

third
edition

NATIVE AMERICAN VOICES: A READER

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JUST SPEAK YOUR LANGUAGE HENA'HAANEHE

Richard Littlebear

Why save our languages, since they now seem to have no political, economic, or global relevance? That impression is exactly the reason why we should save our languages, because it is the spiritual relevance deeply embedded in our own languages that makes them relevant to us as American Indians today.

I have challenged myself to come up with different ways to say "just speak your language," because that is really the core of my message, my first idea for preserving our languages. If we all just spoke our languages to our young people, we would have no need for indigenous language curricula or for conferences to save our languages. If we just spoke them, all of our languages would be healthier; but that is not what's happening. We do not speak our languages, and our languages are dying. We are also confronted with a voracious language, English, that gobbles up everything in its way.

Since this is the first and only time we are going to lose our languages, we have to devise new strategies accordingly.

The Cheyenne people began making the change to a different type of culture and to a written language about a century ago. Those of us who speak the Cheyenne language are quite possibly the last generation able to joke in our own language. We are possibly the last ones who can talk in our language about profound physical, psychological, and spiritual topics and do it in the appropriate technical language. We can articulate how we feel in all these regards and know with satisfaction that we have been understood. The generations that succeed us will be unable to articulate those same feelings in Cheyenne, since English is now their first language. And the sad part is that even in their first language,

English, they have trouble talking about the deeper meanings of life, since they are not being taught English very well at school or at home.

A second idea is that language is the basis of sovereignty. We are always talking about sovereignty, and rightfully so, because when we were dealing with the US government during the treaty era, our people were treated as nations equal in stature. It was a government-to-government relationship. We have all the attributes that constitute sovereign nations: a governance structure, law and order, jurisprudence, literature, a land base, spiritual and sacred practices, and that one attribute that holds all of these other attributes together—our languages. So once our languages disappear, each one of these attributes begins to fall apart, until they are all gone.

For instance, land ceases to be sacred and becomes looked on as only a commodity to be bought and sold. Our land base and sacred practices are passed on through our languages, not by English, the language spoken by people who killed our people and oppressed our languages. Think about that. We are still accepting the idea that English is a superior language. The passage of time and the continuing loss of our languages separates us from our sacred references and our sacred sites. We have to refer to them constantly. We need to see that our languages continue to refer to our sacred sites. At Dull Knife Memorial College, where I work, we took a field trip to Bear Butte in South Dakota's Black Hills. Bear Butte is our most sacred site. It surprised me to learn that this field trip was the first time most of the students had ever gone to this sacred area. Many did not know the spiritual significance of Bear Butte.

A third idea is that of protocol in the language used in ceremonies. For instance, there are some rituals that I have never participated in on our reservation.

Consequently, I am unable to participate in some related activities or to use the language associated with those rituals. The dilemma is that the people who have the right to use that vocabulary and language, and who have done the rituals, are dying. When they die, all of this language will be lost forever. I do not have the years needed to do the rituals, and I don't want to truncate or abbreviate or shortcut them. I keep saying that someone should write these words down on paper and leave them for posterity. The loss of this specialized language will become a major obstacle in retaining the full richness of our languages and cultures. I do not have a solution.

A fourth idea: some of our people go to college and return to us to help preserve our languages and cultures. However they often are not accepted by their own people when they return, or are viewed with suspicion and skepticism. I speak from experience. I have been off my reservation and have earned a doctorate. These factors often lead to my being discounted and dismissed; some of my people assert that I think too much like a white person. The rejection of American Indians by their own people is almost like the rejection of formal education. I just hope that this is not a rejection of learning, because I do not know of any tribal group that ever rejected learning.

Whenever we as American Indian people develop curriculum materials, we tend to immediately confront a faction that opposes their use. Members of our own tribes have produced these materials locally. Yet some faction questions and demolishes our own home-produced materials. What makes this situation even worse is that when we get curriculum materials from outside our geographical and cultural boundaries, we don't utter a word of protest or criticism.

A fifth radical idea is that we must help our own elders and our fluent speakers to be more accepting of those people who are just now learning our languages. We must sensitize our elders and fluent speakers to the needs of potential speakers of our languages. In many of our tribes, the elders are teachers and bearers of wisdom. As a result, when they criticize or make fun of a person trying to speak one of our languages they are taken very seriously, and some people will not even try to speak the language once they have been criticized by a respected elder of that tribe. When this happens, it hastens the death of that language. Somehow we must turn this negativity around.

I teach the Cheyenne language on my reservation. I tell my students that for this semester they must learn Cheyenne with me using my inferior Cheyenne, and after they are done they can go home

and speak the superior Cheyenne that abounds in their families. I say this to preempt needless discussions on what is the correct way of saying things.

A sixth idea concerns our youth, who, even in rural areas, are apparently looking to urban gangs for things that will give them a sense of identity, importance, and belonging. It would be so nice if they would look to our own tribal characteristics. We already have all the things that our youth are apparently looking for and finding in socially destructive gangs. Gangs have distinctive colors, clothes, music, heroes, symbols, rituals, and "turf." We American Indian tribes have these too. We have distinctive colors, clothes, music, heroes, symbols, and rituals, and our "turf" is our reservations.

Another characteristic that really makes a gang distinctive is the language it speaks. If we could transfer the young people's loyalty back to our own tribes and families, we could restore the frayed social fabric of our reservations. We need to make our children see our languages and cultures as viable and just as valuable as anything they see on television in movies, or on videos.

My last idea is that we must remember that our children are not genetically wired for learning and acquiring our tribal languages. Just because our children are born to Cheyenne parents on Cheyenne land and engage in Cheyenne traditional practices does not mean they are automatically predisposed to learning the Cheyenne language. They have to be taught our language. They must learn to speak the Cheyenne language in just the same way they would have to go about acquiring Greek or German or Swahili, especially since for almost all of them English is now their first language. Everybody who works with languages should learn about second-language acquisition and the theories buttressing it, and be able to apply those theories in whatever subject area they are teaching. Teachers of American Indian languages must remember that everybody has to go through some definite stages of acquiring a language. Right now we have children who are mute in our languages, who are migrants to our languages, who are like extraterrestrials to our cultures.

In closing, I want to relate an experience I had in Alaska. I met Marie Smith, the last Native speaker on Earth of the Eyak language. It was truly a profoundly moving experience for me. We talked for about three hours. I felt that I was sitting in the presence of a whole universe of knowledge that could be gone in one last breath. That's how fragile that linguistic universe seemed. It was really difficult for me to stop talking to her, because I wanted to remember every moment of our encounter.

I do not want any more of our languages to have that experience of having one last speaker. I want all of our languages to last forever, to always be around to nurture our children, to bolster their identities, to perpetuate our cultures.

The Cheyenne language is my language. English is also my language. Yet it is Cheyenne I want to use when my time is completed here on this earth and

journey on to the spirit world. I want to greet in our Cheyenne language those who've journeyed on before me because I know that Cheyenne is the only language they know, the only language they ever needed to know. And I hope when I meet them on the other side that they will understand me and accept me. Thank you for listening to me.

Hena'haanehe.

PART REVIEW

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Introduction

1. Why should the Native American heritage be known to everyone?

Darryl Wilson, *Mis Misa*

1. Who or what is *Mis Misa*? What is its central purpose or function?
2. How is the Indian's view of Mt. Shasta different from that of many non-Indians?

Donald A. Grinde, Jr., and Bruce E. Johansen, *Perceptions of America's Native Democracies*

1. Who are the two founders of the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy? Name the six nations of the confederacy.
2. How did the Iroquois League function? Briefly describe its legislative process.

John Mohawk, *Origins of Iroquois Political Thought*

1. What was the Peacemaker's message to the Haudenosaunee?
2. What did he mean by "the power of righteousness"?

Michael Kearney and Stefano Varese, *Latin America's Indigenous Peoples*

1. According to the article by Kearney and Varese, how did the Spanish occupation of the Americas and Spanish colonial policies regarding the Indian peoples differ from those of the English?

2. What are the "four fundamental forms of ethnic resilience and opposition" that have occurred in indigenous Latin American history?
3. As demonstrated by the demands of the Mayan rebels of Chiapas, Mexico, in 1994, what are the two central concerns of the Indigenous peoples of Latin America?

Alexander Ewen, *Mexico: The Crisis of Identity*

1. What is the difference between *indigenismo* and *indianismo*, and why is this distinction important to Native peoples?
2. In Mexico, who are *mestizo*?
3. Explain the relationship between NAFTA and the Zapatista movement in Chiapas.

Jim Adams, *Jim Thorpe: That Championship Season*

1. Who was Jim Thorpe, and why is he famous?
2. Why were the gold medals Thorpe's won at the 1912 Olympics revoked? Do you think this was fair?
3. What was Thorpe's role at Carlisle during the famous 1911 and 1912 football seasons?

Richard Littlebear, *Just Speak Your Language*

1. The author enumerates seven ways that knowing one's native language is important to indigenous culture. Explain at least three of them.

KEY TERMS

Aiowantha (Hiawatha)
Anglo-American, Euro-American
Carlisle Industrial Indian School
clan
Cortés, Hernando
Deganawidah, or Peacemaker
ethnic confederacies
Great Law of Peace
Haudenosaunee
indianismo
indígenas

Jim Thorpe
Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy
longhouse
mestizaje
Mis Misa
Mixtec
Mound Builders
NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement)
power of righteousness
sachem
White Roots of Peace
Zapatistas