



by Don Thornton

## ***The Link Between Language and Sovereignty***

**T**ribal language is a practical political tool, inextricably linked to Native sovereignty. Tribal leaders should consider their tribal languages not only for their inherent traditional knowledge and distinct cultural beauty, but also as a practical political tool. Their continued existence will help to ensure the ultimate survival of tribal sovereignty.

Gaming on reservations and tribal lands has exploded in the last two decades, lifting many tribes out of poverty and occasionally stimulating dynamic economic transformations, but Native languages have not fared as well. For many tribes this might be the last generation of Native speakers and many Native languages are already gone forever. The problem is that these languages are no longer used in the homes of tribal members. According to the Indigenous Language Institute in Santa Fe, New Mexico, just 175 of the 300 indigenous languages remain. Of those, 90% are expected to disappear forever in the next 20 years without drastic intervention.

The right to run gaming operations on tribal land is based on the sovereign status of federally recognized tribes. In winning the right to conduct gaming operations in the US, tribes' two most potent weapons have been a string of positive court decisions and the good will of the American voter. The court decisions reasserted the right to operate gaming casinos and the American voter has consistently voted in favor of Indian gaming. On the whole, Americans have recognized the uniqueness of tribes as distinct entities with their own language and cultures. If tribes lose their distinct languages, will they also lose the good will of the American voter? What if the American voter didn't see tribes as distinct cultures anymore? If Indian languages are lost, voters might ask, "How are Indians different from the average American?"

If the trend continues, tribes could lose their languages, culture, and simply be assimilated into American society. With no languages of their own, in the eyes of voters tribes could become indistinguishable from typical American citizens. Furthermore, tribal governments could become more like state and federal social service caregivers, doling out housing, health and education services.

"If tribes lose their languages they are well on the way to losing their distinctive cultures that are characteristic of a (Indian) nation," said Jon Reyhner, Professor of Bilingual Multicultural Education, Northern Arizona University. "The boarding schools were designed to erase language and culture while allotment of reservations was to make

farmers of them. In the 1950s termination actually took place for several tribes. If American Indians would have assimilated into the dominant culture as was hoped by many, then there would be no reason for special programs (or places) for American Indians." He added that knowing traditional names and the past history of land usage is important in land claims.

"It is your duty to pass on your language, culture, values and traditions!" challenged University of Oklahoma Cherokee language professor Greg Drowning Bear, in a speech to the Oklahoma Native Language Association in 2006. "In order for your people to exist in the future, they will need more than a CDIB card!"

Tribes' distinct cultures are based on a foundation of a distinct language. How can a Cherokee religious ceremony be correctly performed, for instance, without using the Cherokee language? How could the medicinal uses of traditional plants be discussed? Bead art? Traditional foods? All cultural roads end with the language itself.

Every few decades a serious challenge arises to test the nation-to-nation status that tribes enjoy with the U.S. government. Without languages, tribes will become more vulnerable to these challenges. In granting federal recognition to tribes, US courts have always considered the ability of tribal members to speak their own language as a measure of the "authenticity" of a tribe. Isn't it reasonable to assume that one day they will use the inability of tribal members to speak their languages as a weapon to remove that sovereign status? At the very least, it will give enemies of tribal sovereignty a new powerful weapon. Even with the considerable political power that tribes have gained in recent years, they must have the voters on their side to achieve political goals.

Tribal leaders are under immense pressure to deal with very real needs of tribal members, such as housing, health care and education. Too often it's the case that the "issue" of language is a high priority during election time, but is one of the first budgets to get the axe when money is tight. Take these recessionary times as an opportunity to re-assess tribal goals and values. Language and culture have a lasting value that transcends money. Although language and culture departments do not produce revenue they are often the soul of a tribe. Their return-on-investment comes in other ways, such as providing a strong identity for young tribal members, who are often looking for identity. Learning their tribal language can do that. It is a way of knowing who, what and

where tribes are, in defense from the forces in society that aim to make them forget.

Fortunately, there has been a resurgent interest in language revitalization across Indian Country. Several tribes have implemented language immersion programs, including schools where only the tribal language is spoken. Full language immersion, most agree, is the most effective method of producing new speakers. Tribes are also experimenting with exciting handheld devices such as the Nintendo DSi or the iPod Touch, programmed in their language and distributed to tribal members.

In May 2009, Linguist Dr. Leanne Hinton (UC Berkeley) commented at the Cherokee Language Symposium in Cherokee, NC, that linguists will have to “revise up” their numbers in regards to speakers. She was referring to new language speakers being created by innovative language revitalization programs such as the Pechanga Band of Luiseno Indians. Pechanga operates a Luiseno language immersion school that is world-class. They have also placed handheld devices, programmed in Luiseno into the homes of tribal members. This resourceful Southern California tribe plans to be among the communities whose tribal language lives into the next century.

Out of more than 100 Native communities that have worked on customized language projects, most do not have the speakers or resources to create an immersion school. The departments are usually comprised of a small core staff completely devoted to the language. These various communities are as diverse as the languages themselves, but they often cite a common set of challenges.

- Little or no language is spoken in the home. The best way to learn a language is to have a Native speaker in the home. Unfortunately most families no longer have this luxury.
- Tribal members do not have convenient access to the language. Students, especially younger ones, are now used to instant access to information.
- Weekly classes are given, but students continue to speak English every day. Systems must be created for integrating the language into students’ lives on a minute-to-minute basis.
- There is a shortage of Native speakers. Low-cost technologies can multiply the work of Native speakers many times over.
- Language is not “cool” to young people. The needs of the youth must be catered to, as young learners are critical to reviving a language.
- Traditional culture competes with popular culture. The language must be seen as relevant in today’s world.

- Urban or widespread populations. Most Indians now live in urban centers, sometimes far removed from the reservation.

There are new technologies that address these seven challenges, with the goal of putting the language back into the home of tribal members where it belongs. One answer is to program custom applications with Native language onto common handheld devices, such as Nintendo DSi and the iPod Touch. This provides students with convenience and familiarity and is less of a challenge for language departments. Another solution is a 3D video game that creates total language immersion in a virtual world. Although pricey, the game is adaptable to any language and can be customized to any tribe or geography. Tribes’ gaming endeavors, after all, merely reward their unique sovereign status; their Native languages and cultures justify it. ♣

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