The Samala Language

History and Geography

Samala (synonym: Ineseño) is a Chumash language spoken in the Santa Ynez valley of coast central California. The Chumash language family is made up of 6 languages ranging from present-day San Luis Obispo south to Malibu and east to the Central Valley, as well as the three northern California Channel Islands. The Chumash language family existed in a linguistically diverse geographical area, bounded by Salinan to the north, Yokuts languages to the east, and Uto-Aztecan languages to the south.

Shortly after European explorers initially made contact with the Chumash peoples, Franciscan missionaries founded five missions in Chumash territory, backed by the force of Spanish arms. San Luis Obispo was founded in 1772; San Buenaventura in 1782; Santa Barbara in 1786; La Purisima Conception in 1787; and Santa Ynez in 1804. Samala speakers were moved to Mission Santa Ynez and were largely forced to abandon historic villages. The number of Native speakers of Chumash languages rapidly declined during the mission period as European diseases severely impacted Chumash population, and mixed marriages with non-natives and different Chumash bands reduced the transmission of the language.

Language Revitalization

The population of Chumash peoples is estimated to have exceeded 22,000 at the time of initial contact in 1769, and declined dramatically to 2,800 in 1831 due largely to European diseases. During the movement of Chumash Indians to the missions, native languages and customs were discouraged and replaced with Spanish culture and Catholicism. This had a disastrous impact on the transmission of Samala as future generations learned Spanish and English. Recently, there has been considerable interest among the descendants of Samala speakers in the restoration of the language.

Today there are no first language speakers of any Chumash language. In 2003 weekly Samala language classes began in the local community, in 2007 an apprenticeship program was initiated, and in 2009 the “Say it in Samala” program began creating teaching materials. A Samala-English dictionary has been published, for sale and for donation to schools on the Central Coast, and the restoration program actively continues. Samala language tutorials are also available online at www.chumashlanguage.com.

Grammatical Structure

Chumash languages have rich consonant inventories. Ineseno has four stops (p t k q), two affricates (c [ts] ŋ) and three fricatives (s ś x), plus h and ̣. All obstruents occur plain, glottalized, and, except for x, aspirated. There are two nasals (m n) and three approximants (l w y), all of which occur plain and glottalized. All Central Chumash languages have a process of sibilant harmony, whereby all sibilants within a word must be either dental (s c) or palatal (i č). The population of Chumash peoples is estimated to have exceeded 22,000 at the time of initial contact in 1769, and declined dramatically to 2,800 in 1831 due largely to European diseases. During the movement of Chumash Indians to the missions, native languages and customs were discouraged and replaced with Spanish culture and Catholicism. This had a disastrous impact on the transmission of Samala as future generations learned Spanish and English. Recently, there has been considerable interest among the descendants of Samala speakers in the restoration of the language.

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Survey of California and Other Indian Languages
http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/~survey/

Documentation

The earliest records of Samala are a brief vocabulary collected by Arroyo de la Cuesta in 1837. Throughout the following century, several people made contributions to Samala language documentation, including A. Taylor (1856), A. Pinart and H.W. Henshaw (1878), A. Kroeber (1904, 1910) and J.C. Merriam. J. P. Harrington recorded over 100,000 pages of notes on Chumash languages between 1914 and 1919, including word lists, elicited sentences, and narratives. His main consultant for the Samala language was Maria Solares, whose paternal grandparents were from kalawasáq, the second largest village in Ineseño territory. Richard Applegate focused his Berkeley doctoral dissertation on the Samala language, organizing Harrington’s notes into ‘Ineseño Chumash Grammar’ (1972). Today, the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians has developed an active revitalization program and is making huge strides in relearning their Samala language based on historical documentation of the language.

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