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UCSB Professors Document Extinct Native American Language

For thousands of years, the area in and around the headwaters of the Napa River and the Russian River Valley, just north of San Francisco, was home to the Wappo, one of the oldest Native American tribes in California.

A sedentary hunter/gatherer culture, the Wappo had no written language, but communicated solely through the spoken word. Although small in number, Wappo continue to reside in Northern California -- most specifically in Mendocino and Sonoma counties. However, following the death 16 years ago of Laura Fish Somersal, the only remaining fluent speaker, Wappo as a spoken language no longer exists.

In an effort to preserve some history and knowledge of the indigenous language, Sandra A. Thompson and Charles N. Li, professors of linguistics at the University of California, Santa Barbara, along with Joseph Sung-Yul Park, a UCSB graduate student in linguistics, have published "A Reference Grammar of Wappo" (University of California Press). The text offers the most extensive data and grammatical research ever conducted on the Wappo language. Their main source of information for the book was Somersal.

"There's a huge movement to preserve, document, and archive indigenous languages on the verge of extinction," said Thompson. She is a member of the Society for the Study of Indigenous Languages of the Americas, an organization

committed to the documentation of endangered languages.

Although they began their research in 1975, the book wasn't published until 2006, according to Thompson, because the technical resources they required to organize the word-structure data appropriately was not yet available.

"It took most of the 1990s to accomplish that, which we did with the help of graduate students," said Thompson. The most notable among them was Park, who analyzed the patterns of word formation -- the morphology of the language -- and wrote the chapters on verb forms and verb paradigms.

For 10 years, Li and Thompson traveled to Northern California every six or eight weeks to meet with Somersal and record her casual speaking. To elicit sentences in context, they would describe situations and ask her how she would respond.

"For example, we'd say, 'Suppose you're in the kitchen making dinner and someone comes in and asks you what you're doing. What would you say?'" explained Thompson.

By 1984 they had collected a large box of tapes and notebooks full of data. Thompson then spent a year's sabbatical analyzing the material. Additionally, Li and Thompson made a few more trips to visit Somersal before she passed away in 1990.

Somersal was completely bilingual in English and Wappo, which was the language she used when speaking with her mother and siblings. She also was fluent in Pomo, her father's language, also indigenous to the Mendocino coast and Clear Lake areas of Northern California. Somersal had maintained her Wappo language skills into adulthood, according to Thompson, because she never attended the school in her area run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Somersal had been excused permanently to look after her mother, who was blind and required constant care. Had she gone to school as a child, Thompson said, the English she would have been forced to learn would have replaced her native Wappo.

"That was fortuitous for our study of Wappo, but not good for Laura," said Thompson. "She spoke English fluently, but she never learned to read or write."

Thompson received her Ph.D. from Ohio State University. Her research centers on interactional linguistics, which includes the role of discourse, especially everyday embodied conversational interaction. Her primary language areas, including Wappo,

are Mandarin Chinese and English. She also has worked with Japanese, Korean, and Hmong speakers.

Li, who received his Ph.D. from UC Berkeley, specializes in the evolutionary origin of language, animal communication, and the neurological basis of language. He has also worked with speakers of Green Hmong, a language of the Hmong-Mien family in southeast Asia; Baonan, a language of the Mongolic family in Inner Asia; and Chinese. His current research focuses on the biological foundation of language and takes a multidisciplinary approach to the evolutionary origin of language by involving paleoanthropology, neural science, and the evolution of cognitive behavior among mammals.

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