

Foreword: Honoring Who We Are

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We're taught that our language comes from the Creator and that speaking it acknowledges our connection. We're taught that our voice is a sacred gift and that there is a lot of power in our words. When we speak, our words go around the world forever.
(Sharla Peltier, Speech-Language Pathologist, Nipissing First Nation)

It is a sacred honor to have been asked to write the foreword for this special edition of the *Canadian Journal of Native Education (CJNE)*. I had the privilege of being a keynote speaker at the "Celebrating the Local, Negotiating the School: Symposium on Language and Literacy in Aboriginal Communities" in November 2008. I hope to do justice to what people shared with me at that conference and over the past 25 years that I have been involved in Aboriginal literacy across Canada, as well as what I believe to be the preparatory work before that.

I grew up on the Chippewas of Saugeen First Nation in southern Ontario, raised by a mother and grandparents whose first language was Anishnaabemowin. These were the people from whom I learned to speak English. They wanted me to have a good life and admonished me to speak English only as they believed that doing so would help me to do better in school and to have a solid foundation for that good life.

Of course, I noticed that their pronunciation of some words and their sentence structures were different from what I heard at school and in town. I wondered about that and must admit that I sometimes felt a sense of shame. It was half a century later that I finally understood what was going on with them when I heard the term *Aboriginal English*. I had traveled to Australia in 2001 on a federal government grant to study Aboriginal literacy there. Since 1994 the Education Department of Western Australia (Malcolm et al., 1999) had been conducting research on Aboriginal English. Much of this research had been conducted jointly with Edith Cowan University. They defined Aboriginal English in this way:

A range of varieties of English spoken by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and some others in close contact with them which differ in systematic ways from Standard Australian English at all levels of linguistic structure and which are used for distinctive speech acts, speech events and genres.

I learned that certain sounds in English did not exist in the languages of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. I further understood that sentences in their Indigenous languages were structured differently. A light bulb went off in my head and I thought, "That's what was going on with

my mom and my grandparents!" They were *not* speaking "broken English" as we had been socialized to believe.

On my return to Canada, I began sharing this concept with Aboriginal educators whom I encountered in my ongoing work in Aboriginal literacy. A young woman, Dobi-Dawn Frenette, explained to me, "What your mom and grandparents were actually doing is 'code-switching!'" (personal communication, August 2001).

Dobi-Dawn's response prompted me to research code-switching. Over the past several years, I have come to appreciate fully the following explanation from Escamilla and Hopewell (2007) as it gave me a better understanding of what is happening inside people who are code-switching: "emerging bilingual students use multiple strategies in the process of cross language transfer. These include skills and strategies, but also students transfer themselves, their personas, their social realities, and their knowledge of the world" (p. 2).

As I reflected on experiences with Aboriginal people over the years (some Aboriginal educators, many Aboriginal students/learners in literacy programs), I remembered several incidents in which people felt somehow deficient when they were actually employing the higher-order skills of code-switching. I began explaining my hypothesis to them and saw the light in their eyes of new appreciation and better understanding of themselves.

As I pondered several findings in the brain research that I was also doing, I postulated that code-switching actually employs more areas of the brain. This led me to comprehend that my mom, who had been code-switching between Anishnaabemowin and English almost all her life, actually had a neuroscientific reason for having a sharp memory until she left for the Spirit World. People would come to her to ask her how to say things in the language. She would either come up with the answer herself or she would phone other speakers of the language and have a lengthy discussion with them in Anishnaabemowin. She would then explain their consensus to the interviewer in English. I also have many memories of hearing her speak Anishnaabemowin on the phone to her friends with the odd sprinkling of English terms for which there were no Anishnaabemowin equivalents. She would then return to viewing her favorite television programs, which were mostly in English. I transfer this deep appreciation to people I encounter as I hear them code-switching, and I share as much as I can about helping them to honor themselves for who they are.

I close this foreword with my paraphrase of a teaching from Sally Gaikezhongai, an Anishnawbe Kwe and long-time Aboriginal educator from Manitoulin Island. She taught that there are many ways of speaking and writing and that it is a matter of learning the formula required in each situation. If you are speaking and writing for yourself, your way of speak-

ing and writing is okay. If you are speaking and writing for a business or a school purpose, there is a formula, and she said, "I'm going to teach you that formula" (personal communication, September 2000). I understood from this that it is okay to be who we are.

Gichi Miigwech to the contributors to this journal for sharing their experiences and findings over the years in helping people to honor who they are, to use their voice as a sacred gift. May your words go around the world forever.

References

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