

Chief Dull Knife Community is Strengthening the Northern Cheyenne Language and Culture



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The loss of American Indian languages has recently accelerated to such an extent that the majority of those who speak them have become highly concerned. Our Native languages can help and should help us to preserve our spiritual identities in addition to our own individual and cultural identities. No language should ever have to die. To prevent language death, what is needed by those working to strengthen endangered languages is careful and considerate planning.

Language Loss Among American Indians

I want to tell you a story, the old man said to the group of eager young listeners. The children settled into comfortable positions on the floor around the old man who was seated on some comfortable blankets. When they were comfortable, he began talking, “A long time ago, when the animals and the plants and the rocks still talked to us, there was this Bat who did not know . . .” At this point, the old man got up and left . . .

The language loss being experienced by American Indians¹ is not an isolated phenomenon. For example, in the book, *Vanishing Voices*, the authors contend that language loss is occurring around the world and that if nothing is done, almost all Aboriginal languages will soon be dead.

Researchers have found that the United States is a graveyard for hundreds of native languages. Most of the native languages that are still spoken today are barely hanging on, possibly only a generation away from extinction (Nettle & Romaine, 2000). A 1962 survey of the North American continent revealed that there were 79 American Indian languages, most of whose speakers were over 50 (e.g., the Pomo and the Yuki languages of California). There were 51 languages with fewer than 10 speakers (e.g., the Penobscot language of Maine); 35

languages had between 10 and 100 speakers. Only six languages—among them Navajo, Cherokee, and Mohawk—had more than 10,000 speakers. It is almost certain that at least 51 of these languages have all but disappeared. Languages with less than 100 speakers are so close to extinction that revival for everyday use seems unlikely (Nettle & Romaine, 2000, p. 5).

The loss of American Indian languages has been well chronicled by ethnologists, linguists, anthropologists, missionaries, and even hurried along by government-run schools, other educational organizations, some mission schools, some religious denominations, and especially government officials, at least until 1953 when the U.S. Government loosened some of the restrictions it had imposed on American Indians. The loss of American Indian languages has recently accelerated to such an extent that the majority of those who speak American Indian languages have become highly concerned. There is nothing wrong with our American Indian languages. Those who speak these languages know that. What is wrong and what has been wrong all along are the systematic attempts to eradicate, first, the speakers of these languages and, second, to eradicate the languages when the first horrific tactic did not work. Such systematic attempts did succeed in wiping away the identities of many American Indians. This also did succeed in stereotyping speakers of American Indian languages as beings less than human. We have all heard Tonto speak to the Lone Ranger. We have all seen the tall American Indian, with arms regally crossed, uttering with studied profundity, “Ugh.” And we have seen and been disgusted by American Indian mascots engaging in foolish antics on football fields.

Cheyenne Language Loss

In 1997 the Cultural Affairs Department of Chief Dull Knife College submitted an application² to the Administration for Native Americans. This application was for a language preservation planning grant in the amount of \$50,000. The purpose of the planning grant was to (1) design, distribute, and evaluate a survey instrument to assess the current status of Cheyenne language use on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation; (2) to use the data collected to establish community long-range language goals; and (3) to identify and acquire the tools (e.g., materials, equipment, personnel, and support) to prepare Chief Dull Knife College to design and implement a Cheyenne Language Center and curriculum guide. In preparing the grant application, the college found that the number of fluent Cheyenne speakers under age 30 was very low. The rate of language loss was also rapidly accelerating, as more and more households do not use Cheyenne as their first language. It was estimated that in another ten years, only tribal members over age 40 would speak Cheyenne fluently unless aggressive measures were taken. It was the wish of the tribal elders and those concerned with the future of the Cheyenne people that language loss be stopped.

It is now 2003. The optimistic view is that the youngest speakers of the Cheyenne language are in their early 30s. Project that age by 40 years to 2043. Those Cheyenne speakers who are now in their early 30s will then be 73 years old. Given

that the life expectancy of American Indians born, raised, and who continue to live on their reservations are in their late 40s, it seems that after these speakers reach their late 40s, the Cheyenne language will be living on borrowed time. Conceivably, the language could be dead in 2043 as a spoken language and would exist only in written form, or preserved on audiocassettes, CD-ROMs, and videotapes.

Projections such as the preceding are useful since they put a very real and practical timeline on the possible fate of the Cheyenne language. Similar projections can be applied to most all American Indian languages. Once these projections are made, then language-strengthening plans can be developed that have the right vision, mission, goals, and objectives that will help strengthen these endangered languages.

To Teach, To Teach About, To Teach With, and To Teach For Academic Credit

No language should ever have to die. To prevent language death, what is needed by those working to strengthen endangered languages is a carefully thought out plan. Questions that must be asked are the following: (1) What is the language strengthening program going to do? (2) Is it going TO TEACH the language? (3) Is it going TO TEACH ABOUT the language? (4) Is it going TO TEACH WITH the language? or (5) Is it going TO TEACH FOR ACADEMIC CREDIT?

Many language-strengthening programs do not ask these questions and end up attempting to answer all of these questions in one program, thereby dooming their efforts to failure even before they start. For instance, a language-strengthening program, which is going TO TEACH the language, requires a vision statement, a mission statement, pertinent goals, objectives, and activities that are different from programs that are going TO TEACH ABOUT or TO TEACH WITH the language or TO TEACH FOR ACADEMIC CREDIT.

An example of a vision statement for a language-strengthening program that aims TO TEACH the language might read like the following: *The language-strengthening program will teach the language to all Cheyenne people.* An example of a mission statement could read like this: *It is the mission of this program to strengthen the Cheyenne language through the application of oral-based teaching methodologies.* The goals, objectives, and activities could then be stated in such a way as to further the vision and mission statements.

An example of a vision statement for a language-strengthening program TO TEACH ABOUT the language might read like the following: *All Cheyenne people will learn to read and write the Cheyenne language.* An example of a mission statement could read like this: *CDKC will schedule general linguistic courses for the Cheyenne people.* A typical goal statement could be: *CDKC will teach the writing system of the Northern Cheyenne language.* A typical objective could be written like this: *Participants will write Cheyenne as they hear it, using the English alphabet.*

A vision statement for a program that seeks TO TEACH WITH the language could read like this: *All classroom subjects will be taught using the*

Cheyenne language as the primary language of instruction. A mission statement could read like this: *Students will learn biology in a classroom with the Cheyenne language as the language of instruction.* A typical goal statement might read like this: *All students will be exposed to biology using a sheltered Cheyenne language teaching technique.*

Finally, a fourth kind of language instruction program also must be discussed. This is the kind that is offered to TEACH FOR ACADEMIC CREDIT for high school or college graduation. Usually, a program of this kind does not have fluency as its main priority because the criteria that a language learner is asked to meet are designed to fit neatly into a summer session, a quarter, or a semester, and often on a one- or two-year basis. Learners and teachers often have unrealistic expectations in these kinds of language classes because they expect to gain fluency. However, these classes usually concentrate heavily on the grammatical structure and on writing of the language they are studying. Usually, these kinds of classes are modeled the way the English language is taught in high schools and colleges. A person taking these kinds of classes may gain an appreciation of a language, which hopefully will enable the learner to pursue programs or visits to the home of the language they are studying in order to gain fluency in that language.

Obviously, attempts at formulating vision, mission, goal, objective, and activity statements like those in the preceding paragraphs need extensive refining so that they fit with the aspirations of the people who speak the target language. The examples of vision, mission, goal, objective, and activity statements represent an attempt to delineate for those people who are directing language programs the kind of questions they must be asking and answering. If a language program does not have an oral language component as the central focus of the language-strengthening program, then that program is doomed to failure. Each speaker must be able to form and use the smallest sounds (phonemes) of their languages orally. Each speaker must be exposed to vocabulary at all levels.

The CDKC Mission Statement

Chief Dull Knife College is an open-admission, community-based, comprehensive tribally controlled community college and land grant institution designed to provide affordable, quality educational opportunities to residents of the Northern Cheyenne reservation and surrounding communities. The college is named in honor of one of Northern Cheyenne's most respected historical leaders who fought overwhelming odds to maintain the sovereignty of the Cheyenne people, a century before the college's first academic courses were offered in 1978. Reflecting Chief Dull Knife's determination, the college's primary mission is to provide educational and cultural leadership to its constituents.

Chief Dull Knife College operates in the belief that all individuals should be treated with dignity and respect; afforded equal opportunity to acquire complete educational experience; given an opportunity to discover and develop their special aptitudes and insights; and provided an opportunity to equip

themselves for a fulfilling life and responsible citizenship in a world characterized by change, while simultaneously studying and enhancing Cheyenne cultural values.

The CDKC Cultural Affairs Department: Its Relevance to the CDKC Mission

There are two especially pertinent sentences in the following statement: “Reflecting Chief Dull Knife's determination, the College's primary mission is to provide educational and cultural leadership to its constituents” and “. . . while simultaneously studying and enhancing Cheyenne cultural values.” These statements give the college the reason to emphasize the perpetuation of the Northern Cheyenne language and the values that accompany it. The mission statement was initially adopted in 1979 and has been periodically updated to reflect reality and changing times.

CDKC and Its Involvement in Culture and Language Strengthening

A number of efforts have been launched to strengthen and preserve the Cheyenne language. Examples are described below.

Curriculum Development

Curriculum development has been attempted in CDKC's efforts to teach the Cheyenne language. Yet so many of these attempts get entangled in the garbled vision, mission, goals, objectives, and activities statements that were discussed previously. The people implementing these programs spend so much time trying to make sense of this garble that hardly any language teaching and learning occur. Again the pertinent questions (TO TEACH, or TO TEACH ABOUT, or TO TEACH WITH the language, or TO TEACH THE LANGUAGE FOR ACADEMIC CREDIT?) have to be asked at the beginning and the answers clearly articulated.

Total Physical Response³

At CDKC, the efforts are TO TEACH the language with an oral based language methodology, Total Physical Response (TPR). TPR, an oral language teaching methodology, was devised by Dr. James Asher of San Jose State University. This is a methodology that systematizes and replicates the manner in which humans learn their first languages and applies it to second language learning environments. When applied correctly, it is a powerful oral second language teaching and learning method. The many positive aspects of this methodology include its ease of implementation in a classroom or non-classroom setting; its need for minimum curriculum development once the methodology has been correctly implemented; its minimal need for high priced, high tech electronic tools; its immediate application without the need for a four-year teaching degree or teacher certification; its adaptability to American Indian languages because

of the characteristics of American Indian languages like long words built around verbs; its portability between schools; its ability to introduce and build upon thematic units; its versatility to include all levels of language learning proficiency in a classroom or non-classroom setting; its ability to include students at any language proficiency or lack of proficiency level into the program; and its flexibility in incorporating other language methodologies, like total immersion into a language strengthening program.

All of these factors enable TPR to fit into any language teaching or learning situation and makes it especially valuable for those programs that do not have the time to train their language teachers because their language is highly endangered and the only speakers left are in their 70s and 80s. While the speakers of the Cheyenne language on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation are still considerably younger, TPR is still a very good language teaching tool. That shows you its versatility.

Immersion Camp

For the past five years, the CDKC Cultural Affairs Department has sponsored a Cheyenne language immersion camp at Crazy Head Springs between Lame Deer and Ashland, Montana on the reservation. The camp operates for two weeks during the month of July. It employs a work force of people who speak the Cheyenne language fluently or as fluently as the language is now spoken. This camp is an attempt to replicate the kind of language immersion environment that most of the present day, fluent speakers experienced when they were learning Cheyenne as young people. The camp employs at least eight language teachers and each teacher has a group of five non-Cheyenne speakers that they teach. The number of participants is limited to five so that the student/teacher ratio offers maximum one-on-one opportunities for teaching and learning.

While the immersion camp does not guarantee the creation of highly fluent speakers, it, at the very least, exposes Cheyennes who do not speak the Cheyenne language to an appreciation of the language itself. Hopefully, those who are exposed will want to continue learning the language either at home or in school. An alternative would be to enroll in the master language teacher-student apprentice program at Chief Dull Knife College.

Master Language Teachers and Language Interns and Class 7

A three-year grant funded by the Administration for Native Americans (ANA) and implemented by the CDKC Cultural Affairs Department includes master language teacher and language intern apprentice components. The first year was fraught with start-up difficulties and high turnover rates among the language interns. However, as it begins its second year, both the master language teachers and the language intern apprentices have stabilized. Among the issues that resulted in the high turnover rate is that the intern apprentice positions are only halftime and, as such, the pay is not geared for providing the main income for families. Some dedicated student apprentices have departed from the program

because they found full time and higher paying jobs. One intern apprentice has passed the Northern Cheyenne Class 7 certification test and is now a fully certificated teacher who can teach the Cheyenne language in kindergarten to twelfth grade schools. She will be teaching at the college during the 2003 spring semester. More are expected to pass this certification test during the life of the grant. The Class 7 certificate is a unique language and culture certification program whose certification procedures and standards are developed and implemented by each of Montana's 11 American Indian languages. The procedures and standards are established by representatives from each language group. They are then submitted to the Montana Office of Public Instruction. Each language group establishes its own procedures and standards and administers the oral language fluency examination. Establishing the procedures and standards are the responsibility of each tribal council since this Class 7 certification is based on an agreement between the state of Montana and each of the American Indian language groups and their tribal councils.

On the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, the Tribe designated Chief Dull Knife College to establish the procedures and standards; the College president develops, implements, and administers, and also certifies successful applicants. Each of Montana's American Indian language groups develops their own standards and procedures and submits them to the Montana Office of Public Instruction. Consequently, each set of procedures and standards differs considerably in content, stringency, implementation, and certification. However, this certification is unique in that Class 7 teachers can now share in the responsibilities and benefits of the other six classifications of teachers in the state of Montana and, thus, Class 7 is an innovation in American Indian education that certainly contributes to the long range perpetuation and strengthening of American Indian languages and cultures.

Why Preserve The Cheyenne Language and Culture?

In America, a country, which seeks to quantify and classify everything, it is difficult to explain to people why a language and culture with so few speakers and adherents should be preserved and strengthened. Indeed, even many Cheyennes question why CDKC should expend the energy, the financial resources, and personnel that language strengthening requires. In many ways, these are legitimate concerns when the world around and about the reservation is so overwhelmingly English language oriented. But if a language were only to be judged on its ubiquity or lack of ubiquity, its usefulness or lack of usefulness, then it would ignore factors that make the speakers of that language, whether it be Cheyenne or some other American Indian language, whole in a very real sense. American Indian languages transmit and strengthen our cultural and individual identities and any splintering of these abilities to transmit or to strengthen does irreparable harm to American Indian psyches. As one young boy noted, "When you forget the language, you start to forget who you are as a people" (Shulman, 2002). Nobody wants to forget who they are. Everybody wants to be firmly

situated and comfortable in their own skin and when American Indians forget who they are as a people, then the disintegration of belongingness has begun.

These are the really abstract notions that people from the majority culture may have a difficult time grasping, especially when speaking English is equated with patriotism and Americanism. American Indians must remain firm in their individual and cultural identities and one way to do that is to armor people with a positive self-image. American Indians learning their own languages and cultures can help bring about this positive self-image. American Indians have been stereotyped to such an extent that even American Indians have begun to believe those stereotypes and may subconsciously reject their own heritages. For instance, some reservation born teenagers now sport inner city, ghetto, and barrio attire as if in very overt rejection of their own American Indian-ness by engaging in urban gang-type behavior. American Indians must take a good hard look at what their children are doing and why they are doing it. Something in our cultures is driving some American Indian youngsters away from their cultures. Part of it may be the aforementioned belief in the stereotypes that have plagued American Indians since 1492. We must try to bring them back to their community. Many of the elements that promote gang behavior are already part of the package of being American Indian

For instance, many gangs promote colors; American Indians have distinctive colors relative to each nation. Gangs promote belongingness. American Indians already have that in their extended family, tribal, and clan structures. Gangs promote certain clothing; American Indians have certain regalia for ceremonial and celebratory occasions. Gangs stake out certain “turf” areas; American Indians have reservations but are not as destructively possessive of them as are gangs. Gangs have their own music; so do American Indians. Gangs have their own languages and so do American Indians. But the one thing that gangs do not have in a positive way is a spiritual outlook; the reverence for life and all living things.

Our languages can help and should help us preserve our spiritual identities in addition to our own individual and cultural identities. This spiritualism can be the way to heal many of our own dysfunctions and can help lead our youngsters back to the American Indian way of life. This way of life can also help American Indians retain their limited land bases—reservations—because the language of each American Indian nation ties that nation closely and intimately to their sacred land references. Ultimately, land is what we want to retain and in order to retain it physically and spiritually, we must continue to use our own methods for healing decades of old hurts.

Conclusion

The statistics are daunting. There are dire predictions by linguists that the majority of the Native languages now spoken will become extinct within the next generation. The remaining languages may still be used orally for 50 years, at the most generous estimate if no language strengthening efforts are begun soon.

Many Native people, however, do not share this view. Virtually every Native community in the United States and Canada, including Hawaii and American Samoa, are fighting to stave off the potential loss of their language. Concerns expressed in such publications as *Scientific American* set forth alarming facts regarding endangered languages world-wide, where even languages with tens of thousands of speakers are considered endangered. Compared to Native communities in North America—most of whose speakers may number less than a dozen—these would seem to be thriving languages. Put another way, what chance do we have if we're down to our last couple of speakers in some communities, and in others the language may not have been heard for several generations? While announcements of inevitable extinction of our languages may meet the criteria of scientists, such predictions are contradicted by the efforts going on in Native communities to avert this language shift to English only. This is a vision of reality based upon hard work and urgency. Time will prove our efforts successful if we do not lose heart. The same courage that was shown by our ancestors has sustained us throughout the past several hundred years to maintain our distinct identities.

The message is clear: American Indian languages are in danger of becoming extinct. The message is also clear that there is a tremendously encouraging ululation of determination among speakers of American Indian languages. They do not hold a gloom and doom view of the fate of their languages. They believe their languages will survive, thrive, and prosper in the coming millennia. The language strengthening program at CDKC is an example of such determination.

At this point, the old man returned to finish the story of “The Bat.”⁴

... where Bat belonged. A meeting of all living things had been called to decide important things, like where each animal would live, which animal would eat plants or other animals, things like that. Bat flew to where the birds were meeting. When he landed on a branch, all the birds gave him funny looks. “Ayyy, what you doing here?” Wren asked. “You're not a bird. You fly like us but you look like a mouse. Go meet with the animals. You don't belong here. We're real birds.” Bat was so embarrassed that he flew to where the animals were. When he got there, the animals looked at him very strangely, and they asked him, “What are you doing here? You're not an animal. You might look like one of us but you're not. You're a bird. You fly. Go back and meet with the birds.” Bat was so confused. Where did he belong? Was he a bird or an animal? He couldn't ask anybody. He decided he wouldn't meet with any group. He flew off to be by himself. That's why Bat now flies only at night and hangs, covered up with his wings, and hangs upside down during day light hours.

So the old man did return, to the delight of the kids so that they could hear the ending of the story, which dealt with identity and belonging and how Bat was affected. What if the old man had never returned? The incomplete story would have hung in the air for untold centuries with no hope of ever being completed. Now, with renewed interest in American Indian languages, the many stories will have endings and they will be completed in American Indian languages.

Hena'haanehe!

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Endnotes

¹This article uses *American Indians* to refer to the American Indians of the northern western hemisphere.

²This grant application is entitled *Northern Cheyenne Language Instructor Student Apprentice Program* (Grant #N90NL0211), and was submitted March 16, 2001 to the Administration for Native Americans located in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

³For additional information regarding Total Physical Response, see J. Asher, *Originator of the World Famous Total Physical Response* (newly expanded 5th edition) Los Gatos, CA: Sky Oaks Productions or visit <http://www.languageimpact.com/articles/other/ashertpr.htm>

⁴This interruption from the opening paragraph is an attempt to illustrate what happens when an American Indian language dies.

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