

JICARILLA APACHE PRESCHOOL LANGUAGE IMMERSION PROGRAM

Merton Sandoval Jule Gómez de García Melissa Axelrod
Jicarilla Apache University of Colorado University of New Mexico
Tribe

Jordan Lachler Sean M. Burke
University of New Mexico The Perl
Journal

This paper provides a brief report on language revitalization activities undertaken on the Jicarilla Apache reservation. We will begin by providing some background on the Jicarilla community and their language. This will be followed by a brief discussion of earlier language revitalization efforts in the community, leading into a fuller discussion of the current project the authors have been engaged in since 1996.

1. Background on the Language and Community

Jicarilla Apache is a Southern Athabaskan language, related to other varieties of Apache, as well as Navajo. It is spoken on the Jicarilla Apache reservation, located in north-central New Mexico, along the border with Colorado. The tribal enrollment is 3,120 (1996, Tribal Census Office), the majority of whom live in Dulce, the only township on the reservation.

The language is currently in a stage of obsolescence. A language survey conducted by the tribe in 1994 showed that while 60% of tribal members over the age of 50 considered themselves fluent in the language, the percentage drops sharply to 20% for those aged 30 to 49. For people under 30, the percentage plummets to 1.4%.

2. Project Background

Language documentation and preservation efforts have been going on in the Jicarilla community since the mid-1970's. However, these efforts have become more concerted in the past 5 years, as the community becomes more aware that the language is not being passed on to the younger generations.

Much of the groundwork for the current project was laid back in 1995. In that year, the tribe established a Cultural Preservation Program, headed by Merton Sandoval. One of the main goals of the program is to preserve and revitalize the language in the community. To this end, the tribe applied for and received a grant from the Lannon Foundation to do preliminary language documentation work. This included videotaping stories told by fluent-speaker elders, and creating

a library of Jicarilla language materials

In 1995, the language was also introduced into the schools in Dulce. At Dulce High, a semester-long pilot class in Jicarilla language was conducted, while weekly classes were held at the elementary schools. These programs have continued in various forms over the past couple of years, moving to include the middle school grades as well.

3. The Current Project

The current project began late in 1996, with meetings between members of the Cultural Preservation Program staff and members of the Department of Linguistics at the University of New Mexico. In consultation with other community members, the team developed an overall plan for beginning to revitalize the language in the community, focusing first on preschool age children.

In the Spring of 1998, the tribe applied for an implementation grant from the Administration for Native Americans. As designed, the project centers on a language immersion program for kids aged 3-5, with concomitant training for teachers and parents, as well as materials development. *The Jicarilla Apache Tribe Language Immersion Project* was funded by the ANA for a 2 year period, beginning in October 1998, for a total of \$241,118.

4. The First Year of the Grant Period

At the beginning of the first year of the grant period, town meetings were held in Dulce. The goal of these meetings was to inform community members, specifically parents and those who worked in the school system, about the grant and the programs that were going to be put in place. An important result of these meetings was that the project team was able to identify a core group of interested and motivated teachers/speakers, who have become an integral component in the project as it has progressed.

Following these initial informational meetings, team members from the University of Colorado and the University of New Mexico began conducting monthly workshops on linguistics and curriculum training development with members of the Cultural Preservation staff as well the staff at the Day Care Center, where the immersion program was to be housed. These workshops focused on (re-)discovering what were some of the indigenous teaching strategies that adults used in helping young children learn Jicarilla in earlier days -- when the language was still the primary means of communication in the community -- and then on how to adapt those techniques to a modern-day language immersion classroom setting, where nearly all the children would be entering as monolingual English speakers. Arising out of the curricular workshops, a range of different classroom materials were produced, in advance of the first immersion classes being held.

During the same time period as these workshops, the language documentation portion of the project was begun. This included recording a variety of narrative texts from a number of the

eldest fluent speakers in the community. These texts covered a wide assortment of genres, including procedural texts, historical texts, personal anecdotes and jokes. Meanwhile, work was also begun on a Jicarilla dictionary, currently including over a thousand entries.

In the Spring of 1999, as final plans were taking shape for the immersion classes for the Fall, the Day Care Center hosted an all-day Jicarilla Language Fair. There were displays from various tribal departments, and a strong turnout from the community in Dulce. Later in the summer, in preparation for the immersion classes, two week-long immersion day camps were held in Dulce, for kids aged 7-14. These camps focused on basic conversational skills and vocabulary building, within the context of carrying out traditional cultural activities.

5. The Second Year of the Grant Period

The second year of the project began in October of 1999, with the first immersion classes being held on October 4th. Children in the Day Care Center are exposed to Jicarilla in an immersion setting for an hour or more each day. During the first few weeks of the program, there was an important familiarization period, where the staff members (7 in all) learned to become comfortable speaking to the children in Jicarilla, and where the children adjusted to having new people in their classrooms, speaking to them in a language they did not understand.

As the program has progressed now into its second month, the staff members are reporting that the children at the Day Care Center are greeting one another and the day care staff in Jicarilla, often spontaneously, without being prompted to do so. The children have become accustomed to having the immersion classes as part of their daily routine, and have begun to show a marked interest in having people speak "Indian" to them, even though most of them still do not know how to say many words themselves. Parents in the community have also noticed these changes, and have expressed their satisfaction that the program is underway.

The classes are scheduled to continue on a daily basis throughout the rest of the grant period. Other plans include a Christmas pageant, which would showcase the children in the program and the language skills they have acquired, and another language fair to be held during the annual Jicarilla Days celebration in February. Work on language documentation, and the pursuit of continued funding for the project, both from within the tribe and from outside sources, continues apace.

6. Summary

This project, through its planning stages and now in its implementation, demonstrates a close collaboration between Tribal members and professional linguists. Although still in its earliest stages in many ways, the project has already resulted in improved attitudes toward speaking Jicarilla, both at home and in public settings, and we see this as a crucial first step in the long process of language revitalization.