

KEQ NIT MEHSI LIWIHTOMON? WHY DO YOU SAY IT THAT WAY? USING LINGUISTIC KNOWLEDGE IN NATIVE LANGUAGE CURRICULUM

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ABSTRACT

Incorporating linguistic knowledge into native language curriculum is essential if learners are to find their way into the language's structure, patterns, and ways of constructing meanings and expressing ideas. For example, Passamaquoddy-Maliseet, like other North American native languages, forms words and sentences and construes relationships among people and between people and the environment in unique ways. If learners are to speak Passamaquoddy-Maliseet like first-language speakers, they must understand and be able to adopt strategies and attitudes appropriate to the language. In addition, subtleties of tone and meaning must be mastered. Teachers must accept these challenges with a sense of playful good humour, by helping learners think carefully about phrasing, sentence structure, and the organization of utterances.

1. INTRODUCTION

From time to time, when I hear native youth speak of their wish to re-establish the continuity of their culture and history, they will say—poignantly—'I don't speak my language'. That is, I don't know the language of my ancestors and this is painful for me: it is an essential part of my particular native culture and therefore of my identity.

The illustrative examples in this paper are taken from Passamaquoddy-Maliseet, the language of the aboriginal people of the St. Croix and St. John River valleys in Maine and New Brunswick (the principal studies of the language are LeSourd 1993, Sherwood 1986, Teeter 1971). Today there are fewer than 500 fluent speakers, and virtually all are 50 years of age or older (Leavitt 1997). By the 1970s it was evident that the younger generation no longer were speaking the language and had lost much of the practical and intellectual knowledge of their grandparents—not just names of places and plant and animal species, but also broader aspects of oral history and tradition, including awareness of the events of the recent past. More important perhaps, they had lost the ability to speak to their grandparents 'on the same wavelength', as one speaker noted, that is, the ability to think about the world in the same way. Since that time numerous Passamaquoddy-

Maliseet educators have made efforts to teach the language to children and adult learners.

Why learn to speak a native language today? Is it the only way of getting to the heart of the culture, the only way of seeing oneself as a truly complete person? Certainly the native student will answer these questions differently from the non-native, both aware of the particular socio-political, emotional, familial, and historical implications of their desire to speak the language. But in setting out to learn a native language both native and non-native students wish to know how to express themselves from the particular point of view of the language and from inside the knowledge and experiences which give it life. The decision to become a speaker may have a number of motives, some personal and others professional.

2. LEARNING LINGUISTIC STRUCTURES

Those working in a native language education setting, in whatever capacity, need consciously to know at least something of the structure of the language and the world view it expresses. Students, once launched into understanding and speaking it, will become intrigued with the language's capacity to specify, within a single word, a broad range of concrete and context-dependent meanings as well as shades of attitude and opinion. At the same time, they quickly discover that speakers, however fluent, cannot explain the inner workings of the language: they have not studied it and they are neither accustomed nor inclined to analyse it.

Nevertheless, with teachers' and other speakers' help, students acquire an initial vocabulary and a sketchy sense of the syntax. Soon they are surprised when their literal translations into the native language founder (see example 8 below), and they get their first hints of a sense of physical and social space unknown to them in English or French: how people situate themselves in relation to the physical space and the community of people around them. The language offers a glimpse into the nature of a particular native identity.

New speakers begin to enjoy the sense of play they hear in the speech of teachers and elders, who normally invent words as they talk, simply to be precise, or perhaps to insinuate something or make a story more humorous. Eloquent storytellers squeeze yet more meaning into a word by adding or changing a root or inflectional ending. For example, in (1) a husband has used the masculine root *-ape-* to give a bite to his complaint about his wife. In (2) the absentative case, required by the situation (in which Rac-

coon's mittens have been eaten by some fisher kits while he was asleep), also gives a tone of grievance to the question.

- (1) Etuci-moc-ape-w-it nt-ehpit-em.¹
 very-bad-male-verb-AI.3.CONJUNCT² 1-woman-POSS
 'my wife is an ugly fellow'
- (2) Tan nil muwinewiyey-ak n-mulcess-okk?³
 where I/me of.bearskin-PL 1-mitten-PL.ABS
 'where are my bearskin mittens [that were here before]?'

Even at the earliest stages, new speakers begin to create their own words. The use of preverbs and their corresponding initial roots is perhaps the most productive of the processes for qualifying the meaning of a verb (Leavitt 1985). In general, preverbs have the full range of adverbial, adjectival, and prepositional meanings. In (3), (4), and (5), the speaker's interest is in specifying spatial and temporal aspects.

- (3) a. naci (preverb) 'going there or coming here'
 b. naciwitmi 'I'm going to church (going to pray with others)'
 c. natam 'I'm going fishing [there]'
 d. natoness 'I'm going to dig clams'
 e. naciwicuhkemin 'come help me'
 f. naciphin 'come get me [here]'
 g. natewestuwamin 'come talk to me'
- (4) a. api (preverb) 'back from having gone elsewhere'
 b. ntapiwitimi 'I'm back from church'
 c. ntapam 'I'm back from having dug clams'
 d. ntaponess 'I'm back from digging clams'

1 Unless otherwise noted, the examples here were spoken or reported by Pas-samaquoddy-Maliseet speakers David Francis, Wayne Newell, Elizabeth Newell, Joseph Nicholas, Imelda Perley, Mary Ellen Stevens.

2 Abbreviations used include: 0 third person inanimate; 1 first person; 1.2 first person subject with second person object; 2 second person; 2.1 second person subject with first person object; 22.3 second person plural subject with third person animate singular object; 3 third person animate; 3D three-dimensional; A animate; ABS absentative; AI animate intransitive verb; BENEF benefactive; CONJ conjunct mode; II inanimate intransitive verb; IMPER imperative mode; INDEF indefinite (grammatical person and number not specified); PL plural; POSS possessed; PROG progressive; REFL reflexive; SG singular; SUBJ subject; TA transitive animate verb; TI transitive inanimate verb.

3 This sentence appears in Lewis Mitchell's transcription of the traditional story *Espons* (Raccoon), as published in Prince (1921).

- (5) a. motə (preverb) 'heard but not seen'
 b. motəntu 's/he is heard singing (but not seen)'
 c. motəmiye 's/he is heard praying'
 d. metəssik 'change (coins—what is heard moving)'

By mastering such subtleties as they continue to acquire new vocabulary, beginners enter a community of speakers who truly think of the world and talk about it in another way. This is true for both native and non-native learners.

3. GETTING LINGUISTIC INPUT

If they are working in a school setting or in another context where the native language is an object of study, teachers must ask themselves how to help new speakers, including children, acquire the ability to create their own words and sentences. It is only by having some understanding of the grammar of the language, whether conscious or not, that new speakers can communicate effectively. Today, however, in many First Nations communities the native language is seldom used in public or even private forums, and consequently there is no longer the wealth of repeated examples which would allow children to infer such features as the various plural endings or the uses of the verb modes.⁴ For example, the conjunct mode is not only used in relative clauses and certain questions, but in many verbs indicates a commentary on the part of the speaker, as in (6). The verb *liku* denotes someone's physical appearance—as in *ansa liku mihtaqsol* 'he looks like his father'. Its meaning changes in the conjunct.

- (6) a. liku (independent indicative) 's/he looks thus (appearance)'
 b. elikit (conjunct) 's/he is ugly (literally, how s/he looks)'
 c. elalokittiyekit (with expletive) 's/he is ugly as hell'
 d. elikossit (with diminutive) 'she is cute' (*'he is cute')
 e. elalokittiyekossit (with expletive and diminutive) 'she is cuter than hell' (*'he...')

Beginning speakers' careful study of conversation, stories, songs, and oral history becomes fascinating to them in its own right. Useful structures and patterns emerge: verbs and nouns built from the vast set of endlessly re-combining roots; grammatical genders, animate and inanimate; forms

⁴ Leavitt (1996) summarizes the uses of the various verb modes; see also LeSourd (1993), Sherwood (1986), Teeter (1971).

for singular, dual, and plural number; separate sets of positive and negative verb inflections; phonological and prosodic changes;⁵ and an economy of expression unrivalled by the most succinct English. Example (7) is a typical sentence and the first line of a story. The alternative verbs in (7b) through (7e) are but a small fraction of the possible new words a speaker might create by changing the body-part classifier. In (7f) a shape classifier, *-ahq-* 'stick-like', is also incorporated into the verb; others may be used, too, according to the body-part specified.

- (7) a. Kis k-nomiy-awa amucalu etoli-koss-iqe-n-s-it?
 already 2-see.TA-22.3 fly PROG-wash-eye/face-with.hand-REFL-3.CONJ
 'have you ever seen a fly washing its face?'
- b. ...etoli·koss·iptine·nsit '...washing its hands'
- c. ...etoli·koss·ihtone·nsit '...washing its nose'
- d. ...etoli·koss·ilqe·nsit '...washing its armpits'
- e. ...etoli·koss·atpe·nsit '...washing its hair (literally, top of head)'
- f. ...etoli·koss·ahq·iskipe·nsit '...washing its neck'

4. ATTAINING NATIVE FLUENCY

As they set overall goals of instruction, develop curriculum, and design specific lessons and materials—in consultation and collaboration with fluent speakers—those who have become conscious of the structure of the language must ensure that their work remains grounded in the actual, used language of the community, while at the same time maintaining high standards of 'acceptability' in the materials and curriculum they develop. To this end they must carefully define terms like expertise and identify experts—significant challenges for native educators—and they must help the fluent speakers they work with discover language properties.

Especially important in building the connections between language and culture is the ability to say things in a Passamaquoddy-Maliseet way. This is one of the new speaker's goals. A broad vocabulary is not sufficient, since, as may be seen in all the examples above, sentences are not normally translated word for word from English into the native language. In (8a),⁶ a beginning speaker has attempted to translate 'It is dark in the cellar'. The fluent native speaker would formulate the idea quite differently, as shown in (8b). Further examples are shown in (9), where a perfectly good Pas-

⁵ See LeSourd (1993) for a full discussion.

⁶ Thanks to Philip LeSourd, of Indiana University, for examples (8a) and (8b).

samaquoddy-Maliseet word has been supplanted—in many younger speakers' usage—by an anglicized version using separate verb and noun. Sentence (10) shows another typical pattern in contemporary or newly learned Passamaquoddy-Maliseet, the nominalization of a meaning normally expressed with a verb.

- (8) a. Eci-ɔisk-iya-k lahkəp-ok.
 very dark-be/become.II-0SG.CONJ cellar-LOC
 'the cellar is very dark' (anglicized)
- b. Eci-ɔisk-alok-ahte-k eməhkew.
 very dark-hollow-be.thus.II-0SG.CONJ below
 'the cellar is very dark' (idiomatic)
- (9) N-k ɔsinuhk-an n-ipit.—N-ipit-in.
 1-be.sick.AI-1SG.subordinative 1-tooth — 1-tooth-suffer.AI⁷
 'I have a sore tooth' (anglicized—idiomatic)
- (10) sakomawi-pom-k-akon—sakomaw-k-an
 chief-along-dance.AI-NOMINALIZER—chief-dance.AI-INDEF.SUBJ
 'chief's dance' (anglicized—idiomatic)

Such nuances are important in new speakers' development of skill and fluency and in their reconceptualizing or reorienting their identity. As speakers position themselves in the Passamaquoddy-Maliseet world, they acquire the links to space and time, family and society that are characteristic of the active and intimate participation that the language expresses. As an example, in English it is possible to talk of the world 'objectively', without relying upon a personal perspective; in Passamaquoddy-Maliseet it is unusual to express such an impersonal point of view. New speakers of the language need to know that their personal space is both the basis of all the physical and social space they talk about and part of the same continuum.

The examples in (11) show the dependent noun system of Passamaquoddy-Maliseet, which includes all kinship and body-part terms, as well as a small number of personal items. New and younger speakers often deduce a neutral (i.e., not possessed) form unacceptable to most fluent speakers, who would use a verb participle to express such an idea, as in *wemih-taqsit* 'the Son'—literally, 'the one who has a father'.⁸

⁷ Here, as in all AI verbs, independent indicative, the first-person singular ending is null.

⁸ From the widely used translation of the Sign of the Cross: 'In the name of the Father, the Son...' This word could also mean 'daughter' or 'child'.

- (11) a. nuhkomoss 'my grandmother' (*uhkomoss 'a grandmother')
 b. nmihtaqs 'my father' (*mihtaqs 'a father')
 c. nsisoq 'my eye' (*sisoq 'an eye')
 d. npihtin 'my hand' (*pihtin 'a hand')
 e. ntemis 'my dog' (*temis 'a dog'; olomuss 'a dog')
 f. ntul 'my boat, my canoe' (*tul 'a boat'; tuloq 'a boat', oqiton 'a canoe')

The examples in (12) through (15) hint at the large number of speaker-referenced spatial attributes ascribed to motion, extension, and orientation in the physical environment. These are commonly used figuratively as well, as in the final example in (12) and in (13); and they are also used with reference to time: *weckuwikotok* 'in the coming year' and *elomikotok* 'as the year goes along [from now on]'.⁹ Spatial and temporal distinctions were also noted in (3) through (5), above.

- (12) a. akuwi (preverb) 'moving or extending out of view'
 b. akuwuhse 's/he walks out of view'
 c. akuwahte 'it extends out of sight'
 d. akuwolamson 'the wind is blocked from here'
 e. akuwitungom 's/he tries to escape notice'
- (13) a. sakhi (preverb) 'moving or extending into view'
 b. sakuhse 's/he walks into view'
 c. sakhahte 'it extends into view'
 d. sakholamson 'the wind comes out toward here'
 e. sakhitungom 's/he makes h/ presence known'
- (14) a. ckuwi (preverb) 'toward here'
 b. ckuwuhse 's/he walks toward here'
 c. ckuwolamson 'the wind blows toward here'
 d. ckuhqepu 's/he sits facing toward here'
- (15) a. olomi (preverb) 'away from here'
 b. olomuhse 's/he walks away from here'
 c. olomolamson 'the wind blows away from here'
 d. olomuhqepu 's/he sits facing away from here'

5. ACQUIRING HUMOUR

Few aspects of language reveal a people's linguistic resourcefulness more than their humour, which calls for just the right word or turn of phrase. New speakers wish to be able to make and appreciate jokes and in-

⁹ These verb II conjunct forms used the changed forms of *ckuwi* and *olomi*, respectively.

situations. These skills are especially useful in the friendly but pointed teasing favoured as social discipline, the kind of teasing that keeps people in balance with their family and community. In fact, in general, speakers prefer jokes and humorous stories in which the protagonists are known to them; until recently, one seldom heard stories with anonymous or archetypal characters.

During a conference I once attended with two colleagues who were speakers of Passamaquoddy-Maliseet, we spent an evening at a pub with some of the other participants, who began after a while to sing. Soon their songs turned off-colour, eventually becoming more and more explicit. Finally, one of my colleagues hissed through her teeth, 'That's it! I've had enough of this kind of talk. We're leaving'. When we were outside, I said, amazed, 'But you talk that way all the time!' 'Yes', she agreed, 'but that's about people I know'. Her sense of humour, much like her sense of social space, was personally centred.

In (16) and (17) are two jokes based on linguistic ambiguity. The first story, which goes back to the mid-1900s, tells of a particular woman who asks a friend to buy some underwear for her when she goes to town. The cooperative errand-runner misunderstands and asks the clerk for a pistol. The sentence in (17) was spoken by a man contemplating a child's portrait printed on the front of a woman's sweatshirt—much to the woman's delight. This was the same woman, by the way, who was disgusted by the raunchy songs.

- (16) a. Nat onuhm-uw-in elam-sew-i.
go.tl ere-buy.TI-BENEF-2.1.IMPER inside-wear-1.CONJ
'go buy me some underwear'
- b. Nat onuhm-uw-in lam-sew-ey.
go.tl ere-buy.TI-BENEF-2.1.IMPER inside-wear-ADJECTIVAL.NOUN
'go buy me a pistol'¹⁰
- (17) Etut-apsk-onuw-at wot pilsqehsis.
very 3D.round-cheek-3.CONJ this.A girl
'this girl has very big cheeks'

Sometimes the humorous turn of phrase relies on a change of tone much like that found in (6), above. In (18) *-alokittiye-* is inserted into a TA verb meaning 'I am making use of you'. This then becomes a strong accusation, no longer just a statement of fact.

¹⁰ Pistols being commonly carried inside one's clothing.

- (18) Kt-ol-alokittiye-wehkuh-ul!
 2-thus-EXPLETIVE-use.TA-1.2
 'what the hell would I want with you?'

6. CONCLUSION

If teaching a native language as a second language in a school setting is to meet students' needs, it must help them first of all gain continuity of experience with their fluent elders. In this way language-based aspects of culture can be maintained intact, avoiding to some extent the gaps in identity and self-knowledge which currently exist between one generation and the next. Learners will also acquire a new understanding of the past and the future and their place in the continuum of time.

In practical terms, learning to speak requires students to enter the existing forums in which the language is used. They need strategies for making sense—out of what they hear and in what they say—in a broad range of situations, as well as strategies for inventing their own words and experimenting. They must learn what to know and whom to ask, how to solicit feedback and what to do with it. They need to know how to take advantage of the knowledge of speakers and linguists, and of the invaluable data to be found in texts, dictionaries, recordings, and translations.

With a strong linguistic component in the native language program, learners will be able to listen knowledgeably and speak with confidence. Even competent speakers will enrich their language and become more eloquent. Teachers who attend to linguistic features of the language will be able to help everyone move toward a more authentic fluency as they learn. Then, when they say, 'I speak my language', they will mean this in the full sense of the words.

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