The Hupa Language

History and Geography

Hupa, traditionally spoken in Hoopa Valley along the lower Trinity River in present-day Humboldt County, is a member of the Athabaskan language family, one of the largest in North America. Chilula and Whilkut, considered dialects of Hupa, were spoken by people living along Redwood Creek to the west of Hoopa Valley. Hupa territory is adjacent to that of Yurok and Karuk to the north, Wiyot to the west, Nongati to the south, and Shasta and Chimariko to the east.

Due to the relative inaccessibility of Hoopa Valley, direct encounters between the Hupa and Euro-Americans were rare until 1850. This changed with the discovery of gold on the Trinity River, which brought a surge of miners and other newcomers to the region. Although the gold rush lasted only a few years, tensions between settlers and indigenous people led to the establishment of the Hoopa Valley Reservation in 1864, today one of the largest Indian reservations in California. Over the course of the next century, many traditional Hupa cultural practices were gradually set aside, although in recent years there has been interest among Hupa people in reviving key elements of their heritage.

Grammatical Structure

Athabaskan languages are well known among linguists for their complex verb morphology. Hupa is no exception. Each verb consists of a stem preceded by a potentially large number of prefixes that participate in complex morphophonemic interactions. Derivational and inflectional morphemes are interleaved throughout the verbal template, leading to discontinuous lexical items known as ‘themes’ among Athabaskan scholars. For example, the verb theme translated in English as ‘stir’ or ‘move something back and forth’ consists of a prefix xi- and a stem -na. These theme formatives are inflected with aspect and agreement prefixes to make full words like xe'whna 'I move it back and forth'.

Language Revitalization

Scholars estimate that, in pre-contact times, there were as many as 2000 speakers of Hupa, Chilula, and Whilkut combined. When Goddard arrived in Hoopa Valley in the late 19th century, already most young people were bilingual in Hupa and English. Reservation life and adaptation to a wage economy in the 20th century created an imperative for Hupa people to communicate in new ways, and today there are fewer than a half-dozen fluent native speakers of the language.

Since the 1970s, the Hoopa Valley Tribe has been actively working to revitalize the Hupa language. It has sponsored classes and workshops and published materials to help people learn the language. Hoopa Valley High School offers Hupa language classes for its students. As a result of these efforts, a number of people have developed a high degree of second-language fluency.

Documentation

Hupa is one of the best-studied languages of California. The first Ph.D. in linguistics in North America was awarded to Pliny Earle Goddard, whose Berkeley dissertation (published in 1905) was a description of Hupa morphology. Goddard went on to publish a number of studies related to the Athabaskan languages of California. Edward Sapir, one of the most celebrated linguists of the 20th century, collected a large body of Hupa texts in the summer of 1927, edited by Victor Golla and published in 2001. Materials at the Survey of California and Other Indian Languages include the 1953 field notebooks of Mary Woodward and Victor Golla’s database of more than 19,000 index cards containing Hupa vocabulary.

Today, a group of Berkeley graduate students is collaborating with Verdena Parker, one of the last fluent speakers of Hupa, to create a multimedia language resource linking annotated texts to a dictionary and digital recordings. When complete, this online corpus will facilitate the exploration of Hupa syntax and information structure in a variety of speech genres.

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