

**CONFRONTING LANGUAGE AMBIVALENCE AND
LANGUAGE DEATH: THE ROLES OF THE UNIVERSITY
IN NATIVE COMMUNITIES¹**

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ABSTRACT/RESUME

Both Micmac and Maliseet are important links in Native communities in the Maritimes but both are in difficulty. Universities are uniquely suited to help Native communities identify and maintain aspects of Native culture which are embodied in language and affect communication between the generations - affecting values, spatial and psychological orientation, and aesthetics - and which may disappear or change drastically as a language disappears.

Le Micmac et le Maliseet sont tous les deux des liens importants dans les communautés autochtones des régions maritimes, mais ils ont des difficultés. Les universités sont exceptionnellement faites pour aider les communautés indigènes à identifier et à garder les aspects de la culture autochtone que le langage exprime et qui ont un effet sur la communication entre les générations, - intéressant ainsi les valeurs sociales, l'orientation spatiale et psychologique, l'esthétique - et qui peuvent disparaître ou se modifier radicalement lorsqu'un langage disparaît.

The skeptical observer of Native language instruction at a federal or provincial school in the Maritimes might - were he not afraid of the outrage he would encounter - be tempted to ask the teacher, "Why are you doing this? These kids aren't speaking Maliseet at home. Their parents don't teach it to them, so why should you? Where will they use it anyway, and what good will it do them?"

You get the picture, I'm sure. In fact, you probably have gotten it - or have been in it in one role or another. "And anyway," this brash observer might conclude, with the satisfaction of having the last word, "they don't need to speak Maliseet to be Indian."

Some teachers, confronted in this way, have their own discouragement about the Native language confirmed. Others react angrily, particularly to the last point: "When the language is gone," they say, "then our culture goes with it." So they continue to teach, against the odds.

People are fascinated by the death - real or feared - of a language. Is it true that switching over to English will erase Native culture? Is it true that writing an oral language down will petrify it in, at best, an unreliable, non-Indian form? Is the study of Native languages no more than a matter of academic interest - the collection of raw material for theses, reports, articles, and data bases?

I think that the answer to all of these questions must be No.

Even when spoken by fewer and fewer members of a community, the indigenous language is an inexhaustible source of information about what its speakers think, how they act and make decisions, and why they use particular strategies in dealing with other people, with natural resources, and with their own personal and professional development. For this reason the decline of a language does not have to lead to the loss of all that it conveys. People can learn to work knowledgeably with written and recorded language. Their discoveries can find real-life applications. This is not simply linguistic anthropology turned into self-study; it requires the use of rigorous scientific investigation, but also an honest understanding of one's own goals, aspirations, and heritage.

We needn't catalogue here the roles of languages in keeping alive traditions, values, attitudes, and Indian identity. What is often overlooked, however, is that Native languages are crucial to dignity and self-image, especially when we consider whether students have confidence in their work and whether they use what they learn away from home when they return to their families and communities.

My own reasons for studying the Native languages of the Maritimes include my being intrigued by the obvious problems that Native children encounter in their schooling. These problems cannot be separated from the equally obvious shift at home from a Native language to English. I am also curious about seeing life from another point of view. In the past 13 years I have been able to learn quite a bit of Maliseet-Passamaquoddy and also something about how it works. It has been a nerve-shattering experience.

I mean that. It is like being positive, on a stretch of the road without signs or landmarks, that you're heading toward Toronto, only to discover by a chance

clue that you are, in fact, bound east toward Kingston. Your mind, you discover, is locked shut in the westbound lane, and you quite literally cannot imagine that you are headed east. You must pull off the road and stop thinking altogether just to reorient yourself.

Erick Erickson, the psychologist, tells of a similar experience he had when he decided one day, after many years of commuting into Vienna on one road and home on another, to try the opposite route - just for a change. He was so badly shaken by the time he arrived at his office that he went home by the normal way. It is not just that we are creatures of habit; our sense of space is an essential component of our identity. Erickson experienced fear: He did not know where he was.

This is exactly what I went through in learning Maliseet-Passamaquoddy because it is so different from my first language. And it would be the same for a Native speaker - or a Native community - turning to English.

Anyone's native language - first language or mother tongue - is a feature of his life just like his sense of space. In fact, language has many of the same properties: we orient ourselves by it, and - even though it is verbal - we are unaware of its presence in our thinking because it is the very medium of our experience. Its loss, too, produces the same kind of stress, for the individual or the group.

Now there is a generation - at least one - of people who are not able to communicate fully with their own grandparents. Their common language is dying as more and more young people turn to English or French. Their sense of social, physical, and cultural space is, of necessity, threatened too: *social* because they are losing contact with their elders, losing the intimacy of a shared language; *physical* because their new language has a different orientation, it looks at the world in terms of man-made attributes and sees objects where Native speakers have seen processes; and *cultural* because they must make new lives for themselves out of unfamiliar stuff. They are not like Robinson Crusoe, who had no one but himself to accommodate, but like Gulliver, who had to accommodate the beings of a very different world. Not surprisingly, young people have developed a linguistic ambivalence that reflects their predicament.

Many are sincerely unaware that their language is disappearing. "Everyone here speaks Micmac," I was told during a recent study of language use at a reserve school. I observed that the children and teachers do use Micmac grammar; here are some of the things they say: "Cultureematigw." "Correctewatu gpapersml." As time goes by, they may say these things in a different way, using English grammar: "We're having culture nigè." "Correct your papers, gila." Older speakers are keenly aware of this phenomenon. Most condemn it, some frankly acknowledge it and accept it as a sign of times.

It is important to note that people speaking this ambivalent language use Micmac grammar with English vocabulary. That is, the Native language remains strong even with the English component. Micmac's way of structuring environment and experience still dominates. The progression toward using English grammar with a bit of Native vocabulary - as shown by the second examples ... and then to using all English - seems inexorable, but is not necessarily irrever-

sible for all languages.

The disappearance of a language is not uniform: there are pockets of resistance and strongholds of tradition. It is not precipitous either: for years to come people will continue to speak Micmac and Maliseet-Passamaquoddy. Yet life will never be the same.

People inevitably change and reorient themselves. The successful ones seem to be those who can look at each world - Native and non-Native - from the point of view of the other. They succeed doubly, according to the different standards of each community. There is the man who dances, sings traditional songs, knows the oral tradition of his community, and can work beautifully with old people, visiting them, finding out what they need, providing for it, and listening to their wisdom. He is at the same time an expert administrator, handling a million-dollar health services budget fairly, objectively, and with true foresight for the growth and improvement of conditions on the reserve. There is the cheerful, no-nonsense teacher in a provincial school, who is not only a skillful basketmaker but a writer, too. In her community she maintains customs, traditional connections between the generations, and Native-language liturgy in the church. Both of these people are fluently bilingual.

What we in universities and other educational institutions must learn from these successful people is their unstated perspective on the Native language. They spent their childhood completely immersed, not only in the language but also in the community that spoke it. Somehow they gained the self-confidence to tackle a new world - to shatter their own nerves, as it were, on purpose. Where did they get such astonishing courage? Why don't they, like so many others in their families and communities, feel themselves intimidated by the white world and ignored by its schools and enterprises? By a combination of upbringing and circumstances, they have become conscious of their own spatial and linguistic knowledge. They see without prejudice the cultural richness and possibilities of each world.

What will today's generations draw on? Can they look to their elders for the same strength? It has become more difficult to grow up totally immersed in Native culture. Many young people find that they can appreciate their heritage only by stepping outside it for a time. They see better the significance and impact of language. At the same time, the physical, the spatial, separation remains difficult. The more that universities and other agencies can bring their services to the community, the more Native people there will be who have access to this perspective, and (with luck this works both ways) the more university teachers and administrators who will have access to the knowledge of the Native community.

A current program in the Maritime Provinces, the Educational Leadership Development Program, being conducted by the Micmac-Maliseet Institute under a grant from the Donner Canadian Foundation, shows how this mutual exchange can benefit both parties. Designed to train present and potential school board members, the program provides Native people with an outsider's view of school curriculum, educational policy-setting, relationships between reserve and provincial schools, and other legal and administrative issues. At the same time, the

format of each session (usually the equivalent of 72 hours in all) encourages - and in most cases depends upon - participants' using their own points-of-view. The instructor who gives a lecture on progressive education in Europe draws little response from the audience, even though much of his message is clearly applicable to Indian schools. The instructor who asks participants to identify what makes their own community unique is asking them to step back and, eventually, to think about what is possible in the education of their children.

The university makes a contribution by acknowledging that Native students who want to go back and work at home - as doctors, nurses, teachers, lawyers, administrators, journalists, businessmen, foresters, contractors, or in any other capacity - will not be satisfied with anything less than a full, rigorous, and academically complete program of studies that qualifies them anywhere. They want nothing watered down. At the same time, they require some accommodation from the system. The university, for instance, goes to the community, so that students and their neighbours see the program in the content of their lives. University faculty and administration see the program in the same context and make sure that it fits, with appropriate hours, schedule, pace, and course content. We no longer ask why students cannot adapt to the school system, but why the school system does not adapt to its students, providing them equal opportunity for meaningful achievement.

This is especially true in language education today. Over and over again, the importance of learning the Native language is stressed, both for its own sake and for the insight (an interesting point here) that it gives into English. We are seeing an explosion of Native-language materials, teaching guides, original writings and recordings in virtually every indigenous language. People who work with these programs find themselves redefining curriculum and instruction in terms appropriate to the teaching of Algonquian, Iroquoian, or other language families. Algonquian programs, for instance, are verb-based and demand that the teacher find alternatives to noun-based materials such as lottos and other matching games, flash-cards, and vocabulary lists. Basic concepts of the natural world are reflected in the "verbiness" of Micmac and Maliseet:

Time: "Indian time" is not merely a joke. There is real linguistic evidence of people thinking not about blocks (units) of time, but rather about the sequence of events. A great many time-words in Micmac and Maliseet are verbs; virtually none are nouns. English time-words may be among the first to be borrowed into a Native language in conversation; this reflects a cultural adaptation.

The physical environment: Physical space is *directional* in relationship to the speaker and his point of view, not in relation to arbitrary (e.g., compass) directions or fixed landmarks. The directionality is usually shown in verb-stems. Do speakers of Micmac and Maliseet make less of a distinction between themselves and the world within which they live?

Weather: Weather words are virtually all verbs. The only nouns associated with weather are ones like "fallen snow," "cloud," "rainbow," etc. These are visible, tangible things, rather than processes or conditions. There is no Micmac or Maliseet noun, for instance, meaning "rain" or "falling snow" or "storm." These languages have a different perspective from English on the "forces" of nature.

Personal relations: Spatial directionality characterizes virtually all descriptions and expressions of interaction. There is also a "directionality" that is a strong component of grammar, especially in transitive verbs, where verb-forms show the relation between the person (1st, 2nd, 3rd) of the subject and the person of the object. What this implies on a cultural level is not clear.

Students become actively involved in moving, making, conversing, observing, and reporting. Teachers find that they must come to grips with complicated patterns of verb and noun inflection. Those already fluent are astounded by their own ability to manoeuvre in the maze. Newcomers are at first overwhelmed.

Students I have worked with in the Maritimes and Maine often complain, partway through a language course: "I thought I knew how to speak this language; but now I'm not so sure." They get confused trying to construct or analyse Native language sentences. But they get beyond this analysis. One non-Indian student in a class did her homework with her Indian husband, a fluent and frequent speaker of Maliseet-Passamaquoddy. "Frank never knew that there are animate and inanimate nouns," she reported one Tuesday evening, "but he says that it makes sense." Students from Cape Breton to Maine have discovered how Micmac and Maliseet work and that they are lively, versatile, and usable in all aspects of life.

Students become advocates for the Native language. It is possible that its decline is being slowed, and certain that more (and younger) members of the community hold the language in knowledgeable esteem. For its part, the university in offering courses like this, is taking the community seriously. So have the non-Indian teachers, administrators, and priests in the course, who earn 3 credit hours and learn something about the people they work for.

We must confront language death - and openly acknowledge that language is a non-renewable resource. We should be stockpiling and identifying new sources of energy. We must confront language ambivalence and learn what both languages contribute to personal success. For young people, speaking the Native language remains a source of great pleasure. Understanding what it holds is a crucial factor in building cohesive and stable communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Universities should help Native communities establish and maintain col-

lections of Native-language materials - annotated texts, interviews, recorded conversations, history, legendsl stories, songs, prayers, grammars and dictionaries - in written, audio, and audio-visual formats.

2. Universities should train Native people to use such collections for both research and personal enjoyment, and to use what they learn in community planning, education, cultural affairs, and the provision of services.
3. Universities should continue to train Native people as language experts and language teachers.
4. Universities should undertake to study the transition from being Native-speaking to being bilingual (or from being bilingual to being English-speaking) in order to help communities identify and conserve what is crucial to Indian identity. This might be done by examining the strategies of people who are successful in both the Native and non-Native worlds.
5. Universities should train Native and non-Native educators to identify the needs of Native communities and to work from the strengths of these communities, especially in regard to English-language learning and professional development.

NOTES

1. This paper was presented at the annual conference of the Canadian Indian / Native Studies Association at Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario November 1 - 3, 1985.