We still live here

Film by Anne Makepeace


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This film (see also its companion website1) is a story of the determination of one person (Jessie Littledoe Baird) and her friends to revive a Native American Indian language, Wampanoag, that actually died (all native speakers died and the language ceased to exist). The language name, Wampanoag, means Easterners or literally People of the Dawn.2 Although some people are trying to learn the language, the film states that no one actually speaks Wampanoag fluently on a daily basis today. Also none of the public schools in that area teaches the children using Wampanoag.

Reviving a dead language is not easy. Kazakevich (2011), working in Siberia and the Far East, documented that for the 35 minority languages still in use today in Siberia, the teaching of these languages has had very little effect on preserving them. Patte (2011), working with the Anun people in Venezuela, noted that when the Anun people lost their land due to the expansion of the oil industry, they also began to lose their heritage language. Karstedt (2011) noted that the same thing happened with the Oomrang of Germany when they lost their land. The filmmakers of We still live here stated that the Wampanoag lost most of their land to the colonizers. So the Wampanoag’s loss of land may partially explain why the Wampanoag lost their language. However, at minute 7:30 in the film, Jessie Littledoe Baird noted that yellow fever caused two-thirds of the Wampanoag population to die.

Other researchers (Marr and Cathey 2010), however, suggest that there were other causes for the disappearance of the Wampanoag people. They note that from 1616 to 1619 the Wampanoag suffered an epidemic, long suspected to be smallpox, but recent research alternatively theorizes that it was leptospirosis, a bacterial infection also known as Weil’s syndrome or 7-day fever. It caused a high fatality rate and nearly destroyed the society. They suggest that the losses from the epidemic made it possible for the English colonists to get a foothold in creating the Massachusetts Bay Colony in later years. King Philip’s War (1675–1676) against the English colonists resulted in the deaths of 40 percent of the tribe.

Jessie Littledoe Baird produced the materials to teach this language to others by taking a document and recording her voice saying those words with the assumption that she was pronouncing the words correctly. However, she, herself, freely acknowledges that the spelling of the words in the source documents was not consistent.
In order to come up with the word “dog” in Wampanoag, Jessie would assume that the word “dog” in Wampanoag would have been cognate with the word “dog” in other Indian languages and then she would use sound correspondences to derive the word “dog” in Wampanoag. Unfortunately, if this word was not in any source documents, she couldn’t possibly know whether or not the word “dog” in Wampanoag was cognate with the word “dog” in other Indian languages. The Wampanoag language that is re-created here in this way is a good attempt, probably the best that can be done under the circumstances, but is certainly not exactly as it was pronounced by native speakers.

After watching the film, I had a few unanswered questions.

1. The movie starts with this quote, “It was prophesied that language would go away from here for a time. And when the appointed time came, if the people here decided that they wanted to welcome the language home then there would be a way made for that to happen.” But it would have been nice to know who prophesied this. Was it a village chief or a religious leader? The movie doesn’t give any information about who prophesied this or when it was prophesied or how it was prophesied.

2. The second woman interviewed (minutes 2–3 into the film, directly after Jessie Littledoe Baird) said that her brother (Uncle Buster) was still speaking the language until he died. The woman’s husband referred to Uncle Buster as though he had heard him speak because he heard Uncle Buster explain what the Wampanoag words meant. The woman and her husband were both about 70 years old. So this implies that the language was still in use within the past 70 years. Then there was another man interviewed who said that the language has probably been dead for over a century. So who was correct?

3. One speaker in the film said, “John Elliot, who was a missionary here from England, was engaged in the translation of the Bible into Wampanoag in 1680. First of all his goal was a certain amount of destruction of Wampanoag traditional culture.” But at another point in the film, Jessie Littledoe Baird indicated that the main source document that they used to reconstruct the Wampanoag language was the Bible in Wampanoag, which John Elliot helped to translate. She also indicated that Roger Williams was one of the original missionaries to the Wampanoag and apparently Williams wrote about Wampanoag culture. So most of what the Wampanoag descendants today know about their original culture came from the writings of these two missionaries. It seems ironic that one of the interviewees on the film would say that the missionaries were trying to destroy their culture. If it weren’t for these two missionaries, the Wampanoag would have been unable to reconstruct their original language and culture. Why wasn’t this acknowledged within the movie?

4. One speaker in the film said that the missionaries were pressuring the people to either convert or die. But were any Wampanoag people actually killed by the missionaries? The film seems to assume that all the colonizers were Christian missionaries and that all the Christian missionaries were also colonizers.
5. There were literacy primers teaching vowels. It would be interesting to know who
developed the primers and how? Aside from the one MIT consultant, did the community
work with a linguistics organization for assistance? The film doesn’t say.

6. What were the obstacles in teaching and promoting Wampanoag? How were these
obstacles overcome?

Despite the unanswered questions listed above, I would still recommend this movie to anyone
interested in learning about a case study of language revival.

Notes

   Accessed June 14, 2013

   May 27, 2012.

References

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