

LANGUAGE PRESERVATION IN THREE NATIVE AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

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and

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1. **Introduction.** The authors have spent some thirty years, individually and often collaboratively, working on three Native American languages. Our experiences are fairly typical of non-Indians who become interested in Indian languages. The three languages themselves represent different stages common to threatened languages and typical responses within the language communities.

2 **The Delaware Community** The original 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 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 Oklahoma.

With little sleep during a two-and-a-half day trip, he expected to chat with Mr. Washington for a while and then find a place to get some sleep. But before the conversation reached that point he asked Rementer, "You ready to go to the Stomp Dance?" He then explained what a stomp dance was and added a word about how long it would last. "All night!"

That summer Rementer met a number of the Delaware speakers and near the end of the summer started working in with Nora Thompson Dean and her father, James H. Thompson. One of the first phrases he asked Mrs. Dean was, "How do you do?" She sat for a minute, as if waiting, and then asked, "How do you do what?" Thus came the first lesson in taking nothing for granted.

Rementer went back to the Philadelphia area at the end of the summer to take some 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 into his family as a grandson. It was thus that Nora Dean became Rementer's aunt by adoption.

Over the years there was occasional discussion 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, Fred Fall-Leaf, 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 for preserving the language and culture. This was before Indian things became popular.

There was of course no funding available at that time for such a project 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.



ANNA ANDERSON DAVIS



ELIZABETH LONGBONE WEST

Other language classes were taught at Nowata, Oklahoma, by Nora Thompson Dean (Touching Leaves Woman) 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 1980.¹ In 1985 Edward Leonard Thompson, the Ceremonial Chief of the Delaware Tribe of eastern Oklahoma also taught some language classes



NORA THOMPSON DEAN



EDWARD LEONARD THOMPSON

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 continued until May of 1994 when the Veterans Administration threatened to cut off her pension if she continued to "work," so classes had to be discontinued. Work continues today with some class members going to Mrs. Blalock's home. However, due to Veteran Administration rules the tribe can no longer offer

remuneration for her work. In addition, work continues on a Grammar of Delaware being prepared by Lucy Blalock², Bruce Pearson, and Jim Rementer.



LUCY PARKS BLALOCK

Dallas Dennis has discussed the work among the Delawares of Western Oklahoma in a separate article. The Delawares at Moraviantown, Ontario, who speak the closely related Munsí 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. Still more classes were held, but budget cutbacks caused all the classes to end. Language work continues, however, and a dictionary of this dialect compiled by John O'Meara became available in February 1996.

Some people might ask why the language is disappearing. The youngest generation actually to grow up using the language was born before 1920. Some of these people who grew up with Lenape as their first language were sometimes puzzled as to why the white people seemed to use their own language rather imprecisely. One time a white woman who

was visiting Mrs. Dean said she had to get on home because she was "going to make chicken for dinner." After she left, Mrs. Dean commented to Rementer, with a twinkle in her eye, "Now that's the kind of woman you should look for. She can make a chicken. You'd never have to buy groceries again." Another time a professor sent her a letter in which he said that he "had his grandchildren for Thanksgiving dinner." Mrs Dean's comment was, "I never would have guessed he was a cannibal."

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 another tribe or non-Indian. Also, these "younger" people did not live on a reservation as was the case with some tribes where they heard nothing but their native language. They 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 it came time to start dating they experienced difficulty finding someone from their own tribe to go out with. Occasionally when they were interested in someone, an elder would remind them that that person was a relative, for the Lenape figure relationship out to many degrees. In Lenape there is no word for 'cousin'. All cousins, even if ten times removed, are regarded as brothers and sisters.

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 except 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 has only two speakers of the language left, one who is totally fluent, and one who is nearly fluent. Classes are still being held with the help of these people, but we cannot be sure how much longer this will be possible.

Linguists cannot preserve the 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 one recent conference on Native Language Preservation, one of the Native American speakers commented that it wouldn't help if a tribe had fifteen linguists working on the language, because the preservation depends on the people of that tribe. They are the ones who need to make the effort to learn and preserve their language.

It is possible that some of the newer computer equipment can be of some help. It has recently become possible with the advances in computers to preserve native languages not only in written form, but also in spoken form. This produces an actual recording and not simply a computer-synthesized voice. With the push of a few keys one can hear a native speaker saying words and sentences. The word can be accompanied by a picture of what the word represents. For example, typing in the word "dog" would bring a picture of a dog to the screen while the recording of a Lenape speaker saying "mwekane" would be heard. And for those trying to learn the language, pressing one key would play the word again for as many times as the student wishes to hear it.

Unfortunately, recent cutbacks in funding in government and private sectors may mean that, even though the equipment to produce such learning aids is available and continues to improve, the possibility that most North American Indian tribes may acquire such equipment is diminishing.

When asked by a non-Indian what it was like to be one of the few people left who could speak Lenape, Mrs. Dean replied, "Imagine yourself suddenly in a world where all you heard was Lenape. You turn on the radio or television and you hear only Lenape. You go to town and all you see are Lenape people. You try to talk to some of your younger white people, and they answer in Lenape, 'I don't understand that whiteman talk!' Wouldn't you long to hear your English language spoken again, even a few words?"

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 was able to meet Nora Thompson Dean and become 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. Then when Lucy Blalock with Jim Rementer's help began offering classes for younger members of the 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 also 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 question of who "owns" a language, however, is a topic that must always be approached with delicacy.

3 The Shawnee Community Because of close ties between the Eastern 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. Traditional ceremonies are still observed, and the feeling is that these ceremonies should be conducted in the traditional language.

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 present 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..."

Pearson sensed that he had been spoiled by the ease of working with Nora Thompson Dean and began to suspect that, despite his contact with the Delaware community he had probably been insensitive in proposing to "collect" language material. Anyone familiar with the Whorfian hypothesis should have sensed that people might reify the notion of "collecting" and assume that when something is collected it is necessarily taken away. Also, one who is not overtrained as a linguist might have realized sooner that, 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.

There is still another complication. 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.

Under these circumstances one must be careful not to intrude. Pearson has found that he is tolerated and even welcomed in the community, but he has learned that it is still wise not to ask for more than can reasonably be expected. He and some of his students have managed to find individuals who are willing to serve as consultants. They have been able to collect standard vocabularies and have gone over material collected by previous investigators, especially the material of the late C. F. Voegelin. The work thus far has led to a very sketchy dictionary.

However, it remains difficult to collect language data relating to ceremonial practices. It takes a long time to establish the level of confidence that will allow access to such materials or, alternatively, to find members of the community who already have access and who have the time and willingness to undertake the work of data collection, analysis, and presentation in a useful and acceptable format.

There are of course technical problems in compiling a dictionary for use in any community. Members of the Shawnee community are literate in English but unaccustomed to writing or reading in Shawnee. 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. The Wyandotte Community Since 1994 Pearson has also been working on Wyandotte, an Iroquoian language that became extinct about the middle of the 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 where 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 between 1911 and 1913 and later published although never completely analyzed in terms of grammatical and phonological structure. So the narratives constitute a gigantic 254-page data problem, supplemented fortunately by available descriptions of other Iroquoian languages having quite similar structure.

Pearson has managed at this point to circulate the draft of a handbook and dictionary among tribal officials, but this initial effort barely scratches the surface in terms of the grammatical apparatus and complete vocabulary of the language. Tribal officials involved in archives and culture preservation have been helpful in suggesting workable transcription practices. And, given the interrupted transmission of the language, there is something of a feeling that we are all learning together.

Despite this positive and supportive approach, it is still 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. And a linguist who presumes to instruct people on the language of their grandparents must proceed with caution.

As linguists we need to avoid hubris and cultivate humility along with our technical skills. Imagine what it would be like if the United States were to be occupied by aliens from outer space bringing with them a foreign culture and speaking Vulcan or Klingon or any other imaginable language. In time, we would probably adopt this language and abandon English. But our great grandchildren a century from now might want to learn something about the language of their forbears. How would they feel having this language taught to them by Vulcans or Klingons?

ENDNOTE:

1. The Lenape Languages Lessons, as well as some Lenape Music Tapes, are presently available through the following sources:

a. The Delaware Tribal Gift Shop, 108 S Seneca, Bartlesville, OK, 74006. They can be contacted by regular mail, or by e-mail at <lenape@cowboy.net> for more information.

b. Touching Leaves Indian Crafts, 927 E. Portland Ave, Dewey, OK, 74029 The e-mail address is <TouchLeaf@aol.com>, and the catalog can be seen on the Internet at <www.cowboy.net/native/tlc>.

c. Audio-Forum, 96 Broad Street, Guilford, CT, 06437. Their catalog is available by writing to them, or it can be seen on the Internet is at <www.mediatekk.com/audioforum/>.

2. The illustrations in this article were done by Delaware artist Clayton Chambers.