

**The Development of a Community-based Woods Cree Dictionary and Transcripts of the Memoirs of Seventeen Elders of Pukatawagan, Manitoba, with Suggestions for Use as a Resource in Native Language Teaching:  
Focus on Spiritual Elements**

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[CECD refers to Castel's English-Cree Dictionary and Memoirs of the Elders (2001).]

We begin with the holistic approach of the Common Curriculum Framework for Aboriginal Language and Culture Programs proposed by the Western Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education in June of 2000. It is immediately apparent that supporting print materials in the appropriate dialect are in scant supply. The Woods dialect is in dire need of meaningful, community-based documentation. With an eye to the Framework, this presentation will display the scope of a documentation project undertaken at Pukatawagan. The levels of first-language competence in a particular community will determine the kind of program that is needed. Some communities have experienced extinction of the ancestral language, while others have a robust Native tongue, at least at the spoken level. Pukatawagan's case lies somewhere between the two extremes.

The documentation of a language which until recent times has rarely been written in a consistent orthography and analysed with the aid of clear, accurate modern linguistic techniques is far more fraught with difficulties than is known to the general public. The CECD Preface and Introduction explore some of these problems of documentation and their application to teaching. Choice of type of language program is one of the considerations. At present, total Cree immersion is probably not practicable. There has been too much language loss. A bilingual program is, however, quite feasible.

Interconnectedness of Language and Culture

The Framework correctly recognizes the fact that a language--any natural language--does not exist in a vacuum. (*See the Resource Needs Assessment diagram on page 118, in which all of the needs are motivated by cultural experience.*) It builds concepts and provides words for them which are unique to the culture. This "language-boundedness" of concepts to represent all aspects of the culture needed for communication is recognized by some semanticists; however, most concepts are not universal. Semanticist Anna Wierzbicka (1992), for example, identifies only a small number of concepts that are apparently found in all languages. These universals include 'good', 'think' and 'know' (pp. 121 & 446). Examples of concepts that are not found in all languages are 'truth', 'true' (p. 446) and the "English folk construct" 'mind' (p. 40). Perhaps because the concept of 'mind' (the abstract mental faculty) occurs so frequently in English, but there is no corresponding concept in other languages, Wierzbicka devotes her entire first chapter to 'mind' and the related concepts of 'soul' and 'heart'. There is grave danger of misinterpretation if a

translator imagines that an English concept, for example, has an exact equivalent in a Cree concept. One particularly slippery term is *spirituality*: different people have absolutely different ideas of what it is. Those ideas are rooted in their religious upbringing and in their first language.

### Translation and the Problem of Concepts

Because of the nonuniversality of most concepts, people from different cultures and languages talk past each other. Religion and intergenerational conflict present problems for educators in aboriginal communities, too. Often, younger fluent speakers have only a rudimentary grasp of their ancestral language. Their personal vocabulary is skimpy, as is their grasp of the original and full meanings of many terms. The meanings of words, technically termed semantics, is the surely the fuzziest of the grammatical areas, and so few professional linguists, especially those of the dominant Chomskyan school, have seriously tackled it. (See Wierzbicka, p. 445, on Chomsky's suggestion that concepts might be innate.) Semantics is key to translation, however, and must be attempted, however unsatisfactory the results may be. There are few pat solutions, and we often have to paraphrase. Sometimes many words are needed to explain an English word in Cree; the reverse is also true. Because bilingualism or multilingualism must be a goal in the process of preserving a minority language, translation is unavoidable. Hence, the first section of Castel's English-Cree Dictionary consists of English words used in full sentences and translated into Cree. The purpose is to collect as many Cree terms that approximate English terms as possible, presented in grammatically coherent contexts. It is a form of elicitation, without which much essential vocabulary may never occur within the compiler's lifetime!

### Religion as Cultural Artifact and Source of Divisiveness

Many aboriginal communities are sharply divided between traditionalists, people who honour the ways of their ancestors, and fundamentalist Protestants who see only the devil in aboriginal "spirituality." Fearing transmission of the "old ways," the latter group will even oppose teaching the ancestral language because of perceived spiritual content. For them, the two worldviews are incompatible. Aboriginal spiritual teaching, spiritual elements, and the like, are unacceptable. For them, there is only one "truth." In communities where the spirituality conflict is present, the language may have to be taught without the "spiritual" content, if it is to be successful, focusing instead on practical vocabulary and the telling of stories as entertainment, the way stories of witches, invisible dwarfs, elves, leprechauns, fairies, trolls, sprites (from Latin *spiritus*), etc., as well as the part-human, part-fish merpeople and the sometimes-human silkies (seals), have been told in European cultures for centuries, although they are at least in part remnants of the banned pre-Christian religions, rooted in the aboriginal *spirituality* of early Europeans. There is possibly much syncretism in these folk beliefs. It is well known that the eighteenth-century Scottish ancestors of the Woodlands Cree (Brightman 1985) held remarkably similar concepts of a spirit world that exists between heaven and earth. There is probably an underlying common human animistic tendency at work as well, a very ancient belief in souls and spirits that populate the normally invisible dimension of the natural world, i.e., the

supernatural. (See Brightman 1989 and Brown & Brightman 1988 for tales of Woodlands Cree supernatural experiences.)

Occasionally, I have heard from aboriginal Protestants the argument that multilingualism was God's punishment for building the Tower of Babel, and so reducing the world's languages to one would bring peace and harmony again. Has monolingualism ever guaranteed unity of purpose since the Tower story? Overweening human ambition seems to be more the point than is language. As linguist David Crystal (2000, p. 28), perhaps redundantly, points out, Chapter 10 of Genesis states that multilingualism existed *before* the Tower. Chapter 10 is admittedly less dramatic and the eye is more easily drawn to Chapter 11, which appears to be inserted as an afterthought. Interested persons should consult Hebrew scholars. Other, sillier assertions, such as the claim that Jesus spoke English are evidence of historical and religious illiteracy.

Illustrations of ways to incorporate specific cultural content are included in the appendix of the Framework. Some are examples of unique cultural significance, such as the ways greetings are conducted, and are unlikely to be controversial (p. 124). Other specific cultural artifacts are linked to ancestral views of the spirit world and may stir controversy in some communities. An example given in the Framework is the Tlingit/Tutchone cultural understanding of the bear, who is respected to the extent that no one is allowed to wear bear parts as jewellery (p. 128). Some members of many other cultural groups also have special regard for the bear. At Pukatawagan I was witness to a bear-part incident. Someone had killed a bear and thrown the unwanted parts on the road. A skinned bear paw resembling a human hand was brought to class and given to me in a bag, which I innocently opened. The majority of the class laughed and thought it quite a joke, while a few were very disapproving but said nothing. Eventually the chief came to ask me what I had done with the bear paw. I had carefully placed it in the outdoor garbage bin because of the peculiar odour. He retrieved it. I did not hear what happened to the paw. Clearly, it should not be assumed that all members of a cultural group are of one opinion on any aspect of their culture, and yet it would be wise to be sensitive to such cultural content in teaching the language.

In conversations with Woodlands Cree, as well as in the Memoirs of the Elders, I have found a widespread belief in the traditional realm of aboriginal spirituality. Spirituality without supernatural spirits is a strange notion, although English is famously generous in its metaphorical or extended use of spirit terms, for example, "high-spirited," "in good spirits," and "spirits" meaning alcohol. Such extended uses of the term are rarely translatable word-for-word into other languages.

The Framework avoids defining spirituality precisely, and any attempt to do so can be very contentious. In Woodlands communities there may be acceptance, rejection or ambivalence. Many Rock Cree, as some Pukatawagan people term themselves, accept the reality of this force, and they believe that it was not often used for ill purposes. Examples of the use and misuse of shamanistic powers can be read throughout the Memoirs of the Elders. Most practising Catholics have abandoned shamanism, but many are convinced that some people still have the potential in them to be a shaman. Most aspects of Algonkian spirituality, including belief in a spirit dimension inhabited by normally invisible dwarfs are held also by other people of the Woodlands culture, for

example, the Oji-Cree at Island Lake. For them, 'spirit' is not just a metaphor. Redefined for most Cree as the Judeo-Christian God, the Cree term *manitow* [*mantow*] originally referred to 'spirit' in general, as can be seen in *mantônak* 'spirit island' and *mancônakos* 'little spirit island', at which one must not point a finger for fear of raising a fierce wind on the water. References to the *pawâkan*, a dream image of a type of guiding spirit which may take various forms, usually that of an animal such as a bear, wolf or wolverine, are not rare in interviews. (See Brightman 1993, pp. 76-91 for a detailed discussion of the *pawâkan* concept.) Not wishing to overinterpret, we have simply transcribed the Memoirs of the Elders and translated them as literally as possible, bearing in mind that English does not have a precise equivalent term or concept for *mîmîkwîsiw* "little rock person," or for *pawâkan* "dream spirit." In the text, we have usually left the terms untranslated.

I have met some Woodlands Protestants who dismiss all such aboriginal spirit notions because they are, in their opinion, not in the Bible. At any rate, one person's spirituality is another person's superstition. Most "Judeo-Christians" are only vaguely aware of the degree to which their civilization, with its mixture of European and Middle Eastern cultural beliefs and assumptions, is what Jay aptly labels an "odd hybrid" (1998, p. 181). Few Christians, especially Protestants, are able to view the spirit that looks like a dove, the invisible devils that possessed people long ago, and notions of guardian angels that are popularly depicted as part human and part bird in form as "objectively" as they regard traditional Algonkian spiritual conceptualizations. Sometimes the latter are even referred to as witchcraft, the term given by British Christians to practitioners of their own now nearly extinct aboriginal religions, notably Celtic Druidism and pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon spiritual practices, also called Wicca, the Old English word for 'wizard', first recorded in the ninth century (Russell, p. 14). (See also the etymology of 'witch' and 'wicked' in an unabridged dictionary, or in Russell's appendix (1982, p. 177).

No credible evidence has yet been found to show that European pre-Christian religions were actually practised in the late Middle Ages or in early modern times (Cohn, p. 149). Of course, "bits and pieces of pagan beliefs and practice survived the [Christian] conversion" (Russell, p. 41). The belief in secret covens and evil witches masquerading as Christians was always a fantasy, albeit a pernicious one that led to the torture and death of an estimated hundred thousand innocent Europeans during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Through his authorized translation of the Bible, James I reinforced the idea that malevolent, Devil-worshipping witches were a very real threat to all Christians. Upon James's insistence, the English term "witch" was used liberally to translate different Hebrew words. Previous translations had used "wizard" to represent most Hebrew magician or sorcery terms. (Russell, p. 33) The popularity of the King James Translation gave new and lasting vigour to the witch craze.

The notions of evil witchcraft were brought to America by seventeenth century immigrants and sometimes applied freely to the spiritual practices and worldviews of aboriginal North Americans. Witchcraft hysteria such as that which gripped New England until the 1690s (Russell, p. 103-108) was still being reproduced among Algonkian converts in the United States as late as the early 1800s. Many practitioners of

traditional aboriginal spirituality were slaughtered by their own tribesmen in campaigns to destroy the ancestral religion. (See Sugden, pp. 208-209 for examples; on the largely imaginary European folk beliefs concerning witchcraft, see Cohn, pp. 148-161.) It is very sad to see such long-discredited, intolerant fantasies thriving into the twenty-first century to the detriment of traditional aboriginal languages and culture. Even today, freedom of religion is a very fragile concept.

### Religion and Literacy

Historically, religion has always played a role in literacy (Crystal, pp. 138-141). Many writing systems were created for religious purposes, and thus may be a symptom of divisiveness, as in the cases of Serbian and Croatian in the former Yugoslavia and in Hindi and Urdu in the Indian subcontinent. Choice of the missionary Syllabics devised for Cree around 1840 is problematic because it represents in most published documents a geographically extreme dialect, incomprehensible east of Lake Manitoba. The Syllabics apparently derive from characters found in Greek, Phoenician and early Christian alphabets and syllabaries known to educated missionaries and church scholars. These alphabets are a more likely source of the Cree Syllabics set than the often suggested early nineteenth-century Pitman shorthand: Phoenician, Old Hebrew and Greek, as well as Armenian and Ethiopian characters in use since the fourth century. See examples in Crystal, 1987: pp. 195, 203, as well as "Alphabet" in any large general encyclopedia. The Syllabics shapes are all there. They have been assigned different sound correspondences to suit the target language, as is also the case in the 1821 Cherokee syllabary devised by Sequoya (Crystal, 1987, p. 201).

Attempts to establish the Plains Cree Syllabics as a norm even in Oji-Cree communities continue. However, many Island Lake people have confided in me that they do not understand Cree, and they certainly do not understand the Plains Cree Bible. If they had a Bible in their own dialect, one that is suited to their religious denomination, they would not face this difficulty. I have played tape recordings of spoken Cree to fluent speakers at Island Lake. I have also played recordings of Island Lake to fluent speakers of Cree and southern Ojibwe. There is little mutual understanding, in spite of much common vocabulary. Their grammars are too different. Perhaps it was hoped that the Plains Cree Syllabics Bible would become what Luther's German Bible eventually accomplished for the German dialects. In the latter case a written Standard German evolved which did become a national standard. However, the Cree Bible failed to achieve linguistic unity among the Cree, in spite of a spotty record of success in dialect areas where the Syllabics characters were adapted to local needs. Religious notions of written word "sanctity"--for want of a better term--which I have observed have, I suspect, have actually hampered literacy in the areas where the language of the Bible translation is not easily understood, if at all. Moreover, and more importantly, to promote literacy in a language, one book is simply not enough. A wide variety of visually appealing publications on many topics is needed.

### Role of the Elders in Documentation

At Pukatawagan, there is no reluctance by most Elders to tell their stories--the traditional tales their grandparents told them in the early twentieth century. Some narrate with a good dose of skepticism and humour, while others narrate the supernatural as plain fact. They all enjoy talking about it, for the benefit of future generations. As to Religion (spiritual rites of Christianity, termed *ayamihâwin* 'praying' in Cree), there is only one church, as is still the case in many isolated northern communities. We were able to document freely the memoirs of the Elders, and the work continues. There is no heavy editing or censoring of their words by disapproving converted descendants. The people of Pukatawagan as a whole still honour their ancestors.

To make the recordings, we usually enlisted the aid of Elders' younger relatives who encouraged them to contribute for the sake of future generations. Many of the Elders are not functionally literate in English, a few know almost no English, and a couple are blind. The procedure has had to be conducted orally.

### Outline and Scope of the English-Cree Dictionary and Memoirs of the Elders of Pukatawagan

To address the need for a practical handbook of Woods Cree, the CECD is a compendium of grammar, vocabulary, local language history and speech transcription backed up by the actual audio sources, available on request. The Preface explains in detail the scope and purpose of the book. The Introduction is a skeletal outline of the grammatical features of the dialect, a brief history of Woods Cree writing, and linguistic factors that relate to the transcription of this poorly documented dialect. The bulk of the text is the actual words of fluent speakers of Woods Cree, with English translations. Those words are used to create a glossary that also includes all inflected forms, not just stems and third person singular verbs as is the case in standard dictionaries. The English-Cree Index provides quick access to the more detailed glossary. The CD-ROM's Acrobat search feature can be used to locate the words throughout the Dictionary and Memoirs. Many photographs from the community and surrounding area enhance the text. Even many local people have not seen all of the locales discussed in the Memoirs, and so we have included photographs wherever possible. The historic photographs, dating from approximately 1920, help readers and listeners to visualize more accurately how the community and its people appeared earlier in the twentieth century.

### Effective Language Teaching Methods for the Twenty-First Century

Teaching Cree Language Arts should in theory be similar to teaching English or French Language Arts. However, Cree language teachers do not have a wealth of trade books to aid them. In many cases, such as in Woods Cree, there are no trade books at all. There are videotapes and CD recordings of local Elders' speeches and memoirs, but one cannot research books or the Internet for Woods Cree material. In spite of these shortfalls, many of the strategies and procedures used in English Language Arts can be adapted to Cree language teaching, and some attempts are under way now at Pukatawagan.

Employing Standard Roman Orthography, CECD is a researched and referenced contribution of substance to a transparent, context-based documentation of the dialect. Development of grade-appropriate reading materials based on the content of CECD will be the implementation stage. The Framework includes novels, songs, poems, dramas, storybooks and information texts among the resource needs. Native Studies, taught in English, must not be equated with language teaching. For teaching Cree these print materials must be in Cree. They do not yet exist, except for a few songs, usually based on another dialect which requires adaptation. It will be some time before novels are written in Woods Cree, especially for the middle and senior years. Meanwhile, though, we are continuing to gather, record in formats compatible with current technology, and transcribe oral texts in SRO in order to promote first language literacy through a consistent orthography. The salvaging of older recordings from now unusable formats such as U-Matic tapes, as well as recording the speech of other Elders is urgent. If we wait another ten years it will be too late.

### The Importance of Continuing Documentation

The Elders must be encouraged to speak freely, to have their words preserved in sound recordings and in verbatim transcription, and to contribute their cultural knowledge to future generations. For linguistic models, we must look to the Elders. They have a far richer vocabulary and employ less code switching, mixing of English and Cree, than do younger speakers. Their grammar is more productive, to the extent that younger speakers who are more fluent in English than in Cree refer to it as "Deep Cree" or "High Cree," as if it were a different language. It is not. Just as highly literate English speakers have a larger vocabulary and a stronger command of Standard English grammar than simply functionally literate speakers have, orally literate Elders have a noticeably larger vocabulary than younger native speakers, as well as a more sophisticated command of the grammar. The linguistic generational gap is a well-documented global problem for all endangered minority languages (Nettle & Romaine, pp. 90-93).

Unfortunately, the Cree language has not kept up with the times. The hunting and trapping lifestyle, along with its vocabulary, is not gone but clearly a rarity today and not a realistic option for most children. It is a matter of education. New vocabulary is needed for today's children, who are inevitably conditioned by the popular culture of the dominant society. Cree has to be functional, with meaning and purpose for today's children. All living languages change constantly, and Cree should be no exception. If teachers attempt to keep it as a museum artifact, it will be scarcely more viable than ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. [For a broader discussion of Cree teaching methods, see Paupanekis & Westfall (2001).]

It is advisable, for the sake of communication, that Cree teachers throughout the Woodlands and Plains regions come to some agreement on common terms for new vocabulary. To some extent they are sharing vocabulary through recently published dictionaries, as face-to-face meetings are extremely costly due to the cost of travel to and from isolated northern communities. A chat-room forum on the Internet at the schools may be one way of

accomplishing this much needed language expansion. Although the Internet is not yet available in many isolated communities, most schools have their own satellite Internet service. Sufficient computer time allotment and adjusted workload would be necessary to make a computer approach viable.

Classroom teachers cannot be expected to do extensive curriculum and materials development as well as teach full-time. They also need time to coordinate their work with Cree language peers at other schools. Often, a school will have only one Cree language teacher, and so communication with other Cree teachers is rare. Too often, a teacher working in isolation with no linguistic training creates an inconsistent orthography that only further isolates that community from other communities of the same dialect. Often, there is little awareness that a Standard Roman Orthography has been available for several decades, or that there is even a need for standardization. An annual workshop in a mutually agreeable central location can help, too, so Cree teachers can become acquainted with one another and share materials and ideas in person. The Western Cree dialects are close enough to each other that many materials developed for one dialect can be adjusted grammatically and in phrasing to suit other dialects.

Also, if teachers have a greater opportunity to hear each other's dialects, and to speak to each other *in Cree*, there may develop more commonality in purpose and an understanding of Cree that goes beyond the boundaries of each isolated community.



Left: *mancônakos* near Highrock , Manitoba  
Above: *mancônakos* at Oxford House, Manitoba



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## Appendix: Suggestions for use of the CECD as a Woods Cree teacher resource

There is a substantive collection of primary Rock Cree material in the Cree language now. (There is a smaller collection also in the 1989 collection of Robert Brightman.) The next stage is the classroom application of authentic content in Woods Cree.

The audio recordings can be used in the traditional way, i.e., as oral literature. The CD tracks can be played to the class and, as in English Language Arts, a great number of strategies can be employed to extend the experience. Typically, these strategies involve the children directly in creative, hands-on enhancement and reinforcement activities that use art, crafts, music, drama, dance, etc., in conjunction with written genres of stories, poetry, plays, and journals.

Locally published story books will be created and illustrated by local artists. Materials will be produced for early years and middle years children at first. Near-professional looking products are possible today, thanks to advances in computer technology. This need not be a dauntingly expensive enterprise. It is essential that these books be available, eventually, in variety and abundance. It will take time, but it is feasible. If a few quality items are created each year, over time the body of classroom-applicable material will become substantial.

Plays for elementary children will be written as spin-offs from the original CECD transcripts. From simple plays, the children will learn to create their own plays and do their own writing, as they already do in English Language Arts.

Unsung poetry presents a greater challenge, as it is not a traditional genre of Woods Cree oral literature. Certain forms, however, such as concrete or shape poems can be created by children with sufficient vocabulary. It is an easily understood category and great fun to work with. The children create their own illustrations for poetry where the shape of the poem is not also its topic.

Songs, which already exist in small number, often in another dialect, need to be adapted to Woods Cree for the sake of consistency. Unfortunately, the indigenous Woods Cree songs are now extinct, having been banned by the first priests to the area. Some personal songs, along with the banned drums, are said to exist in remoter regions, such as the Granville Lake area. They may not be accessible for school purposes, and local indigenous music has reportedly not been heard in Pukatawagan for about a hundred years. About ten or twelve years ago, Plains culture drumming was introduced to Pukatawagan. It features the large drum beaten by a number of seated drummers. The original Woodlands Cree drum that I have heard of was a smaller, one-sided, hand-held drum resembling the Dene drum. To my knowledge, it has not been reintroduced.

Journal writing is typically a personal form of expression. However, the technique may also be used in role playing. As part of a larger thematic unit, children working in small groups may create journals that simulate what people of long ago would have written if they had kept journals in their language. It is fantasy, of course, but fantasy based on authentic content and an effective way to practice language.