

**Strategies for Native language retention in Northern Manitoba:
Oji-Cree at Island Lake and Woods Cree at Pukatawagan and Lynn Lake**

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Note: Some of the observations and strategies discussed here were explored in greater depth by myself and a Cree native speaker in two cowritten publications: Paupanekis & Westfall (2001) and Castel & Westfall (2001, 2000). My personal observations are based on eight years (1991-1999) as a centre coordinator for the Brandon University Teacher Education Program in St. Theresa Point and Pukatawagan, Manitoba.

Language loss

On my way to observe a student teacher deliver a lesson one day at Pukatawagan, I was startled to hear a young child greet me with “tânisi,” the Cree word for ‘hello’. It was one of the few times I had ever heard a child speak Cree in the isolated northern Manitoba reserve, located on the Churchill River close to the Saskatchewan border. Fresh from his Native Language class, he looked pleased to find someone to practise the vocabulary with, as minimal as it was. In nearly five years of residence as coordinator of a teacher education program at Pukatawagan, I never heard anyone under the age of twenty converse in Cree. Today, children at play do so exclusively in English. I once overheard an older Cree man, probably a relative, speak to a young teenaged boy in Cree, whereupon the boy replied in English that he did not understand the language. “You are a Native person and should speak the Native language,” the man rebuked him. And yet, almost every Pukatawagan Cree over twenty years of age speaks the Native language fluently, though not always flawlessly. Further study of the phenomenon revealed a name for it: *language tip* (Craig 1997, p. 259), also referred to as *language shift*. The linguistic scale had tilted in favour of English to the virtual elimination of Cree.

My previous coordinator post had been at the Island Lake community of St. Theresa Point. From there I had the opportunity to observe the teaching and, to some

extent, the strength of the spoken Native language. It is another Algonkian dialect, called the Island Lake Dialect (ILD), a variety of Northern Ojibwe or Oji-Cree. There, English is clearly a second language, the working language of the community being ILD, and English the language of schools and officialdom. Children at play use Oji-Cree. On rare occasions I observed a child whose parents had moved to Winnipeg and neglected to speak the Native language. I once witnessed an eight-year-old girl unable to converse with her own grandparents, who knew no English. Such a situation was rare then, although I have been informed that it is becoming more common. These “uprooted” children are referred to locally as the “Winnipeg kids.”

Because language loss of the type described above is occurring world-wide due to diverse factors that professional linguists are just beginning to explain, it is not yet possible to create a comprehensive model or description of it (*See* Grenoble, 1998). Many studies of individual aspects of loss in specific languages and dialects have been undertaken in recent years, however. (See, for example, the bibliography of language endangerment research compiled by Tasaku Tsunoda and posted on the Internet.) These studies identify the following factors in language loss or endangerment:

- 1) Environmental distress. Often the loss of habitat means the dispersal of indigenous peoples who lived there. They scatter and mix with other peoples, losing their languages in the process. It takes only a generation or two for the language to fall into disuse. It is not passed on to younger generations. (The problem is discussed at length by Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine, 2000.)
- 2) Persecution of speakers of minority languages. Speakers of a dominant language forbid the teaching of the minority language, sometimes even its use

on the radio and in newspapers. This has occurred in many European and Asian countries in recent years, as well as in the Americas. (See, for example, articles in C. Schäffner & A.I. Wenden (Eds.), Language and Peace.)

- 3) Prestige. The minority language is devalued in favour of the language of the people with more political power and greater representation in the national government. Employment favours speakers of the national language, even in areas where the national language is itself a minority tongue. Only the majority language is written and visible everywhere. Literacy is clearly also a prestige factor. A language that is only spoken lacks this prestige factor in the modern world.
- 4) Religion. The Native language is condemned by zealots as “the devil’s speech.” This tactic is usually employed by the recently converted who are themselves monolingual, though of Native ancestry. They have totally embraced the language and culture of the majority culture. There is sometimes an attempt to inject feelings of guilt in anyone who persists in speaking the minority language. This phenomenon has been observed in Alaska as well as in Manitoba (Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer, 1998, p. 64; Castel & Westfall, 2001, p. xvi).
- 5) Economics. Some speakers neglect to pass the language on to their children because they see no economic value in it. All the good jobs, they think, require only the language of the majority, and the minority language may be a hindrance to financial “betterment.”

- 6) Popular culture. Related to the issue of prestige, but driven more by private sector advertising, especially through the persuasive power of majority-language television, younger people begin to feel that it is not “cool” to be Cree (or Ojibwe, or whatever the minority Native language and culture may be). Not content to buy the clothing and other merchandise, they increasingly adopt the speech of the dominant culture. Many people see the introduction of English-language television, bolstered now by overwhelmingly English-content satellite programming, as the most abrupt break in intergenerational transmission of the Native language. In most parts of northern Manitoba it occurred in the late 1970s, when many parents ceased passing the language on to their children in remote locations like Pukatawagan and Lynn Lake. (The Native population of the Lynn Lake area is mainly derived from Pukatawagan.)

Strategies for Native language retention

At Garden Hill in 1993 a lengthy, persuasive questionnaire (in English) was sent home to parents of young children explaining the need for an immersion program in the Island Lake Dialect. The arguments were sound. The need was there, recognized by most of the community members who were watching their language disappear in stages. It was far from being moribund, but there were danger signs, for example, increasing numbers of “Winnipeg kids” who could not speak the language of the community. Until about a year ago, a two-year kindergarten and grade 1 program had been taught entirely in the Island Lake Dialect. After that, English instruction began at 50%. Unfortunately, the full program was abruptly halted and now hangs in the balance due to a disastrous fire that

destroyed six classrooms. The elementary school has been closed because of asbestos pollution. For a year, the youngest children were kept at home. If they learned any ILD it was up to the parents to do the teaching.

It looks like the end. But it is not necessarily so, because the factor that determines survival of a spoken language has always been intergenerational transmission (*See* Joshua Fishman's address.) Grandparents, parents and children must all communicate with one another in the ancestral language every day. The school can lend prestige to a minority language, however, by teaching reading and writing in that language and by promoting its use visually as well as orally throughout the community. Another Island Lake community may fare better in this regard: Wasagamack. There, an immersion program has been started. It is still too soon to see definite results, but it will be interesting to watch developments over the next ten years. (*See* Thomas Peacock and Donald R. Day's article on models of successful school programs for Native languages.)

At the Island Lake community of St. Theresa Point, there is discussion of launching an ILD immersion program, but at present elementary children get at best two forty-five minute periods of Native language instruction a week. At Pukatawagan it is about three periods a week. There are to my knowledge no plans for an immersion program.

A living language is too important to be left to the schools, unless the community wishes it to become a treasured relic like Latin. (If it has been extensively documented, an endangered language could eventually achieve that hallowed status, but it may also be spoken by no one.) In the Island Lake communities local radio is in ILD and occasionally local television is broadcast in the Native language as well. The English spoken language

content may be 15%, according to local informants. Most of the songs—at least 50% of transmission time—are in English. Island Lake band meetings are usually conducted exclusively in ILD, but this is not the case at Pukatawagan, where only older people can be heard speaking out in the Native language. At many meetings there, local officials tend to use only English, although all of the older persons can speak Cree. In Pukatawagan, Cree is rarely heard on the local radio.

Literacy and documentation

Professional linguists have long decried the lack of standardization in the writing systems used for Native languages at the local level. It appears that every community, and in fact every teacher, is inventing a unique spelling system. Seldom is there any consistency in these systems. The same sound may be represented with different letters. Even the same word may be written various ways, which can only be confusing to learners. As professional linguist Nora England notes, standardization is “the single most technical issue in language reinforcement” (1998, p. 113). Standard one-letter for the same significant sound (phoneme) systems do exist for most North American Native dialects, although some of the technical work is still in progress—especially in British Columbia. There has been in my observation almost no professional linguistic input at the community level in northern Manitoba. Invented spellings proliferate, hindering written Native language communication between communities and creating an unnecessary conflict between the spoken language and written representation. Native language teachers’ lack of education in basic linguistic principles and in teaching methods are apparent to any outside observer who has even an inkling of these technical and educational matters.

In a few communities, a syllabics system devised in the early 1800s is used—mainly by older persons. Even there, different communities speaking the same dialect do not use quite the same character set. Also, many individuals have even begun swapping characters, for example, substituting the p-final character which should be written as a single stroke character with the character for h ("). Island Lake residents who are syllabics-literate cannot read texts from speakers of their own dialect living in Ontario because different syllabics sets are used.

Many dialects have no grammatically reliable, consistently written reference books, such as comprehensive and unabridged dictionaries or grammars. Often, an inappropriate model is used, such as a century-old Plains Cree translation of the Bible. The latter misappropriation has been observed in Oji-Cree communities. Words that are alien to the local language or dialect are taught to the children. Elders sometimes protest in vain. The teacher presumes to be the ultimate authority, after all. It is akin to using a Spanish dictionary as an authoritative source of French vocabulary!

In spite of such difficulties, I have on two occasions tackled the thorny issue of appropriate local documentation and translation. The first attempt was to create a dictionary of idioms, a project that stems from my realization that many bilingual speakers misunderstood a number of common English figures of speech, such as “to fall off the wagon” and “to be on the wagon.” Years of work informed by the technical studies of professional linguists and the contribution of many Island Lake native speakers, as well as frequent editing by three Elders, yielded the English-Island Lake Dictionary of Idioms, which includes a brief overview of Island Lake grammar and 99 original cartoon drawings to illustrate the idioms.

The above publication is essentially a translation project. The second reference book, Castel's English-Cree Dictionary and Memoirs of the Elders, includes a smaller translation section. The bulk of the illustrated anthology is devoted to hundreds of pages of authentic Rock Cree material in the form of recorded and transcribed interviews with the Elders of Pukatawagan. There are sections on grammar, an extensive annotated glossary of Cree terms, and an English index to the glossary. The aim is to rescue the speech of the last truly fluent traditional Elders of the community from oblivion. As noted earlier, the youngest generation in that community no longer speaks Cree. There is also much vocabulary shrinkage in the speech of the intervening generation. The book, available a year ago in a preliminary edition (only on CD-ROM), will be published in its entirety later this year in a limited edition with 15 accompanying audio CDs.

Materials and methods

Reliable materials, based on the best linguistic models, need to be developed. A few materials of this type are available, but they are suited only to the dialect that they are based on. Shelves of publications of Southern Plains Cree materials have been observed in the resource rooms at Island Lake communities. They sit there untouched, and little wonder—they do not represent the Oji-Cree of Island Lake. They are more useful for comparison in other Cree dialect areas, for example, at Pukatawagan. Even there, significant differences in the sound systems (phonology) and other aspects of grammar between Plains Cree and Woods Cree are apparent. In our above-mentioned reference work we have addressed those differences and produced, it is hoped, something that truly represents the local language.

Educators and professional linguists alike are increasingly coming to the realization that materials for local use have to be developed at the local level. Once a foundation of *reliable documentation* has been achieved, it will be up to the speakers of the local dialects themselves to create and adapt other materials suited to different age and grade levels (Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer, 1998, p. 60, 97; Grinevald, 1998, p. 152; Hale, 1998, pp. 213-214). It will require some retraining and the hiring of new staff educated in the rudiments of modern linguistic procedures. As long as the old practices of falling back on inappropriate materials or even on materials based on other languages and dialects—not to mention individual, uninformed attempts to reinvent the wheel—continue, the teaching of Native languages will remain ineffective. To be a native speaker of the language is simply not enough. The teacher needs to be well educated in the field, and effective language teaching methods need to be employed as well.

Conclusion

Minority languages are disappearing around the world, but the most endangered ones are those spoken by indigenous peoples, who are themselves divided concerning maintaining or abandoning their ancestral language and culture. Those who value their culture and who still speak the language are often heard to say, “Our language is who we are.” More to the point is “What can be done about it?”

Much research has shown that the prerequisite for ensuring the stability of an endangered language is **intergenerational transmission**. Once that condition has been met, much can be done in the communities to promote the language through band meetings conducted only in the Native language, dedicated Native language

radio and television, and a vigorous, effective local Native language program that employs modern, effective teaching methods and works with reliable materials suited to the local dialect. It is a matter of political will and educational policy that can be decided upon and implemented only at the local level.

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