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Whispers in Cyberspace: A Haida Language Website and the Internet's Role in Language Revitalization

1. Introduction

The rate at which the world's languages are dying out is incredibly disturbing—for linguists, and for members of a community wishing to preserve their cultural identity and heritage through their language. Increasingly, language activists have become interested in harnessing the power of many forms of electronic media and communication for their cause (Eisenlohr, 2004). In particular, with the mounting role of computers and the Internet in society, there has been considerable growth in the number of endangered language websites over the past several years (Buszard-Welcher, 2001). However, the extent to which these websites succeed at helping to revitalize a language is more difficult to assess. This paper evaluates a website for the highly endangered Haida language, identifying both strengths and weaknesses in content and design. I concluded that without a large enough group of native speakers and students of the language, a website in and of itself can do little to initiate the revitalization of a highly endangered language.

2. Leoki: A Program with a Purpose

One of the most fascinating instances of the application of Internet technology to language revitalization is the software used in the revitalization of Hawaiian. Warschauer (1998) describes how a Bulletin Board System (BBS) called Leoki ('powerful voice') has been extremely successful in fostering community among learners of Hawaiian. Leoki is "believed to

be one of the first BBSs in the world to operate entirely in an indigenous language” (“Preservation of Hawaiian”). It allows users to interact both synchronously via live chat and asynchronously via e-mail in Hawaiian. Furthermore, it provides resources to users, including a Hawaiian language newspaper, historical and cultural materials, and a Hawaiian-English dictionary.

Along with the Leoki system, the World Wide Web has emerged as a tool for students to share their Hawaiian writing, accompanied by multimedia, with the rest of the world. The Internet also makes it easier for teachers to disseminate educational materials for Hawaiian classrooms. Warschauer (1998) argues that these new technologies have greatly contributed to the revitalization by allowing Hawaiian students to share their language and culture with others regardless of location. In accordance with the traditional “importance of social relations in Hawaiian learning,” he maintains, teachers emphasize “the social and collaborative aspects of the Internet.” In one such project, fourth-graders use long-distance online collaboration to compose a song about their community (“Culture”). Finally, using new technologies to produce collaborative work in a language serves to make the language more relevant to modern life.

3. A Website for the Haida Language

After reading about how the Internet has been used in the context of large revitalization scenarios, I decided to examine how the Web is being used in the revitalization of a highly endangered language. I chose a small website, entitled *Xaat Kíl: The Haida Language*, dedicated to the language of the Haida people of Alaska and British Columbia. Haida is nearly extinct, yet according to *Xaat Kíl*'s homepage, a modest attempt to revitalize it is underway:

While a hundred years ago all Haidas were fluent in the Haida language, today the number of speakers is down to no more than 3 or 4 dozen, and nearly all of those

speakers are over the age of 70. However, there is a strong interest among many younger Haidas to learn their ancestral language and to use it once again on a daily basis in their communities. [...] There are a range of Haida classes, both formal and informal, being offered in several Haida communities [and Alaskan universities]. (<http://www.haidalanguage.org/>)

A work of the Sealaska Heritage Institute—a nonprofit organization “founded for the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian people of Southeast Alaska” dedicated to the preservation of these native cultures (Sealaska Heritage Institute)—Xaat Kíl seems to be the only site on the Web dedicated to the Haida language.

3.1. Objectives

The stated purpose of the Xaat Kíl site is “the study, preservation and revitalization of the Haida language” (<http://www.haidalanguage.org/>). Very little content on the site is devoted to Haida history, culture, or current events. Aside from a few sentences on the homepage, there is no effort to acquaint outsiders with the Haida people; it seems that there is not enough basic information about the community to appeal to a general audience. Presumably, the site is designed for members of the Haida community interested in learning more about the language. And unlike Leoki, whose “purpose is to provide on-line support for Hawaiian language use in immersion schools and the broader community” (Warschauer, 1998, “Preservation”), Xaat Kíl does not at presently include features designed for building a community of Haida language learners.

3.2. Content

The material on any given page from the site can be classified as belonging to one of three content groups: general language information, phrase lists, and grammar lessons.

3.2.1. General Information

Anchored by the homepage, these pages contain introductory information about the language and the Haida people. The homepage is structured as a short list of questions about Haida (*What is Haida?*, *How many people speak Haida?*, *Do all Haidas speak the same dialect?*, etc.), with a very brief response provided for each. Contained in the text of each response are links to any pages on the site that happen to be relevant to the question. Aside from the highly condensed information on the homepage, the website contains virtually no discussion of the Haida people apart from the language itself.

A few other pages provide general information about the language. One page explains the writing systems¹ used for Haida; it contains a table associating the symbols with articulatory descriptions for the sounds. Another page lists the sounds of Haida and gives a sample word (orthography, audio MP3, and translation) for each. A short story in Haida is available on another page, complete with interlinear translations and a vocabulary list. Finally, another page provides instructions on how to subscribe to a Haida language email discussion list and is the only portion of the website even remotely related to community building.

3.2.2. Phrase Lists

Three collections of vocabulary and phrases comprise the core informational content of the website. Each phrase is displayed in Haida orthography alongside its English translation; clicking a hyperlink downloads and plays an MP3 audio recording of a female speaker saying the phrase.

The first list contains 37 basic conversational phrases (*How are you?*, *I am eating some meat*, *I'll see you again*). The second lists 287 simple sentences from a Haida phrasebook. The

¹ Three writing systems are in use on the site, each for a different dialect; none require special fonts to be displayed on the Web.

third consists of about 150 words and phrases grouped into the following categories: Greetings and Responses, Public Introductions, Interrogatives, Commands, Body Parts, Head and Face, and Numbers.

3.2.3. Grammar Tutorials

The Xaat Kíl site also contains six grammar lessons, each with a short vocabulary list, model sentences, grammatical notes in English, and several interactive exercises. Words are color-coded according to lexical category; several “sentence patterns” (phrase structures) are stated explicitly and then illustrated with sample sentences. These lessons seem like they would be comprehensible and useful to linguists and non-linguists alike.

3.2.4. Compared with Other Site Content

How does this content compare to what is presented in other endangered language websites? Before Xaat Kíl was created, Buszard-Welcher surveyed (2001) fifty websites of endangered Native American languages. She found the most popular content type to be community information (available on 42% of the sites); the absence of community information from Xaat Kíl is striking, and suggests that the primary intended audience consists of community members. Also popular were information on writing systems (32%) and vocabulary and phrases (32%) (§3.4). The topics covered in Xaat Kíl’s phrase lists were some of the most common among the sites surveyed by Buszard-Welcher that featured such lists.

Of the sites, 20% contained reference materials such as grammatical notes (6%) and online searchable dictionaries (14%) (Buszard-Welcher, 2001, §3.4). It is unsurprising, however, that Xaat Kíl lacks a dictionary, as the first comprehensive Haida dictionary was published just this year (Fry, 2005).

Other somewhat common features included texts in the language (22%); pedagogical materials such as lessons, guides, and games (18%); e-commerce (14%); and audio (12%) (Buszard-Welcher, 2001, §3.4). The Xaat Kíl site includes all of these features to some extent, with the exception of e-commerce. It seems to stand out from most of the other sites in its extensive use of audio, although the use of audio files on such websites is perhaps more widespread now than it was a few years ago.

3.3. Design Observations: Appearance and Usability

Instead of one consistent look and feel, this site has three: one for the general pages, one for the longer phrase lists, and one for the grammar lessons. The only common navigational element on the pages is a link back to the homepage. These observations are noteworthy in that a more consistent look and feel with a clear menu hierarchy would probably improve website usability, particularly if the number of pages were expanded.

Cunliffe and Roberts-Young (2004) studied 19 Welsh-advocacy websites featuring bilingual designs—that is, they give the user a choice of languages for the content and navigational elements, sometimes displaying the two languages side-by-side. Unlike these sites, the Xaat Kíl site has an interface which is entirely in English. For endangered languages with larger communities of native speakers, bilingual websites are usually advantageous in promoting the endangered language. Cunliffe and Roberts-Young go so far as to argue that “[i]n minority language communities where the levels of proficiency in the minority language are lower than they are in Wales, the failure of bilingual design may effectively disenfranchise these communities and hasten the demise of their language and culture” (p. 102). Unfortunately, Haida is so endangered that a monolingual website is unlikely to disenfranchise many native

speakers. However, a bilingual interface for Xaat Kíl—particularly one featuring side-by-side translations—could still be valuable to students of the language.

3.4. Presence

There are several factors in a site’s presence within the Web as a whole, which in turn governs how successful the site will be in attracting users. One such consideration is the “branding” of a site or organization as unique through elements such as its name, URL, and visual design.

Another is findability—how easy it is to find the site using search engines or hyperlinks from other websites (Cunliffe & Roberts-Young, 2005). The Xaat Kíl site is lucky enough to have its own top-level domain, haidalanguage.org (as opposed to something like haidalanguage.sealaska.org, which is more difficult to remember). It is easily found on popular search engines with the query *Haida language*. Though the site is perhaps less consistent in terms of visual branding than sites about other languages, since it has no other Haida language sites to compete with this probably isn’t much of a problem.

3.5. Coolness

If Xaat Kíl stands out in its wealth of audio files, one thing it lacks is any sort of “coolness” factor. If a language website seeks to appeal to a broader population than academics, innovative and interactive features can be a magnet for users. Indeed, Buszard-Welcher writes that “[f]or endangered languages, the commotion raised by a cool site can have the important functions of increasing the language’s prestige (especially among younger people), and its domain of use” (2001, §3.5). With its current design, this site will not appeal to youth who might be persuaded by a cooler design to take an interest in the language.

4. Discussion

As a medium for promoting an endangered language, Xaat Kíl has both strengths and weaknesses. It serves as a repository for many digitized recordings of native speakers, supplementing basic vocabulary and phrases with introductions to Haida writing systems and grammar. Yet the site fails to take advantage of a variety of features that other language sites use to attract and motivate users who might be interested in learning the language. In particular, it does not emulate the Hawaiian language applications which seek to foster community by emphasizing and exploring a common cultural heritage.

I suspect that community-building features which provide a centralized system for interaction among language students—one example might be a forum—would best enhance the site’s ability to serve the Haida revitalization. The ability to communicate virtually with language learners in another location, as Hawaiian students do via Leoki, would be extremely beneficial, especially if Haida students are dispersed over a large geographic area.

Ultimately, though, these features will only be effective if there are speakers or potential speakers to use them. As Dauenhauer and Dauenhaur caution us,

the demand for “More tools!” [...] places the burden of action on “them” (rather than “me” or “us”) to “do something to save the language.” [...] These are useful tools, and they greatly change the dimension and possibilities for documentation and instruction, but they are no substitute for human desire and effort. (1998, p. 70)

In other words, today’s technology can be of assistance to those actively seeking to revitalize a language; but technology cannot force anyone to learn a language, let alone create a new

community of speakers. The current trends in the use of native Southeast Alaskan languages lead Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer to conclude:

The odds are against reversing language shift for Tlingit, Haida, and Alaskan Tsimshian. The anxieties and attitudes that contributed to abandoning the languages still remain stronger in the community and among individuals than the attitudes necessary for restoration of the languages. (1998, p. 97)

5. Conclusion

The Web is still a secondary medium for promoting a language in the context of revitalization. The success of a revitalization can probably be judged, in part, by the breadth and quality of sites dedicated to or presented in the language. But I predict that with the improvement of interactive multimedia technology for the Internet; the ease with which the average person can utilize that technology; and (particularly high-speed) Internet access, endangered language websites will begin to be capable of jumpstarting and fueling solid revitalization efforts in addition to reinforcing existing ones. The challenge is to improve the technology and accessibility which make that possible.

But in the meantime, websites for highly endangered languages such as Haida may do little more than collect linguistic information for documentation purposes. In order to create a large enough user base to facilitate meaningful computer-mediated interaction, it seems that there first needs to be a fundamental shift within the Haida community of the prevailing attitude towards the language. Only then will technological aids help communities to engage in the challenging and evocative process of reviving an ancestral language.

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