



Preserving languages with the help of technology

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WHITE EAGLE, Okla. (AP) - Suzanne White Eagle never dreamed in her 71 years that she would be able to speak her American Indian language into a machine and have it translate the phrase into English.

But White Eagle did just that Aug. 23 as part of an effort to preserve the Ponca language, now spoken fluently by only about a dozen of the 3,000 Ponca tribal members in north-central Oklahoma.

The handheld machine, called a Phraselator P2, was developed for the U.S. military. Once programmed with a new language, the machine acts as a translator, spitting out the English counterpart for a Ponca word.

White Eagle has been helping in that programming, recording Ponca phrases and English translations.

Don Thornton, a Cherokee citizen from Banning, Calif., purchased the device from defense contractor Vortex International and pioneered its use for capturing American Indian languages that are in danger of being lost as tribal elders die and fewer young people speak Native tongues.

"The inventor of the device never imagined it could be used for language revitalization," said Thornton, who runs Thornton Media Inc. with his wife, Kara.

Some of the tribes in Oklahoma whose languages have been recorded are the Choctaw Nation, United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians, Comanche Nation, Ponca Tribe and the Cheyenne-Arapaho Tribe of Oklahoma.

Thornton said he will soon be recording the language of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and tribes in Montana and Alberta, Canada.

White Eagle has lived most of her life about five miles south of Ponca City. She moved away for about 15 years while her husband was in the military.

White Eagle said even before she left home she felt her tribe's language was "fading away" and became determined to preserve it.

"It scared me - to see our language slipping away," White Eagle said. "So I said, 'Let's get started. Let's teach our language.'"