TAG ARCHIVES: MUNSEE

Saving Dying Languages

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The clock on the kitchen wall at the Moraviantown Reserve seniors' centre loudly clicks away the seconds as Velma Noah waits to see if any of the few remaining speakers of a vanishing language can remember the word for "beet."

Five elderly women and a man stare ahead of them, silently searching for a word they may not have heard since they were children, when nearly everyone on this small reserve could speak the language. Ms. Noah frets the cover of an English-Delaware dictionary, which might hold a clue. But if the word for beet isn't in the book and she can't tease it out of the minds of the three women most likely to know, one more piece of the language could be gone forever.

Alma Burgoon is 80; Retta Huff, 86; and her cousin Mattie Huff, 90. Along with one or two other elderly women on the reserve, "they're the last known speakers. They're all over the age of 70," says Ms. Noah, 36-year-old mother of four.

Suddenly there's chuckling around the folding table as someone remembers: *maxkeetkweek*.

Europeans gave this language the name Delaware (or Munsee Delaware), but its advocates today are taking back the name Lunaape (or Lenape). Its once-large territory has been reduced to a rump at Munsee-Delaware Nation — also known as Moraviantown — a reserve near London, Ont., with a population of about 200.

Like dozens of First Nations languages across the country, Lunaape is in danger of disappearing within a matter of years. Canada's indigenous languages are in a state of crisis. Unless the knowledge is transferred to a new generation, dozens of traditional tongues will breathe their last.

Only a handful of indigenous languages — principally Inuktitut, Ojibway and various dialects of Cree — can be expected to survive without active intervention, according to linguistics experts.

There is no specific point at which a language officially becomes endangered. "The way that linguists usually look at it is to take into consideration the normal course of language transmission," says John O'Meara, a linguist at Lakehead University who has studied Lunaape since 1979. "By that I mean languages are passed on from one generation to the next. If at some point that process of transmission is broken, then you can deduce that the language isn't going to be spoken by younger people in the future."

Lunaape is on the list of nearly extinct languages as “Munsee.” British Columbia figures prominently, as the home of Bella Coola (20 speakers left by last count in 2002), Haida (55), Kutenai (12), Sechelt (40) and seven others. The Yukon tongue of Tagish is a heartbeat away from vanishing: Lucy Wren, the last native speaker, is in her 90s and there is sparse interest from the community in reviving the language.”

Native languages have declined because of economic and social pressure to speak English and French. Language activists also blame assimilationist education policies; children sent to residential schools were often punished for speaking the languages they had learned at home.

“What happens, then, when you begin to devalue the languages?” asks Keren Rice, a linguistics professor at the University of Toronto, and director of its Centre for Aboriginal Initiatives. “People didn’t speak them to their children because they didn’t want their children to have the hard time that they had.”

Should a full language revival prove unworkable in some communities, experts like Prof. Poser suggest there are other ways of bringing about a linguistic comeback.

“We can certainly imagine a situation in which children learn native languages in school as written languages, together with much cultural information, just as European children not very long ago learned Latin, or as many Jews still learn Hebrew.”

For Ms. Noah, who spends a couple days each week rounding up most of what’s left of her community’s Lunaape speakers so she can practice the language, reviving Lunaape isn’t simply a matter of remembering vocabulary and syntax; it is a mission to restore traditional culture, and thus identity. Without it, she says, Moraviantown will continue to struggle with problems like drug addiction and high secondary school dropout rates.

“It’s not the social workers that’ll help, it’s the language. If you know your language, you know who you are,” she says.

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