I. Wichita

Ia. About Wichita

Wichita is a Caddoan language spoken near Anadarko, Oklahoma, USA. There are approximately 2,100 enrolled tribal members but only one person, Doris Lamar, now an octogenarian, can still speak the language fluently. Wichita is structurally prototypical of polysynthetic languages; i.e. most of the information in an utterance is contained in bound verbal morphology.

Some people remember songs or short phrases, but only one can actually use the language any more. The DoBeS projects documented this language at the last possible moment.

Ib. Linguistic Affiliation

By 1960, there were no longer any dialect variations among the Wichita speakers. In the past Waco, Tawakoni, and Wichita were considered as separate dialects (Rood, 1996). Along with Pawnee, Arikara, Caddo, and now extinct Kotsai, it forms the Caddoan family of languages.

Ic. Current Condition

At the time of the last DoBeS-sponsored field trip in 2003, about 10 people could still speak the language well enough to participate in the recording sessions. In 2013, that number is 4. Some people remember songs or short phrases, but only one can actually use the language any more. The DoBeS projects documented this language at the last possible moment.

II. Documenting the Language

IIa. Older Material

In the pilot phase of the project Rood's text-based database of words and sentences was imported into (i) the IDD dictionary program and (ii) a searchable web-based tool. The sound recordings of the words and verb paradigms, as well as the oral narratives and a 28 minute conversation from 1966, were digitized at 16bit, 44.1 kHz from the original reel-reel tapes and are now included as examples in the multimedia dictionary.

The DoBeS projects documented this language at the last possible moment. Some of the time during the individual interview sessions was used for elicitation of more verb paradigms. Rood's 1980 list of nouns was re-elicted in order to obtain high quality sound recordings for the archive.

During the summer of 2002 and 2003 field trips the researchers also organized various "Language Sessions" with the remaining ten fluent, or semi-fluent, Wichita speakers in the hopes of inspiring the elders to speak the language and to generate more natural language material for the archive. Eight sessions, varying in length between 1.5 hours and 2.5 hours, were recorded with digital video and audio.

IIb. What's new?

Most attempts to get the speakers to use the language failed. The language meetings also revealed that the type of material that is found in the older stories, conversations, and elicitation is irreprodudible. These language sessions did generate some Wichita but the segments were not nearly as fluent as the older material and the discourse was primarily in English. Despite the lack of fluency, the video sessions contain interesting cultural material that is important for the archive. There is a prayer, some songs, some short segments of storytelling, and sequences of question-response pairs in Wichita. These segments have been organized into media sessions and are being transcribed with the DoBeS ELAN tool.

The videos also contain personal narratives which give us a glimpse into the reality of language endangerment and how the native speakers react to the state of endangerment.

TEAM & CONTACT ADDRESSES

Team members:
David S. Rood (PI)
Armik Mirzayan
Andreas Mühlröder

Affiliation:
Department of Linguistics and Center for the Study of Indigenous Languages of the West (CSILW)
University of Colorado, Boulder, CO 80309, USA

Project funded by the Volkswagen Stiftung.

The technical support for the Project is provided by the project DoBeS at the MPI for Psycholinguistik at HiLjingen (NL).

David S. Rood (David.Rood@Colorado.EDU)
Armik Mirzayan (mirzayan@slr.colorado.edu)