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Coming Soon... ‘Star Wars’ in the Navajo Language



Left to Right: Manuelito Wheeler - Director of Navajo Nation Museum, Martin L. Begaye, Department Manager of Navajo Parks and Recreation, Knifewing, William Nakai one of the Navajo Linguist. Press Conference on April 23, 2013 at Navajo Nation Museum in Window Rock, Az. (Photo by Geri Hongeva)

WINDOW ROCK, AZ. – Coming as a surprise to everyone, especially members of the Navajo Tribe, Obi-Wan Kenobi will soon say “ May the Force be with you” in the Navajo language.

Navajo members will soon be able to hear the beloved character from the Star Wars saga say this and more as the Navajo Nation Museum, Navajo Parks and Recreation, and Lucasfilm, Ltd. have joined forces to dub the classic space fantasy film, Star Wars into the Navajo language. This marks the first time that a mainstream movie will be dubbed into the Navajo language.

For more than three years, Director of the Navajo Nation Museum Manuelito Wheeler, has been working on the idea of getting a popular film dubbed into Navajo as a way to preserve the Navajo language.

“By preserving the Navajo language and encouraging Navajo youth to learn their language, we will also be preserving our Navajo culture,” said Wheeler.

He said when he approached Lucasfilm with the idea, he found that they were excited about the project. Since its inception, the Star Wars Saga has been viewed and shared all over the world. Its timeless themes of good versus evil have resonated with cultures far and wide. The movies have been translated across multiple languages and Lucasfilm Ltd. is proud to have Navajo as its most recent addition.

An initial obstacle was funding, but with the generous help of the Navajo Parks and Recreation Department and Knifewing Productions, the project has begun.

“Our Department is proud and honored to be a part of this innovative and entertaining approach to helping preserve our Navajo language,” said Martin L. Begaye, Department Manager of Navajo Parks and Recreation.

Together, Navajo Nation Museum and Deluxe are planning to dub the movie into the Navajo language, with a group of Navajo-speaking members of the tribe. It begins with translating the movie into the Navajo language. Shana Priesz, Senior Director of Localization at Deluxe says “While we have dubbed many films in the past into a variety of languages, this project ranks among the most significant.”

“Every time we dub a film, we recognize the fact that we are helping to bridge cultural and communications gaps among societies. In this case, however, we have the unique privilege of contributing to the preservation of a storied and noble culture, the Navajo. Deluxe is looking forward to traveling to Navajo Nation to supervise the adaptation and recording process. It's always a challenge to dub a complicated film like Star Wars, but we welcome the challenge and look forward to learning a lot about the Navajo from our hosts. We are confident that working together with native speakers, we will be able to produce a final product that creates joy and pride from viewers and contributors alike,” stated Priesz.

Wheeler said this group consists not only of Navajo linguists, but also young Navajo speakers. “This is going to be a challenge since there are many words in the movie for which there are no counterpart in the Navajo language,” said Wheeler. The Navajo language is a descriptive language and in many cases, the language uses a description of what the word does to relay its meaning. One word in English can take several words in Navajo to convey the same meaning.

Syncing the lip movements with the Navajo words will be difficult. “What we don’t want is a situation like what people saw in the old kung fu movies when the lip movements didn’t coincide at all with what was said,” explained Wheeler. “I don’t want to disparage the kung fu movies because I loved watching them, but this can become very distracting and we don’t want to see that happen here,” added Wheeler.

To minimize this, the Navajo linguists will have to work with the dubbing director closely, to ensure that the adaptation is done well. One of the best dubbing directors in the business, Richard Epcar, has been tapped for this project.

He is a well-known voice actor/director who has directed dubs of many projects including many Academy Award®-winning films.

Our next step is to cast men and women fluent in the Navajo language to be voice actors. Auditions for the roles of Luke Skywalker, Darth Vader, Princess Leia, Han Solo, C-3PO, Obi-Wan Kenobi and Grand Moff Tarkin will be held at two locations on three dates. April 29th at Deluxe 2400 West Empire St Burbank, CA. May 3rd & 4th at Navajo Nation Museum in Window Rock, AZ.

If you are interested in trying out, please call 818- 565-4641 for Burbank or 928-871-7941 for Arizona to book your time slot. We are not necessarily looking for people who sound like Harrison Ford, Carrie Fisher, Mark Hamill or the others, instead tryouts should have the ability to speak the dialogue with the force and emotions of the original actors.

Final plans are to premier the Navajo version of the movie at the upcoming Fourth of July Celebration & PRCA ProRodeo in Window Rock, Az. While this will be an educational tool for those learning Navajo, Wheeler stressed that the main purpose is to encourage the preservation of the language and to show that the language is still strong vital today.

The project is cultural and educational so there will be no admission charged to see the movie. Wheeler hopes that the success of this project could result in more funding for the preservation of the Navajo language and culture. "We also want to capture our youth and encourage them to learn more about their heritage and to be proud," added Wheeler.

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