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Oral History: Indigenous linguists use endangered language to connect Wampanoag members to their roots

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Indigenous teachers and linguists are using new methods to revitalize an ancient and endangered language.

Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal member Tracy Kelley, a language teacher with the Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project, has been working alongside others over the last several months teaching tribal households Wôpanâak, the Wampanoag language, via Zoom and other online platforms.

Kelley created a website called Kun8seeh, which means "Talk to me," where tribal households can access different language resources and materials, including information on the Wôpanâak alphabet as well as nouns and phrases.

While the site and other online technologies utilized by the Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project provide an alternative to in-person learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, they have also sparked an increased interest among tribal households wanting to learn the language.

Jennifer Weston, director of the Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project, said the organization currently teaches about 300 students each month, about three times more than last year.

"It's made me really happy to know that we're reaching so many more people," Weston said. "The work has been amplified in the midst of really challenging times."

The project, which serves all tribal households of Aquinnah, Assonet, Herring Pond and Mashpee, offers a number of programs for all ages. Through its Weetumuw School, it teaches immersion classes to children in preschool, kindergarten and first and second grades. It also provides programming in Mashpee Public Schools, where middle and high school students receive world language credit.

Through remote courses, staffers have gotten creative in their teachings, using different platforms like Zoom, Seesaw, and Gimkit and teaching through slideshows, art, Facebook live streams, sing-

alongside and story times, Weston said.

Wôpanâak was at one point considered a “sleeping language” that people did not speak for a number of years, Weston said.

But a large number of written documents from the 16th and 17th centuries helped tribal linguists revive the language, she said. The project used 17th-century editions of the King James Bible that Wampanoag communities produced in collaboration with missionaries who were trying to convert Native Americans. Documents such as wills, deeds and land transfers dating back hundreds of years were also used, Weston said.

But while the project has been working to make the Wôpanâak language available to tribal households for 28 years, the language is still considered endangered, Weston said.

Kelley began learning the language in the 1990s when she was 8 or 9 years old, and it helped shape her identity and give her pride in her culture, she said. She attended cultural nights where tribal members sang songs and made crafts. She also took different intergenerational workbook classes, where tribal members learned the sounds of the language and how to read and write.

Her mother, Jessie “Little Doe” Baird, a linguist who co-founded the reclamation project, would label things throughout the house in the Wôpanâak language with sticky notes, Kelley said.

“It was just a beautiful experience,” Kelley said.

But when Kelley went to the University of Massachusetts Amherst for her undergraduate degree, she could not take Wôpanâak classes, which only were offered where the instructors were located, such as in Mashpee or Aquinnah.

Kelley, who graduated with a master’s degree from MIT’s Indigenous Languages Initiative program in 2020, has since used her website Kun8seeh to teach tribal households across the country and the world, including some students in British Columbia and Finland.

She taught her first online class in October and recently finished teaching six-week intensive units that will resume in April.

During her hour-long Zoom classes, students of all ages immerse themselves in Wôpanâak, participating in small talk about the weather and how they are doing for about 20 or 30 minutes, Kelley said. They then spend the rest of the time talking about what they learned, introducing new materials and holding other discussions, typically in English, Kelley said.

The online classes have also connected Wampanoag people who otherwise would not have met. Two families in the Washington D.C. area, for example, realized they lived near each other when they were both taking Kelley’s class, Weston said.

But the technology still presents its own challenges, Kelley said.

“Providing Indigenous teachings online isn’t necessarily the most approved-of idea,” Kelley said.

Some tribal elders have gotten left behind due to issues with the technology, Kelley said, although she has worked to help elders with their devices and teach them how they work.

“It would be really wise for folks, in general, to think about how we can best not leave elders behind,” Kelley said “Technology is a great tool and it should be accessible to everybody.”

In addition to accessibility and who should receive access to the teachings, there have also been some concerns raised about exploitation. At one time, Kelley said, Wampanoag people were not able to speak their language or express their culture. Some were sent to boarding schools and were beaten for speaking their language, she said, and it took a long time for some tribal members to come around to the idea of making the language more accessible online.

Weston, who is part of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, said she is impressed in the way the Wampanoag Tribe has worked to protect its language and nurture it for households. Wôpanâak is not something that is available to linguists or the general public, Weston said; it is entirely community and family driven.

Given its limited staff, Weston said the project must be strategic in how it deploys resources. The project tries to focus its teachings toward people who use the language meaningfully in their households, not just those who think learning the language might be “fun” or “cool,” she said.

“In the future, our students will pass the language down to their own children,” Weston said. “It’s something that has to take place in the household.”

For the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe, learning the language reinforces the connections among the people and reminds them of those ancient ties — and just how powerful they are.

“That’s just a very powerful healing force,” Weston said.

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