State's native languages diverse
Written by Briana Wipf, Tribune Staff Writer
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Montana is home to seven federally recognized Indian tribes and one state-recognized tribe. All told, 12 languages in four language families are represented among Montana's tribes. University of New Mexico doctoral candidate Logan Sutton noted that the four language families, Algonquian, Kutenai, Salishan and Siouan, give the state a rich diversity of Native American languages.

To compare, Sutton pointed out Europe is home to three language families.

"Comparing Salish, Blackfoot, Kutenai and Assiniboine to each other would be like comparing English, Arabic, Chinese and Indonesian — completely different languages," Sutton said in an email.

Languages spoken on Montana reservations include Salish, Pend d'Oreille and Kootenai on the Flathead Reservation; Blackfoot on the Blackfeet Reservation; Cree and Chippewa, also called Ojibwe, on Rocky Boy's Reservation; Gros Ventre, also called White Clay or A'aniiih, and Assiniboine, or Nakoda, on Fort Belknap Reservation; and Dakota and Nakoda on the Fort Peck Reservation. Assiniboine or Nakoda speakers on Fort Belknap and Fort Peck speak different dialects of the same language. Farther south, the Cheyenne language is spoken on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, and Crow, or Apsaalooke, on the Crow Reservation. The Little Shell Band of Chippewa Indians speak Chippewa and Michif.

These languages are organized in families, showing which languages came from common ancestors. Families differ widely in the way they use sounds and grammar. Salishan languages are known to have complex sound systems and place the verb at the beginning of a sentence, which very few world languages do, Sutton said. Pend d'Oreille is a separate dialect of Salish, but speakers of the two languages can understand each other with little trouble.

Siouan languages, which include Assiniboine, or Nakoda/Nakota, Dakota and Crow, originated in modern-day Virginia and North Carolina, suggesting speakers of Siouan languages gradually moved westward. The three branches of Siouan languages vary — some employ suffixes and prefixes extensively to change meaning, while others do not.

Algonquian languages, including Blackfoot, Northern Cheyenne, A'aniiih Gros Ventre/White Clay, Cree and Chippewa/Ojibwe, is a large language family with examples found from Montana to the Hudson Bay.

Like some Siouan languages, Algonquian languages use prefixes and suffixes, and word order is flexible.

"The number of distinct sounds (Algonquian languages) make it smaller and 'easier' than the inventory of sounds in Siouan or Salishan," Sutton said.

Kootenai is a language isolate, meaning it has no living relatives anywhere in the world. Sutton explained that the sound system of Kootenai is not as complex as Salish but more complex than Siouan and Alonquian. Like Salish, Kootenai allows for a verb to come at the beginning of a sentence.

"This is relatively rare in the world's languages but is common in the Pacific Northwest," Sutton said.

Michif, spoken historically by the Little Shell Tribe, is a mixture of European and aboriginal words that made a new language, said historian and folklorist Nicholas Vrooman, who has documented the history of the Little Shell Tribe.

While the language may at first appear to be a creole of European nouns and aboriginal verbs, Vrooman said it is actually its own discrete language that grew out of a mixing of cultures when French and Scottish fur trappers came to the area and fathered children with Native American women. Those children were raised in the "aboriginal sphere," Vrooman said, which created "a loving new culture in which the language is aboriginal and has strong European elements in it."

Taken together, the languages represent incredible diversity, Sutton said. While not as linguistically diverse as the Pacific Northwest, present-day Montana represents a "crossroads" for several Native American tribes, he said.

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