

NEAR THE EDGE: LANGUAGE REVIVAL FROM THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION

James Rementer, Language Director
The Delaware Tribe, Bartlesville, Oklahoma
and
Bruce L. Pearson, University of South Carolina

1. Introduction. The authors have spent close to forty years, individually and often collaboratively, working on three Native American languages. Our experiences are fairly typical of people who become involved in Indian languages, whether they are born into a tribal community or come as outsiders. The three languages are Delaware and Shawnee, both Algonquian, and Wyandotte, and Iroquoian language. Although the focus of this conference is on Algonquian languages, the threat of extinction is common to all native languages regardless of family identity.

These three languages themselves represent different stages common to threatened languages and typical responses within threatened language communities. The last speaker of Wyandotte died some 50 years ago. Delaware now has but one living native speaker, an elderly man whose health no longer permits him to actively pass on the language. The language is preserved by a few adults who have acquired limited fluency in recent years. Only Shawnee has native speakers still living although all are above age fifty.

The attitudes toward language revival and the programs adopted to preserve the language differ in each community. These differences are based largely on the perceived degree of endangerment and community assumptions about what can be done to preserve the language and, more importantly, what should be done. We will describe the situation in these three communities starting with the one in which we have had the longest and most extensive involvement and proceeding to those in which we have had a lesser degree of involvement.

2a. Background of the Delaware Community. The homeland of the Lenape or Delaware Indians was New Jersey, northern Delaware, southeastern New York, and eastern Pennsylvania, where Rementer grew up. Late in 1960 while going over some documents at the Library of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, he found some letters to anthropologist Frank Speck from a Delaware man named Fred Washington. He wrote to him on the chance that he might still be at the same address and, after a brief correspondence, expressed an interest in coming to Oklahoma. Mr. Washington said to come ahead, and in the summer of 1961 Rementer got on a bus and headed for eastern Oklahoma, where he became involved in the larger of the two Delaware communities in the state.

That summer Rementer met a number of the Delaware speakers and near the end of the summer started working with James H. Thompson and his daughter, Nora Thompson Dean (Delaware name: /weènchipahkìhélèxkwe/ 'Touching Leaves

Woman'). Rementer went back to the Philadelphia area at the end of the summer to take classes at the University of Pennsylvania, but returned to Oklahoma a year later for additional fieldwork. One event after another kept him in Oklahoma among the Delawares, and in 1963, James Thompson adopted him, according to tribal custom, into his family as a grandson. Thus Nora Thompson Dean became Rementer's aunt by adoption.

Pearson's experience in the Delaware community, unlike Rementer's, has been more as an outsider. On his first day in Oklahoma as a graduate student in 1968, he met Nora Thompson Dean and became acquainted with Rementer, who had already become part of her family and had been working on Delaware for seven years. By this time James Thompson had died, so Pearson concentrated on working with Mrs. Dean and a number of her contemporaries then ranging in age from 60s to 80s.

Mrs. Dean proved to be a particularly helpful collaborator. Short of actually telling where morpheme boundaries were located or when phonological processes had taken place to obscure an expected form, she was always ready with helpful comments: "There's something about the word that tells you it's being done over and over again" and the like. Pearson worked with her at intervals from 1968 until her death in 1984. By that time most of her contemporaries were already dead, and it appeared there would be little continuing interest in the Delaware language.

2b. Development of Delaware language programs. Over the years that Rementer lived in the Delaware community there were occasional discussions among the Delaware elders on how best to keep the language alive. One proposal was for weekly meetings of the elders to keep in practice with the language. One man suggested that the elders be fined a nickel a word for every English word used, but someone else jokingly replied that they would all be broke in one meeting. The elders would often talk about the lack of interest among the younger Lenape people for preserving the language and culture. An atmosphere more supportive of culture preservation was still many years away.

There was of course no funding available at that time for such projects as language preservation. Nonetheless, among Lenape people in northeastern Oklahoma, there were several attempts to preserve the language. One such endeavor was by Anna Davis and Elizabeth West who taught classes in 1974 at the New Hope Indian Methodist Church in Dewey, Oklahoma.

Other language classes were taught at Nowata, Oklahoma, by Nora Thompson Dean in the years 1979-80. The fact that the local language classes were reaching only a small number of tribal members caused Mrs. Dean to develop several cassette tapes and booklets in 1980. In 1985 Edward Leonard Thompson, the Ceremonial Chief of the Delaware Tribe of Eastern Oklahoma also taught some language classes. During this period the smaller Delaware Tribe of Western Oklahoma also made sporadic efforts to document the language spoken in their community and publish collections of stories told by elders. This was done with some help from an outside linguist, Ralph Cooley, who died before the project was

completed, leaving it in the hands of others. Neither Rementer nor Pearson had direct involvement in this project, although both had occasional contact with members of the western group.

In 1992 Lucy Blalock began to teach classes under the auspices of the Culture Preservation Committee of the Delaware Tribe at the Tribal headquarters in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. These classes continued until May of 1994. Work continued, however, with some class members going to Mrs. Blalock's home until about a year before her death in 2000. A preliminary version of a Grammar and Dictionary of Delaware, prepared by Lucy Blalock, Bruce Pearson, and Jim Rementer, was compiled in 1994 and remains available. It is expected to serve as the basis for an expanded edition within the next few years.

At the time this article was written in 2002 work had only just begun on the Lenape talking dictionary. It contains not only Lenape words and phrases but also stories and some songs in the language. It can be found at www.talk-Lenape.org.

The Delawares at Moraviantown, Ontario, who speak the closely related Munsi dialect conducted language classes in the late 1970s. Later, some classes were held there for children in grades K-2. These continued until about 1991. Classes for adults were also offered during this period, but budget cutbacks eventually caused all the classes to end. Language work continues, however, and a dictionary of this dialect compiled by the linguist John O'Meara became available in 1996. Several children's books have also been produced in the Munsi dialect by Dianne Snake at Moraviantown.

Meanwhile, the Delawares in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, through their Culture Preservation Committee, have continued to hold language classes using information mainly from Nora Thompson Dean and Lucy Blalock and taught by Rementer. The tribe also carried out a survey of language interest and in response has developed a multimedia compact disk for interactive computer use. The program introduces numbers, common expressions, and familiar nouns. It includes sound files for authentic pronunciation as well as pictures for many objects, especially animals that might not be familiar to an urban population and cultural items that have no counterpart in English. The tribe currently has applied for a grant to fund a three-year program to develop a comprehensive computerized multimedia dictionary as an expansion of this pilot project.

2c. Reasons for Delaware language decline. The "younger" members of the tribe who grew up during the 1920s and 1930s often had parents who had a mixed marriage in that one parent was Delaware, while the other parent was from another tribe or was non-Indian. Also, these "younger" people did not live on a reservation as was the case with some tribes who had the advantage of hearing their native language on a regular basis. The Delawares grew up living among the white people who surrounded them. They attended the local schools and took part in community activities with non-Indians. When they went looking for jobs, most of them found work in the white community.

When this generation began dating, they experienced difficulty finding someone from their own tribe to go out with. Occasionally if they were interested in another Delaware, an elder would remind point out that that person was a relative: the Lenape traditionally calculate family relationships to many degrees. In Lenape there is no word for 'cousin.' All cousins, no matter how distant, are regarded as brothers and sisters, making them ineligible as marriage partners and inappropriate for dating.

In some cases young people moved with their parents to other parts of the country. So there was a break with the elders, the core group of Lenape speakers. For the most part the elders stayed in northeastern Oklahoma and tried to carry on what they could of the traditions of the past-the Big House Church, the Doll Dances, and so forth. But many things worked against preserving the old ways. The young people were in school and had difficulty taking off the twelve days necessary for the Big House Ceremony. As the old ways disappeared, there was little left to tie the younger Lenape with their elders beyond kinship.

At the present time, the total population of the Delaware Tribe with headquarters in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, is approximately 10,500. Of this total, not over 25 percent live within 75 miles of Bartlesville. The Delaware Tribe, as already noted, has one elderly native speaker still living. Rementer, along with tribal members who attended Lucy Blalock's classes, and several linguists speak the language in limited ways-for example, to open business meetings with a formal prayer in Delaware. This gives the language a tenuous hold. But there is probably greater interest in the language now than there has been for many years, and there is now a core of people within the community who are committed to spreading a knowledge of the language.

3. The situation in the Shawnee community. Because of close ties between the Delaware community and the Loyal Shawnee community, Pearson was able to collect a limited amount of Shawnee data within a year after starting work on Delaware. He expanded this effort by working with members of the somewhat larger Absentee Shawnee community shortly after Mrs. Dean's death, supposing at the time there would be no further opportunities to develop Delaware materials. The Absentee Shawnee tribe has an enrollment of some 2500, with over 200 speakers, all aged 50 and older. Traditional ceremonies are still observed, and the feeling is that these ceremonies should be conducted in the traditional language. This is done by ceremonial leaders, aided by younger apprentices who are learning the language. But the number of tribal members who understand the language is declining.

Clearly, the language remains important to members of the community despite the fact it is no longer spoken by people born in the second half of the twentieth century. As Pearson visited members of the community and explained his desire to collect language materials, his intentions were commended by everyone. But at the same time there were built-in obstacles. He was constantly reminded that the elders of the community held the view that people should not sell their language or give it away. One after another, everyone he spoke to declined to

serve as a language consultant. But everyone seemed to genuinely regret this self-imposed restriction. And everyone concluded the interview with the same lament, often accompanied by the same kind of sigh. "If only we had a dictionary so the young people could hold onto the language..."

Even though there is nothing magical about the ability of a dictionary to restore a language to regular use, a dictionary is nonetheless an important tool for documenting a language and establishing conditions for its preservation. Accordingly, Pearson has focused on compilation of a Shawnee language dictionary which now exists in a preliminary version.

There are other complications, however. Since the Shawnee language is now used almost exclusively in a sacred context, the language itself is viewed as a semi-sacred artifact, something to be protected in the same way that the dances and ceremonies themselves are to be protected and shielded from those who might scorn or misuse them. Thus there is understandable reluctance to commit descriptions of formal ceremonies to writing, and even greater reluctance to write down the words spoken on these occasions. Yet these are the very words most in need of preservation.

One volunteer teacher within the community has been conducting Saturday morning classes for a small group of interested learners. But beyond that there is no organized program for language preservation. To any detached observer, it seems clear that this language will be in the same situation as Delaware within a generation.

4. The situation in the Wyandotte community. Since 1994 Pearson has also been working on Wyandotte, an Iroquoian language that became extinct about the middle of the twentieth century. Now that the language is extinct, members of the tribe have grown curious about the language of their forebears. Pearson's involvement in this language came about through a chance meeting at a conference when he was invited by a tribal official to see what could be done to compile language materials for members of the community.

It happens that there is a collection of forty narratives in Wyandotte that were transcribed in the years 1911 and 1912 and later published although never completely analyzed in terms of grammatical and phonological structure. The narratives constitute a gigantic 254-page data problem, supplemented fortunately by available descriptions of other Iroquoian languages having quite similar structure.

Within the last year the Wyandotte Tribe, with Pearson as editor, has published a fully analyzed and annotated interlinear edition of the narratives for tribal use. Pearson is currently in the process of compiling a handbook of the grammar and a dictionary of the language based on material drawn from the narratives.

5. Problems and tentative solutions. Linguists cannot preserve a language by themselves even though they can help by documenting the language and making materials available, and by working with community members in developing a writing system acceptable to that group. At a recent conference on Native Language Preservation, one of the Native American speakers commented that it would be no help if a tribe had fifteen linguists working on the language, because preservation depends on the people of the tribe itself. They are the ones who need to make the effort to learn and preserve their language. This is undeniably true. But there are numerous obstacles to overcome in the process. The obstacles that have become obvious to us are outlined below. Additional hints are given in an appendix.

(1) It is inherently difficult to present complicated grammatical structures in easy-to-understand terms. The fact that one's ancestors spoke a particular language does not automatically make it easy for their monolingual English-speaking descendants to learn that language.

(2) A linguist who presumes to instruct people on the language of their grandparents must proceed with caution. People rather naturally feel a sense of ownership where the ancestral language is concerned, and it is awkward to be instructed in what seems to be one's own language by an outsider. Linguists need a lot of humility. At the same time linguists have an obligation to prepare materials in a step-by-step, easily followed sequence that replicates insofar as possible the natural steps in learning one's native language. And it is important for the linguist to offer encouragement by reminding learners of the inherent difficulty of the task but at the same time reassuring them that the goal of step-by-step mastery is attainable.

People often look for the easiest way to learn a language and hope for shortcuts. There are no easy ways, and there are no shortcuts. Language learners need to know from the beginning that the learning process will be hard work and there will be ups and down along the way. Everyone will make mistakes, and some of these will be embarrassing. But the best learning sometimes comes from mistakes. A sense of humor and an ability to laugh at oneself is a valuable asset.

(3) While there is a natural, even reflexive, demand for a dictionary, there are of course technical problems in compiling a dictionary for use in any community. Members of many Indian communities are literate in English but unaccustomed to writing or reading in their ancestral language. Different people have quite different ideas as to how words should be transcribed and how entries can most effectively be presented. Part of the problem is simply getting people accustomed to seeing the language in print. This, like everything else, requires patience and a willingness to experiment to see what works and what is accepted.

(4) Groundwork must be carefully prepared for any successful language program. This is especially important if the task is language resurrection rather than language preservation. Reference materials must be in place for language students to draw on. These materials can be in the form of print dictionaries,

handbooks, story collections, audiotapes, or multimedia compact disks for interactive computer use.

(5) Those interested in learning the language can be encouraged to use interactive materials on their own to the extent this is feasible. Participation in a class, held at regular intervals and structured so as to progress from simple structures to more complex structures, is desirable in the long run. Meeting once a week to study a language is not an ideal method, but it is at least a start. Learning some of the language is better than knowing none. Language use is a social skill and is best learned as a group activity. Students must be actively involved in each class session. Language learning does not come about from listening to someone talk about the language. It comes from active use of the language.

This use can occur in various ways. It can come from responding to a teacher's questions. It can come from acting out memorized (and later improvised) situations. It can come from reading traditional stories (and in some cases memorizing these stories) so the material becomes part of a common cultural heritage. It can come from looking at pictures and talking about the objects pictured. If learners can use such activities as stepping stones to complete mastery of the language, splendid. But at the very least we can reasonably expect that everyone will become familiar with certain words and phrases, along with the cultural heritage they embody.

Learners can quickly reach the point when they incorporate traditional words in English sentences when referring to traditional culture. Given the right circumstances, it is not impossible to imagine that the number of traditional words would grow until they gradually outnumber English words. And as traditional grammatical structures are substituted for English structures, it is possible to imagine learners gradually returning to their ancestral language. This, in effect, is the reverse of the process that over the years led to the loss of the ancestral language and its replacement by English.

The ideal would undoubtedly be a complete immersion environment, in which the learner is surrounded early in life by fluent speakers of the language so as to learn the language in the most natural way. For many communities struggling to hold on to a language or restore it to use in a total immersion program is impossible, and the other approaches mentioned here become necessary alternatives.

Latin is often thought of as a dead language. But people continue to study Latin, and even people who have not formally studied Latin know and can quote various Latin expressions on appropriate occasions. If a Native American group can regain enough of their ancestral language to use their language in a similar way, their language will be no more dead than Latin. And if they can go beyond that to partial or even complete mastery of the language, so much the better.

Perhaps one of the best examples of both reviving a language and dedication is the work being done by Daryl Baldwin, one of the participants at this conference.

He may be too modest to say much about his own accomplishments, but they certainly deserve mention. He became interested in his ancestral language, Miami, over ten years ago. He soon discovered there were no longer any fluent speakers of the language, but also that it had been meticulously documented by linguists over the years. Of course linguists use an abundance of technical terminology, and Daryl found it necessary to take college courses in linguistics so he could master this language in order to learn Miami.

Once he began to learn Miami, he took the next step and began using the language with his four children. Originally it was a part of a home schooling project where nothing but Miami was used for an hour or two every day, but it now serves as the common way to speak within the family. The older children pass the language on to the younger ones and prefer this language to English when they are among themselves. Daryl's wife, who is not Miami, is also learning the language to support the family effort.

Rementer recently had occasion to visit Daryl Baldwin while working on the interactive Delaware language CD mentioned previously. The oldest Baldwin son was interested in the project and Rementer was impressed with his pronunciation of Delaware and his comments on the similarity of Delaware and Miami words. Another linguist who has visited the Baldwin family was struck by hearing the youngest daughter speaking Miami, a language that has been without speakers for more than thirty years.

In this same spirit, it is worth noting that when Lucy Blalock, with Rementer's help, began offering classes for younger members of the Delaware community, Pearson joined with them to organize the materials and begin work on a handbook and dictionary that could be used by tribal members and also made available to those in the larger community. The philosophy behind the project is that the beauty and complexity of the Delaware language is something that is properly the heritage of all Americans regardless of ethnic origin.

The same could be said of any other Native American language. While these languages are primarily the heritage of those whose ancestors spoke the language, their significance and their very existence is in danger of being lost even in the surviving tribal community. It can be preserved there and made known to a larger community only with dedicated effort and a determined, carefully planned program.

Such a program is under way in the Delaware community. The groundwork is now in place in the Wyandotte community. How these two programs will develop in the coming years remains to be seen. In a sense, the situation is even less certain in the Shawnee community, which still has elderly speakers but has no formal program for language preservation. With fluent speakers still available, the community is a good position to pass the language on to a younger generation, but this can be done only with the kind of dedication and planning that we have already described.

6. Conclusion. The foregoing constitute our suggestions for language preservation. Some people, especially non-Indians, may wonder why Indian people are so concerned about preserving their languages. But if these skeptics (or their children or grandchildren) someday wish to study their own ancestral language, they can enroll in classes or go back to the country their ancestors came from to learn the language. Where can the Pequot, the Miami, the Delaware, and other tribes go? Where?

Well, the answer is simple. Tribal people have their own resources. They can undertake any or all of the actions described in this paper or in any of the other papers presented at this conference.

We have already mentioned our notion that the beauty and complexity of a language is properly the heritage not only of its speakers but of all people, just as the earth and its resources belong to all. We have also mentioned the inevitability of making mistakes, even embarrassing mistakes, in the process of language learning and the need to maintain a sense of humor. We want to close with two short stories.

The first story, perhaps apocryphal, is told of a young man who was eager to learn to pray in his ancestral language. He noticed that many of the older people prayed in the native language in church meetings. One time he took a tape recorder to church and secretly recorded some of these prayers. He was especially impressed by a prayer given by one of the women who spoke clearly and seemed particularly fluent, so he learned it by heart and offered it one evening as his own prayer. Later he asked one of the older men what he thought of the prayer. The man hesitated but finally said, "Well, I sure hope God helps you through your monthly period."

That may illustrate one of the perils of language learning, but we want to add a story that we know to be true. This is the observation of an elderly Shawnee man from the generation of people who went to government boarding schools where children were severely punished if they used their native language, and as a result these children typically returned to their home community speaking only English. This man, who had gone through the process but had managed to hold on to his language, told me, "When you pray, you have to pray in Indian. God didn't go to school. He don't speak English."

APPENDIX

A. If you want to learn your ancestral language, and your tribe still has speakers:

1. If you are working with a language that still has speakers we cannot stress enough the importance of recording everyday things, such as, greetings, small talk, words to use when eating, cooking, working, and especially words used in prayers. While it is good to record the ancient stories of your tribe, for students

in a language class the words and phrases needed in the beginning are the everyday ones. How do you ask for things? How you ask where someone has gone? How do you ask if you can help? How do you say, "Pass the coffee." How do you ask, "Where's the bathroom?"

2. In some languages it is also important to know whether there is a different expression or different way of saying the same thing if said by a woman instead of a man. This occurs in the Delaware language in only a few cases. Some of our elder female speakers found it distressing when a man learning the language would come up to them and address them as nitis which means 'my male friend', and should only be said by one man to another. In addition, the word is used only in speaking about a male friend. There is an entirely different word used in direct address.

3. Do not wait to start your language work until your tribe gets a grant, or until a linguist shows up. Buy blank tapes and an inexpensive tape recorder at a local store, learn how to use it, and find a speaker who is willing to teach you. As stated above, record everything you can. It might also be a good idea to purchase a lavalier microphone at a store like Radio Shack. This can be attached to the speaker's shirt or blouse and will help eliminate outside noises.

4. Do not tell one person that someone else knew a word or fact which the person you are asking did not know. And, do not tell the person, "But this other person says it this way." Make a note of the differences and recheck them later.

5. Do not interrupt when someone is answering your question. Among white people it is often fine to jump in with your opinion, but among Indians this is rude. Let the person finish talking. You might be surprised what you will learn.

B. If you want to learn your ancestral language, and your tribe no longer has speakers:

1. Find a linguist who is or has worked on your language or a related language. A phone call to a large university with a linguistics department, especially one that specializes in Native American languages, can usually get you started in finding such a linguist. Ask what resources are available for your language. Universities with such programs include the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Kansas, Indiana University, and Yale University.

C. Finally, from over 20 years experience assisting with language classes some practical suggestions come to mind.

1. It is very important to have a well thought out plan of the topics you're going to cover in your classes.

2. When you teach, Repeat, repeat, repeat. This is how children learn their native language. Provide as much repetition as possible, but vary it as much as you can to avoid boredom.

3. Try to find things that will keep students interested in the subject. These can be games, pictures, even stuffed animals or puppets. We have found that bingo can be a great incentive for the students to learn numbers. This can be combined with word bingo in which you can give random words or words divided into classes, such as animals, birds, plants, and so on.

4. Provide audiotapes of the words and sentences used in class so students can do home study.

5. You can ask students what topics or words they would like to have covered, but do this sparingly as it can lead to a lot of random words and sentences.

6. You will encounter people who have no interest in learning their ancestral language. Often you will hear excuses like, "Who would I talk it with?" or "My parents didn't speak it, why should I want to?" Don't let them discourage you.

7. Expect to have dropouts from the class. Some people just sign up out of curiosity, some think it will be easy, and some will not want to devote the time and effort necessary. Don't let the dropouts discourage you.

8. Do not praise one student in front of the others. Strive to maintain a sense that everyone is making progress and developing a language community together

9. If any of your students have babies or very young children, encourage them to expose the little ones to the sounds of the language as soon as possible. Ideally this should become a normal part of parent-child interaction.

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