Preserving Indigenous Languages:  
The Heart of Native America

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ABSTRACT

Native American language is an important aspect of Native American culture. It is a significant part of each tribe's individual cultural identity. However, Native languages may also play a crucial role in establishing American Indian nations as sovereign nations. It is still feared by some language instructors and cultural preservationist that language loss is not being taken as seriously as it should. Native languages are endangered, which is of grave importance because loss of language may result in the loss of cultural identity and sovereignty. Measures are being taken to prevent this extinction by using classroom time and emergence programs.

Introduction

Native American languages are more than just mere languages; they are an inseparable part of Native American culture. Native language itself holds the very key to learning about and understanding the cultural practices of Native American people. Native languages like the Ojibwe and the Menominee languages are tied directly to cultural traditions and identity. Language is used to conduct ceremonial practices and infuse religious beliefs. Seemingly, unlike English, the cultural applications such as lessons about respect of environment and moral values are embedded in the language. Traditional cultural practices have a direct connection to the language itself. To learn these languages is to learn about the cultures from which they originate; native languages give individual tribes their own distinct identity. Tribal nations are their own sovereign nations. Language contributes to this individual sovereignty status by helping to give each tribe its own nationality. To reinforce the survival of language is to strengthen the survival of individual cultural identity and thus strengthen each individual culture’s sovereignty.

Both culture and sovereignty are now at risk as many native languages are facing the possibility of extinction. This is why many tribal leaders today are on the frontlines of the battle to keep native languages alive. It has become not just a fight to keep a language alive but a fight to
keep culture and sovereignty alive. Maintaining language is essential to maintaining cultural identity and tribal sovereignty.

**The Loss of Language and the Loss of Culture**

There is a growing concern over the issue of whether or not Native American cultures can survive without their language. Indigenous languages are descriptive of the cultures from which they derive. If a language is descriptive of that specific culture, then once that language has disappeared it stands that certain cultural characteristics will be lost, because those attributes could not be conveyed or described in another language such as English. For example, in the Ojibwe word for "cranberry pie" the entire process of gathering, preparing, and baking the pie is described in the word itself. If that word is lost, then the description of carrying out this time-honored tradition is lost. For a culture to keep in touch with its traditions it stands to reason that a culture would need the traditional language in which those traditions were originally performed. Ojibwe language instructor, Keller Paap of Lac Courte Oreilles Tribal and Community College and Waadookoodaading school, discussed the direct connection between the culture and the language in “Waasaa-Inaabidaa: We Look In All Directions.” He states, “The language is alive. It lives connected to, I think, the traditional environment of the Anishinaabeg. Out there at the rice beds, it lives at our ceremonies, it lives at the story tellings.” In short, Native languages are a necessary component of Native cultures and therefore those cultures would not likely remain intact without them. The federal government itself has taken this belief into consideration. “The traditional languages of Native Americans are an integral part of their cultures and identities and form the basic medium for the transmission, and thus survival, of Native American cultures, literatures, histories, religions, political institutions, and values” (Native American Languages Act of 1990, Congressional findings # 3).

Language instructors are cultural preservationists who see the language as the prime educator of their culture. It is, in fact, the very heart of the culture. Language instructors see language as the very moral fabric that holds together the values and spirituality of a tribe’s identity, and they have collectively expressed concern for what loss of language could mean for the future of Native culture. Menominee language and culture teacher John H. Teller established these feelings in the video “Indians of North America, video collection II: Menominee”. “To me language is the key to the Menominee people,” confirmed Teller. “It’s the crux of the culture. It’s the number one thing. And if we lose our language we lose, I think, all of our identity and spiritualism as a people.” Mr. Teller expresses what seems to be the general feeling among language and culture instructors: that
loss of the treasured language will result in a loss of cherished values and
time honored traditions.

**The Loss of Language and the Loss of Sovereignty**

Language and tribal sovereignty are interwoven. Language is
necessary for maintaining tribal sovereignty. Language gives tribes their
own unique cultural identities, and because of this unique individual
cultural identity they are seen as sovereign nations. "Sovereignty in
modern times more accurately connotes legal competence; the power of a
culturally and territorially distinctive group of people to develop
institutional arrangements that both protect and limit personal freedoms by
social control" (David Wilkins, 1997). Author, Professor, and American
Indian Law expert Dr. David Wilkins best put into words this correlation
between language, culture, and sovereignty in Waasa-Inaabidaa. "Tribal
people, in order to be self-governing and to understand who they are in
relation to all the other Native peoples, need to retain their cultural identity.
And that includes language, which is the linchpin of sovereignty" (Wilkins,
2002). Wilkins makes a clear connection between language and cultural
identity and the ways in which that identity directly affects the idea of
sovereignty. Since language plays a key role in constructing this unique
cultural identity, language then must play a key role in maintaining
individual sovereignty. Thus, loss of language could directly result in the
loss of sovereignty. Loss of language could very well weaken tribal ability
to argue successfully for the protection of their sovereignty status with the
federal government, as well as discourage hopes of accomplishing a self-
sustaining form of tribal government. It could be that strongly securing
indigenous languages could be the best defense in the future for securing
sovereignty.

There has been a recent debate over language and its relevance to
sovereignty. Tribal leaders have many issues of concern such as health
programs and economics, but for others the discussion of language in
regards to the concept of sovereignty has been held with utmost
importance. Ojibwe language instructor Wilf Cyr places so much
importance on protecting the language that he feels that if the language is
not kept alive then “We have no right to call ourselves sovereign.
Language is the cornerstone to considering yourself a political entity.
According to international law, you have to have a language in order for
you to consider yourself sovereign” (Waasa Inaabidaa, 2002). If language
is the cornerstone of sovereignty, then it would be of grave importance to
take its preservation seriously. “When we begin to lose our language,” said
Cyr, “we become nothing more than brown skin people”. Although Cyr’s
beliefs may not be popular, he makes valid points about how the United States government may perceive tribes.

Tribal leaders may argue that government would not dare to terminate the tribes' sovereignty status over the issue of language loss because of the treaties that are in place. However, the federal government and its courts have disregarded these treaties and have slowly eroded tribal sovereignty over the years. In the historic “Marshall Trilogy” cases during the early 1800’s these governmental attitudes were established by the rulings handed down from the Supreme Court. In the case of Johnson vs. McIntosh (1823), the Supreme court establish control over Indian lands and implied that tribes did not freely own the land and therefore did not have the right to sell it (Wilkins, 1997). In the cases of Cherokee vs. Georgia (1831) and Worcester vs. Georgia (1832), the Supreme Court ruled that tribes were wards of the government or "domestic dependent nations" that required the protection of the federal government (Wilkins, 1997). This decision ensured that the federal government had jurisdiction on Indian land and thus removed powers of making and enforcing laws from the tribes. These three court cases removed the tribes' ability to control their own lands and laws and ultimately diluted the power of tribal sovereignty status. These cases exist, as precedent that the government does have desires to denounce the sovereignty status of tribes.

Evidence of the possibility of termination of tribal sovereignty exists with the Wisconsin Menominee tribe. Along with several others, including the Klamath tribe of Oregon, the Menominee were terminated during the 1950’s under the government’s then new termination policy (Vine Deloria, Jr. & Clifford M. Lytle). The Menominee were eventually reinstated, but this case remains as proof of the government's ability to terminate the sovereign status of Native American tribes.

Loss of language could pose a serious threat to sovereignty. One of the reasons the federal courts have always at least entertained the notion that American Indian tribes were “domestic sovereign nations” is because the tribes were their own distinct cultural nations. As language is an integral part of this distinct cultural identity, it is also an integral part of sovereignty. The loss of language may give the federal government a reason to pursue the termination of the sovereignty status for many of America’s Indian tribes.

The Endangerment Status

Native languages are currently facing a seriously crucial turning point in their continuing existence. Approximately 100 indigenous North American languages have been pushed into extinction, which leaves only an estimated 200 in active existence (Krauss, 1996). Of the remaining
languages that are in active existence, most are facing an unpleasant reality of becoming extinguished. Former president of the Society for the study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas Dr. Michael Krauss (1996) described the current situation in his essay “Status of Native American Language Endangerment”. Krauss broke the then currently existing Native languages into four categories. Category A consisted of languages that were still being spoken by children, who had most likely and ideally learned the languages from elders and family members at home. Category B consisted of languages that were fluent among the current parenting generation, which had the capability of passing on these languages to their children. Category C consisted of those languages that were spoken by the middle-aged or grandparental generations only, and category D languages were spoken only by a few members of the oldest generation.

Unfortunately this only re-establishes the urgency of the situation. Category C and D, those language that are most in danger of becoming extinct, made up the largest two of the four categories. According to Krauss (1996), combined, these categories describe the present status of approximately 73% of the currently existing Native languages of North America. The lack of young speakers in these languages puts their futures in serious jeopardy. When the older generations pass on, the younger generation will have lost the teachers of their native tongue. In order for a language to continue to thrive, it obviously needs each generation to continue to learn and speak it fluently. Even category B languages, which made up only about 17%, face an uncertain future due to the fact that even though parents possess the ability to teach their children the language, the children still remain inefficient as speakers.

**The Causes of Language Loss**

There are several factors that lead to language endangerment. The most infamous was that of the federal boarding schools ran by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). Religious organizations and churches oversaw these schools and used physical punishment to re-enforce their form of "education." The boarding school system in the United States was the brainstorm of Lt. Richard Henry Pratt (video: "In the White Man's Image"). Pratt made the statement "Kill the Indian ... and save the man," insinuating that the best way to assimilate the Indian people was cut them off from their traditional cultural practices which included their native language. Boarding schools became a weapon in the hands of the federal government in their war to wipe out Native American culture and thus force indigenous people to become a part of mainstream society.

The government saw language as a vital component of the culture and it was forbidden for Native people to speak their language while
attending these boarding schools. "Killing the language was seen as a necessary means to this end. By insulating children from any kind of Indian influence, Pratt believed they could be indoctrinated with the same culture, values, and language as white Anglo children" (James Crawford, 1996). The boarding schools took a large toll in the dissemination of indigenous languages, helping to push tribes' languages and cultures towards a future of critical endangerment. "One of the most successful initiatives to wipe out American Indian cultures was the requirement that American Indian children attend federal boarding schools. At these schools, American Indian children were not allowed to speak their Native tongues. Within only a couple of generations, most American Indian and Alaskan Native people forgot how to speak their Native languages, and along with their own languages, they lost significant portions of their cultures that were embedded in these Native languages" (Thomas D. Peacock and Donald R. Day, 1999). Pratt and the government believed that by not allowing Indian children to speak their native language they would then lose touch with their culture and then cease to practice it. In theory, the children would then be left with no choice but to accept the practices of the dominant culture. The government and Pratt believed that in the long run there would be no future generations that would embrace Native American cultures.

Boarding schools had a long-term effect on indigenous languages. As the children that attended these institutions grew older and had children and grandchildren of their own, they were often reluctant to teach their offspring their traditional language. Often fearing that their descendants would face the same treatment that they were subjected to, elders have been hesitant in the language instruction process. "Some people believe that the boarding school experience has had a delayed effect, including shame among many Indians about their culture or at least convincing them that their languages are a source of educational difficulties. So, on becoming parents themselves, they have raised their children only or mostly in English, believing this would help them in school", (Crawford, 1996). Crawford goes on to explain that such practices still occur though out Indian country even today. Boarding schools placed unwarranted shame and guilt upon Native people. This "shame" has left its mark and has further complicated the attempted renewal of indigenous languages over the years.

James Crawford states two additional interesting factors that help re-enforce the negative attitudes directed towards Native languages in his article "Seven Hypotheses on Language Loss Causes and Cures" (1996). He discusses how "language choices are influenced" both at conscious and unconscious levels. Crawford cited factors such as demographic factors and mass media. He described "demographic factors" in regards to
migration as people leave the reservation to attend schools or seek employment opportunities that are not available on the reservation. This migration tends to lead to intermarriage with members of other cultures that tend to be dominated by other languages. For instance if intermarriage occurs with someone who speaks only English then it is likely English will become the dominant language of the household. The mass media also has an influence according to Crawford (1996). Mass media makes no use of Native languages and such media past-times such as video games have a tendency to replace cultural activities. Mass media sources such as television and motion pictures also have created untrue, unflattering stereotypes of American Indians. I propose that these stereotypes often promote a shame base emotion in Native people about their culture and language.

The Role of Education in Language Renewal

Education now has a new role in the struggle for the survival of Native languages. Many tribal schools and colleges have developed Native language classes and courses as part of their offered curriculum. "Because schools played such a powerful role in the decline of Native languages, it is reasonable to expect they can play a powerful role in restoring languages," (Peacock & Day, 1999). Peacock and Day make a valid point: since education was a key component in the erosion of Native languages then it can be a key component in language renewal. The classroom experience can serve as a vital outlet for those who wish to learn their native language. Although one cannot attain language skills solely from a classroom source, the classroom can still serve as a vital component in the process of language acquirement. The classroom serves as a source of constant reinforcement and establishes another environment in which knowing the language is recognized as valued knowledge.

It is likely that the best possible results would come from learning Native languages from various sources. Students of English are constantly submerged in English in the classroom, at home, and by the mass media. English is everywhere you go, and thus you are always learning more about its structure and meaning. Native languages do not yet have this luxury as they are not the dominant language and are not spoken openly in most environments. Nor are they the popular languages in the mass media. Arapaho language instructor, Stephen Greymorning, discussed what he referred to as the "multifaceted approach." Greymorning concluded that it was best for language students to learn the language from as many different sources as possible. "This means that efforts should be taken to have the language seen and heard in as many places as possible, like on the street signs, the radio, computers, videos, and books", (Greymorning, 1999).
Since we acquire language skills though constant interaction with various sources, then it would be in the student's best interest to have as many different sources to learn from as possible. This includes the use of class time.

Conclusion

Learning Native languages can be a sometimes difficult and often frustrating experience for the student. It is especially difficult for a student who has had little or no exposure to the language. Students need to feel pride in their languages. Leach Lake Ojibwe elder, Marlene Stately, stated in her native tongue that "All Indian people should speak their language, even if there is very little Indian blood in you. You will find that you are truly Indian (Waasa Inaabidaa, 2002). Students should be allowed to feel pride in their own remarkable cultural identity of which their language is an inseparable part. Students need to see indigenous languages as having a practical and useful place in their daily lives. Therefore, learning these languages should embrace as many different learning methods as possible.

Learning Native languages should encompass all areas of the student's life. The learning process should be constantly re-enforced by a number of different sources. Basically, learning a Native language should be a "holistic" experience. Ojibwe language instructor, Keller Paap, also alluded to this philosophy in "Waasa Inaabidaa". Paap stated that "teaching Ojibwe has to be holistic. You have to use as many different experiences as possible and enrich the student's learning with real life experiences. Something practical, something they're going to be able to use," (video: Waasa-Inaabidaa, 2002). This would include using all of the available tools and experiences that a student has available to him or her such as technology, classroom experiences, and at home experiences. Also common aspects of the mass media that have great influence on younger people such as books and pop songs can be put to use. However, Paap, also cautions that technology and classrooms should never replace the experience of spending time with elders. In this sense, the "holistic approach" must include knowledge that is shared by the cultural elders, which has always been and must always be an inseparable and traditional component to learning indigenous languages.

Language is at a critical crossroads in its existence. With 73% of Native languages currently facing near extinction, now is the time for action. Now is the time to take bold steps and use every method within one’s grasp to save them. We are aware of the current status of these languages and of the causes behind this current trend. We are aware of what is possibly at stake, and we know it can be counteracted. Preserving
Native languages is possibly the best defense in preserving the cultural identity and sovereignty of Native America.
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