing tool (KLCC 2010:Services). The Kawaiisu have been working with speakers of Tachi and Mono to provide training for their own such projects (Julie Turner and Luther Girado 2009, pers. comm., 07 August).

As part of their language revitalization efforts, the Kawaiisu also worked with the Owens Valley Career Development Center's Nüümü Yadoha Language Program³ from 2003-2007 (Julie Turner 2011a, pers. comm., 08 April). This program works with Paiute, Yowlumni, Wukchumni, Kawaiisu, Pakanapul (Tübatulabal) and Western Mono teams to offer community classes in the language, providing an opportunity for involvement in the language (Owens Valley Career Development Center 2007). Language classes for the Kawaiisu have been taught by Jon Hammond, who was a student of the language, and by Janice Williams on individual contracts. The classes include regular beginning and intermediate levels, along with an advanced class offered on Friday evenings, all of which make use of the audio-visual materials and lesson plans described above (Julie Turner 2012a, pers. comm., 06 April; 29 January 2013).

In addition to taught classes, the Kawaiisu have been participating extensively in the Master Apprentice Language Learning Program. Luther Girado is now working with his fourth apprentice, daughter Joy Girado, and has so far graduated three apprentices: partner Christine Corcoran, daughter Julie Turner, and granddaughter Loreen Park (Julie Turner 2012a, pers. comm., 06 April; KLCC 2010:Projects). The program teams fluent elders with younger apprentices to engage with each other for over 320 hours of active language usage in daily interactions and has been used by over 80 teams in over 25 California languages since 1993 (Hinton 2002). The focus is on immersion-methods of language learning and teaching and the teams are trained during two intensive sessions on these methods (AICLS 2009). They also make use of tools such as flash cards with conversation topics on one side for the master to use while engaging the apprentice in questions in the language, to maintain the immersion situation (Julie Turner 2010, pers. comm., 22 March). The Kawaiisu have developed other language learning materials such as a coloring book, which uses the writing system of the revised grammatical description, and bingo cards, which actively use the language (Julie Turner and Luther Girado 2009, pers. comm., 07 August).

To extend the reach of the Master Apprentice model beyond a two-person pair, the Kawaiisu, in partnership with the AICLS, began testing a new program in August 2008 called Language Revitalization at Home, in which fluent speakers teach their family members how to do normal family activities using only the language. The topics are determined by the family based on what is important to them and there is an emphasis on creating an interesting and fun environment for language learning, for all age groups. The first team to begin the new program was the extended family of elder Betty Hernandez, including her great-grandchild who was born during the project (AICLS 2009; KLCC 2010:Projects,Services). This program is further described in *Bringing Our Languages Home: Language Revitalization for Families* by Leanne Hinton (2013). The chapter describing the Kawaiisu language at home program is co-authored by Julie Turner and Laura Grant, who has written all of the grant proposals for the Kawaiisu's projects.

³ Whose mission statement is: "Working with Elders to increase fluency, practicing teaching skills, reviving traditional skills, becoming familiar with linguistics, digitally recording language and culture, creating archives and teaching tools - community teams are challenged daily by the fragile state of our endangered California languages."

The community has done significant outreach, including hosting community potlucks since 2010 and a Go Native! day event held annually since 2011 as a fundraiser for the Kawaiisu language program that includes Native American artists, music, food, hands-on crafts, storytelling, basket weaving, and other cultural activities (KLCC 2010:Programs; Julie Turner 2012a, pers. comm., 06 April). They have placed an emphasis on ensuring that neighboring language communities also find success in their revitalization programs, and offer various forms of training and assistance for those interested in their own language revitalization, including Master Apprentice, Voices in Your Pocket, and Communication Based Instruction, which focuses on active immersion learning strategies (KLCC 2010:Programs,Services). As Leap (1981:226) has pointed out, training is invaluable, as it “cannot be taken away even under budget cutbacks and staff reductions.”

Funding can be a difficult obstacle for language revitalization programs, particularly those involving technology (see Holton 2011:377; Leap 1981:214,226), but the Kawaiisu have successfully been awarded funding from many sources and offer guidance for other language communities on how to write grant applications (KLCC 2010:Services). These sources include the Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival, with funding from the California Arts Council, the Walter and Elise Haas Fund, the National Endowment for the Arts (Home); the Administration for Native Americans; the Alliance for California Traditional Arts; Native Cultures Fund; the Sociological Initiatives Foundation; Ringing Rocks Foundation; Zero Divide (Projects); Seventh Generation (Julie Turner 2013, pers. comm., 29 January); and the NSF (Julie Turner 2012b, pers. comm., 08 April).

6. Integration of language and culture

The diversity in funding sources available to support the Kawaiisu projects is partially an effect of their combined focus on language and culture. As Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer have observed, language and culture are separable, but things will inevitably be lost in the separation (1998:75). The Kawaiisu have chosen to leave them combined, as evidenced clearly in the title, Kawaiisu Language and Cultural Center, and in the webpage subheadings of, “Nuwa, without our language, who are we?” (KLCC 2010:Home) and, “Culture strengthens community” (Programs). This is reiterated by Holton’s statement, “Fluency is often only one piece of what is often a more holistic approach to language and culture revitalization.” (2011:381). It is this integration of language and culture in the Kawaiisu situation which has been used synergistically by those driving the movement to create a whole-picture approach to revitalization. Thus, many of the language learning materials developed include traditional stories as well as knowledge of material culture and medicinal usages of plants, to the effect that not only the language but also the traditional practices and culture can be carried on into the future through the same effort. Meek has described indigenous language issues as “providing people with an opportunity to reclaim their own heritage or to celebrate its persistence” (2010:137). This link between language and culture puts their efforts in line with the rhetoric of official United States policy regarding Native American languages, such as the Native American Languages Act (NALA) of 1990 (US Congress 1990), which states: “the status of the cultures and languages of Native Americans is unique and the United States has the responsibility to act together with Native Americans to ensure the survival of these unique cultures and languages.” Similarly, the Indian Nations at Risk Task Force (1991), “echoes [NALA] in calling for the

maintenance and renewal of native languages and cultures” (Reyhner and Tennant 1995:6).

7. Use of language at home

Though this acknowledgement of the importance of language and culture in official policy can make revitalization efforts less of a struggle, it is “no substitute for grassroots efforts focused on use of the language in homes” (Reyhner and Tennant 1995:4), and the Kawaiisu have taken this to heart, choosing what Sallabank (2011:289) refers to as the “phatic route” of encouraging the use of the language in the home and in daily life, particularly amongst the youngest members of the community, while recognizing the importance of training adults as well. This is expressed in nearly every aspect of the revitalization program, which engages entire families in projects such as Language Revitalization at Home and methods such as Communication Based Instruction, and includes language learning media with a focus on using the language in everyday situations including meals, greetings, asking for things, counting, and getting dressed (KLCC 2010:Media Exchange). Littlebear (1990), in his keynote address on effective language education practices and native language survival, draws attention to the necessity of involving the family in language revitalization efforts, and the Kawaiisu demonstrate this approach through projects such as the aforementioned Voices in Your Pocket, which emphasizes the participation of the entire family. This aspect of the project has had much success, as demonstrated by the fact that, as the webpage boasts, the youngest “technician” is ten years old (KLCC 2010:Projects). By focusing on making language learning interesting and engaging for the youth, the Kawaiisu are strengthening the likelihood of successful intergenerational transmission of the language and ensuring that their efforts are “facilitating and enabling” instead of “compulsory and punitive,” which Fishman (1991) points out matters in successful minority language restoration. Leap additionally points out that it takes the cooperation of the entire community in ensuring that learners are able to practice the language in daily interactions in order for revitalization programs to be successful (1981:225).

8. Encouraging a successful language ecology with neighbors

It is not only cooperation within the community which will create an environment that is supportive of revitalization, however. It is also the cooperative effort of all the indigenous groups of the area which will gradually encourage the widespread revitalization, and ultimately the daily use, of their languages and cultures. This approach reflects an ecolinguistic model of focusing revitalization efforts on an entire language ecology, not simply on individual languages (see Grenoble 2011:31; Mühlhäusler 2003). The Kawaiisu demonstrate this in their emphasis on creating teaching materials with universal applicability, which can then be shared with and used by other language groups due to their lack of printed text in any given language. The leaders of the revitalization movement also are actively engaged in gatherings held in California, such as the Language is Life conference, which bring together language advocates from throughout California and elsewhere to share their experiences and successes (KLCC 2010:Projects). Throughout the Kawaiisu Language and Cultural Center, a focus on encouraging the success of their neighbors is evident. The Programs page states, “We would be lonely people if our neighbors could not say “hello!” in their own native languages.” They are willing to post advertisements for others’ language classes and “assist other indigenous groups in their language and cultural revitalization

by providing non-profit fiscal sponsorship and training in language revitalization strategies, such as the development of teaching materials, archives, and new media” (Home).

9. Use of technology in revitalization

As shown, the Kawaiisu are quite familiar with the use of technology for revitalization, and have been using it to teach and document their language and culture since 2003 (KLCC 2010:Home). The role of technology has become integrated into their broader revitalization plan, as recommended by Holton (2011:397). Contrary to Holton’s (p.373) warning that “Technology can become a barrier between generations,” the Kawaiisu have used it as a tool to assist in intergenerational transmission and engagement: the creation of new media involves elders interacting with younger members of the community in the process of sharing cultural traditions through the medium of the language, which then become teaching materials for future use. Additionally, because the Kawaiisu membership is scattered across a broad geographical area and there are so few native speakers of the language, technology has played a role in bridging the distance between the speakers and the potential language learners, a role of technology also noted by Holton (p.371)

10. Evaluating success

The success of the program remains to be judged, as it is an ongoing effort and will require several generations in order to re-establish a state of stable intergenerational transmission. However, if one speaks of a framework for success which is focused on the process of taking action and serving as a model of encouragement and support for others, rather than simply focused on details such as number of new speakers or level of fluency attained in a given amount of time, then the Kawaiisu revitalization effort is a remarkable example of engagement against a backdrop of critical language loss in California. There are several indications that suggest it is well on track to creating new appreciation of the language and culture, new speakers, and a sustainable ecology of language revitalization in the area. The combined efforts of the Kawaiisu Language and Cultural Center, the Kawaiisu exhibit at the Tehachapi museum, the language teaching programs, the recently published handbook, and the efforts of the Kern Valley Indian Council to obtain federal tribal recognition, referred to as a whole as the “Kawaiisu Project,” received the Governor’s Historic Preservation Award from the State of California in 2011 in recognition of their work (Turner 2011b). Brandt and Ayoungman (1989) recommend twelve “Exercises for Language Planning,” several of which are relevant for discussing the Kawaiisu language renewal process. The Kawaiisu Language and Cultural Center has done exceptionally well at “establishing an information network to promote their goals” through their online presence at <http://kawaiisu.org>; at “recruiting individuals and groups to achieve those goals” by engaging community members and linguists from nearby universities in collaborative projects; at “focusing on the unique functions of the local language” by documenting it in relationship to traditional cultures and including prayers by Girado in important events; and at “implementing a practical, comprehensive plan” by addressing the needs of community members with steady, realistic movement towards their ultimate goals through smaller steps (from Reyhner and Tennant 1995:7). Leap (1981:230) describes indicators of success for language maintenance (in opposition to formal assessments of students’ familiarity with grammatical concepts) such as increased interest and concern in the

language and its role in contemporary life and increased involvement from the younger generations. This is clearly demonstrated by the enthusiasm of those leading the revitalization movement, who, though very busy, were willing to meet with two undergraduate students from Los Angeles in 2009 to discuss the project, have always been very responsive to e-mails, and are clearly passionate about the work they do.

Though those involved in the renewal process are generating a lot of energy and excitement, they are only a small subset of all tribal members and also include non-tribal members as well. Leap (1981:230-231) cautions,

“The language maintenance effort may act as a catalyst, but it cannot carry the full responsibility for bringing about a renewal of language fluency within the tribe; only the tribe, its members, its institutions, its value system, and its sense of group identity can assume that responsibility. And unless there are indications that the tribe is becoming more concerned about the language issue and is willing to take action in response to those concerns, the work of an Indian language maintenance program can never be judged to be successful.”

In light of this, the rest remains to be seen. However, given the success of community-wide events such as the Go Native! day and the involvement of entire families in the Language Revitalization at Home program, it does seem that there are such indications of wider concern throughout the community. These, along with the commitment and motivation of those behind the Kawaiisu Language and Cultural Center, are indicative of the hope which remains in spite of the many challenges of renewing native language and culture in this context.

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