

FIGHTING ACCULTURATION AND REBUILDING CONFIDENCE IN ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES

*By Rohahe Iain Phillips**

I was asked to speak at this conference regarding education in the mother tongue and, as an aboriginal person, I can say that our ancient traditional languages are extremely important to us. What I would like to do is to lay out what I have to say in three sections starting with a little bit of history, including some impediments to the transmission of our languages, then including the current situation and some pretty horrific statistics.

Pre-contact, our languages were strong as they were the only languages we spoke. During the period of initial contact, the languages that were spoken between us and those people doing the explorations of the new world were our languages. So, initial trade and gathering of information was done by the outside people learning our languages. That worked quite well for a while, but as the process of colonization and domination began to take over, that situation became completely reversed and, as the situation progressed, the use of our languages and traditional cultures were banned.

This resulted finally, in the early part of this century, in the process of the residential schools here in Canada. The residential schools are a very bad part of Canadian history. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the story of residential schools, the government of Canada actually had a policy of acculturation. It was part of the federal government policy to de-indianize Indians in Canada. Children were removed from their families and their home cultures and put in residential schools. These schools were often at great distances from their home communities and these children were often separated from their friends and families for months, sometimes even years. At these residential schools, the use of aboriginal traditional languages was completely banned. In fact, it was a punishable offence to speak your original language. As a result, a lot of these children grew up totally confused about their cultural identity. They didn't know if they were white. They didn't know if they were Indian. They didn't know what they were.

The whole result of the residential schools was a generation and a half that we refer to as the "lost generation" that has no idea of what their culture is, that has no idea of what being Onkwehonwe (this is a Mohawk word meaning "the people" or "aboriginal people") is, that has no idea about what being aboriginal or having a cultural identity means.

Now, this is a widespread phenomenon across Canada and the legacy of what could almost be called cultural genocide that came through these residential schools is known from one end of Canada to the other, from north to south. As a

* Languages and Culture Officer, Assembly of First Nations.

result, there was a loss of the cultural identity and the loss of the language which is the key component to a cultural identity. If you destroy the language, you destroy the culture. The colonial powers were actually very well equipped to deal with a cultural take-over when they came here, especially the British. The British were particularly good at it because they had hundreds of years of working on the Scots, the Irish and Welsh. So they knew very well what the process was to acculturate a people.

The other part of that is the destruction of the cultures. There are a number of reservations that did not have residential schools. I can point to my reservation and the reserves at Akwesasne and Kanesatake which you know as the Cornwall and the Oka Reserves. There were no residential schools on these reserves. We were fairly lucky. We had day schools, so a lot of the children were not sent away and separated from parents, but the acculturation still took place because a lot of our people do not know how to speak the language. It was forbidden to speak the language. My mother, when she first started school, did not speak English. When I started school, I spoke half English and half Mohawk. By the time I got out of elementary school, I did not speak Mohawk any more. Now, hand in hand with that is the process of acculturation. There is that whole lost generation and a half where my parents and those of the preceding generation did not want us to grow up disadvantaged. Their thought process was: "I'm not going to teach my children our traditional language because I do not want my children to be poor. I do not want my children to be disadvantaged like we were growing up in a society where there was this bombardment of a culture that is not our own, through television, radio and everything." So we were not taught our languages. I struggled all my life to retain what I have now and I am still relearning my language.

The other thing that happens with a lot of our people, especially those of us who have gone out and gotten a white education, is that we have become fearful of our people and of our religions. Of course, there is the religious overlay on that too. We have had many, many years of religious intolerance that said our traditional ways were evil. Now I am the first one to admit that I have had some amazingly wonderful dialogues with the Anglican Church and members of the Roman Catholic Church just recently on traditional spirituality and the attitude is definitely changing. It is improving vastly. But a lot of our people are still afraid. A lot of us are afraid of our own people and afraid of our own cultures because we have had so many years of people saying our traditions were bad and that we should be learning the white peoples' ways. It takes a long time to break out of that mode. This is the other half of the experience of the lost generation and a half. I am part of that half generation because I still have one foot in my people's world and one foot in the other world and it has been a struggle for me to recapture and to re-learn my people's traditions. Part of the process has been learning to accept and that has been an extremely difficult process for me.

Now I have to explain that I grew up under very unusual circumstances back home on my reserve. I was raised a Roman Catholic, but, at the same time, in secret, my parents were taking me to the long house. So, Yes, I went to church on Sunday morning, but I went to all the socials and the festivals in the Long House too, so I had

the advantage of learning both systems and both sets of values. It has taken me many years to come to a balance between both systems. Now I am definitely going back to my own people's traditional ways and that has caused a number of turnings upside downs in my life, but it has slowly but surely balanced itself out.

So this is the process of self-rediscovery that has to happen with individuals, but it can be aided by processes within the community. Now among First Nations people, the process of revitalizing the languages is just beginning. When I was in the last year of elementary school and my first year of high school, it was the first time that I ever heard Mohawk being spoken in the school. I remember being shocked by the fact that one of the teachers was actually teaching Mohawk words as part of the curriculum in the school. I remember getting copies of the papers and bringing them home to my mother and my mother broke down and cried because, for her, she spoke fluent Mohawk, but she did not want to teach us Mohawk: as I said, she did not want us to have that disadvantage. This is why that whole process of relearning your culture and relearning your language is so important.

Part of my talk here is pulled from three separate sources. I did a talk at the National Indian Education Conference last May, called "The Importance of Tradition and Culture in the Classroom" and I spent the better part of an hour talking to teachers and First Nations educators saying:

O.K. bring the Elders in. Speak the language in the classroom. Incorporate the ritual cycles into the classroom curriculum. Make sure that your students know their culture, whether they are coming from the West Coast or the East Coast, whether they are Mohawk, whether they are Salish. Let them know it's important because, without it, we lose all sense of our identity. We lose who we are.

Especially in Canada, there has been so much damage done already that can be corrected. It's going to be a slow process.

What I want to do now is to talk a little bit about the status of aboriginal languages today and where we are. This includes some pretty horrific statistics. The latest estimate of the total number of aboriginal speakers that are found in the 1991 census shows that, of the aboriginal people surveyed, 35.8% of aboriginal adults speak an aboriginal language. This rate drops to only 21% among aboriginal children. It shows that aboriginal languages across Canada are experiencing a serious decline in speakers in the younger age groups. There is little consensus among linguistic specialists as to the number of indigenous languages. This is because they still need to develop research in this area. Estimates of the number of languages in Canada range from 53 to 70 and are divided among 11 language families. The 1990 *Report* of the Standing Committee of the House of Commons called *You Took My Talk* stated that 43 of the 53 known aboriginal languages are on the verge of extinction. Seven are in danger, and here's the scary one: only three aboriginal languages in Canada are considered to have any excellent chance of survival.

The 1982 Commissioner of Official Languages study of Canada's first languages also estimated that only three languages can be expected to survive. We, at

the Assembly of First Nations, undertook a study a number of years ago where we surveyed 151 communities and we created a much more detailed report on the state of languages. The concentration of languages can be divided into five categories based on the number of speakers and the distribution across age groups. Communities with a language fluency rate of over 80% in all age groups were categorized as having a flourishing language. The next categories were "enduring languages," "declining languages," "endangered languages" and "critical languages." The state of "critical" was assigned to communities where there were less than ten speakers living in the community. Our *Report* entitled *Towards the Rebirth of First Nations Languages* states that 12% of First Nations Languages are flourishing; 18% of First Nations have enduring languages; 28% have declining languages and 11% have critical languages. These results are alarming because it indicates that 67% of all first Nations Languages are declining, endangered or critical.

The need to strengthen the teaching in the classroom of our languages is aptly demonstrated by all these numbers and it is not just our *Report*. The Aboriginal People's Survey, which is part of the Census of Canada, the Standing Committee *Report* of the House of Commons and our own Assembly of First Nations *Report* show these numbers. The numbers speak for themselves.

I am going to abandon my papers now and go into my more traditional mode of speaking which is the way our traditional elders speak. I am going to speak more from my heart and my head as opposed to speaking from papers because I prefer to speak from my heart. When I addressed the First Nations educators, administrators and those people at the education conference in May, we sat more in a circle and I've always been uncomfortable with this podium. I am going to speak a little bit about my personal experiences with languages and learning because I think I have spoken enough about the statistics and some of the horror that has happened.

In my case having grown up with a foot in both worlds. I have had the advantage and the disadvantage of seeing both sides of the coin. The disadvantage I can see where when I was growing up was that I was told I had to keep my involvement and my family's involvement secret. When I was growing up I was told it was a subversive thing, a dangerous and anti-Christian thing to be involved with the Long House and to learn our people's traditional ways. However, our people did this for us, especially my mother. Every day, when I get up, I thank her for her foresight and her wisdom for doing this to us. I don't mean that in a negative sense. She did it *for* us and I just wish that more of my people would have had this advantage. As I said, when I was growing up, we had to keep our traditions secret.

Later on, by the time I got to my first year in University, we began to discover that more and more people were beginning to look at the traditional ways. The elected band council on our reserve, which is still a political system which was imposed on us through the *Indian Act*, began to work within a more traditional mode and format and managed to blend the two systems. There is some problem with a true blend of the two systems. They are so radically different that I don't think we will ever really come to a clear consensus on that. But one of the things that I saw as a

great change was that documents began to be produced in both Mohawk and English. Documents began to be sent out to the community in Mohawk.

Another of the changes that happened within the community itself to start promoting the languages started, as I said, in my last year of elementary school, when one teacher began to teach and speak a few words of Mohawk in the classroom. She started this by herself, not with the approval of the school board. She produced small documents on aboriginal history by herself. These were positive documents and not, you know, the “noble savage” or the “disappearing savage” and, you know, “Indians were like this.” I am sure you have all had a chance to look at some very interesting books that said very interesting things about First Nations people. As I said, those were the documents that made my mother cry and, as I said, I could not understand why it made her cry. Years later, I began to understand because it meant that, for the first time in our school system – where we were not encouraged to speak our language, where there was no reference to our history and where the history we were taught was “Canadian history” along with “British history” –, we were starting to learn a little bit about our *own* history.

This led to a sort of flowering of interesting curriculum development in the schools, especially in Kahnawake, Akwesasne and Kanasatake. The three curriculum offices are now very well established. There are immersion programmes in the three communities. The problem I personally see with the immersion programmes is that they stop too soon. A lot of people will put their children in the immersion programme in Kindergarten, grade one and maybe grade two, then they pull them out and put them back into the regular English programme so that they will learn their math, their history and their sciences in English, so they won't be disadvantaged. One of the things we have found out is that the critical year for maintaining the language base is grade three. If you keep the children in immersion in grade three, they have the language skills and cultural identity built into them and they are more inclined to maintain it.

The other thing we have found is that those children who have gone through the immersion programme past grade three actually have a better capacity for thinking and abstraction because they can think in both systems. We have found that the Western system is based on giving facts, whereas in the aboriginal teaching systems, we do not present you with more facts. We present you with more questions. Those questions make you think and build the facts yourself and then build more bridges. So we are one step just outside of that narrowly logical system, and our education tends to be more community based and less rigid.

Having sat with a number of elders, having been to a number of elders gatherings across this country, having had a chance to sit and talk with the elders from everywhere from the Yukon to B.C., I have even spent some time with the Hopi and the Navaho in Arizona and I have learned. The knowledge that can be imparted by the elders in cooperation with First Nations educators when we bring these two systems and teaching methods together, the Indo-European system and the aboriginal, combined with the languages, produces much more intelligent children. This has been proven a number of times. Among children who have been raised with the language

and allowed to *think* in the language and who, at the same time, have worked with the Indo-European system, the abstraction in the mind works much better and much faster.

As I say, there was a lot of fear and parents are still pulling their children out of immersion programme at the end of grade one or at the beginning of grade two because they have this fear that their children are going to be disadvantaged if they speak only Mohawk. But I can point to our own reserve which is just outside Montreal, one of the largest metropolitan areas in Canada and we are exposed to both English and French all the time: the fear that a lot of parents have, that their children are not going to be able to learn one of the two official languages, is totally unfounded.

With regard to official languages, as noted by someone in the audience, we have in Canada only two official languages, English and French, except for the new territory of Nunavut which has a number of official languages. I think this is really good and I think it is going to be a nightmare for them, but they are very lucky in that they have been able to maintain their language base a little bit better than we, some of the southern Native peoples, have.

I don't know how much I can emphasize enough the link between the language, the spirituality and the tradition. In a presentation that I gave to the Standing Committee on Culture at the House of Commons last September, they asked me to answer questions about cultural industries and how to separate this. And one of the first things I told them was that you cannot separate culture and language. It just does not work with Native people, and I think, universally. I have talked to Native people from one end of Canada to the other. You can not separate anything because everything is sacred. Everything comes from the creator and having come from the Creator means that everything we do and everything we use is sacred. This is why we are told all the time to walk with respect for every one and every thing, because every one and every thing comes from the Creator.

That is embodied in the language. I went to a conference in Arizona a number of years ago and one of the topics given was on linguistics and language generally. This may seem a little crass. I was shocked when I read it. But one of the presenters put forward the point that, in the Indo-European languages, and especially in English, everything is based on sexuality. It is gender specific, whereas everything in most aboriginal languages is based on prayer and spirituality.

Now, you can see right away that, if children are raised with the language and have those language skills which preserve their cultural identity, which preserve their spiritual identity, which preserve those methods of thinking and the ability to think abstractly in different modes, it would have a very profound effect on their manner of dealing with the world. Children who are taught both systems have a great advantage. We are only now just making the first sets of steps in our communities. Yes, our languages are in decline and we have a lot of rebuilding to do. It is those horrible statistics I gave you earlier during my presentation that I hope we can reverse.