

## *Introduction*

The Kawaiisu are the indigenous people from Kern County, California. We call ourselves Nuwa. The name “Kawaiisu” was recently given to us by scholars. Our traditional lands are in the areas of Bakersfield, Tehachapi, and Walker Basin and part of the Mohave Desert. We have lived here for thousands of years.

### *A little on our language situation*

Beginning in 2009, the “Kawaiisu Practical Grammar” project grew out of the need of Kawaiisu language learners to have a resource that would help them understand how complex and elusive parts of the Kawaiisu language fit together. Like most American Indian people in the United States, through a combination of policies for assimilation and population loss from diseases and wars that came with the waves of immigrants, in the last one hundred years our language declined. Today there are less than ten fluent speakers so it is rare for learners to hear conversations and learn in a natural way.

Kawaiisu language advocates have, through the years, raised support for language revitalization and have participated in language teaching and learning. In 2006 we formed the Kawaiisu Language and Cultural Center, a non-profit organization. With the support of the 200+ Kawaiisu members of the Kern Valley Indian Communities Council, we have taken the point on language revitalization.

The Kawaiisu have no reservation and are not a federally-recognized tribe. California issued allotment land in the 1880s, but few people live on these properties now because there are no paved roads, no running water, no power, or any modern households. Families scattered to follow employment opportunities. This has contributed to our difficulties in providing service to those wishing to learn the Kawaiisu language.

The source of Kawaiisu for our “Kawaiisu Practical Grammar” teaching materials and recordings are three fluent Elders from one family, a brother and two sisters, Luther Girado, Betty Girado-Hernandez, and Lucille Girado-Hicks. Their parents, Raphael and Gladys Girado, unlike most Nuwa parents of the 1940s, defied the trend and stressed that their Nuwa language be primary in their household while, in households all over California, English was nudging out Native languages. It is only through their foresight that we are able to pass the language on to new generations.

### *About our project*

Since 2002 Luther, Betty and Lucille have put tremendous effort into teaching language either through community classes or through intensive immersion programs such as the Advocates Master Apprentice Language Learning Program and Language at Home

Program. Many of us had learned a lot of vocabulary, simple sentences, and how to describe things, but were still having trouble putting together more complex words and sentences correctly. We needed a resource to help us get over the hump so we could continue making progress in becoming fluent speakers. In 2008, teachers and students discussed which features of the language were the most mysterious and difficult. These became the eight topics that form the chapters of “Kawaiisu Practical Grammar.”

Although there is a good descriptive grammar with a dictionary of Kawaiisu (written by Maurice Zigmond, Curtis Booth, and Pam Munro, and published in 1990), it is written mainly for an audience of professional linguists. “Kawaiisu Practical Grammar” is for people who may not have a special education and who are trying to learn to speak Kawaiisu, and for the people who are not fluent speakers but who are trying to teach others what they have learned. As Lucille says, “This is a different road we are taking than what they have already done.” We have tried to keep the writing style clear and non-technical as much as possible. Sometimes we will introduce some technical vocabulary to make it easier to talk about Kawaiisu grammar, but the main concepts are defined in an introductory chapter, “Grammar Basics” with examples to help you understand them.

This learner’s grammar is also designed specifically for use in a language teaching program. The eight chapters focus on the most common features of the language as it is spoken today and they are presented in an order that will give learners a few new concepts at time. Many chapters include exercises to help learners practice the ideas as they read about them. The “Kawaiisu Practical Grammar” reference is accompanied by eight unit plans with lessons that teachers can use to help people master each topic.

### *Notes from our project’s lead linguist, Justin Spence*

This Kawaiisu grammar reference does not cover every possible topic. The project lasted only two years and started first by addressing topics that were stopping advanced beginning learners from becoming more fluent. There is simply a lot that we don’t know for sure just yet. In a nutshell, the language as spoken by today’s Kawaiisu elders is not exactly the same as the language described in the Zigmond, Booth, and Munro grammar. This might be partly because today’s elders grew up speaking both Kawaiisu and English, and then didn’t use Kawaiisu very much when they were adults. As the elders themselves say, they mostly remember the common things they used to hear when they were kids – the “everyday use” language they heard from their parents, aunties, and uncles.

For example, Kawaiisu as spoken by people born in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century included a set of special plural verb roots (that is, action words that changed depending on whether you were talking about one person doing it, or a lot of people doing it). Kawaiisu speakers today don’t use these very often anymore, although there are sporadic

examples in stories they've told and they recognize some of these roots when they hear them. This is sometimes called "language loss." However, it is important to remember that it is hard to distinguish this from other kinds of linguistic change (like the changes that occurred in English from Old English, last spoken around the year 1000): The main thing that makes it loss, instead of just change, is that young people today don't speak much Kawaiisu at all (although some of them understand quite a bit).

We should also keep in mind that the published grammar of Kawaiisu was based on the language of fairly small number of speakers. While the Zigmond, Booth and Munro grammar does a good job of discussing areas where there were probably differences among speakers, it could only include variation in the speech of the people who happened to work with the linguists. There might have been more dialect and individual micro-variation than is reflected in the grammar, so differences between Kawaiisu as spoken by Elders today might reflect differences that already existed even when the language was used by everyone in the community. Sheldon Klein, who worked with Kawaiisu speakers in the 1950s and again in the 1980s, commented on how widespread such differences were. He seems to have come to the view that each speaker had his or her own way of speaking. This is true for all languages, of course – everyone talks a little bit different from everyone else, and people are pretty good at recognizing voices they're familiar with (or even unfamiliar voices that they've only heard a couple of times). But Klein seems to suggest that the differences ran much deeper than we usually find in languages with densely-packed populations where speakers can communicate easily over long distances, like English in the twentieth century.

A final point is for people who are just getting started learning Kawaiisu: Be patient. Language learning is a big project, and even in the best circumstances it can take years to master a new language. You will probably feel frustrated sometimes, like when you know you've studied a word or a grammatical concept but can't quite remember what you learned. Don't worry: This is a normal part of language learning. Just try to break things down into manageable pieces and focus on one thing at a time. With some patience and dedication, you'll be surprised how much you can master in a month, a year, and a lifetime.

### ***Our thanks***

In recent times past Nuwa people felt strongly that their language should not be taught outside their immediate families. We especially want to thank our fluent speakers and Elders, Luther Girado, Betty Girado-Hernandez, and Lucille Girado-Hicks for their courage and dedication in bringing the Nuwa language back into our communities. Many thanks go as well to the other members of our project development team, Justin Spence, Dr. Jocelyn Ahlers, Julie Turner, Laura Grant, and Merlene Knight-Everson. We also

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