

The Value of First Nations Languages

PATRICK KELLY

“One of the strongest gains to be realized by Canada and British Columbia in encouraging First Nations educational ideas to flourish is that the creative energy of the First Nations people, so long suppressed by social, economic, and political barriers would be made available for everyone’s benefit.”

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A Whole-Life Context

Communication is essential in a world where change is the standard. Interpersonal communication messages, for both sender and receiver, are influenced by cultural and knowledge reference points that exist within every person. The heritage of First Nations people is popularly promoted and understood to include traditions, values, and beliefs that holistically link the people interdependently to the world around them. That assumption is important to understand the nature of the message here. First Nations languages are important unto themselves but are best considered in a whole-life context.

A Multi-dimensional Problem

Language is an important vehicle for cultural expression, for it is largely through language that unique cultural experience is shared. It is well known that some concepts do not translate easily from one language to another. For example, a provincial court judge recently intimated to a tribal leader (they had been working closely together on common justice problems for almost two years) that he was troubled by a difficult problem

in which some of the judge's peers could not see how the courts could adopt some of the tribe's traditional justice methods of dealing with tribal members convicted by the courts. The judge worried that the differences between the tribal and court methods were irreconcilable and that the attitudes of his peers would anger the First Nations people so much that they would not want to work further with the courts. The tribal leader was puzzled by the judge's concern, for he thought they had been working well together. The tribal leader realized he and his people were working according to their traditions but had not told the judge explicitly what those were. He explained that the solution to the judge's problem was q'eq'otel (pronounced Kwa-kwel-tel from Halq'emeylem [pronounced Hal-kem-ay-lem] — a Salish language) meaning "to meet." The judge was puzzled because he thought they had been doing that already. One word seemed such a simplistic solution, but the Halq'emeylem term actually linked the judges into the tribe's traditional governing process in which q'eq'otel is a first step. The solution resulted in a meeting between the judges and the First Nations community leaders in which they worked out their problem.

The foregoing example illustrates the multi-dimensional nature of language problems. One word or simple phrase in one language can actually mean a complex process in another. Attitudes and community relations are invariably part of language problems. The cultural context of one language may not be easily understood when seen or heard from the perspective of another culture using a different language. Governing principles and philosophical approaches may be different. The challenge of working with language problems is multi-faceted.

A Diverse Cultural Base

Sixty-three percent or seven of the eleven First Nations language families (defined in volume I, *Historical Atlas of Canada*, as "related languages of common origin," Plate 66, 1987) that exist in Canada exist in British Columbia. They are Athapaskan, Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, Wakashan, Salish, and Kootenay. The latter six exist solely in British Columbia. It is clear that First Nations make up a rich cultural resource in British Columbia.

Pressures Against Survival

No one likes the feeling or to admit that part of their heritage and identity is dying or lost. The very nature of this subject is troublesome. For many First Nations people, succumbing to this would be admitting that the early

attempts at their assimilation through government and church efforts have succeeded. Nevertheless, recent studies show that some First Nations languages are critically close to being lost forever.

The Assembly of First Nations September 1990 report "Towards Linguistic Justice For First Nations" finds that 66 percent of First Nations languages across Canada are declining, endangered, or critical (based on a survey of 151 bands). Fifteen percent are flourishing, and the remainder are enduring.

A January 1988 report entitled "Critical Conditions of Traditional Languages in British Columbia," prepared by Bill Mussell for the Department of the Secretary of State, concluded that "traditional (indigenous) languages spoken by the status Indian peoples of British Columbia are in serious condition and require substantial support for their survival. People over the age of 40 represent the main population of speakers of all but a few of the languages." Mussell further reports of the Salish group that "their combined population is about 26,500. Only 3,000 of these people can speak their traditional language." With only 11 percent of the Salish population able to speak their traditional language, the pressures against their language surviving, considering numbers alone, are immense. Add to that the events of everyday living (school, business, community living, etc.) occurring in the official languages of Canada (mostly English in British Columbia), and it becomes clear that unless drastic efforts are made to retain and revitalize most First Nations languages in British Columbia, their only legacy will be found in archives.

Assisting Survival

A comparison of how languages are treated in Canada will help to clarify possible future actions needed for the survival of First Nations languages. The official languages of Canada (English and French) are protected under federal law by statute, including the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and by policy and programs (\$372.6 million for French in 1988-89). The languages of Canada's multicultural communities (commonly known as "Heritage Languages") are supported under federal programs of the Ministry of State for Multiculturalism (\$3.7 million in 1988-89) and Canada Employment and Immigration. Federal legislation has been proposed to create a department for multiculturalism, which suggests that heritage languages would gain new impetus in federal government support. Currently, the status of most First Nations languages in federal schemes is at the program stage (\$1 million in 1988-89, Secretary

of State) with the exception of those in the Yukon and Northwest Territories, where five-year federal-territorial agreements are in place totalling \$21 million combined from 1985 to 1990.

The British Columbia government in May 1990 announced a "five-year, \$10.7 million initiative to help preserve and strengthen the culture and language of British Columbia's Native Peoples." Native heritage, language, and culture centres would be developed in British Columbia with the program under the direction of a Native Advisory Committee representing all the major tribal groups in the province. The program remains in its early stages of development, and it is too early to assess its success.

The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) has recommended that "First Nations language and culture must receive equivalent recognition, protection and promotion in the Canadian constitution, and through enabling legislation, as that of official languages" (*Towards Linguistic Justice for First Nations*, 1990). Whereas the government response to the AFN is not yet known, future federal support cannot be ascertained. The AFN argues "that the Government of Canada has a moral obligation to rectify previous government action to suppress our (First Nations) language and culture."

Motivation to Succeed

First Nations language survival efforts must be directed at the learner, for without people speaking them, the languages cannot survive. This seems like a trite comment, but not when it comes to choosing priorities for limited funds and other resources. There are many competing demands for language-program activity ranging from linguistic research, pedagogical research and curriculum development, language policy research and development, teacher training, conferences, and many others. Certainly all are needed. However, unless all such activities are directed at assisting learners, their value is severely limited. All efforts must eventually end up assisting to motivate the language learner.

As stated at the outset, the whole-life context is important to the teaching traditions of First Nations. Traditional education methods usually revolved around elders. Minnie Peters of the Sto:lo Nation has said, "Our Elders speak from the heart of this Land." Chief Seattle said, "Teach your children what we have taught our children — that the earth is our mother." Cheryl Arnouse and Lori Jules of the Shuswap nation have said, "Our language is what separates us from other people of the world; with our language, we are unique and rich in culture." The preceding quotations encompass more than language, but especially they reflect the holistic

values that underlie traditional First Nations culture and language. Consequently, the challenge of motivating First Nations language learners is complex if full traditional value is to be imparted.

Value is the key. If First Nations language and culture can be restored as honourable qualities in a person's education, only then will a person want to gain such qualities. Otherwise, the learner will focus on other knowledge that is considered valuable. School curriculum reflects what a society values. First Nations language and culture do not form an integral part of the British Columbia school core curriculum. They should.

The value of First Nations language and culture in school curriculum should be recognized to help reduce perceived systemic discrimination against the heritage of the First Nations learner. An invisible barrier exists and works against motivation except in schools where First Nations languages are taught or those run by native people themselves in which there is usually culturally relevant curriculum.

The bottom line expected of education today usually focuses on job skills. However, if the generally problematic condition of much of the environment, of the job market and of society today is an indication of the success of this approach to education, it may be time to include aspects of the holistic approaches promoted by First Nations. Business cannot be separated from the environment. The environment cannot be separated from government. Government cannot be separated from social and economic issues. People cannot be separated from all of the above. Perhaps it is time to recognize this and make efforts to reinstate a whole-life perspective in education. Teaching First Nations languages would contribute to understanding such concepts given that such holistic or whole-life values are embedded in them.

Remove the Barriers

Arrangements between federal, provincial, local, and First Nations governments are needed to accommodate the teaching of First Nations languages. If it is accepted by all parties that culture is becoming increasingly important to people throughout the world today, it should not be too difficult to make adequate arrangements for good culturally relevant education. Rather than look for jurisdictional barriers to stifle such development, all parties must make a good effort to work together. All parties would stand to gain from mutually developed plans.

One of the strongest gains to be realized by Canada and British Columbia in encouraging First Nations educational ideas to flourish is that the cre-

ative energy of First Nations people, so long suppressed by social, economic, and political barriers, would be made available for everyone's benefit. Recent economic development positions expressed by First Nations governments include concepts that focus on renewable resource development, sustainable economic development, environmentally sensitive development, community control of decision-making, and ideas reflecting similar themes. There are words for such ideas in First Nations languages. There are also words that explain how such concepts work. Surely Canadians can support barriers being removed that would permit First Nations people to re-assert their holistic concepts of the world. True integration in Canadian society would permit First Nations citizens to contribute values and ideas equally alongside those of other Canadians.

Prospects for the Future

Among the many recommendations proposed in the Mussell and Assembly of First Nations reports, the following seem to capture the essence of immediate and short-term needs:

- Native people must recognize that the language belongs to them, that it is their responsibility, and that only THEIR efforts will keep it alive. (Mussell)
- First Nations language and culture must receive recognition, protection, and promotion in the Canadian constitution, and through enabling legislation, equivalent to that given the official languages. (AFN)
- Elder speakers' knowledge or cultural traditions, language skills, fluency, and ways of presentation, such as body language, should be collected, recorded, and documented. Such information should be filmed/recorded by native people with the assistance of competent technicians who are willing to share their expertise. (Mussell)
- Day care and preschools that will provide immersion or bilingual language instruction must be promoted. (AFN)
- Time should be allocated at specific meetings for the expression of problems and for seeking ways in which to resolve issues. A tenet of these group-solving processes should be the bringing together of people rather than the taking of divisive positions. (Mussell) Though proposed for First Nations language groups, this method could apply equally to cross-cultural sharing between First Nations people and other Canadians.

- An Aboriginal Languages Foundation should be established immediately to carry out such activities necessary to ensure the perpetuation, revitalization, growth, and protection of First Nations languages. (AFN) Verna Kirkness, Director of the First Nations House of Learning at the University of British Columbia, in a report that she prepared in 1988 for the Department of the Secretary of State for Canada, has already recommended the formation of a national First Nations Language Foundation. And Bill C-269, presented to the federal Parliament in November 1989 by Member of Parliament Ethel Blondin, proposed "An Act to establish the Aboriginal Languages Foundation." No action has, however, yet been taken, and it remains an unresolved issue.

The provincial Native Advisory Committee on Heritage, Language and Culture, in its July 1989 report, proposed several recommendations. As noted earlier, the provincial government announced its response to the report in May 1990. One recommendation that propels language initiatives beyond the usual social policy boundaries states:

The Ministry of Native Affairs should be charged with proactively integrating this initiative with Native participants, key provincial ministries, inter-ministry committees, central agencies, local municipalities, regional governments, and educational institutions.

The committee's explanation of possible economic benefits positioned the language and culture initiative as part of British Columbia's growing tourism industry in which First Nations cultural centres would enhance the province's reputation as a desirable destination for Canadian and international travellers. In explaining further the benefits of its proposal, the committee stated,

The cultural benefits, which will accrue to Native and non-Native British Columbians alike, include a better understanding and celebration of the differences between native and non-native cultures. This has obvious implications for improved relations between the native community and the larger community in all aspects of daily life in British Columbia.

The cross-cultural education and economic dimensions of language and culture programs provide enhanced prospects for First Nations and other citizens to work constructively together.

There seems to be a changing atmosphere across Canada in which governments at all levels are being encouraged to address pressing First Nations issues. Among the most subtle and potentially most valuable is language. Let us hope that the efforts by the provincial government and further considerations by the federal government will enable First Nations

people to contribute their share of shaping how the world of the future develops. If the proper value of whole-life education can be realized, Canada and British Columbia would be better for that. The provincial court judge and the tribal leader realized, when dealing together on common issues, that it was possible to reach workable solutions that respected both cultures. Understanding one First Nations word made the difference. Imagine the value of all British Columbia First Nations languages. If they are lost, they cannot be recovered, because British Columbia is the only part of the world where they exist.

My Blanket, My Story

I want you to make a book about
My blanket.
It seems such a shame all that work.

That blanket just sits in my home;
More people should see it,
And know how it got made.
More people could share it.

I just can't seem to write,
I try, but it doesn't work very well.
The words just don't come,
The words just don't.

I think it could be good,
My work, my blanket, my story.
Such a shame,
People could share it.