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Native Languages Supporting Indigenous Knowledge

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NATIVE LANGUAGES SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

Language is at the heart of First Nations culture and knowledge retention. Indigenous peoples, especially elders, believe that without language we have lost our culture and the essence of who we are. Language is the most fundamental way that cultural information is communicated and preserved, especially in those that until recently did not use written expressions. Language's important relationship to knowledge and the survival of a culture requires that any discussion of Indigenous Knowledge Systems must include language retention. The deliberate and state-imposed destruction of Indigenous languages has caused the loss of traditional knowledge systems. It is estimated that only 3 out of fifty-two Canadian Indigenous languages will survive this century. Today many Indigenous youth are not speaking their native languages. Historically, children were taken out of their homes to attend schools for 10 months of the year. Many of these children received corporal punishment when they spoke their language in boarding schools. As a direct result of historical processes, but also the hegemony and racialization that pervades present education, both formal and informal Indian languages have been slowly disintegrating. This language disappearance trend is happening in other Indigenous communities throughout the world. The loss of language means the loss of human diversity and all the knowledge contained therein. It is important that both community-based and higher learning institutes, with the support of communities and governments, work together to preserve the cultural diversity of Indigenous communities through the support of Indigenous languages. This can be achieved by valuing Indigenous languages enough to offer them at mainstream universities. Indigenous languages should be recognized as official national languages and resources identified to make that statement a reality. Recognizing that all learning does not happen within four walls and that Universities must consider some new pedagogical shifts can save languages. Individuals and communities deciding to strengthen traditional forms of learning can revitalize languages. A group of educators organized a Cree language immersion summer camp at the Sturgeon Lake First Nation, which I attended. For 5 days we sang, exercised, cooked, performed skits, and learned in the outdoors without formal classrooms. The learning lent itself to much laughter and room for discussion about visioning future language strategies. We had the opportunity to pick sweetgrass and sage and participate in a sweatlodge that was led by a highly regarded Indigenous Knowledge holder who used the ceremony as an opportunity to explain Cree teachings. At the camp, many activities were presented that did not involve lectures and note-taking. There are many ways to learn languages. Activities as simple as turning off the television and returning to visit each other using Native language are excellent examples. This is one aspect of Indigenous sovereignty that no one can take away. It means that as Indigenous people we have to walk our talk.

Verna Kirkness (1998), an Indigenous Language proponent who has been highly recognized for her work, states that the question in Canada should not be whether we should have only 1 or 2 official languages of English or English and French. Kirkness maintains that language is key to identity, and Aboriginal people are more likely to maintain their identity if governments give the same support to Indigenous languages as they have to French language retention:

Language is the principal means whereby culture is accumulated, shared and transmitted from one generation to another. Language expresses the uniqueness of a group's world view. (Kirkness, 1998, p.4)

In order to quell the disappearance of Indigenous Knowledge and languages, Kirkness advises her communities that they must establish banks of knowledge to preserve the language and the stories of elders. Storage is of utmost importance and storage, according to Kirkness, does not have to be fancy or complicated. A tape and tape recorder is a good beginning.

Kirkness cites the successful revival of the Maori language in Aotearoa as an example that could be applied here in Canada. Disgruntled with the socio-economic standards and the loss of their culture, Maoris forced governments to establish language programs beginning with toddlers in language nests called *Te Kohanga Reo*. The *Te Kohanga Reo* movement is based on holistic principles of Maori culture, *Kaupapa Maori*. In addition to successfully instilling the Maori language, the process led to a broader based Maori cultural revitalization. *Te Kohanga Reo* used the community inclusivity principles, which are based on the belief that every community member has a purpose and skill and these skills need to be used when designing language programming. It has been referred to as the Family, *Whanau*, Development Model. The use of traditional cultural values and elder knowledge was foundational to the *Te Kohanga Reo* programming. In addition to learning the languages, participants also learned administration, catering, financial management, building, and teaching:

The selection of the whanau model was the essential feature of this training because it provided a means whereby the whanau could work together locally and progressively strengthen its ties. In this way the traditional values of the whanau were being actively fostered and practiced, thus stopping the fragmentation, which has been a progressively deteriorating feature of Maori society in the wakes of the drift to the cities. This model accredits the Maori educational experts: the kaumatua, koroua and kuia (elders, elderly men and elderly women, respectively), who are the respected repositories of traditional knowledge and wisdom. Their role as educators is central to the whanau learning programme, providing an opportunity for Maori educational professionalism to be affirmed. This learning, under the guidance and tutelage of the Kaumatua (elders), has been accepted by the whanau as the most appropriate for the *te Kohanga Reo* movement in the first instance. (Kirkness, 1998, p.108)

Some had language training at university, some learned from their parents, and others took it up in tertiary institutions and made requests for language classes wherever they found themselves. The Maori people have a distinguished reputation of entrenching their language and of challenging New Zealand's cultural hegemony.

Just as the devaluing of Indigenous languages has been structural, so too must the revitalization. For example, the early Christian churches, with the support of the state, were brutal in their language extermination policies. Children were beaten and

humiliated if they spoke their language. Some religious order members stuck pins in the tongues of students who spoke their language. The governments and agencies in the position to support languages must be as intent on reinstating these same languages and ensure that resources match that commitment. The document *Policy Options for Aboriginal Peoples of Canada* (1976) recommends full government support for languages: “Governments, with international cooperation, should provide the necessary financial resources and institutional support to ensure that every indigenous child has the opportunity to achieve both fluency and literacy in his/her own traditional language” (p.5).

There is no one magic formula to support language strategies. The Canadian government has committed to support French language acquisition. This same support should be extended for the founding languages of pre-confederation Canada, such as Cree, Inuit, Siksika, Ojibway, Sto'lo, Dakota, Okanogan, Dene, and more. The demand for language preservation is another means of challenging the cultural hegemony that exists within higher learning. When we ask for space to teach our languages, it is a means of ensuring our cultural continuation as First Nations and Métis peoples.

CANADIAN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

In Canada, the Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute (CILLDI) was established in 1999 with few resources and lots of commitment from its partners, including the Indigenous Peoples Program at the Extension Division at the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Alberta and the host communities. CILLDI was inspired by its American counterpart, the two-decade-old American Indian Language Development Institute (AILDI) at the University of Arizona (Blair, Paskemin, & Laderoute, 2001). Cree scholars and language specialists, Dr. Freda Ahenakew and Dr. Verna Kirkness also helped inspire the development of the CILLDI. The CILLDI's vision comes from recognizing the shortage of teachers, curriculum developers, researchers, and community linguists prepared to work in Indigenous language education. Despite the existence of teacher education in Saskatchewan, limited attention has been paid to the development of bilingual and biliterate teachers. In many universities and public schools, more attention is given to the romance languages than Indigenous languages. The CILLDI recognized the need to address this aspect of linguistic hegemony and to work to preserve Canada's Indigenous languages. CILLDI was first hosted at Onion Lake in 2000 with one course offering in the Cree language. In subsequent years, CILLDI took place at Blue Quills School near Saddle Lake First Nations in 2001 and at LaRonge, Saskatchewan in 2002.

The CILLDI is an example of what determined individual faculty members are capable of producing. However, most mainstream academic institutions do not take adequate initiatives for Indigenous language studies. Some, such as the University of Saskatchewan, have chosen to hand the major responsibility for Indigenous languages over to centers such as the First Nations University of Canada. Other departments; which

traditionally overlap in language related disciplines and worldviews, such as music, art, psychology, and history; are ill-equipped to offer courses on Indigenous worldviews and practices. Even when the courses are offered in the university calendar, they are not taught because of the lack of Indigenous faculty or because other faculty are not trained in the discipline. It is not a priority area for a mainstream university. This was best exemplified when I tried to communicate the need for the Music Department to offer an Indigenous music course for our annual Indigenous languages institute. I was told this was not possible, as the Music Department had no one that could supervise our proposed music instructor. Rather than see this as an opportunity and a challenge, most departments simply ignore the opportunity to do things differently. The English-only attitude remains problematic for First Nations peoples and ensures that the predominant and colonizer worldview is seldom diversified:

It is our experience that, even now, there is a constant tension within academic and professional programmes and policies to resource and privilege Indigenous languages sufficiently to maintain indigenous world-views, concepts and values, balanced against the need for English to effectively access mainstream higher education and careers. (Odora Hoppers, 2002, p. 228)

TERRALINGUA

Terralingua is an international non-profit organization that was established in 1996 to preserve the world's linguistic and cultural diversity. In addition to supporting the preservation of the world's linguistic diversity, Terralingua also explores the connections among linguistic, cultural, and biological diversities. It accomplishes this through research, applied work, and advocacy. Two of Terralingua's findings are of particular interest to Indigenous researchers:

1. As with biological diversity, linguistic diversity is facing rapidly increasing threats that are causing a drastic loss of both languages and the knowledge of which they are carriers, including knowledge about the environment and sustainable resource use.
2. That the continued loss of linguistic, cultural, and biological diversity will have dangerous consequences for humans and the Earth.

Terralingua estimates that many, of the more than 10,000, of the world's languages are at grave risk of extinction for a number of reasons, including suppression by hostile governments and the influence of large economically-dominant cultures and their languages—the last largely brought on by the process of globalization. Terralingua's work includes promoting linguistic human rights. It works tirelessly to challenge the colonizer-language-only mentality that follows the education policies of educational institutions. In her presentation at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Dr. Tove Shutnabb-Kangas, Vice-President of Terralingua, stated that the conditions that erode Indigenous languages are nothing short of human rights abuses:

Unless action is taken to support and foster linguistic diversity, some scholars have estimated that perhaps 50% of the extant oral languages--conceivably as

many as 90%--may become extinct, or doomed to extinction, as native tongues by the end of the century, (Terra Lingua website <http://www.terralingua.org/AboutTL.htm>, accessed February 2006)

It is predicted that the loss of these languages will create a cultural monopoly and a loss of cultural diversity, which will have grave consequences for Indigenous peoples:

Our research has shown strong correlations between areas of biological mega diversity and areas of highest linguistic diversity, represented mostly by Indigenous languages. It has been estimated that there are at least 300 million people worldwide who are indigenous. This constitutes only about 20% of the world's total population, yet these peoples probably represent the largest portion of cultural diversity on earth. If we take language distinctiveness as a measure of cultural diversity, estimates suggest that 4,000 to 5,000 of the over 6,000 oral languages are spoken by indigenous peoples (or 57% to 70% of the world's languages), strongly implying that such peoples constitute most of the world's cultural diversity. (Terra Lingua website <http://www.terralingua.org/AboutTL.htm>, accessed February 16, 2006)

Terralingua claims that the fate of Indigenous languages, lands, and cultures is key for the preservation of biodiversity and linguistic and cultural diversity. To this end, they organized the "Endangered Languages, Endangered Knowledge, Endangered Environment" conference in 1996 and a published book based on the proceedings. Their other works include an electronic newsletter called *Langscape*, an organization of community workshops and seminars on language preservation, and advocacy activities for the protection of indigenous languages and traditional knowledge. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) first international instrument devoted entirely to linguistic rights will include Dr. Shutnabb-Kangas' Declaration on Indigenous Rights. Terralingua's contributed to the work on the "Convention on Biological Diversity" including the 1998 workshop called "The Interrelationships between Cultural and Biological Diversity" and to statements aimed at the Subsidiary Body for Scientific, Technical, and Technological Advice. Terralingua has over 200 members throughout the world. Indigenous language retention work will ensure that diverse cultures can continue to exist in the future. When languages die Indigenous cultures lose their unique essence and the world loses cultural diversity. The work of Terralingua and the CILLDI ensure that academic institutes support Indigenous world views, philosophies, biodiversities and knowledge through the preservation of Indigenous languages and literacy development.

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