Native Languages and Language Teaching in B.C.

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I would like to start by comparing the language teaching situation in B.C. at the present with how things were when I first came to British Columbia in 1972. At that time, the movement to maintain and revive the use of Native languages in B.C. was still very new. There was a tremendous optimism, but not much in the way of organization, and no very clear understanding on very many people's part of what sort of methods ought to be used. There were some highly emotional issues here, especially in the area of writing systems—which one was best? Surprisingly enough, this question involved major conflicts and drained away a lot of energy which ought to have been devoted to the really difficult problems of teaching Native languages. But at that time, the issue seemed very important, because few people were sufficiently aware of the distinction between teaching people to write a language they already knew—that is, teaching literacy—and teaching a language to people who did not know how to speak it.

There were also political problems: it was necessary to convince politicians and government officials that language teaching was important, that Native communities valued their languages and demanded cooperation from the government in the effort to preserve them. At this time Native people in Alaska and their allies were just about to win a great victory with the passing of the Alaska Native Language Act which set up the Alaska Native Language Center and guaranteed that children from communities which were mostly fluent in a Native language would receive school instruction in that language. People were saying, 'why not here in B.C.?' I think many of us expected something like that would happen. So there was this feeling in the air that we were on the verge of great things, but meanwhile there was a lot we didn't know about and no agreement on what our best goals and approaches should be.

These days things are very different. There are many ongoing programmes in Native Language teaching. Teaching methods have become more sophisticated and carefully worked out. We have gotten much more relaxed about writing systems, to the point where we sometimes find it advisable to have more than one system in the same programme. For example, at the University of Victoria this past year, some of the students were already very well trained in the use of a type of writing system different from the one generally used at UVic, and were encouraged to keep using their original writing system by the UVic faculty. It has become, unfortunately, all too clear that we will not be able to get an Alaskan type of situation in British Columbia in the foreseeable future, and that we may have to wait a long time before Native languages here get the same kind of recognition from the government they do in Alaska.

One thing has not changed since 1972, and that is the endangered status of every single Native language in British Columbia. Some languages are much better off, compared with others, but none can be said to be safe. What I want to do now is go over in some detail, the condition of the languages as far as we have been able to determine it.

It is very difficult to get reliable estimates of the numbers of people who speak different Native languages in B.C. These figures are not final, and are subject to correction. What is really important, in any case, is not the number of speakers but the age of the youngest speaker. Consider the case of Haida, for example. There are two communities in B.C., one at Skidegate and the other at Masset. The resident Skidegate community numbers around 250 (though the number of people who are resident band members is between 400 and 500). There are between 40 and 60 people who speak Haida fluently in Skidegate; all but one or two are in their late sixties or older. Simple arithmetic therefore points to the physical extinction of the Skidegate dialect by the year 2000, assuming that most of the youngest speakers live to be 80 years old. This projection would still hold even if the entire Skidegate community spoke Haida, as long as the youngest speakers were around 60. The same is true for the Masset dialect. So we can see that, barring some radical changes, Haida would have a very difficult time surviving the next twenty years.

Now the situation with, say, the Athapaskan languages is quite different. Several of the Athapaskan languages are spoken by the youngest children. This means that, for the moment, there is no danger of these languages becoming extinct. This optimistic prognosis applies to Beaver, Chilcotin, Carrier, Babine, and probably Slave; it is not clear what the status of Tahltan/Kaska or Sekani are.

The Salishan languages are in better shape in the interior than on the coast. Within Coast Salish, Squamish and Sechelt are spoken by only a handful of older speakers and may not even survive 1990. Straits is also near extinction—a particular problem here is that Halkomelem has replaced Straits in some of the Straits communities through intermarriage over several generations between members of the two groups. Halkomelem itself does not have many fluent speakers younger than 40, although there are several hundred Halkomelem speakers. The same is true for Comox, and the situation is even more critical for Bella Coola. On the other hand, there are numerous speakers of the various Interior Salishan languages who are in their forties, and there are several hundred of these for most Interior Salish languages. Even so, the young people in these areas do not speak their own languages, and therefore these languages are in serious danger.

Also in the interior we have Kutenai, which only has a few speakers left, all elderly so far as we know.

In the Tsimshianic family, there are a large number of speakers for the Nisga'a and Gitksan, and relatively quite a bit fewer for Coast Tsimshian. It is possible that young people are still growing up speaking Nisga'a and Gitksan; our information on this point is still uncertain. Coast Tsimshian, on the other hand, is definitely faced with extinction. We do not yet know about Southern Tsimshian, which is thought to be a separate language from Nisga'a and Gitksan as well as Coast Tsimshian.

Tlingit also seems to be faced with extinction in the near future. It is certain that almost all the speakers of Canadian Tlingit are elderly, or at least middle-aged.

The Wakashan languages are in better condition than the Coast Salish, but are still in grave danger. In Northern Wakashan, which includes Haisla in the north, Bella Bella and Rivers Inlet in the central portion, and Kwakwala in the south, we have no situation in which the language is being learned by young children. The age of the youngest speakers in the Kitimat area is somewhere in the twenties; for Bella Bella and Rivers Inlet, in the forties and fifties; for Kwakwala, in the forties and fifties. Numerically, these languages are in relatively good shape. For Southern Wakashan, the picture is much the same—a few hundred speakers of Nootka, a few doze of Nitinat. Most speakers are in their forties or older, but there are a few in their thirties.

The picture these figures gives us are, it must be admitted, not tremendously encouraging. The problem is, what is to be done about it? Any language teaching programme must confront the fact that in most Native communities English is the dominant language used by parents, and a child growing up will almost certainly be learning English as the first language. Although the child may be of completely Native ancestry, when she or he has grown up a little, he or she will have, as an English speaker, as difficult a time learning the ancestral Native language as a white child, whose first language was also English, would have. This is simply because there is a tremendous difference between learning a language as an infant, and starting to learn a second language when one is older. Children do not need to be given incentives to learn to speak their first language—they just do it. But, without strong incentives or motivations, it is very difficult for people to acquire a second language.

In many parts of the world, people are bilingual or multilingual. If one looks in Asia or South America, for instance, one notices that people commonly speak, besides their own language, some European tongue—generally that of the nations which were or are the main colonial power in the area. People in these places generally outnumbered the Europeans, so that they still retained their ancestral languages, but this was not so in B.C. How, then, are you going to motivate people to use an ancestral language when in their dealing with the white part of the population, and in the Native community for the most part , there is no strong reward for using a language other than English? There isn't any economic advantage you can point to, and not much prestige. The real reasons for retaining an ancestral language, that it is a link with one's ancestral past, and a way of identifying who you are—of being who you are—are pretty abstract; you can't point to them the way you can with land. This is a very important reason why language teaching is so extremely difficult.

Now, knowing these difficulties, the organizers of language programmes have to decide well in advance exactly what they want to achieve. First of all, what are the specific goals of the programme? At one level, a realistic goal might be to teach people already fluent in the language how to write it down. This has been done on many occasions, using a variety of alphabets, all of which seem to work quite well. The design of the writing system is less important than providing the learner with the chance for a lot of practice. A student can learn to write extremely well in between one and two years, if the instructor is encouraging and helpful, and clear.

This is a totally different task from training people who do not speak the language to use it. In this case, writing is not an end in itself, but is just a tool. The real goal is the spoken, not the written word. What must be decided is how great a command over the language you are going to try to develop in your students. There are several possibilities. You might want to teach children, or adults for that matter, to sing some songs in the language. This would require that they achieve good pronunciation in the language—a difficult problem, for most people, but easier for those growing up hearing the language. They would also have to memorize a certain number of words. At a more advanced level, you might want to teach a number of phrases to people— 'hello' or a similar greeting, like 'yo' in Kwakwala; 'how are you?' — 'I'm fine'; 'I'm tired' and so on. To go much beyond this you are going to be writing language lessons of considerable depth, because people can only go so far on sheer memorizing—they must understand something about the grammar or after a while they will not learn more. Ultimately, you may want to make people completely fluent—you may want to fully revive the language. This is an incredibly difficult job. Remember that a child spends at least the first six or seven years, surrounded only by the language, before the first major stage of language learning is complete. The child learns automatically and has no other language to 'get in the way'. It is therefore almost inevitable that it would take at least this long, under total immersion conditions, for an adult to become completely fluent in a second language.

I do not wish at all to try here to prescribe for any language programme what its goals ought to be. I only wish to stress that if you are going to have a language programme you have to develop a very explicit idea of what your goals are, and you have to confront, in a completely realistic way, the genuine obstacles that will hinder you in reaching those goals. In the type of project I have been talking about, which is the total revival of the language, you have a very difficult undertaking, one that you must approach in a different way from the others. To really revive a language, you must concentrate on the children—the really young infants. You need to make a deliberate effort to have these children reared at least partly in households in which the language is still used actively as an everyday thing. This will, in many communities, if not most communities, have to be child's grandparents' household. If the grandparents talk to each other, and to the child, for three or four hours a day every day—and more, if possible—the odds are good that the child would grow up speaking the language fluently.

This would not interfere with the child's learning English in the least, as long as the parents also spoke to each other, and the child, in English. We now know something we didn't know before about children's. capacity to learn languages, which is that a child can learn two or more languages simultaneously. It was this sort of error which in part led to the destruction of Native languages in the residential schools, where children were forbidden to use their languages year after year: the teachers, and the Department of Indian Affairs officials, believed that in order to teach Native children to speak English they had to wipe out the children's own language. This was a terrible mistake, and it would be a mistake to think that you cannot bring up a child speaking both English and the ancestral language.

It is my belief that in certain communities this is the only way a programme for full scale revival of the language can have any chance of success. In other communities, where there are more younger speakers, there is another approach imaginable. You would need a group of people who were willing to

spend a very long time—several years—in a total immersion situation with speakers of the language, after having spent some time studying the Native language as a second language. Nothing but the Native language would be spoken. If these people were young enough, then not only would they become fluent, but their children born later, after this programme, would learn the language from the parents. In a programme like this you would want to have written materials, but it should be entirely in the Native Language; there should be no English at all. A great deal of just this sort of material—monolingual in the Native Language—has come out of the Athapaskan speaking areas. They can write this sort of material right now because as I mentioned earlier their languages are still learned from the cradle on.

It may be that programmes of the sort I have just suggested are not feasible for a group for political or economic reasons. In that case the realistic goal will have to be something other than full-scale language revival. What the goal should be will depend, in large part, on what resources are available to the organizers of the project. One might want to teach the language as a second language—not, that is, as a way of reviving the language, but as a way of presenting to young people a living part of their ancestral past. For this, the total immersion approach, while the most effective, is not absolutely necessary. One can have a classroom situation, using lessons of the type we have just seen illustrated. In these cases, while fluency is of course desirable, it is acquired far more slowly, and probably cannot reach the point where students can converse monolingually for a whole day, without some further 'total immersion' type programme. For older speakers, a course of this type could well serve as the preliminary part of a total programme which would shift to total immersion later and aim at complete language revival. In any case, this 'second language' approach represents a way for important information about history or culture to be transmitted to young people who have no way of learning such things in their school courses.

The type of lesson format used at the University of Victoria is a good example of this sort of approach. A community which wants to develop a programme of this type will either have to import linguists from outside or get training for some of its own members as linguists, or both. In the final analysis you will have to train members of the community, at least for the long run, because the outside linguist usually cannot stay forever, and a community dependent on outsiders may have to deal with relatively high turnovers. The best approach, then, is for the outside person to train members of the community to do their own work. This is not easy to do, and it is not a short process, but it can be quite effective and has been done in many places in the province. The best results come when younger fluent speakers received linguistic training and then work with the very oldest speakers.

This approach has also been taken toward establishing what one might want to call a band or community archive. The goal of this programme would be to preserve, in both written and spoken form, important parts of the group's heritage. The use of tape recorders and long-lasting, high-quality magnetic recording tape is necessary here. The material recorded from the older people can be transcribed either by themselves or by someone else, and in this way myths, songs, techniques for fishing, basket making, carving and so on can be preserved. This is a very important step for a community to take because it is a way of taking over control of one's own history, of interpreting one's

own culture rather than having it interpreted for one by others. Here is where literacy in one's own language is an end in itself, an important tool to use in creating the archive I have described. In some communities, which cannot implement a 'second language' approach, the creation of an archive could be a very important way of recovering something from the past. If a project is organized on these lines, the main task is then to train fluent speakers in the use of a writing system.

All these options I have referred to are choices which must be faced when a language programme is being contemplated. The choices must be made in the light of what is practical and what is possible. Otherwise, by trying to do too much without the proper background, we can set ourselves up for disappointment, and a backlash of skepticism from those whose support we need. The general principal underlying all efforts towards Native language teaching is that the more ambitious the programme, the more elaborate and coordinated the organization of the programme must be.

The basic problem with trying to do language work is lack of money. No language programme I know of has enough. I should like to disregard this for the moment and outline to you what I regard as the ideal language programme, aiming at the most ambitious possible goals—the resurrection of the language as a tool of ordinary communication and the comprehensive study of the literature which has been produced in the language.

- Infants would be reared by their grandparents in part, and the grandparents would speak to them in the Native language only, or almost entirely.
- Parents and adults without children would all study the language as a second language, and some of these adults would then participate in total immersion programmes for several years.
- At the same time, members of the group fluent in the language would receive training in the analysis of language and the development of language lessons. These people would be hired to work full-time as language teachers and curriculum planners.
- When enough people had been trained and had been brought up to speak the Native language, it would be time to start teaching a complete programme in the literature of the language. Much of this literature has already been recorded by people like Boas. Professional Native language teachers would rewrite these myths, songs, stories and so on in a modern writing system and teach this material the same way the *Iliad* is taught to students in Greece or *Beowulf* in England—as a basic part of the people's history and heritage.

To accomplish this end, or these ends, the community will need to work with linguists and train some of its people as linguists. These Native linguists would have the dual role of helping to prepare teaching materials in the language and developing literacy programmes such as those I have just referred to. Many of them would also probably carry out research on parts of the language that interested them.

To set up such a programme would require a complete commitment within the community to the recovery of the language. Outside the community it would require a high level of cooperation on the

part of a number of government agencies, and it would require a huge budget. But it is far from impossible—the Navajo already have this sort of programme. Beyond the technical details of language teaching methods, there is thus a political dimension to the work you are trying to accomplish—to motivate your people, especially young people, to learn, and to get the Federal and Provincial Governments to support and encourage your work.