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Activists and Scholars Meet at UCSB to Learn How to Save Endangered Languages

(Santa Barbara, CA, June 18, 2008) -- Ekegusi - a language spoken by 1.8 million people in Western Kenya - and

Mandan - a language spoken by Sacajawea, which has just one remaining fluent speaker - are both in danger of dying out. They are only two of the thousands of the world's languages that are predicted to disappear before the end of this century. And along with these languages entire cultures and ways of life may also be lost.

Fighting this trend are linguists, academics who study languages scientifically, and members of communities who are actively working to stop their own languages from losing ground to more dominant national or regional tongues. Over 120 of these linguists and activists will meet at the University of California, Santa Barbara for two weeks beginning June 23

for "Infield" - the Institute on Field Linguistics and Language Documentation - to examine successful models of language preservation and to train participants in techniques for working in endangered language communities.

At Infield, language activists from Native American communities across North America will work with linguists and activists from Africa, Asia, Europe and the

Pacific Rim, including Australia, Indonesia, New Zealand, and Hawaii. They will examine successful examples of language revitalization and share current techniques for documenting languages. And in a change from past practice, they will collaborate as partners in this training. "InField offers a new way for language activists and linguists to come together," said Dr. Carol Genetti, Professor of Linguistics at UC Santa Barbara and organizer of InField.

"This institute offers both groups the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the perspectives, resources, and goals of the other. This will allow us to develop more effective partnerships as we work together to preserve this important human heritage." Some InField participants are

members of the language communities who are also trained linguists and are working with their elders to preserve not only their languages, but their customs and traditions.

Jenny Davis, a Ph.D. student in linguistics at the University of Colorado, is a member of the Chickasaw Nation, which was originally based in the southeastern United States but was removed to Oklahoma during the early 19th century. Today only 70 Chickasaws, out of some 40,000 members of the tribe, are fluent speakers of their language. Davis, one of the only linguists working with the Chickasaws and the only member of the tribe with linguistics training, is active in efforts to revitalize the Chickasaw language. Her community has recently begun a "Master/Apprentice" program, which pairs native speakers with younger members of the tribe, who agree to speak Chickasaw for a minimum of 10 hours per week. "The Chickasaw nation now employs two fluent speakers as 'Masters' who are resources for our community," said Davis. "The 'Masters' receive a subsidy from the tribe in recognition of their service to the Nation, and they mentor neighbors, members of their own families or work colleagues." The program complements efforts to teach young children Chickasaw in pre-schools and Head Start, and the tribe is working to open an immersion school as well.

The Master/Apprentice approach was developed by Leanne Hinton, Professor Emeritus of Linguistics at UC Berkeley. At InField, Hinton will discuss this approach as well as the "Breath of Life" workshop which took place earlier this month and focused on California's native languages.

The experience of revitalizing Samala, one of six languages spoken by the Chumash, the native people of Central and Southern California, will be shared at InField by Dr. Richard Applegate. Earlier this year Dr. Applegate completed a 4,000 word dictionary of Samala, which is spoken by the Santa Ynez branch of the Chumash. Dr. Applegate has been working with the Santa Ynez Chumash for the past five years to develop a language program, and has appointed five "apprentices" who teach Samala words to their own children and other members of the tribe.

Professor Larry Kimura of the University of Hawaii will present the story of how Hawaiian was brought back from near extinction. In a state where until 1987, it was against state law to teach Hawaiian in the public schools, except as a foreign language, students may now pursue Hawaiian-medium studies up to the level of a Master's degree.

Other models being presented at InField will show how modern technology can be used to document and revitalize languages. In addition to techniques in audio and video recording, and data management, participants will learn how to use the Internet and "wikis" (websites that can be edited collectively) as tools. Professor Shobhana Chelliah of the University of North Texas, who documents minority and endangered languages of Northeast India, said that "... the internet is going to be the safest and most efficient way for me to keep in touch with ... the politically troubled Northeast Indian region." Dr. Te Taka Keegan, a Maori from New Zealand who was trained as a computer scientist, will present his work in developing Maori language software. Jeanne LaVerne, who is a Hopi Indian and has a Ph.D. in linguistics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, wants to develop a Hopi database that can be more easily accessed and updated.

The coordinators of the Ekegusi Encyclopedic Project, from Kenya, are working to document their language before it is eroded by migration and the younger generation's preference for English or Kiswahili, which are taught in the school system. Kennedy Bosire and Gladys Machogu

are researching an encyclopedic Ekegusii- English dictionary, which currently has 30,000 words translated into English, and includes pictures of plants, animals, birds, insects, and physical features. Along with the language, says Machogu, the project is researching and compiling data on the traditions of the

Ekegusi community -

including the naming and raising of children, marriage, health and medicine, and religion and socio-economic activities. This is increasingly difficult since the older generation is aging and dying.

The Ekegusi activists are working to preserve their language while there are still large numbers of speakers, although they are ageing. On the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation in North Dakota, Edwin Benson, age 75, is the last remaining fluent speaker of Mandan, the language spoken by Sacajawea, Lewis and Clark's young Indian guide. Alyce Spotted Bear, an educator, activist and leader of the Mandan tribe who will be attending InField, reports that children learn vocabulary from "Uncle Edwin" in the Twin Buttes Elementary School, and a few people meet weekly to try and learn the language. There is great urgency to learn and document the language while the last speaker is still alive.

Another group of activists attending InField are members of the Lakota and Dakota tribes of North and South Dakota who are also linguistics students. The members of this group, students of Professor David Rood of at the University of Colorado at Boulder, are enrolled in a Master's degree program in which they are studying linguistics and ethnographic videography. They will be able to serve as language resources for their own tribes. The program is supported by the National Science Foundation as part of its Documenting Endangered Languages project.

For two weeks, from June 23 to July 3, InField will present a course of workshops on language documentation, maintenance, and revitalization. . This will be followed by a four-week session of field training from July 7 to August 1. This intensive course is similar to a doctoral course on linguistic field methods, where students will utilize the skills taught in the workshops. In addition to technical work, participants may learn about moral, ethical, and practical issues of working within foreign speech communities.

Other participants from North America include activists from diverse communities: White Mountain Apache (Arizona); Kwak'wala (Northern Vancouver Island); Seneca (New York State and Canada); Cheyenne (Montana); Karuk (Northern California; Central Pomo (Mendocino County, California); and Algonquin (Western Quebec and Eastern Ontario) Also taking part will be speakers and scholars of Ese Eja (Bolivia and Peru); Baram and Bhujel (Nepal); Lamkang and Haroti (India); Banda, Krim and Bom' (West and Central Africa); Kiong and Ibani (Nigeria); and Jambi and Papuan Malay (Indonesia).

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Note: The workshops for InField will take place June 23-July 3 at various locations on the UC Santa Barbara campus. Each day there will be a plenary session focusing on specific language models: Hawaiian language revitalization, Australian Language Centres, Seneca, Chumash, Manx Gaelic, Indonesian, Maori, and the "Breath of Life" workshop on Californian native languages. These will take place in the McCune Conference Room of the Humanities and Social Sciences Building.

About UC Santa Barbara

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