

Speaking to the Future: Adapting Authentic Cree Cultural Material from the Recorded Speech of the Elders

Presentation at the CIESC Annual Conference (University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, May 29, 2004)

Introduction

The title phrase “speaking to the future” represents an idea taken from the 1998-2003 recorded interviews of the Elders of Pukatawagan. In previous presentations, I have alluded to the problem of authenticity in aboriginal teaching materials. The term “authentic” points to a very fuzzy concept. Nevertheless, within the context of Cree cultural materials, it is my contention that authenticity must be proved by reference to verbatim *recorded* speech of the most fluent traditional speakers. There is no significant corpus of pre-twentieth century written Cree language cultural materials. Any cultural claims that are based solely on English texts are suspect. Translations made by missionaries and priests, for example, will always view such matters from within their own narrow religious perspective. Many aboriginals who were brought up in the ancestral language have insisted all along on a Cree language-based perspective, for example, the bicultural Cree speaker Stan Cuthand (“On Nelson’s Text,” in Brown & Brightman 1988:189-198) and in the CBC Mother Earth radio program.

Of particular interest is the earth deity popularized in Germany during the Nazi era, the goddess Mother Earth, to whom slaves were sacrificed, according to the first century Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus (*Germania*, chapter 40). She has inexplicably been elevated from the status of metaphor to a religious image by many aboriginals who did not acquire the ancestral language at home. The anthropologist Robert Brightman found no evidence at all for a Mother Earth deity or spirit in Cree spirituality, nor has to my knowledge any other scholar found proof of the widespread claim that “Mother Earth” has always had a special place in Native tradition. It is easy to document where she *does* occur; to disprove an unsubstantiated cherished belief is more difficult and, some may suggest, a waste of time. Exposing popular but false notions is not a waste of time.

To correct a popular myth of recent origin can be challenging but also entertaining, and surely one purpose of education is to determine the facts, not to perpetuate false assumptions. Journalist Maureen Matthews tackled the issue with the zeal of a competent investigative reporter in the 2003 CBC radio program hosted by Paul Kennedy titled “Mother Earth.” In the broadcast, Stan Cuthand (Cree) and Roger Roulette (Ojibwe) voiced their respective linguistic and cultural perspectives on the question. The roots of the idea in aboriginal settings, primarily urban—definitely not traditional land-based (e.g., trapline)—have been traced to an ecological movement that embraced a certain idea of aboriginality around 1970. (Listen to the radio

program on-line at
<http://winnipeg.cbc.ca/features/ourmanitoba/firstvoice.html> .)

Unfortunately, the quantity and quality of accessible Cree language materials in the schools today are insufficient or even absent, leading even Cree speakers to fall back on questionable English-language publications that present at best a facade of cultural content, a facade which has no authentic, language-based roots. It is urgent that as much of the Cree language material as possible be recorded on tape or in digital format. In many communities most of the fluent traditional speakers have already passed away unrecorded.

Semantics

While there is insufficient time and space in this venue to deal with the importance of grammatical considerations when working to achieve a workable cultural interpretation from Cree to English, I know from my own earlier cultural experiences with German and English—and those two languages are noticeably related—that words and the concepts they represent are not to be taken for granted. In my 2003 presentation I discussed the cannibal wihtiko idea as it surfaces, male and female, in Pukatawagan folklore. The wihtiko concept has also been explored further, at the community level, in an audio recording made at St. Theresa Point in their Oji-Cree dialect. The folktale has been translated and awaits syllabic transcription. The story by Elder Mary Mason presents a view of the windigo quite different from the Woods Cree wihtiko: instead of a solitary hunger-driven cannibal figure we find whole families of cannibal windigos who kidnap children for eating. Those windigo families, cannibal parents and cannibal sons, are appropriately dispatched by the local culture hero Kayanway with one arrow designated for each cannibal. The hero also has an extraordinary gift: he can sense the windigo's cold, frozen heart from a distance and thus track him down.

Documentation

The first stage of the Pukatawagan Cree language documentation has produced 15 audio CDs. The reference book itself includes full transcripts of the interviews, accompanied by interlinear English translations, free translations, a copious glossary, outline of grammatical features of the dialect, and an English index to the Cree words. The texts are enhanced by photographs and drawings. One of the projected school text extracts, a local legend told by entertainer Sidney Castel, who passed away in 2003, is available with an enhanced audio CD of the field recording. The same volume will be used as a template for the windigo story from St. Theresa Point, useful for purposes of comparison—concrete evidence that there is no single

satisfactory definition or understanding of wihtiko/windigo. The concept varies according to community and ethnic group.

The second stage, "Speaking to the Future," is a supplement that includes some older video material from the Pukatawagan Cree Language Program. It has been transferred to VHS and DVD formats, and one of the videotapes, an hour-long interview of the late Elder Gabriel Bighetty at Bloodstone, has been transcribed and translated. Two additions have been made to the audio CD collection, along with their transcripts and translations: Peter Castel (1930-2004) and Jerome Colomb. The latter, while at 37 technically not an Elder, was brought up on the trapline in the Cree language by his grandparents.

Cree Language Categories

The materials collected for transcription, analysis, and classroom teaching application include the following:

- 1) folktales (*âcimowina* 'narratives' and *âcaðôhkîwina* 'sacred legends or myths')
- 2) anecdotes and personal history
- 3) religion and memories of early experiences with priests and missionaries, including residential school anecdotes
- 4) political commentary

There are also some English-language materials with local content and local perspectives. I have misgivings about using any materials that are produced first in English. Nevertheless, at the request of the Native Studies teacher, some of this content may be translated into Cree. An example is a modern Wisahkechahk tale created and illustrated by a local school child. In this story, the famous culture hero arrives in Pukatawagan just in time to enter the annual Miss Dixie contest. As is often the case with the original 'sacred legends', everything goes wrong for our hero. He may be supernatural, but he is not infallible.

References

[See the 2003 Halifax presentation paper for a more detailed look at Woods Cree cultural elements.]

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