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## An Overview of the “History of Native American Languages and Introduction to the Arapaho Language” Presentation by Professor Andrew Cowell

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*Written and transcribed by Cynthia Vannoy and JoAnne Puckett, with audio courtesy of Sheridan Media.*

*Slides courtesy of Prof. Cowell.*

On June 16th the Fort Phil Kearny/Bozeman Trail Association sponsored an Introduction to the Arapaho Language with Professor Andrew Cowell, University of Colorado, at Kearny Community Hall, Banner, WY. Cowell is the chair of the University of Colorado Department of Linguistics. One of his main research interests is the indigenous languages of the Western U.S., and he directs the Center for the Study of Indigenous Languages of the West (CSILW). He has published extensively on Arapaho, and also works on Gros Ventre, Arapaho, and Miwok.

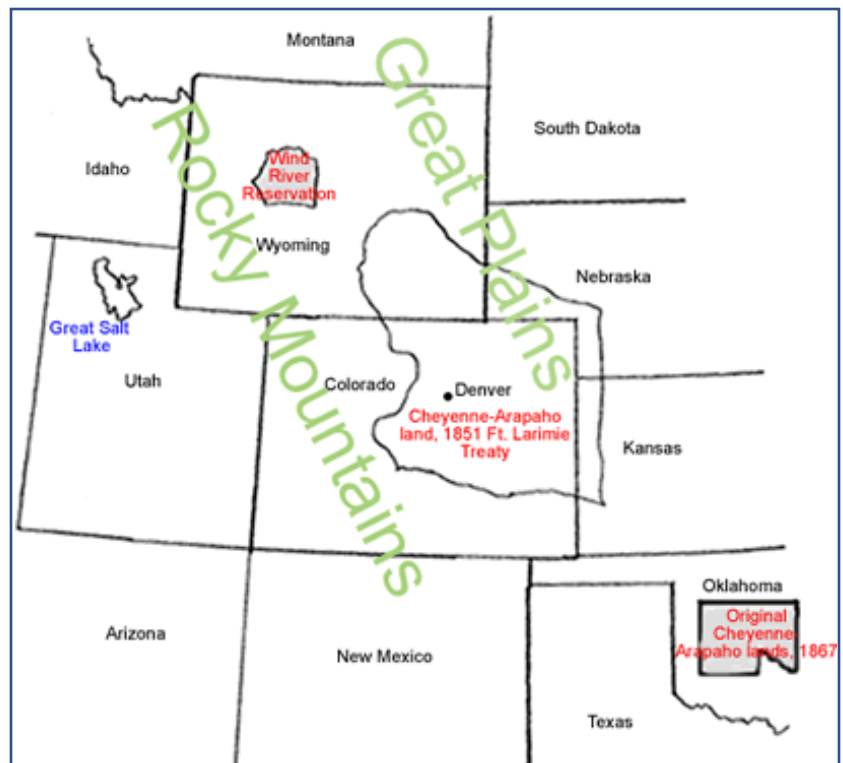


Although Cowell is not an Arapaho, he speaks the language. He has been working with the Arapaho for 25 years and was adopted into the tribe. He added that Arapaho itself is not actually an Arapaho word.

“To clarify who we are talking about, we are talking about the people who were formerly from mostly Wyoming and Colorado.”

He presented a map of the 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty showing their-assigned lands then and the contrast now of their reservations.

He talked about the historic land of the Arapaho.



Native Americans were very diverse in terms of clothing, lifestyle, housing, culture, and language. The Arapaho were a classic plains Indian buffalo hunting culture. The Hollywood stereotype does not match most of the Native American cultures, however that stereotype was based on the plains culture of the Cheyenne, Lakota, and Arapaho.

He said that language can be put into families. English, for example, is in the Indo-European language family and is related to German, as well as Italian, French, Latin, and even Russian.

Cowell said that the Arapaho and Cheyenne languages are of the Algonquian language family and are related to the Blackfoot, Cree, Ojibwe, and several others way out to the east coast. Thousands of years ago a single Algonquian language was spoken that probably originated in the northwest and gradually over time the different groups spread out, losing contact with each other, and developed their own specific languages. The different tribes, like the Arapaho and Cheyenne, did not understand each other, even though the language family was the same. Much in the same way that we do not understand German, however our languages have similarities. Cowell showed a slide with words that have some similarities in Cheyenne to Arapaho.



Algonquian Languages

### Different languages, not 'dialects'

#### Cheyenne

- He'e = woman
- Ve'ho'e = white person
- Esevone = buffalo
- Mo'sohko = arrowhead

#### Arapaho

- Hisei = woman
- Nih'oo3oo = white person
- Hii3einoon = buffalo
- Woosoo3 = arrowhead

He said that as opposed to Europe, where one language family predominates, in North America there were dozens of different language families and more language diversity than in all of Europe. For example, Lakota is of the Siouan Language family, as are the Mandan and Crow languages, and that Shoshone and Ute languages are of the large Uto- Aztecan language family. The Shoshone and Utes are related to the Aztecs, and there is a controversy about the Aztec's whether the Utes came north or the Aztecs went south.

There is a lot of research going on, including archaeology and linguistics, to understand how the native tribes ended up where in they did.

In answer to a question about Sacajawea who was Shoshone and taken into the Mandan tribe, and how she was able to talk to Lewis and Clark on the expedition. Cowell answered that there were multiple languages used in the translation: Shoshone to Mandan to French (traders) to English "You can understand how there might be some confusion there."

He talked of Polysynthetic languages. Poly means multiple and synthetic means put together. In Arapaho and Cheyenne, instead of having a lot of words that are separate, they have one long word and structurally very different than English.

EXAMPLE of POLYSYNTHETIC:  
*heibeexcebe'eikoxo'eitibe!* (Arapaho)  
hei-beex-cebe'ei-koxo'-eiti-be  
you-should-more-slow-speak-plural  
You all should speak more slowly!  
*móstaévâhósenó'òhtséhohevōhe.* (Cheyenne)  
mó- h- ta- éva- hóse- nó'òhtséh -ó -hé -vohe  
reported-past-to there-back-again-fetch-he-maybe-her  
He reportedly went there to fetch her back (here) again.

It is tough to translate from Arapaho to English as many times the Arapaho language does not actually have a word for something as the English language does. For an English speaker Native American languages are more difficult to learn than Chinese or even Arabic.

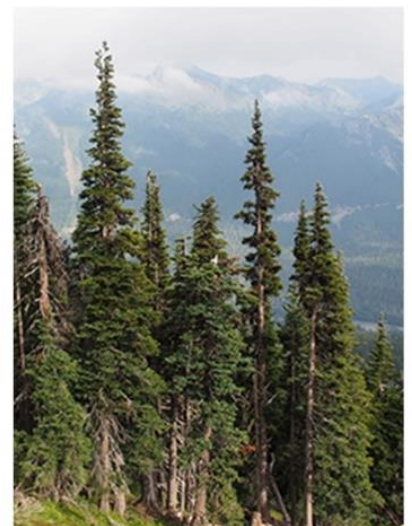
Later in the program an audience question led to the discussion that there are male and female versions of Arapaho, Cheyenne and Lakota languages. Also it was asked if there are words in Arapaho to adapt to our current society. Cowell responded yes, and that there are actually teams who help develop a living language, for instance Facebook is called "idle gossip" and twitter is called "little idle gossip".

What is most important for us to know is that most Native American languages are endangered and are disappearing. If one doesn't grow up learning a language like this, it is very challenging to learn as an English speaker. Most native speakers are older and when they are gone the language is going to go with them if something isn't done.

Cowell talked about the connection between language and culture. "I think that language and culture are infinitely connected, and people are interested in how language shows culture." Many people think that Arapaho was a plains tribe only, but they also had names for several mountains and other mountainous areas in Colorado and Wyoming. Cowell said "This proves the Arapaho territory was much more extensive than just the plains. They had to have spent a lot of time in the mountains to have names for these areas that you

### Plants and Animals of the Mountains

lynx =  
*3ouuyoteebexookee*  
= 'pointed eared  
mountain lion'  
wolverine = *seihiwox*  
= 'weasel bear'  
subalpine fir =  
*nii'ibouuti* = 'it  
smells good'  
Cheyenne: no  
names known for  
these items



can't see from the plains. Linguistic research helps to demonstrate social and cultural history and geography and landscape."

In addition to several mountain and other place names, they also have a name for a lynx (a pointy ear mountain lion) and a wolverine (weasel bear), so the Arapaho had to have interactions with these mountain animals.

The Arapaho were much more of a mountain tribe in addition to being a plains tribe than the Cheyenne and the languages show, for example, the Cheyenne did not have a known name for a lynx or wolverine.



Most Native American languages have names for plants, animals, places, and other things that translate into very descriptive words. Knowing one of these indigenous languages is like looking at everything through a different lens, giving you a different perspective on life around you.

The presence of the indigenous people is in the landscape and other words that we use. Linguistic research helps to uncover historical language connections that may otherwise be lost. Many rivers still bear the English translation of the Native American names, such as Tongue River and Goose Creek. Rivers were travel corridors and everyone used them so the names were shared with other tribes. Towns would be named after the rivers they were on. Summits were used as guides and individual visible peaks were named, as they used the taller mountains for navigation. The Arapaho name for the Bighorn Mountains is 'houuneniinoho'oooyoo" which translates into "Crow Indians rocky area", although most tribes did not name the entire mountain ranges.

He said that a fort was a 'soldiers' house', and Fort Fetterman was named 'Stingy House," as the soldiers there had a bad reputation among the Indians for not having many trade goods.

Lake DeSmet was known as "holy or powerful water" or "circling or whirlpool water". A brief version Arapaho story on Lake DeSmet is that the tribe was traveling, and the bands split up because there was not enough grass for their horses and wood. When they gathered again one band was missing. Tracks went into the lake and after riding around the lake twice tracks could not be seen coming out of the lake. They say that sometimes at night you can hear the sound of the band moving, dogs barking, horses whinnying, children playing.

Before showing a prerecorded Bear Lodge talk by Wayne C'Hair, Prof. Cowell closed the formal part of his program by reciting an Arapaho prayer that had been recorded in about 1900. Since the Arapaho believe that the Creator is Arapaho, he would not understand the prayer if it is recited in English. So they have to pray in Arapaho so the Creator will understand them. That is one reason that the tribal elders don't want the language to be lost.

## Arapaho Prayer



hehheisonoonin neniitoneino', noh hebesiibeih'in.

**Let them hear us, our fathers and our grandfathers.**

Hee3ei'iinoh'oeseihiit, noh nohkunihitowoo;

**I say this in conjunction with all the heavenly lights;**

Hiisi' niihooyoo', heseisen hii3eti',

**The yellow day, the good wind,**

Neeyeici' hii3eti', biito'owu' huu3eti'.

**the good timber, the good earth.**

Cese'eihii heetihceh'e3tiin he3oowowu'!

**You animals who live below the earth, I pray that you**

**hear my words!**

No'xuutowu' cese'eihii, neci' cese'eihiiho',

cihbehceh'e3tii'!

**You animals who live on the earth, and in the water,**

**listen to my prayer!**

Heciyyowooninoo, heetwonibiini' heetih'i3eihit,

**Your surplus is going to be eaten so that the people**

**will prosper,**

Heetihcihkoutee' hoowu3oow hiine'etiit,

**so that the breath of life will endure for a long time,**

Heetih'iihooho'owoo' hinenteeniit, tei'yoonehe'

heeneicxooyeiht,

**so that the tribe will be numerous: the children of all**

**ages,**

Hiseihihi' noh honoh'oehihi' noh hinen heeneicxooyeiht,

**the girls and boys and men of all ages,**

Hisei, beh'eihehi' heeneicxooyeihtin betebi.

**he women and old men, and you old women, of all ages.**

, bii3iwo, hooniikoohu3i hiisiis.

**(we pray that) these foods will keep us healthy as long as  
the sun follows its path in the sky.**

Hee3o' neixoo! Cihceh'e3tii, nebesiwoo, neinihii3ooo.

**I say to him "my father, listen, and my grandfather," the**

**one I am praying to.**

Kokoh'u3ecoot, betee, bixoo3etiit honowuune'etiit.

**(We ask for good) thoughts, a (good) heart, love and a  
joyful life.**

Heetniinii3ixonebe3en.

**I am now going to share this feast with you, Man Above.**

Cowell said that these languages can be eloquent and sophisticated and were not in any way primitive. He mentioned that in Arapaho, four is a sacred number, and everything is done in fours. This is another reason that the language is more than just a language but is tied into culture and that the prayer, the way it is structured and organized, reflects the Arapaho worldview. As one line of the poem says, '(We ask for good thoughts, a (good) heart, love and joyful life.'

Wayne C'Hair, member of the Northern Arapaho Language and Culture Commission, was unable to attend the program, but told the Arapaho story about the origin of Bear's Teepee (Devils Tower) and the Broken Back Bear (Big Dipper constellation) via a previously recorded video. This story can be heard on the audio of Cowell's presentation.

Prof. Cowell hopes that we now understand more of the richness and specificity of the language, why the tribe and elder speakers think it is valuable and why they want the children to learn it, and why the children want to learn it. He hopes that we also understand the challenges that one can encounter with the language, and that, sadly, the threats are very real for the language's extinction.