

Rekindling the Flutes of Fire

Why Indigenous Languages Matter to Humanity

Matthew Bronson

The world's languages are dying. Ninety percent of the world's languages are expected to die in the next one hundred years.

—D. Nettle and S. Romaine, *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World's Languages*

There is a story that the Maidu of northern California tell about the beginning of the world and the origin of language. Mouse was blowing his flutes of fire and heating up the rocks for the people in the sweat lodge. He would drop them through a hole in the roof and the people near the rocks would be warmed and would speak to each other, the way people should, in Maidu. Just then, Coyote came around and distracted Mouse from his duties, and he stopped. The people in the sweat lodge who were farther away from the hot rocks then grew cold. In fact, they were so cold their teeth began to chatter. And all those people could only chatter; they never learned to speak “properly,” and that is how all the other languages of the world came to be.¹

There is a lot of wisdom in this little tale (as well as a bit of ethnocentrism—more on that later) and a beginning point from which to consider both the value and the challenge of holding the

world's languages back from the brink of extinction. Languages, like people, need love and care to sustain themselves. Someone has to continually blow the flutes of fire to heat up the rocks, or it gets cold really quickly in the sweat lodge. And once the fire goes out (just as in the old days before stick rubbing and matches), it has gone out forever.

This is what gives this issue immediate poignancy and resonance. A large portion of the world's indigenous languages, along with the voices of wisdom embodied in them, are being extinguished, banished forever to the cold and silent place where songs go when no one sings them anymore. What do communities themselves, not to mention linguists and other scientists, stand to lose in the great language extinction now under way? Moreover, what is at stake for humanity?

On the way to answering these questions, it will be helpful to challenge some of the assumptions and practices that have brought us to this state of affairs. In particular, many people think that a world free of linguistic diversity will automatically be a more harmonious and prosperous place (the post-Babel fallacy). Others “exoticize” the experience and culture of First Peoples as “noble savages,” removing them from their human and historical (i.e.,

postcolonial) context (the cultural-linguistic zoo fallacy). To avoid these fallacies and to maximize the opportunities that do exist, the struggle for language rights should be viewed as a facet of a larger struggle. Preserving and revitalizing indigenous languages makes the most sense when these activities are aligned with (1) the will and benefit of the communities themselves within their present, lived contexts, (2) a general movement for social and environmental justice, and (3) a quest to identify and disseminate more sustainable ways of life on a planet in crisis. I'll start with a look at the present significance of an ancient myth.

The Legacy of Babel: English-Only and One World Language

As far as I can tell, every culture on the planet includes stories about the origin of language in what Diné elder Leon Secatero calls “first instructions.” These are instructions given to all peoples by the creator (however this is conceived) in the moments after their creation that tell them who they are and why they are here. Secatero has devoted his life to uncovering the first instructions embedded in the Diné language, especially their number system, for the benefit of his people and humanity.² Within another native tradition, the Cheyenne tell the following story:

Long ago, people and animals and spirits and plants all communicated in the same way. Then something happened. After that, we had to talk to each other in human speech. But we retained the “old language” for dreams, and for communicating with spirits and animals and plants.³

Again, there is important wisdom encapsulated in this story. First of all, it posits a connection between all living things and the invisible realm of spirit, which remains accessible to speaking humans, albeit in an alternate “old language.” In this sense Cheyenne people thought of themselves as “bilinguals” in the first instance, fluent in at least the language of everyday life and the old language, common to the web of life, that came before it and made it possible in the first place. The old language of the Cheyenne is nothing less than the way that humans find and affirm their connection with other beings and with the living universe itself. It is, however, not to be mistaken for the everyday language, in this case Cheyenne, that, like Maidu, may only be spoken by those in the inner circle. Rather, the old language emanates from a universal intelligence.

On a similar note, Lorin Smith, a healer and elder in the Weya tradition of the Kashaya Pomo near Bodega Bay, in northern California, tells how he was initiated by a disembodied teacher into the lost medicine ways of his people. Tom Smith, a deceased elder and shaman, taught Lorin how to speak the old language of the plants and animals. Whenever someone was sick, Lorin was instructed to go and talk to the plants and tell them about the ailment. Then the plant that could most help would volunteer and tell Lorin how it should be gathered and prepared for the benefit of the patient.⁴

The Western, more specifically Judeo-Christian, tradition has its own origin of language story, the Tower of Babel, one in which bilingualism doesn't figure at all. In the Old Testament account, the diversity of the world's languages (today numbering some 6,000–8,000 and dropping) was a punishment, inflicted by a (somewhat insecure?) deity upon humanity for daring to erect a tower that would challenge his heavenly reign.

Prior to this divine intervention (when “something happened” in the Cheyenne version), everyone spoke the same language and work on the tower was progressing nicely. At one point, God “confused the language of the earth,” bringing forth many languages where before there had been one. It is no surprise that the project timeline slipped considerably when the workers could not understand each other anymore! The lesson of the story for some in the present day is that globalization is delivering us from the curse of Babel. Where before there were many languages, now there will be only a few, with a correspondingly reduced possibility for misunderstanding, tribalism, conflict, and war among the world's peoples.

Although every story, especially one that has been passed along for a few millennia, has an element of truth, it also hides as much as it reveals. The argument against the legacy of Babel is a bit subtle but is worth making here. It is relevant to consider what is still hidden in our collective unconscious, in the shadow of the tower, as we consider language and human rights in the twenty-first century.

We can begin by recognizing that English-only, antibilingual education, and similar postcolonial inheritances retain the logic and conclusions, if not the imagery, of the Babel story. To summarize: what is different is bad, a source of mystery and dissent rather than light and reason, and a point of contention rather than convergence. Linguistic diversity is nothing less than a fall from an original position of grace where everyone was unified and got along. Within this post-Babel framework, functional multilingualism, that is, the capacity to transact the business of life in multiple languages, is, at best, a distraction from the serious business of learning the language of power. At worst, multilingualism is a positive evil, a violation of the sacred equation one language = one nation = one people. Of course there are many, perhaps a majority of people, here in the “center of empire” who, as a result of thinking like this see no problem with the ongoing linguistic holocaust. The current collapse of linguistic diversity means for some that we have finally overcome the

historic curse of Babel. “At last, we'll be able to understand each other!” goes the triumphal, post-Babel refrain.

Nevertheless, most of the world flourishes in conditions of bi- and multilingualism, and an ideology of monolingualism is a conceit which can only be nourished here in the center of empire. Consider the fact that 84 percent of the world's languages do not enjoy official national status to put this into perspective. Science is finally beginning to study bilingualism as something other than a deficit or an aberration.⁵ Recent research shows that bilinguals actually use their brains differently from monolinguals. Bilinguals employ a less lateralized strategy, tend to be creative thinkers, and also enjoy many cognitive and educational advantages over monolinguals. This is especially true when both languages are actively nurtured and maintained into adolescence and beyond.

The support of indigenous languages does not equate, as the post-Babel ideology assumes, to a complete rejection of the global languages of power and domination. A more encompassing view emerges when language rights are viewed as human rights. Under such an equation, all the peoples of the world have an inherent right to their own home languages, as well as a right to be educated in a national language.

The legacy of Babel leads many, even today, toward simplistic either/or thinking, a zero-sum game in which any maintenance of native languages is bad for children and necessarily a blow against the nation and the unity of the people. Under the force of this thinking legislative initiatives like Proposition 227 in California (which severely restricted instruction in public schools in languages other than English) make perfect sense. Under the shadow of Babel, students who come to school speaking Spanish, Chinese, or Hopi must give up what they have learned in order to become fully civilized, that is, monolingual in English. This was of course the same thinking that licensed kidnapping native children during the early to mid-twentieth century. For many decades, native children were forced into boarding schools where they were whipped if they spoke in their

native tongues. The systematic destruction of native languages and cultures in the Americas is no more a “natural” progression than is the deforestation of 93 percent of the same land. In our race to get out from under this shadow, it’s an easy hop to an “alternative” fallacy which I discuss below, “the noble savage/linguistic zoo.”

The Linguistic Zoo and the Noble Savage Fallacy

Here, native experience, knowledge, and language, rather than being actively destroyed, are inflated by romantic fantasy even as they are reduced to a quaint set of props and metaphors from a “simpler time.” Under this conception, indigenous societies are timeless. They must be preserved in their pristine state, quarantined from global civilization, and protected from encroachment like the spotted owl in the Pacific Northwest. Disney’s version of Pocahontas comes to mind, as does the appropriation of Native American symbols and caricatures as high-school mascots across the country (which Native Americans rightly decry as racist and insulting). A similar, cartoonlike manifestation of this fallacy comes out of the “culture envy” that draws people of northern European extraction who have been largely stripped of their own indigenous traditions to “play Indian.” As anyone who has been to an “Authentic Indian Powwow” in Germany or Switzerland can attest, festooning oneself in turquoise jewelry and Indian regalia doesn’t have much to do with honoring native cultures. Native peoples continue to evolve and resist simple, nineteenth-century ideals born of initial colonial contact. Nevertheless, these are fragile societies, and to paraphrase linguist Marianne Mithun of U.C. Santa Barbara, the last thing we should be doing at this point is inundating them with a new wave of ecolinguistic tourists.

It is time to throw the wooden Indian out of the cigar store. Camcorders are now as much a part of traditional rituals in many South Sea islands as music and dancing, and the hottest ticket in Manhattan this month is a feature-length film made entirely in Inuit by a native of the Arctic Circle. Extinct California lan-

guages such as Ohlone and Chumash may soon be available on CD-ROM. The millions of people of indigenous extraction on the planet, those who have the most at stake in the present discussion, must be allowed to take their place at the table to voice not only their silenced histories but also their present challenges and their hopes for a better future.

My point is simple: We do a disservice to our native brothers and sisters to imagine that anyone but they should determine how their languages and traditions are relevant to their present day, often fourth-world, existence in the world’s reservations and cultural enclaves. “The most important thing is to talk to the people themselves about what they want to do with their language,” says Mithun. “Then maybe we need to help them create a written language, a formal understanding of their grammar, and, eventually, culturally relevant curricula for their schools.” This was exactly the path taken by Mithun in her work with the Mohawk of New York and Quebec as they attempted to reverse a language shift in their community in the 1970s and 1980s, with some success. Similarly, linguist Wally Chafe came to the aid of the Seneca people in upstate New York several decades ago when they noticed that only a handful of people could do the ritual talk expected in the longhouse. He helped them over the years to record their language, to describe it, to teach it to new generations, and to manage it as a cultural resource at least as precious as their ancestral lands.

At this juncture, a dialogue between modern and native science, as embodied in endangered indigenous languages and the teachings that go with them, can point the way back toward an ancient and sustainable future. Depending upon where you sit—as a member of an indigenous community, as a linguist or other scientist, or as a “common earth person,” to use a translation of a Lakhotá phrase—your stake in this dialogue will vary.

The Vanishing Voices of the Ancestors: Why Indigenous People Value Their Languages

Our language is the language of the plants

and the animals and the rocks and the wind and the birds. The only thing that we can base our own thought on is our language because our language [Hopi] itself is a living entity, growing out of the earth, and it’s basically a reflection of the natural phenomena, with the natural world around us. Being able to understand and speak the Hopi language is a very integral part of being Hopi. (Brian Honyouti, Hopi teacher, on Nova 1990)

From the Inuit seal hunters of the Arctic to the Kwara’ë subsistence farmers of the Solomon Islands, the varied circumstances of the indigenous peoples of the world resist generalization. Their situations and historical experiences vary as much as those of any other defined group. Thus, points of agreement among such diverse traditions merit special attention. They are, at least, indicative of some kind of collective human wisdom, distilled in the crucible of the habitable world and tested empirically over millennia of experience.

As an example, indigenous cultures accept as fact that the land and the language are intimately connected and that language belongs to, and connects First Peoples with, the natural world. “Language and nature are inwardly akin” wrote linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf after working with the Hopi language. First Peoples the world over seem to agree with Hopi elder Brian Honyouti’s statements about the connection of language and the natural world. Australian aborigines say that the land “sings” and that by attuning themselves to its “song-lines” in the earth they can find their way across the vastness of the outback when they go on walkabouts. Among the Temiar of Malaysia, mediums in trance merge with spirits in nature and the hybrid creature sings a healing song. The song is later recounted by the medium and sung by a chorus to heal those suffering from disease.⁶

People come to know themselves and their place in the more-than-human world largely through their language. Leroy Littlebear, a Blackfoot elder from Northern Alberta says of his native Algonquin language:

We see that English seems to think it can make statements about anything in the universe that sound like they’re true. But we’re not so sure. In Blackfoot, we don’t

know whether it applies to the whole universe. We just know that it works really well for describing how things are around here [i.e., in Blackfoot land]. (*First Language of Spirituality Conference 1999*)

This connection with the land is not an abstract concept or a “metaphor” for native peoples. In the Blackfoot case, recent work in cultural and linguistic revitalization has revealed a hidden order to the human landscape. When native scientists put together what was known about the original place names of the prominent features of the Blackfoot territory, they discovered that the vestigial place names in Blackfoot, translated as “elbow” or “knee,” in fact referred to the features of the original man, “napi,” and the original woman in Blackfoot teaching. Their forms emerge in relief only when one takes an aerial view. Not only was this a practical way to navigate—for who can forget how to get from their foot to their head?—it indicated a direct connection between the landscape and the first instructions of the Blackfoot people. With the recent revitalization of their language and traditions, including the reintroduction of an ancient syllabary, the Blackfoot are also reinvigorating their connection with their ancient earth and sky wisdom.

In the current global language extinction, endangered communities stand to lose with their languages nothing less than their identities as distinct peoples and their legal and spiritual connection with their ancestral land. Mira Sussman, an anthropologist interested in Berber autonomy movements, relates a telling story of the struggle for language rights among the Tamazight (Berber) peoples of the Maghreb.

A Tamazight Berber man I met in southern Morocco, struggling against the Moroccan nationalist and Islamist hegemony of Arabic, summarized this point well. We’re at this Berber liberation meeting, and I was really worried when he figured out I was Jewish. His reaction was as surprising as it was memorable. He said: “You [Jews] got your language back! You got your land back! If you can do it, we [Berbers] can do it.” Basically what he said was, “You lost your oral language and kept your written, we were vice versa, we can learn from you, do it like you, and get our land back.” (Sussman interview, 7/3/2002)

Admittedly, the political rather than the sacred connection between the language, the land, and the people is highlighted in this example. Nevertheless, it speaks to the aspirations of native peoples everywhere. Indeed, language revitalization is, for them, a way to tap the wisdom of their ancestors as they attempt to imagine a postcolonial future. Endangered communities can use language revitalization as a practical strategy of great value as they struggle in the world for recognition, self-determination, and access to resources. With a suicide rate that is one and a half times greater than the norm, Alaskan Natives and Native Americans are recognizing that they are traumatized peoples who suffer from “soul loss”; they have been displaced from their land and forgotten their languages. Language revitalization addresses the spiritual needs of the people even as it increases their capacity to act in the wider world.

Altered States of Language: What Linguists Learn from Indigenous Languages

For linguists, it is useful to think of language as doing three things, as displayed in this diagram:

Thoughts ⇔ Sounds

Language organizes thoughts, it organizes sounds, and it associates the thoughts with the sounds. In so doing, it provides humans with a handle on their experiences that other living beings seem to lack. By associating thoughts with sounds, it is possible for separate humans to know something of what other humans are thinking (Chafe 1997, 6–7).

As the branch of the human sciences concerned with language, linguistics has a special interest in maintaining linguistic diversity. Indigenous languages are to the linguist as rare butterflies and endangered sea mammals are to the biologist.

The earth’s languages reveal the variety of ways that humans have learned to use their biological endowments to live with each other and to adapt to the natural world. When a language dies, a unique configuration of sounds and rules for combining them also dies. Because linguists are still in the early

stages of understanding the parameters of speech production and reception, any loss in variety at this stage will restrict the scientific value of findings. To illustrate the range of ways that languages can differ at the sound level, consider the case of Lushotseed, a Salishan language spoken in the Puget Sound area of Washington State. It has the following thirty-seven consonants:

P, t, c, ch, k, q, k^w, q, q^w, p’, t’, c’, tl’, ch’, k’, q’, k’^w, q’^w, ? b, d, g, j, j’, g, g^w, s, ʔ, l, sh, x, x^w, h, l, y, w, l’, y’, w’

By contrast, English has some thirty consonants, and Mohawk nine. The amazing thing is that all languages seem to get by just fine with their allotment of sounds. In languages where there are very few sounds, such as Hawaiian or Mohawk, the syllable structure tends to approximate a CV(C) pattern (Consonant Vowel). This can result in relatively longer words, as the language must now find distinct labels for all the things that people need to talk about. The state fish of Hawai’i, for example, is “humuhumunukunukuapua’a,” which means “little pig-nosed fish.” Here simplicity at one level of the language system corresponds to complexity at another. Linguists aspire to discover this kind of nested complexity within languages as ordered systems and to explain what they find. In their better moments, they consider how their findings pertain to wider inquiry into the parameters and meaning of being human.

While there is not space here to go into the “thought” side of the equation in any detail, suffice it to say that indigenous languages vary in the way that they organize thinking at least as much as they do in terms of sound. Consider as a small example the fact that native languages, at least in the Americas, tend to favor verbs rather than nouns in their formulation of utterances. Thus, it has been said that “God is not a noun in native America.” *Thanka wakan* in Lakhota is perhaps better translated as the “great mysteriousing” than as the “great mystery.” Sakéj Henderson says that his people can speak Micmaq (Nova Scotia) all day without uttering a single noun. English, by contrast, requires a noun or pronoun subject in every sentence, even when there is no

“logical” subject. For example, linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf pointed out that the Hopi term *rehpi* means “flashed” and would be properly uttered when, say, one saw lightening in the sky, without any implication that “something” flashed: the flashing and “what” is flashing are coterminous.

English, by contrast, requires a subject in such an utterance, even though it might be the dummy subject “it,” as in “It flashed.” This is the same “impersonal it” that is required in “It is raining.” To demonstrate that this is a placeholder without an underlying referent, one has only to consider the myriad ways that people answer the question, What is the “it” in “It is raining”? (the sky, the rain, the weather, God, the raindrops?). In their strong preference for process over product, Native American grammars differ significantly from the European grammars with which we are most familiar. In the absence of counterexamples, we take a noun-centered strategy as the only “logical” way to organize a language. If “philosophy is grammar writ large,” as Whorf claims, when we lose a language, we also lose an alternative world view and a unique way of organizing experience. In addition, we lose a chance to challenge our own unconscious assumptions about how the mind—and the world—works.

Today, in the twenty-first century, linguistics and Western science are struggling to understand the universe as a living and unfolding process in scientific terms. The scientific community may be recognizing the perennial wisdom and applicability of the verb-centered science and wisdom of native people at the eleventh hour. Linguists and other scientists have their part to play in ensuring that this verb-centered wisdom is not frozen in the past but that it is also inflected in the present and future tenses.

Back to the Future: Indigenous Languages in the Twenty-First Century

The both/and world of complementary thinking (as opposed to Newtonian either/or) is foundational to ancient native science and twenty-first-century quantum physics and ecology.

Quantum physicists such as David

Bohm, a colleague of Albert Einstein, and Brian Josephson, Nobel laureate and discoverer of coherence in quantum tunneling, have become interested in the insights of native science even as their own native European languages failed to adequately describe the quantum realm. For example, the whole question of whether light is a “wave” or a “particle” is one of the interesting conundrums of modern physics. The answer, of course, depends on who’s asking and how. In native science there is no prior commitment to “something” that is “waving,” and complementarity is an assumed attribute of the universe. In native-science terms, it is not surprising that light shows up differently depending on the situation. Indeed, a key facet of native science and language is that it aspires to represent the local and particular, as opposed to universal and invariant knowledge.

The images of Babel and the noble savage to which I referred earlier guide a fair amount of thinking on the subject of indigenous languages and cultures. What I have suggested here is a third way, a postcolonial approach that acknowledges the complexities and challenges of the contemporary lived realities of native peoples and respects their right to self-determination of language and culture. Linguists and other scientists also stand to benefit from a respectful dialogue with indigenous peoples. For the first time in five hundred years, natives, linguists, other scientists, and educators are engaging in dialogues as equals about local and world situations and how they can work together for the benefit of all people.

Native languages and knowledge can coexist with modern technology and with English, Chinese, Arabic, and the other languages of empire. This is not a question of a mere possibility but, now, a moral and practical imperative. The world stands at an important crossroads where the boundaries between disciplines and between peoples and cultures are blurring into a “contact zone” of infinite combinations and possibilities. For the promise of this time to be fully realized, the contact zone needs to be approached with “respect thinking,” that is, a radical embrace of the distinctness of languages and their accompanying

world views as complementary rather than contradictory. In respect thinking, complexity becomes a source for new ideas rather than an engine of dissent and confusion.

Also at stake is a vast store of local knowledge about how to live in harmony with the earth and about the place of humans in a more-than-human world. The earth wisdom of First Peoples, so sorely needed in a world in search of sustainable systems, is deeply embedded in the stories, the words, the grammar, and even the sounds of the languages that are dying. These are almost entirely oral languages and traditions—once the last elder dies, there are usually no written records from which one might even attempt a reconstruction. As the last speakers of these languages die, earth wisdom, wisdom that has been distilled over millennia of intimate cohabitation with particular ecosystems,⁷ dies with them. It can never again be reconstructed in its original form.

In today’s terms, the chill North Wind of globalization has dislodged First Peoples everywhere from the warmth of their own ancient and local ways of speaking, being, and knowing, just as it has dislodged them from their homes into towns and huge cities (see McWhorter 2001). The North Wind has found its way into the sacred places of First Peoples, especially in the Global South. It is carrying them from their homes in the far-flung jungles of Papua and the mountains of Nepal, leaving them to chatter in the shantytowns of Port Moresby and Kathmandu in the cold, hard, portable languages of commerce and domination. People are struggling to rekindle their flutes of fire all over the planet, to revitalize the language and wisdom of their ancestors. We of the Global North must engage with this process and these endangered communities only as true allies, not as saviors or saints. When we shed romantic, nineteenth-century delusions and extricate ourselves from the shadow of Babel, we can better serve not only the interests of endangered communities but all of humanity.

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NOTES

1. This is adapted from Hinton (1994), *Flutes of Fire*, a delightful selection of articles on California's indigenous languages, which I recommend to linguist and general reader alike.

2. See the transcription of the first, second, and third Language of Spirituality conferences, Seed Open University, Albuquerque, NM. For more information see www.seedopenu.edu.

3. This story was told to Dan Moonhawk Alford by Sakéj Henderson. See for details.

4. While it exceeds the scope of this paper to fully explore the implications of these teachings, I note in passing that ethnobotanists haven't a clue as to how a native pharmacopoeia develops. Think for a moment of the odds of discovering that foxglove (*digitalis*) is good for the heart! Did early herbal healers have to go through trial and error with 276,000 other substances first, giving the suffering "patient" a new meaning, or did they just "ask the plants" to prescribe themselves?

5. See Guadalupe Valdes's treatise on the monolingual bias at www.lmri.ucsb.edu.

6. Check out David Abram's now-classic *Spell of the Sensuous: Language and Perception in a More-than-Human World* for a much fuller exposition of the complex genealogy of nature, language, and literacy.

7. This is no exaggeration. The Australian aborigines are believed to have inhabited their ancestral homeland for some fifty thousand years. In one of the great ironies of history, the world's oldest human tradition is also among the most threatened. According to recent estimates, virtually all of Australia's aboriginal languages will be extinct (beyond some formulaic, ritualized uses) within a decade.

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