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Thursday, October 28, 2010

"New World" Film Revives Extinct Native American Tongue

Stefan Lovgren for National Geographic News January 20, 2006

For his movie *The New World*, which arrives in U.S. theaters nationwide today, director Terrence Malick wanted to accurately recreate the sights and sounds of a 17th-century English colony.

The film depicts the clash between the native Algonquian Indians and English settlers at the founding of Jamestown in present-day Virginia. Malick therefore decided to have the Native American characters speak the indigenous language of the time—Virginia Algonquian.



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Canada] to the eastern seaboard and down to North Carolina. On the East Coast, there were perhaps 15 Algonquian languages. Most no longer have any speakers.

Why did the languages on the coast go extinct first?

That was simply a contact phenomenon. When the English first arrived, they were the minority population, and they were dependent upon the majority Algonquian speakers for their survival. So initially they learned some Algonquian.

There was only one problem: No one had spoken the tongue for about 200 years.

Enter Blair Rudes, a linguist at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. As the amount of Virginia Algonquian dialogue spoken in the movie increased from just two scenes to more than a third of the film, Rudes found himself reconstructing an entire language that had long gone extinct.

(Click here to download an audio clip.)

National Geographic News recently spoke with Rudes about the challenges of bringing a language back from the dead.

It sounds like the filmmakers had no idea what they were getting themselves into with this language restoration project.

Terrence Malick wanted the movie to be as authentic as possible. It was his decision to use the native language indigenous to the area at the founding of Jamestown. What he didn't know was that the language had been extinct since the late 18th or early 19th century.

Virginia Algonquian is part of a family of languages known as Algonquian, right?

Yes, there were about 800 native languages in North America, and five or six families. The Algonquian family was one of the largest. It extended from the province of Manitoba [in

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But then the number of English kept increasing. Once the colonies could survive on their own without being dependent on the Algonquian Indians, the English stopped learning Algonquian.

Meanwhile, the Algonquian ended up being dependent on the English colonies for trade goods. So they continued to learn English, because there was a long tradition going way back into pre-history of bilingualism among East Coast Native American people. They didn't mind learning another language. Gradually their own language faded out.



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Did the English make any written records of Virginia Algonquian?

One of the [colony's] secretaries, a man named William Strachey, recorded a vocabulary of about 500 words of Virginia Algonquian. Then there was the word list that John Smith recorded, which was less than 50 words. That's basically all the material there is.

And from this you had to reconstruct an entire language. It's fair to say the resources at your disposal were pretty limited.

I had been doing similar work for [another tribal nation] in terms of reviving their ancestral language, Pequot, which is also an eastern Algonquian language. I pulled together everything that was known about every eastern Algonquian language.

The real job was to figure out what Virginia Algonquian looked like in terms of pronunciation and grammar and trying to figure out which of the other eastern languages it was similar to, so I knew where to go when I needed to have a word or grammatical structure that was not attested by Strachey or Smith.

How often was that?

A lot. This is why I jokingly refer to the language in the film as the Blair Rudes dialect of Virginia Algonquian. The core of it is based on the material collected by Strachey and John Smith. But only maybe a quarter of the words necessary to translate the dialogue were attested in that material. I had to go elsewhere for the rest.

So what would you do when you didn't have the material from Strachey and Smith to consult?

I would turn to three other Algonquian languages and say, How would you say this word in those languages? If I could find two of them that agree, then I would say, OK, that's probably how the majority of the eastern Algonquian languages do it, and the third one is doing something weird. And I would make the assumption that Virginia Algonquian is saying it the same way.

What is the language's sentence structure like?

For the most part, subjects would come first, objects would come second, verbs would come last. But sometimes objects would come after verbs. Adverbs would frequently come at the very beginning of a sentence. So if they're saying, "I love you always," it would be, "Always I love you."



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Were there any particular words or expressions that were difficult to translate?

[In the script] ... when Smith and Powhatan were first speaking, Smith said, "I come from a land to the east." But at the time Smith arrived in Jamestown, the only thing [the tribe knew of] to the east was the ocean. What we ended up saying is something like, "I come from an island at the other side of the sea." That would be conceivable, that there would be an island out there beyond what they could see.

What did the language sound like to the British colonists? Would it have been difficult for them to learn?

The Algonquian are among the easier [Native American languages] in terms of pronunciation for a European. They tend to be somewhat like Spanish, for example, in terms of having a consonant-vowel-consonant-vowel structure. This is one of the reasons why the English borrowed quite a number of words from the Algonquian language that we still have today, like pecan, opossum, and moccasins.

How difficult was it for the actors to speak the language?

They picked it up quite quickly. Some of the seasoned actors memorized their lines. The younger actors, like Q'orianka Kilcher [who plays Pocahontas], were willing to learn the language like you would any foreign language. She would learn the pronunciation and the meaning of every single word and then string them together to make the dialogue.

It must have been incredibly demanding for you too.

I had no life for two months. During those first two weeks when the decision had been made to move from 2 to 40-something scenes, I basically stayed in my hotel room and translated, translated, translated and recorded, recorded, recorded. Then I had to be on location whenever they filmed a scene where Virginia Algonquian was spoken.

The thing that was the most challenging was when Terrence Malick would change his mind and want an actor to say something else. He would call me in and say, OK, teach him how to say this, and I would have to do it right there and then.

Sometimes I would know off the top of my head. Other times, I would have to make up something that I felt would have enough syllables in it that the actor could say it, and later we could do a voice-over to put in what should have been said.

This project doesn't end with the movie for you.

As soon as the DVD is released, we are going to turn over all the CDs and scripts that I had prepared for the film to the Virginia tribes for them to use in their language revitalization efforts. My job will be to consult in those efforts. Meanwhile, I'm working on an expanded full dictionary of Virginia Algonquian. All of this will be useful to the Virginia tribes in revitalizing their language.

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