

The Importance of Language

Language.

What does this word mean? There are thousands of ways in which to say this word in the many beautiful languages of the world. Currently, there are 6 912 languages still spoken, (Ethnologue online) many of which are spoken in several dialects, depending on the terrain that separates them.

The death of languages has been happening for thousands of years, but at a slower rate and in a way that made sense to the changing of times. This is in sharp contrast to the state of languages today, which are experiencing the disappearance of thousands of languages. *Specifically, 3000 are seriously endangered or on the verge of complete extinction.* (UNESCO, 1996, p.1) This is at a rate of one language lost each ten to fourteen days!

Of all these languages, none are as threatened as those of the world's Indigenous people.

It is estimated that there are over 300 million Indigenous people representing 6% of the planet's population. (Wikipedia, 2008) **Indigenous** means the people who are descendants of those who were the first to inhabit the land within a specific country. In the U.S there are 361 978 speakers of indigenous American languages who communicate in the over 162 Indigenous languages still spoken in the United States.

In Canada, there are 208 601 speakers of Indigenous languages in 85 distinct languages (Atlas of Canada, 1996, Table 1) All B.C. First Nations' languages are endangered as well as many classical art forms. (FPHLCC annual report)

Sadly, within the next generation or two, only three of these diverse languages are projected to survive. These are Cree, Ojibway, Inuktitut. Luckily there is a grassroots momentum growing, by which Native peoples are working hard to capture and reclaim their traditional languages as a means of reclaiming the culture. This will be discussed later.

So what does language mean to the people?

Article 5 of UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, states: "All persons should therefore be able to express themselves and to create and disseminate their work in the language of their choice, and particularly in their mother tongue; all persons should be entitled to quality education and training that fully respect their cultural identity. (Grenoble A. Lenore & Whaley J. Lindsay, 2006, P.2)

This quote was created because it is finally being understood that it is incredibly important for a people to be able to retain their language, even becoming bi or multilingual, instead of having a mother tongue extinguished.

Language holds the intricate memory and information for thousands of years of a culture. (This is especially the case for Indigenous languages that did not keep record of any written form of the language until the late 1800's. So the essence of who the people are is only passed down through the generations, much like a blue print for how a people are to live. It is the world view, the way one speaks, associates with one's neighbours, treats the animals, raises a family, pays attention to the environment, disciplines their children, creates medicinal cures for diseases, basket weaving and arts techniques, learns their spirituality, humour and traditions; to name only a small fraction of examples of what is hidden within a language.

Since Language is a visible and powerful indicator of groups identity, it has accurately been recognized as an important way to maintain links with one's cultural past and to protect one's cultural uniqueness in the present (Grenoble A. Lenore & Whaley J. Lindsay, 2006, P.3)

There are many unique aspects to Aboriginal languages. Unfortunately, many words are not transferable into the English language and are lost in translation. Many aspects of even current languages that are still in existence are suffering from erosion, as aspects of the culture and traditions are no longer being used, so those words are being dropped from the language use. This is especially the case for the many Aboriginal people who migrate to the cities. Living off the land is just not as feasible, so speaking about Nature and the links to nature, no longer happen.

Human Environmental Knowledge is built upon a vast accretion of observations about animal's appearance and behaviour. Complex patterns, such as bird flocking, termite mound building, bee swarming, fish schooling, have been keenly observed for a very long time by humans. (Harrison K. David, 2007, p.49)

From the description of Francine Burning, when describing her language of Mohawk (which she cannot speak). She stated that Native languages and English are vastly different languages. For example, in the Mohawk language there are over 26 prefixes that describe the relation to one thing and another. One root word can mean and be used in a large number of ways because we have specific prefixes and suffixes that acknowledge and address different relations, gender, numbers of each, groups, things, etc. She feels that if she were to be speaking in this way, she would have a different relationship and awareness, than the one she has now, which is of an English speaker. (Burning F., 2008, Interview) This is a very powerful statement to make because it illustrates what comes up over and over again- something is just not right, if we are Native and not speaking our Native languages. There is a disconnect that permeates our lives...

Gossip was not tolerated for many reasons as it could tear apart the very fibre of the people's morals. As shared by Delia Nahanee in the interview, in the Nisga'a language, there is no manner in which a person can lie. It is just not

done. (2008) In the Cree language, my own Mother has shared that lying was also not permissive as it could affect the well being of the entire community to speak an untruth.

While speaking in the interview, it was observed that there was a connection between my Cree and the Nisga'a dialects, which did not have any swear words traditionally, not in the way that we do today by any means. There were no ways to put a person down cruelly. Usually, a chastisement was done in such a way as to teach a person a lesson. This was also shared by my Mother while I was a child, this was often done in a way that used humour and teasing. In the Nisga'a language, it is only possible to call someone the equivalent of "stingy". The worst 'swear' word between women is the term "Lummi" which simply is a funny sounding version for "Vagina", which roughly translates into meaning woman anyhow. It is not a derogatory term and is not meant to anger, it is meant to diffuse a situation by using humour (Delia, 2008). These examples are very different from the day and age we live in now. I recall a women's studies class many years ago, in which a class mate stated that there are over eighty swear words or put downs for women alone in the English language!

Additionally, stories in the language were used to educate young people to introduce life experiences to them before they actually experienced it. Some stories were designed to activate the mind and interest of the young people...so they will be introduced to things they will encounter so that they will not be shocked when it happens. (Bird, Louis, 2005. p.35).

We falsely have come to believe that this natural information is not necessary to our well being any longer as many of us now live in urban environments and purchase the majority of our goods from stores, and have little to do with the acquiring of goods, such as growing food or making our own natural fibre clothing etc. Yet there is great evidence now with the 'green revolution' that going back to these ways would be the best, not only for our environment at a home level but for the environment on a world level.

Francine Burning shared; As far as I know, [though my dear friend is only in her thirties, she may not even have been aware of these words consciously, but they are the respectful way that Native people are taught to begin to speak with when asked questions on a subject. I asked her about language, so she is beginning her response with these five opening words, which show respect to me as her friend and person who is listening.] One of the things that makes us distinct nations is our languages. Colonization attempted to get rid of these so that we were only classified as Indians, First Nations, Aboriginal [or a Status Indian card number]. In the context of Canada, you are not referred to as Cree and I am not referred to as Mohawk. Yet there are things that give us common experiences and we consider ourselves a Native people-a cohesive group. But, its our languages and how our languages shape the way we interact with the world that makes us distinct from one another. (Burning F., 2008, Interview)

When a language is lost, so much more has been lost for the people and for the world. All languages and people are much like the delicate eco-system that is affected by the loss of a single entity, with the reality of the rapid extinction that the world is also experiencing. A dictionary or grammar reference book is never going to capture the richness of a language.

Each language reflects a unique world-view and culture complex, mirroring the manner in which a speech community has resolved its problems in dealing with the world, and has formulated its thinking, its system of philosophy and understanding of the world around it. In this, each language is the means of expression of the intangible cultural heritage of a people, and it even remains a reflection of this culture for a while after the culture which underlies it decays and crumbles, often under the impact of an intrusive, powerful, usually metropolitan, different culture. However, with the death and disappearance of such a language, an irreplaceable unit of our knowledge and understanding of human thought and world-view has been lost forever. (Wurm A. Stephen, 1996, p.1)

Due to learning this new and better understanding of the language, I was interested in looking a little closer at my Mother and my husband's Indigenous language of Cree. Though they speak vastly different dialects, there were many similarities such as when translating a Cree term, often it will need to be done in such a way as to describe what the word means in general terms, rather than an exact word description. When I asked my husband to ask me how I can say "Bath time" to the children. He gave me a long descriptive sentence which had to do with cleansing the entire body. My suspicion was that there is probably even a spiritual element that he could not take out of the sentence, which spoke to the greater aspect of cleansing. Interesting also, is to learn that Cree has little to no gender based biological distinctions in its basic structure. There is no she/he, her/him, himself/herself. Cree language divides everything according to a life principle. If it has an inner life force, it is said to be animate. If it is sedentary and has no evident principle in it, it is inanimate. However this generalization sometimes breaks down and these reasons are often tied into our not understanding the way in which the language was once used and understood in its entirety.

An interesting development, which happened not only with the Cree language, but many other dialects across North America, was in the development of what are presently termed *Trade Languages*. Often, after the first contacts occurred, there was a need to have interpreters for travel and trade. When a language did not exist, even forms of sign language were used. Some of the more common ones were termed Mobilian, Michif (unique form of Plains Cree words and French grammar nouns), Chinook, which had over 100 000 speakers covering over 100 dialects of Native languages at its peak (Wikipedia, 2008) and Creek were all examples of Native languages that developed out of the trade and interaction of Native people with non-Native contact. Sign languages were created also as needed. But as Natives were being pressed farther off their lands and as lands were being traded amongst the French, Spanish and British, these dialects began to be lost. (Crawford M. James, 1978, p 21)

Incredibly, the history of the *Code Talkers* is not known in detail (though thankfully there has been a Hollywood movie starring Adam Beach and Nicholas Cage which did draw some attention to the incredible

achievements of these men and women). Many Native Americans, of various tribes, assisted with securing the victory of America in both WWI and II through the use of their language! The Navajo and Choctaw Native Americans languages were used to create a code that was used to transmit thousands of messages with regards to necessary communication for battle. The German and later Japanese, who were both skilled code breakers, remained baffled by the Navajo language. Both the U.S and France have acknowledged these contributions with the highest of military honours. Noteworthy, Native Americans did not even have the right to vote in all states until well in the 1960's!

So with all this rich history, why and how is it that a language can die?

A language does not die because the people no longer enjoy hearing their manner of speaking. As stated earlier, Native languages carry thousands of years of information woven within that when speaking a Native language, it has been described is nearly as comfortable as breathing. Many circumstances happen which cause the language to go into hiding.

For Native people in Canada the factors lie within the forced assimilation techniques used against them.

Government policies and pressures from the dominant society are the root causes of language loss....Missionaries and later the U.S government forcibly removed children from their families and placed them in government run boarding schools...their hair was cut, made to wear European clothing, and their names were replaced with English names. Children were punished, often severely, for speaking their Native languages. Outside the school, fear and ridicule compelled some Native parents to teach traditional Native languages to their children, while others saw the exclusive use of English as the only way to survive economically. (West Rick, 2007, p. 166-7)

Also, after the Boarding or Residential *schools* entered our communities, it halted the pattern of bi and multilingualism that had occurred prior to contact, by which two members of neighbouring nations would intermarry and than be forced to have the families learn the different dialect in order to communicate. Once English was forced via these facilities that the children were forced to attend, there was a shift to Native people speaking in English to communicate. (Langlois J. W., 1976, p. 65)

With the population decline, resulting primarily from epidemics of smallpox, influenza, and other diseases introduced by Europeans, this had important consequences for Native languages. Because, as Margaret Butcher's letters illustrate, medical services were made available primarily to children in residential school. (Langlois J. W., 1976. p. 66) and parents were of course going to do anything to help their children try and survive the deadly diseases that were foreign to them and their traditional medicines. So they in listed them in the schools and if they survived, they often only left, once they were unable to speak their languages any longer.

But much worse. There were many heinous and horrific crimes that Native people have suffered while being at the Residential *schools*. Native people were taught and forced to believe that being Indian was dirty and that any aspects of their life or language should be destroyed. This made it so that adults/elders did not wish to have their children speaking the language. My own Father in law has many stories of his time in school and the view of him speaking his language. None of which are as difficult to hear as the one in which he was placed in the dark room in the back where there sat a electric chair, which was a part of the building, which was previously a jail, before becoming a residential school. Children who spoke their language repeatedly were placed in this chair and zapped! This was a form of torture and their form of discipline. So with these instances, began the slow death of all Native languages which has begun these few generations ago.

Below is some of the transcription of an interview with people who attended these so called schools. The content is language specific.

Mr. Orchard: Some of the schools-I'm thinking of one of the Protestant schools [had] very severe penalties if they were caught speaking their own language.

Mrs. Hall: Yes, we had to do the same, too; when they took us to LeJacq, well, they said no more- you don't talk your own language any more, that's finished. And if we were caught talking our own language we would get punished.

Mr. Orchard: How would they punish you?

Mrs. Hall: Well they had these straps, these thick straps that the Sisters carried under their aprons.

Mr. Orchard: That's what you got? (Langlois J. W.,1976, p. 56)

Mrs. Joyce: Sometimes we got the strap- behind or else on the hand.

Mr. Orchard: It was the same with the boys too?

Mrs. Joyce: M-hm.

Mr. Orchard: That's just if they heard you speaking your own language?

Mrs. Joyce: Well, sometimes they'd have girls that were- I don't know what they call them, Captains; anyway, they listened and if they heard us they'd report us to the principle or whoever was the head of us. (Langlois J. W.,1976, p.56)

Mr. Clemine: Well, they punish us for anything we do is, go without supper or whatever...and that was the big punishment, if you missed a meal, 'cause he feed us very little anyway. You go hungry all the time in there. (Langlois J. W., 1976. p. 55)

...sense of helplessness among most of the pupils at schools such as St. Joseph's, from which the only escape would be a satisfactory effort to avoid all use of the Native language in conversation. (Langlois J. W., 1976. p.57)

A rule against using one's mother tongue is not like a rule against staying up late, or running inside a building; it is more comparable to a rule requiring a certain number of breaths per minute, all day long, or regulating the frequency with which one blinks. (Langlois J. W., 1976. p. 57)

When asked about if the punishments stopped you from using the languages? (A granddaughter of the above interviews)

Ms. Touchie: "Yes- because of the punishments-because you sort of wanted to have a good reputation in the school, and besides, there was no program in our classes which encouraged speaking. Besides, being [away] from our people for so long, you're just all English-oriented; you're bound to let it slip by. (Langlois J. W., 1976. p. 59)

Mr. Levine: When you got out of boarding school, did you find that you had difficulty communicating with other people, those who hadn't been to boarding school, when you tried to talk with them in your own language?

Ms. Touchie: Oh yeah, I had a real difficulty, mostly in pronouncing the words, *thinking in Indian again*, [own emphasis added] that sort of thing....(Langlois J. W., 1976. p.61)

...there'd be one word used, but still we got the cuff in the ear for it....We tended to stay away from using it, because, you know there was-say, 50-60 boys in the school, junior, and intermediate boys, between the ages of 6 and 12, 13, and there was some boys who listened just for other boys to speak their language and if they told on, boys were afraid of using just the little that they knew...Sometimes when one boy was punished for having done something-it may not have been for speaking or using words in our language-we were punished as a whole. Sixty boys were sent to bed or 40 boys were given two straps on each side, so there was a greater amount of fear instilled. Sixty boys got to line up for one little fellow getting wet walking up the river or something; 60 boys were given a whack each. (Langlois J. W., 1976, p. 64)

Unfortunately, even when a people go through the history and become once more in charge of their lives and more in charge of their communities, after surviving colonization, than they are lost and usually follow the teachings