

## News

### Saving America's native languages

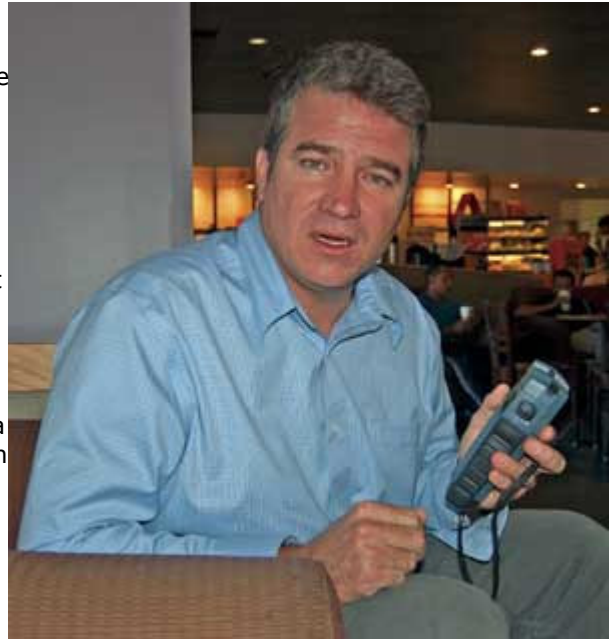
*By Larry Rand  
 Record Gazette*

Don Thornton grew up hearing his mother speak Cherokee.

"It was her first language; she is a certified Master Speaker of the language," he said at the Banning Starbucks last week.

Don will be at the Morongo Thunder and Lightning Powwow tonight, manning a booth for his company Thornton Media. He has taken a Phraselator P2 developed for troops in Afghanistan and turned it into a language tool for American Indians. The powwow won't be a long trip for him; he lives in Poppet Flats just south of Banning.

He demonstrated the unobtrusive Phraselator at Starbucks. Weighing only a pound and measuring just 5 by 7 inches - but built to survive combat situations - the Phraselator P2 looks like a digital recorder that went to West Point. Thornton would speak an English phrase into the machine, punch a button, and it would immediately translate his English phrase into Cherokee - or the languages of several other tribes, each spoken authentically by a member of that tribe. Thornton has recorded more than 35 tribal languages.



**DON THORNTON - The head of Thornton Media punched up a Phraselator P2 at Starbucks.**

The technologies that the Phraselator relies on came from the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency - the same 240 folks who brought us the Internet, the computer mouse, ATM machines and GPS technology when they weren't helping to invent the M-16, Stealth technology, body armor and sophisticated new radars and sonars. Person for person, DARPA may be the most productive federal agency of the last 100 years.

After reading about the Phraselator P2 on the Internet, Thornton became convinced that it would be the perfect tool for American Indians to preserve their culture.

"There were no high-tech language tools for American Indians, the kind that tribes can use in the home," he said. "We have found home to be the best place for people to learn a native language, so we have put our effort into putting language back into the home, where it can be spoken at the dinner table."

Voxtec, a company run by former Navy SEALs, thought there was no market for what Thornton wanted to do - until he went to the Pechanga Band of Mission Indians in Temecula and sold them Phraselators. Thornton Media became an authorized Voxtec distributor.

"We may be their only civilian contractor in the US," Thornton said.

A lot of what Thornton Media does is to help tribes record their languages, which is where Thornton's background helps. He has been a filmmaker who made documentaries for governments and private industry and music videos. He even manned a camera for some B movies. A longtime Indian activist, he had founded the American Indian Clubhouse in Los Angeles, an after-school program for the largest urban Indian population in the US.

Thornton was no stranger to audio production, but he was surprised by the effect the Phraselator had on tribal members.

"Some native speaking elders laugh with delight when they hear the P2 speaking their language," he said. "Several have even cried. It's humbling."

Jane Dumas, a Kumeyaay Elder, had that experience.

"After I played with it I cried," she said. This will help save our language."

The biggest advantage to Thornton's approach to language education is that it's purely oral.

"American Indian culture is essentially oral," he said. "Tribal writing systems can be a bit artificial, since they were an afterthought - a concept introduced by the Europeans. Many tribes resisted a writing system, and most tribes follow oral law."

A significant byproduct of using the Phraselator is the preservation of highly endangered Indian cultures. Some native languages, including Cahuilla - the Shoshonean language spoken by the ancestors of many Morongo Reservation residents - are spoken by fewer than 100 people.

"The variety of Indian languages is mind boggling," Thornton said. "There once were 500 distinct languages, but that has been reduced to perhaps 200, many of which could be lost in the next 20 years.

"Buying a Phraselator compels the tribe to sit down and create a permanent record of their language, which is the basic repository for their culture," he said.

Recording the language, however, can be a complicated process involving diplomacy and patience.

"There can be 12 different dialects even in a small tribe, so there can be political considerations about how to record the language," Thornton said. "With the Blackfoot tribes in California, we spent two weeks recording a super-module with multiple speakers of multiple dialects."

Thornton's approach is to let each tribe decide how to record the language, and the tribe owns the resulting recording.

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His strategy was a reaction to a Cherokee dictionary project that his mother had worked on with an academic who took all the credit - and the copyright - for the resulting book.

A Phraselator P2, which is built more like a Humvee than a Ford Focus, is an expensive device costing \$3,300. But Thornton said he thinks it's the best tool available for learning native languages, because it employs phrases recorded by master speakers of the languages.

"Children can learn to speak a native language without an accent," he said, "and the longer the Phraselator P2 is used, the more valuable it becomes. Hearing a language is often the only way to develop an ear for it. The Phraselator P2 leads to understanding of phrases, not just words, and the machine responds in real time."

Children are more likely to learn with a Phraselator, said Thornton, because they think it's cool - one Morongo teen described it as "being right out of Star Wars."

Adults see it as saving a vanishing culture.

"It is a great tool that can give us our whole world in our hand," said Ken Tuffy Helpeson, a Nakota language teacher.

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