My Acjachemem background

I am an Acjachemem enrolled tribal member and a linguist. I have always loved languages, enjoyed the sounds and rhythms of each language, and the way the mind bends categories and thoughts so that they can be articulated into language. I love dialects and accents. As a teen, I began learning the basics of my tribal language, the Acjachemem language. In my 20s, I began studying it in earnest. If I had any kids, my goal was to teach it as a first language in a natural environment. I felt blessed that there was a large amount of linguistic materials on the language, but there were so many external challenges and I was concerned that I would be able to gain any level of competency. How could I make time to practice and learn? Who would I speak with? How to avoid being obliterated by mass media and culture?

My father, Frank Lobo, grew up in the Acjachemem community of San Juan Capistrano, deeply involved in the culture, language and history of our tribe. He took a special interest in the traditional astronomy, mythology and stories of our tribe. My mother, Susan, was from a neighboring community minutes away. She was a surfer girl, a real athlete who won regional...
swimming awards. She was welcomed into the Lobo family and the tribe when she was a teenager, and a whole new world opened up to her. Together, they went into Anthropology. In the summers of 1970 and 1971 they collected oral histories for their graduate work in Anthropology from the University of Arizona. My father was doing anthropology research on his own community from a deeply embedded position – he was related to almost everyone in the community in some way or another.

Anastacia Majel, an Acjachemem tribal member, was one of the last truly fluent speakers of the Acjachemem language. Her son, Abel “Viejo” Majel, told my parents a story in our tribal language that summer. He was in his 70s and he had a wry sense of humor. The Social Science literature at that time said that the tribe did not exist, that we were “extinct,” as if we were animals, not people. Well! The stories of our demise were greatly exaggerated! Not only were they totally immersed in the Acjachemem culture, but they were collecting a rich array of traditional stories and history. And they were collecting part of a story in our language, also a supposedly “extinct” language.

I had not been born at the time. Many years later, I translated this story in an article I co-authored with them in Oral histories with the Acjachemem of San Juan Capistrano from jstor.org (or here from Amazon) in the Journal of the Southwest. They collected a fabulous array of oral histories – please check it out. I am including the Acjachemem language story, English translations, and the gloss below starting on page 7.
There is so much more information on everything that I will discuss here. I am just skimming the surface. So please do not take my word for it – please look into it yourself. Then I would love to hear what you find. There are resources at the end of this post, and they are a good starting point. I will be adding more. The more of us that look into our languages, history and cultures, the better off we all are.

If you want to jump straight to the Acjachemem story and translation without any background information, here is the PDF of just the story. If you see formatting problems below or would like the print friendly version of this entire article, the PDF of the entire article is here.

About the Acjachemem language

The Acjachemem language is a member of the Uto-Aztecan family and the Takic branch. The traditional Acjachemem territory is in Southern California on the Orange County coast, centered around the San Juan Capistrano valley. Because of an association with the Mission San Juan Capistrano, the older Social Science literature refers to the Acjachemem people as Juaneño. This group is currently referred to as Acjachemem, or Acjachemen, terms preferred by the people themselves, myself included. Some tribal members belong to a group that refers to themselves as Acjachemen, ending in –n, and out of respect for this self-identification, I use these names interchangeably to refer to different groups of the same tribe. The language spoken by the Acjachemem is very closely related to the Luiseño language, and most would consider them dialects of the same language. The Luiseño are inland and south of us in the hills, and have a much larger territory than we do. Our traditional area is on the coast. Historically, we had boats and the sea played a larger part in life. The Luiseño are politically and culturally distinct from the Acjachemem, but we do share a language. It seems very likely that we had more in common before the massive social disruption that the mission system created.

The last fluent speakers of Acjachemem passed away in the early 1980s, and there is relatively little information on the Acjachemem dialect. On the other hand, there is an impressively large amount of linguistic information on the Luiseño dialect, including several very large dictionaries, grammars and pedagogical materials, collections of texts in a range of registers, academic monographs, extensive notes by J.P. Harrington and a few audio recordings (1)
Anastacia Majel, who I mentioned earlier, was one of the last truly fluent speakers of Acjachemem, and she referred to the language as Chamtééla when speaking to Arthur Harrington in 1937. The Acjachemem language is alternately referred to as netééla (literally: ‘my language,’ Acjachemem dialect) or notééla (‘my language,’ Luiseño dialect.) Chamtééla means ‘our language’ in both Acjachemem and Luiseño dialects. Of course, very often it is also referred to as ‘the Acjachemem language.’

The village of Acjacheme was located where the San Juan Capistrano Mission was later built. The name continued to be used after the mission was established and the area surrounding the mission came to be known as the town of Acjacheme, or in Spanish, San Juan Capistrano. Eventually, the entire San Juan Capistrano valley was referred to as Acjacheme or Acjachema. To describe the people of this place, the standard plural suffix in the language –m was added to the place name, to become Acjachemem, in other words, the name of the tribe. Acjachemem is used in the title of Father Geronimo Boscana’s manuscript Chinigchinich (2) as the name of the tribe, and other early community history and oral tradition show the tribe referred to as Acjachemem. Other early visitors, for example Oscar Leow in 1873 said that “the Indians call themselves Ak Hatchma.” (3) Historic records and street signs in the area show the town as named Acjachemay or spelled slightly differently, Acjachemai. These also make sense, because the locational ending meaning (‘from’) or (‘coming out of’) is –ay.

These slight changes of suffixes may be confusing, and another way to think of this type of variation on the place name is this: There is a contemporary city in California called San Francisco, and (‘San Franciscan’) with the suffix –an, refers to the people of San Francisco. (‘San Franciscans’) refers to more than one person from San Francisco, with the suffix –ans. Additionally, there may be other names to refer to self-identified groups from that location, the modern equivalent of the tribe.
The dialect debate

There is some disagreement about how closely related spoken Acjachemem and Luiseño are; however, according to Acjachemem oral tradition, most of the last speakers of Acjachemem considered them closely related dialects of the same language. In the social science literature, although in some cases they are referred to as two separate tribes with different languages, Krober described Acjachemem as a dialect of Luiseño (4) and others, such as Bean and Shipek have referred to them as “ethnologically and linguistically one nationality” (5).

Boscana’s Chinigchinich, and J.P. Harrington’s annotations of this work (6) are both occasionally unclear whether they are describing Acjachemem or Luiseño dialects, because they considered them the same language. Some of the sources knew both dialects, or had spent time in both locations. J.P. Harrington was meticulous with all details and he would have noted if they were different enough to be classified different languages. He had an excellent ear and was extremely careful, if not obsessive, to write down all dialect, location and pronunciation differences. More recent scholarship on the Luiseño language by Elliott (7) or Woodward (8) refers to Acjachemem and Luiseño as dialects of the same language.

I am Acjachemem and a language enthusiast, and I refer to them as dialects of the same language, but I acknowledge that not all will agree with me. Because there is so little recorded information on the Acjachemem dialect, and what we do have is spotty at best, I use the Luiseño dialect of the language. Think of it this way: the English language is spoken on the Southern California coast. Contrast it to the English language spoken in New York City or in the rural South. Both are English, and given the option of learning a regional dialect other than


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your own, or not learning the language at all, wouldn’t you choose to learn the language? I chose to learn the language.

Although printed records and audio recordings of the language spoken in the Acjachemem areas are limited, and there are no Acjachemem fluent speakers, it is still possible to draw conclusions about the Acjachemem dialect from available resources. Using an Acjachemem and Luiseño vocabulary list compiled by William Bright (9) I came up with the following generalizations. In a nutshell, Acjachemem has more consonant clusters, longer vowel length, unstressed vowel loss, and some stress movement (10). In Bright’s word list comparison of Luiseño and Acjachemem, in nearly identical words the [i] sound in an unstressed syllable in Luiseño is often an [a] sound in Acjachemem (116 of 123 instances). In 92 of 123 instances these sounds are in final position. However, this is not clear cut, because verbs ending in [-i] are transitive and those ending in [-a] are intransitive. J. P. Harrington’s original elicitations with Anastacia de Majel, used in this study, showed some words to have possessive prefixes or be missing absolutive suffixes. Without being present when Anastacia Majel spoke to J. P. Harrington or when Viejo Majel spoke forty years later, it is very difficult to come to a clear conclusion.

I also noticed that the [ʃ] sound in Luiseño words is often a [tʃ] sound in Acjachemem (in 38 of 39 instances) and it is possible that there is no retroflex ‘s,’ [s] in Acjachemem. J. P. Harrington did not note a single retroflex ‘s’ [s] in Acjachemem, although he shows them for Luiseño. This would suggest that there was no retroflex ‘s’ [s] in Acjachemem. Compared to Luiseño, Acjachemem has a clipped quality and in some words there is a loss of vowels in unstressed syllables. Finally, the [k] sound in Acjachemem is almost always a [q] sound in Luiseño. (11) To hear the audio for the special characters above, shown in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), see the audio players below or try these two interactive charts with audio here at wikipedia for vowels, or here at wikipedia for consonants.

Audio is available online.

The [ʃ] sound – as in wííwish, (‘acorn cereal’), or in English, ship or shell.

The [tʃ] sound – as in chóóri, (‘to chop’), or in English, child or church.

The retroflex ‘s,’ [s] sound – as in ʂʊŋalum, (‘women’). This sound does not exist in standard American English.

The [k] sound – as in kút, (‘fire’), or in English, king or cow.

The [q] sound – as in náqmaq, (‘is listening’). This sound does not exist in standard American English.

It is a substantial issue that in some word lists comparisons, some Acjachemem words appear with possessives or without absolutive suffixes. It makes comparison more difficult. Also, an elicitation for the word (‘rabbit’) is sufficiently vague that a speaker might have given the Acjachemem/Luiseño equivalent for (‘cottontail’) in one instance and (‘jackrabbit’) in another. For example, the word for (‘brush rabbit’) tóóvit sounds similar to (‘cottontail rabbit’) tóóşaxit but quite different from (‘jackrabbit’) šú’ish, so comparisons between dialects can be difficult if based on lists of words collected out of context. For a broader discussion of Acjachemem/Luiseño dialect vs. language, see Woodward. (12)

**Audio is available online.**

(‘brush rabbit’) tóóvit -

(‘cottontail rabbit’) tóóşaxit -

(‘jackrabbit’) šú’ish -

Open sky near San Juan Capistrano, CA.
Acjachemem language translated: Anoo pi Ataal (Coyote and Pelican)

Now that I have described the sounds, we can get to what is more important, the story of “Anoo pi Ataal” (Coyote and Pelican) in Acjachemem as Viejo Majel spoke it, along with my translation. Note that I do not use accents or special characters because they were not noted in the original elicitation.

Ano Pi Ataal – Coyote and Pelican – in Acjachemem, as collected in 1970 and 1971

Pampane Ataal wita.

Toy waywut.
Toy waywut.
Toy waywut.

Pampane Ataal kuupla.
Pampane Ano wota papuulna.
Pampane Ano natchwa pescado.

Coyote and Pelican – Ano Pi Ataal – My translation

And so it goes, Pelican was standing.

You dweeb (nonsense word, teasing in animal language.)
You dweeb (nonsense word, teasing in animal language.)
You dweeb (nonsense word, teasing in animal language.)

And so it goes, Pelican was in bed.
And so it goes, Coyote hit his face with a stick.
And so it goes, Coyote ate the fish with gusto.
Pampane ataal wita
   He pelican was standing
Toy waywut
   Ano sang to pelican three times
Pampane ataal kuupla
   The pelican slept
Pampane ano wota
   Then the coyote hit him on the face
Pampane ano natchwa
   Coyote ate the fish

Ano Pi Ataal – Coyote and Pelican – All information (linguistic gloss)

The linguistic gloss below shows much more detailed information about how each word and sentence is translated. If you read it carefully, you will find a much more nuanced translation. It is an image, if you are having trouble viewing it, here is “Ano Pi Ataal” in PDF.

**Majel**: line represents Viejo Majel's words.
**Lobo**: line represents my estimation of what the word might be in Luiseño.
**1971**: line is the translation that was provided to me. (Viejo Majel’s translation in 1970 and 1971 via Frank and Susan Lobo.)

Majel: pampane ataal wita
Lobo: ? 'ataal wiita-?
   and so it goes pelican-SG.SUB stand-INTR.SG.SUB ANIM-IMPER.SG
('and so it goes pelican stand [imperative OR [archaic form] missing tense/aspect']"
'Majel': 'and so it goes, Pelican was standing'
1971: he pelican was standing
The sentence below is repeated three times:

**Majel:** toy waywut
**Lobo:** 'oy way-wut
2SG-OBJ unintelligible song word in animal language-being with this quality
('you nonsense word, probably teasing')

'youth deweb'

**1971:** Ano sang to Pelican three times

**Majel:** pampane ataal kuupla
**Lobo:** ? 'ataal kup-lash
and so it goes pelican-SG.SUB bed place-item that has this function
('and so it goes pelican bed [missing ABS; tense/aspect; possessive or a locational]')

'and so it goes, Pelican was in bed'

**1971:** the pelican slept

**Majel:** pampane ano wota papuulna
**Lobo:** ? 'ano' wota-? po-push-la
and so it goes coyote-SG.SUB hit with long object-INTR.SG.SUB.ANIM-IMPER.SG 3SG.POS-face-ABS
('and so it goes coyote hit with a stick [imperative OR missing tense/aspect] his face')

'and so it goes, Coyote hit his face with a stick'

**1971:** then the coyote hit him on the face

**Majel:** pampane ano natchwa pescado
**Lobo:** ? 'ano' naachaxan-wut? (-wun?) pescado
and so it goes coyote-SG.SUB food/eat[partial]-overdoer? (-PL.PRES?) fish.SPAN
('and so it goes coyote glutton fish')

'and so it goes, Coyote ate the fish with gusto'

**1971:** coyote ate the fish

As you can see, there are differences between all translations. Language is complex and nuanced. I hope that my translation adds more detail to understanding the richness of language, and how it is collected and documented. For example, in the last line, we learn that Coyote did not just eat the fish, but he probably ate it with gusto, like a glutton! Or, do you find it significant that there were stylistic storytelling words? I do think it is significant, it shows the artistry of storytelling. Another line reads (‘Pelican was in bed’) vs translated as (‘the pelican slept’). Another interesting thing is that in line three, *toy waywut*, Viejo Majel translates: (‘Ano sang to Pelican three times’). This is common when eliciting translations. A phrase is said three times in a song, so someone says “it is said three times,” instead of translating the actual phrase, which in this case was (‘you dweeb’) or some other similar teasing name. I can imagine
myself doing this if I had to translate a pop song chorus, I might say that “...this part was repeated three times,” because everyone sitting there with me heard the chorus words repeated three times. Perhaps Anastacia translated it this way when she told the story to her son Abel (AKA Viejo.) Or maybe Viejo translated it this way when he re-told it.

I was not able to find a translation for pampane, although I have several tentative ideas. This may be an Acjachemem word with no similar-sounding Luiseño translation. The word appears to be used stylistically in storytelling, so I have given the translation (‘and so it goes’). This seems to be the most likely translation in this context. It is also possible that it may be a word with a third-person possessive prefix, pom- in Luiseño, meaning (‘their-unknown word’). It may also be a place having to do with yucca or other plant species, although it does not include a locational marker.

This dialect difference may be significant for this mystery word, and for this translation in general. Although I have done some comparative work on Acjachemem and Luiseño dialects, a great deal still needs to be done. Unfortunately, it is difficult to come up with any definitive comparisons of the dialects. I hope the ideas I have discussed here will make the logic of this translation clearer; they should be seen as an invitation for further research on Acjachemem and Luiseño language. There is so much fascinating information that we can learn from how a language is constructed. I could discuss this at length, but I would much rather to hear your input and ideas.

I am not fluent in the language, so any errors or omissions are purely my own. I always like talking about and learning about Acjachemem / Luiseño language. Some of you might remember that I made online language learning lessons a while back. I do not have them ready, I have to re-record all the audio and jump through a lot of technical hoops. Slowly, when I have time, I will start posting some of the online learning modules that I made. If you would like more information, bibliographies, pedagogical materials, or anything at all related to the language, please contact me.

Respectfully,
Kelina Lobo
ENDNOTES


2 Bright, 1978, title page

3 Loew, 1875

4 Krober, 1925, p.636

5 Bean and Shipek, 1978, p.550

6 Bright, 1978

7 Elliott, 1999

8 Woodward, 2007, p.81-93

9 Bright, 1994

10 Lobo, 2002

11 To hear the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), there are many handy interactive charts with audio. Here are a few examples: IPA vowel chart with audio: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/IPA_vowel_chart_with_audio
   IPA consonant chart with audio: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/IPA_consonants_chart_with_audio

12 Woodward, 2007, p.81-93

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