

Smithsonian joins U. to log tribal languages

By **Stephen Speckman**

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Out of 175 American Indian languages, only about 20 are being taught to children as generations of Indians die off and leave little or no evidence of their languages or cultures.

"This is probably the hottest topic in linguistics right now," said Lyle Campbell, director of the University of Utah's Center for American Indian Languages (CAIL). "The languages are becoming extinct at such an accelerated rate.

"This is a worldwide problem," Campbell added. "All of the Utah (Indian) languages are in trouble."

It's a big enough problem that the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., has decided to partner with the U. center in an effort to record and archive Indian languages, stories and cultural histories in video, audio and book form.

When languages are lost, Campbell said, "then we're all diminished, because we don't have access to their experiences."

One of the U.'s current projects, funded by an ongoing grant, involves the preservation of endangered languages in northern Argentina and Brazil.

The Smithsonian is lending its support to the U. center with the use of linguists and anthropologists.

"They have very similar interests to ours, so it was a natural collaboration," Campbell said. "We'll be able to get more people involved — we need more human resources."

Unique collections of endangered languages are kept in the National Anthropological Archives, which is housed in the National Museum of Natural History.

Within that museum is the Department of Anthropology's senior linguist, Ives Goddard, who said the department's staff has made the study of Native American languages a priority for over 150 years.

The one-of-a-kind arrangement with the U. will have students traveling to Washington to work with Smithsonian collections and staff.

"We realized that we were both thinking along the same lines after the appointment of Lyle Campbell to head CAIL last year," Goddard said.

After two meetings in Washington, the two sides drew up a declaration of shared interests and goals. The Smithsonian partnership will be housed in the

Indigenous languages

Below is a partial listing of Indigenous languages spoken in the U.S.

LANGUAGE	NUMBER OF SPEAKERS	WHERE SPOKEN
Coos	1	Oregon
Pawnee	4	Oklahoma
Holikachuk	12	Alaska
Apache, Kiowa	18	Oklahoma
Abnaki-Penobscot	20	Maine
Oneida	50	New York, Wisconsin
Shawnee	234	Oklahoma
Hawaiian	1,000	Hawaii
Ute	1,984	Utah, Arizona, Nevada, California
Paiute	2,000	Nevada, Oregon, California, Idaho
Shoshoni	2,284	Nevada, Idaho, Wyoming
Hopi	5,264	Arizona, Utah, New Mexico
Cherokee	11,905	Oklahoma, North Carolina
Navajo	148,530	Arizona, Utah, New Mexico
TOTAL	361,978	Total represents all indigenous languages

SOURCE: Center for American Indian Languages, University of Utah

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same building at Fort Douglas on the U. campus where U. professor of linguistics Mauricio J. Mixco has been working on a language preservation project, funded by the National Science Foundation.

Mixco is part of four teams sifting through 120 audio tapes filled with interviews, stories and anecdotes from members of the Shoshone tribe. The recordings date back to the 1960s and 1970s, when anthropological linguist Wick R. Miller ventured onto reservations with a curiosity and a tape recorder. Miller left the tapes behind as part of his estate.

Mixco's project has been in the exploratory phase since its beginning last September. The teams will act as audio archaeologists, uncovering legends and histories that have not been heard since they were recorded, according to Mixco.

"All Shoshone in the Great Basin area will uncover a huge library of their history," Mixco said.

The recordings will be digitally preserved and rendered archive-ready, which means greater access to those who want to learn more about Shoshone Indians and their language. With only about 20 percent of the tribe still speaking the language, Mixco estimates that the Shoshone dialect could be nonexistent within 20 or 25 years.

"Here's the question around the world: 'Are children learning the language?' " Mixco said. "If it's 'No,' then that's the death warrant."

In places like Hawaii and New Zealand, where there are larger communities of indigenous speakers, "language nests" have helped revive dying languages, Mixco said. The "grandparent generation" in these areas was organized into groups that included children, who were taught the language once spoken regularly by their elders.

It's estimated that more than 2,000 languages were once spoken throughout the Americas, with fewer than 200 remaining in North America and 450 in Latin America.

Worldwide, it's expected that 90 percent of all languages will not survive this century or that, best case, as many as 50 percent will die off, according the U. center.

"Linguists are racing against time to study and understand the languages spoken by small groups around the world before they are replaced by regional and national languages in the onslaught of globalization," Goddard said. "This effort is critical to our ability to understand the possibilities of human language in general and will be crucial to all future attempts to understand the basic principles that underlie all languages, including our own."

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