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Linguists Find the Words, and Pocahontas Speaks Again

By [JOHN NOBLE WILFORD](#)

In the new movie about Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in North America, founded in 1607, the paramount Indian chief Powhatan asks Capt. John Smith where his people came from. The sky?

Responding to the question, translated by an Indian whose smattering of English probably came indirectly from the earlier failed Roanoke colony in North Carolina, Smith replies: "The sky? No. We come from England, an island on the other side of the sea."

The dialogue continues as the interpreter puts Smith's reply in Powhatan's own words, Virginia Algonquian, a language not spoken for more than two centuries. Like most of the 800 or more indigenous languages of North America when Europeans first arrived, Powhatan's became extinct as Indians declined in number, dispersed and lost their cultural identity.

But a small yet growing number of linguists and anthropologists has been busy in recent years recreating such dead or dying Indian speech. Their field is language revitalization, the science of reconstructing lost languages. One byproduct of the scholarship is the dialogue in Virginia Algonquian for the movie "The New World."

More than moviemaking is behind the research. A revival of ethnic pride and cultural studies among Indians has stimulated Indians' interest in their languages, some long dead. Of the more than 15 original Algonquian languages in eastern North America, the two still spoken are Passamaquoddy-Malecite in Maine and Mikmaq in New Brunswick.

In other cases, the few speakers of an Indian tongue are the old people, never their grandchildren, and so the research is a desperate attempt to save another language from burial with a departing generation.

The passing of a language diminishes cultural diversity, anthropologists say, and the restoration of at least some part of a language is an act of reclaiming a people's heritage.

Blair A. Rudes, a linguist at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, who specializes in reconstructing Indian languages, said several Algonquian communities in the East had efforts under way to recover their lost languages and return them to daily use.

"What turns out to be really important is just that they learn some piece of the language because it is reclaiming their heritage," Dr. Rudes said. "So much was lost that reclaiming any of it is a major event."

Ives Goddard, who is a curator for linguistics and anthropology at the Smithsonian Institution, said, "The loss of languages continues, and it's a worldwide phenomenon."

At least half the world's estimated 6,000 languages, Dr. Goddard said, have so few remaining speakers that they are threatened with extinction. By 2100, he predicted, "there will be fewer than 3,000 languages still spoken."

When the director of "The New World," Terrence Malick, decided that for authenticity Powhatan should speak in his own language, he called in Dr. Rudes, who has worked with Dr. Goddard in reconstructing the defunct Algonquian language of the Pequot of Connecticut. He is also engaged in language restoration for the Catawba of North Carolina and is collaborating with Helen Rountree, emeritus professor of anthropology at Old Dominion University, on a dictionary of Virginia Algonquian.

Dr. Rudes was asked what Powhatan and his daughter Pocahontas would say and how they would say it. It was a daunting assignment.

The related Algonquian languages were among the first in America to die out, and no one is known to have spoken Virginia Algonquian since 1785. Like many other Indians, except some cultures in Mexico and Central America, Algonquian speakers had no writing system, and their grammar and most of their vocabulary were lost.

Just two contemporary accounts — one by Captain Smith and the other by the Jamestown colony secretary, William Strachey — preserved some Virginia Algonquian words, including ones that have passed into modern English as raccoon, terrapin, moccasins and tomahawk.

Clearly, even the wits of the celebrated roundtable at the namesake Algonquin Hotel, who had something cutting to say about everything and everybody, would have for once been at a loss for words in the presence of Powhatan and Pocahontas. Unless, perhaps, the two happened to wear their moccasins and the soup of the day was terrapin.

The first challenge for Dr. Rudes was the limited vocabulary. Smith, the colony leader, set down just 50 Indian words, and Strachey compiled 600. The lists were written phonetically by Englishmen who were not expert in linguistics and whose spelling and pronunciation differed considerably from modern usage, making it difficult to determine the words' actual Indian form.

Dr. Rudes had to apply techniques of historical linguistics to rebuilding a language from these sketchy, unreliable word lists. He compared Strachey's recorded words with vocabularies of related Algonquian languages, especially those spoken from the Carolinas north into Canada that had survived longer and are thus better known.

This family of Indian tongues, in one respect, reminded linguists of the Romance languages. Each was distinctive but as closely related as Spanish is to Italian or Italian to Romanian. Comparisons with related languages revealed the common elements of grammar and sentence structure and many similarities in vocabulary.

A translation of the Bible into the language once spoken by Massachusetts Indians offered more insights into the grammar. The Munsee Delaware version spoken by coastal Indians from Delaware to New York, including those who sold Manhattan, may be dead, but its grammar and vocabulary are fairly well known to scholars.

"We have a big fat dictionary of Munsee Delaware," said Dr. Rudes, who adapted some of those words when needed for Virginia Algonquian. Recordings of the last Munsee Delaware speakers, a century ago, were a valuable guide to pronunciations.

Another research tool was what is called Proto-Algonquian. It is the hypothetical ancestor common to all Algonquian speech, 4,000 words that scholars have compiled from the surviving tongues and documentation of the extinct ones.

The reconstruction involves educated guesses. Strachey set down words for walnut, shoes and two kinds of beast, "paukauns," "mawhcasuns," "aroughcoune" and "opposum." In Proto-Algonquian, similar words are paka-ni (meaning large nut), maxkesen (shoe), la-le-ckani (raccoon) and wa-pa'oemwi (white dog).

From this, Dr. Rudes reconstructed the Virginia Algonquian words pakán, mahkusun, árehkan and wápahshum," or pecan, moccasin, raccoon and opossum.

When he started the project, he was handed the movie script for the parts to be translated. "I had to rewrite terms for the dialogue," he said. "For example, we often use nonspecific verbs, 'He went to town.' In Algonquian, you have to tell the mode of travel, 'He walked to town.' "

The peculiar sentence structure required changes in the Indian translation. Pocahontas would not have said to Smith, if she ever actually did, "I love you." She would have used the verb for love, with a prefix meaning you and a suffix for I. "It is one of the few languages that give greater importance to the listener than the speaker," Dr. Rudes said.

Then there was the problem of creating dialogue reflecting what the Indians would have understood in the early 17th century. This also required changing the script for the initial Powhatan-Smith

conversation.

In a paper summarizing his methods, Dr. Rudes said the original script had Smith saying: "The sky? No. From England, a land to the east." At the time, though, a land to the east was for the Indians more myth than reality, he noted, but they probably had already heard about "white-skinned people who lived on islands in the Caribbean."

So Smith's reply was changed to "We came from England, an island on the other side of the sea," and the translator then used documented words of Virginia Algonquian for sky, no, island and sea. The spelling was slightly modified to account for Strachey's misspellings and conform to similar words in other Algonquian speech. Because the word signifying a question is not known in Virginia Algonquian, Dr. Rudes borrowed the word *sá* from a related language.

Of course, Powhatan's interpreter could not be expected to have a word for England. He presumably did his best to reproduce what it sounded like in Algonquian, *Inkurent*, to which he added the general locational ending *-unk*, meaning at or in. He also followed the practice of naming the place first and adding the word for "we come from there."

The translation thus reads: "*Sá arahqat? Mahta. Inkurent-unk kunowamun - mununag akamunk yapam.*"

William M. Kelso, director of archaeology of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, which owns the Jamestown fort site, said that he could not assess the language of the dialogue, but that the costumes, armor, arms and nearly all aspects of the fort were realistic.

Dr. Kelso and other archaeologists found the remains of the three-sided Jamestown fort in 1996. Their goal between now and the 400th anniversary celebration of Jamestown next year is to excavate the well at the site, search for artifacts and look for the foundations of the colony's storehouse and church. At the festivities next spring, some of the words of celebration may echo the Virginia Algonquian of 1607, the resurrected language of Powhatan and Pocahontas.

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Giving Voice to a Lost Language

In reconstructing the Virginia Algonquian language, scholars reviewed a list of 600 vocabulary words compiled in 1612 by the Jamestown colony's secretary, William Strachey, and the language of similar Indian groups.

Examples of words that eventually passed into English

English word	Word as written by Strachey	Strachey's definition	Word in Proto-Algonquian	Proto-Algonquian definition	Virginia Algonquian spelling	Virginia Algonquian pronunciation
raccoon	aroughcounē	kind of beast	la·le·čkani	raccoon	árehkan	[aw-REH-kahn]
moccasins	mawhcasuns	shoes	maxkesen	shoe	mahkusun	[MAH-kuh-suhn]
opossum	opposum	kind of beast	wa·pa'θemwi	white dog	wápahshum	[WOE-pah-shum]
pecan	paukauns	walnut	paka·ni	large nut	pakán	[pa-KAUN]
persimmons	pessemins	plum	pe'šimini	husked fruit	puhshimin	[puh-SHIH-min]
tomahawk	tamahaak	hatchet	temaha·kani	hatchet	tumahák	[tuh-mah-HAWK]

Scholars have created a hypothetical ancestral language called Proto-Algonquian, which is compilation of more than 25 Algonquian languages that were once spoken.

Source: Blair A. Rudes, University of North Carolina