
Canoe Journey as a Model for Language Revitalization: Experiences with the Grande Ronde Canoe Family

Jerome Viles
Linguistics

Faculty Mentor: Janne Underriner
Northwest Indian Language Institute

1.0 Introduction:

Canoe Journey is a yearly event that serves to preserve traditional Northwest Native life-ways and traditions, and facilitates revitalization of language and culture. As many as ninety tribal groups are represented, with more than 100 canoes and 10,000 people in attendance (Suquamish Tribe, 2009). The Journey is part of a progressing indigenous social movement known as the Canoe Resurgence (McReynolds, 1996) that is unique to the ocean traversing tribes on the west coast of North America.

The Canoe Resurgence structures itself around Canoe Families that represent one or more tribes from the Pacific Northwest. The Family is a community built around the continuation of Northwest Indigenous life-ways and ceremonies. Canoe Families often establish themselves as groups for youth to experience and live their culture, but participation of families and elders is also highly valued. The focus on youth is valuable in that young people are vessels of linguistic continuity, without whom their languages and cultures will die with their parents and grandparents. Chief Frank Nelson, one of the founders of the Journey, recalls the importance

of youth at the beginning of the movement as “an opportunity to commit ourselves to a healing path for our children” (Neel, 1995). That commitment does not end when the Journey is over, but continues in every aspect of the lives of those involved. The Canoe Resurgence aims to strengthen traditional Northwest values (Red Eagle, 2009), which include life-ways, ceremonies, and languages.

Historically, the Pacific Northwest has been a place of vast linguistic diversity. In Oregon alone more than 30 languages were spoken, with many dialectical variations among each. The arrival of White trappers, traders, military, settlers, and diseases left some languages with few remaining speakers. The forced removal of many tribes from ancestral homelands as part of the reservation process lent itself to further language loss as many linguistically distinct groups were forced to live together. For example, the Siletz and Grand Ronde reservations in Oregon include people from over a dozen different tribes, who speak more than a dozen mutually unintelligible languages. As a consequence, most people spoke Chinuk Wawa, and their original languages fell out of daily use (Underriner, 2010).

The establishment of Indian boarding schools in the United States and Canada further destabilized Northwest indigenous languages. Indian boarding schools actively discouraged and punished the speaking of native languages. While inhumane, these techniques were highly effective in destroying many native languages and instilling negative social views towards passing on indigenous languages and ways of life. Although those views are not as common today, tribes still feel the effects of those policies as they face a lack of knowledgeable tribal elders able to impart traditional life-ways and language.

This study aims to describe Canoe Journey as an effective model for native language revitalization because it provides an extended setting outside of modern cultural influences that allows language to be spoken on

a daily basis. Two main venues exist within the structure of the Journey to facilitate language revitalization: full immersion and traditional language learning. Language learning is time intensive, needing approximately 500 hours of instruction for basic conversational proficiency (Hinton, 1994). Canoe Journey could offer a conservative estimate of 120 hours in a summer.

This paper will discuss the history of canoes in the Pacific Northwest and examine the two predominant types of canoes and their decline. Canoes' importance to tribes of the area along with their importance to the potlatch will also be discussed. The Canoe Journey will be described as the author experienced it with the Grande Ronde and Chinook Canoe Family. Following an examination of canoe protocol, a discussion of obstacles to language revitalization and their adverse effects on language teaching efforts will be addressed. We will then examine language learning and teaching theories and apply them, using the Canoe Journey as a setting. We will return to a discussion of the benefits and limitations of the Canoe Journey as a language learning model to conclude the paper.

2.0 History of Northwest Canoes:

Before European contact, canoes were a vital way of life for Northwest people. Bobby Baker of the Suquamish tribe compares their importance to horses for the plains people: "We're water people. Just as sure as plains people need their horses, water people need their canoes" (Neel, 1995). Leslie Lincoln, a maritime anthropologist, estimates that over 20,000 canoes once paddled the waters of the Pacific Ocean carrying goods, people and culture for hundreds of miles up and down the coast (McReynolds, 1996). The importance of the canoe should not be understated. Not only did it fuel the vast trade networks of the Northwest, it was a vessel of diplomacy between tribes and served to connect people who typically would be

isolated from one another. In the Puget Sound, where canoe culture was particularly strong, travel to other tribal groups would be prohibited if not for the highly developed canoe.

Two types of ocean going canoes, both constructed from the largest cedar trees in the world, were common from Alaska to southern Oregon. The first type, found mostly within Salish speaking communities of the Puget Sound and north into Canada, are known as the Coast Salish canoes. They are distinguished by their almost symmetrical bow and stern. They are usually carved from a single log of cedar that is spread using steam. The Coast Salish canoes often bear intricate painted designs along the sides, which hold specific significance to the tribe or canoe family.

The second type of ocean cedar canoe is known as the West Coast, Nootkan or Chinook canoe. This style of canoe could be found off the coast of Oregon north into Washington. They are generally larger than the Salish canoes sometimes reaching 50 feet in length. Due to the harsher weather conditions faced in the open sea, as opposed to the Puget Sound, the length of the Chinook style canoe gives the vessel greater stability when traversing ocean environments. Traditional Chinook canoes are less elaborate in their designs and limit themselves to black paint on the outside of the hull and red on the interior. This is especially true for tribes south of the Puget Sound, for example those from the Columbia River. Their flat vertical stern, and bow made from a separate piece of wood identify these canoes.

Canoe usage followed in many ways the decline of tribal language and culture. Canoes were widely used into the early part of the twentieth century, but as western economic and cultural power grew, use of canoes diminished until they were almost nonexistent for tribes of the area.

In the 1980s, Northwest Natives started the process of reclaiming the canoe as a central cultural theme. Community leaders who founded the

Canoe Journey in 1989, then under the name Paddle to Seattle, recognized that if something were not done, their culture and languages would continue to degrade at an alarming rate. They chose the canoe as their central icon.

2.1 The Potlatch:

Canoe Journey has its roots in traditional potlatches of the Northwest. Throughout history Northwest tribes used the potlatch as their central method for social cohesion, ceremonies, and inter-tribal diplomacy. Potlatches occur around marriage or naming ceremonies for example. In these instances, gifts are given to the guests expressing thankfulness and recognizing their role as witnesses who legitimize the event. Canoes were a central component of potlatches for coastal people as the primary method of transit for the guests. Just as a parking lot is filled with cars for a wedding, a beach was lined with canoes.

In the early twentieth century, Canada and the United States outlawed native traditional ways, thus prohibiting the practice of potlatches. After the outlawing of potlatches, canoes became almost non-existent on the coast. Yet, potlatches were still practiced illegally until the bans were lifted in the 1950s. Forcing potlatches to be practiced underground prevented the type of mass canoe gatherings characteristic in the past.

3.0 Canoe Journey Today:

In 2009, the Canoe Journey's destination port was Suquamish, Washington. The participating tribes, some from as far away as northern Vancouver Island in British Columbia, used five routes to reach Suquamish. As the tribes traveled towards the host nation they stopped at reservations and village sites to camp and practice traditional protocol. As the visitors left various sites, canoes from those sites joined the Journey. Ultimately, 87 canoes arrived in Suquamish on August 3, 2009. Fifteen or more stops were made with some tribes journeying for more than a month.

3.1 Stages of Protocol:

Canoe Journey protocol consists of traditional doctrines that guide intertribal relations and are central to the Journey. Protocol has three stages: arrival, in the longhouse, and departure. The first stage of protocol involves asking permission to come ashore. It is traditional to humble oneself with statements of need for food, water, and a place to sleep. A visiting nation typically praises the host with good words about a previous visit and how well the host treated them. Once the host grants permission to come ashore, the visiting nation places their canoes on land with the noses facing the water. Often this exchange occurs in each tribe's native language. Once on shore, the paddlers proceed to their campsite. After a brief settling in period, the next stage of protocol commences.

The second stage is preceded by a dinner provided by the host tribe. Afterward, visiting nations share their dances and songs with the host as well as good words that express appreciation for the generosity and kindness they have received. Typically, tribes who have travelled the farthest distance begin the sharing. For example, Maori representatives would take the floor first. The third stage of protocol is marked by the departure of the canoes. As a sign of respect and recognition of the host tribe, the visitors ask permission to leave their host's land. Again the visitors praise the host, and tribal leaders offer speeches ensuring that the host will be honored in the home nations of the visitors.

The end of the actual Journey is celebrated by a week of extended protocol. Speakers extend their orations, visitors sing more elaborate songs, and dancers show respect by wearing their finest regalia. During this week, gifts are exchanged between the visiting tribes and host nation. It is during this extended protocol that thousands of visitors gather to observe and learn about traditional Northwest culture. The week culminates in an elaborate feast followed by a traditional Potlatch.

The arrival of the canoes at the final destination is marked by the Ring Ceremony, led by Phillip Red Eagle, one of the founders of the Journey. During this ceremony participants promise to live by the *ten rules of the canoe* and uphold the canoe culture in their daily lives. The *ten rules of the canoe* outline a commitment centered on curbing the inter-personal abuse that has afflicted Native people and provides motivation for a healthy lifestyle centered on traditional Native values. In promising to uphold traditional values, participants receive a copper ring that symbolizes their commitment. Leather holds the ring and beads that symbolize each year of participation in the Journey; other special beads honor important individuals. Beads placed on the ring itself recognize canoe carvers. This year a yellow bead honoring Emmet Oliver, one of the elders of the Canoe Movement, was placed on the right side of the necklace.

The typical day for a Canoe Family starts before the sun rises, as it is important to catch a good outgoing tide so as not to fight the currents. The mornings usually consist of a quick breakfast before heading to the water to put in the canoes. Once at the water, the third stage of protocol is delivered asking the host tribe permission to leave. When granted, the visiting canoes embark, often paddling as many as eight hours in a day.

4.0 Obstacles to Language Revitalization:

The obstacles to effective language revitalization in the Pacific Northwest are a challenge for all tribes of the area. Loss of fluent speakers is a compounding problem. Most, if not all, of the first language speakers of Northwest languages are elders, and those who pass away without imparting their knowledge to the next generation leave a people unable to communicate in their native languages. Lack of financial, governmental, and social support each hamper effective language teaching programs in Native communities. Tribal governments are modeled after the United

States in their constitutional, educational, judicial, and social systems. The adoption of Western institutions required the use of English to engage the United States and Canadian governments, and has been detrimental to native language use.

Too often tribal language programs are underfunded, surrounded by unsupportive tribal policies, and are sources of controversy within tribal communities. Leanne Hinton (2001) has addressed the devastation such controversy can cause: "Smaller programs such as those on the American mainland are much more likely to fail altogether when leadership becomes split and their positions harden against each other." Negative social attitudes towards academia caused by historical United States educational policies fuels this distrust. Additionally, it is a challenge for communities to cohesively support language programs. Lack of commitment on the part of tribal members cannot be understated as a fundamental reason for the ineffectiveness of many language programs.

With the adoption of Western institutions came the adoption of Western values that place emphasis on economic viability and successful social integration. These prevailing social attitudes prevent many tribal members from investing the time necessary to productively speak their languages. Even in communities with strong immersion and early education, language teaching efforts are hampered by a lack of commitment from parents to foster the language environment in the home. Further compounding this problem is the commonly held attitude that language teachers who learned their indigenous tongue as a second language are not speaking correctly or in the right dialect. This view is extremely detrimental to language programs. As one language teacher argued: "I don't speak like my grandmother, but I speak the language of my grandmother" (Reyhner, 2003).

Negative social attitudes and tribal policies combined with lack of education about effective teaching models suppress language revitalization.

Many well-intentioned tribal leaders have attempted to learn and teach their languages without any formal background or training in language teaching. While that effort is admirable, it is often ineffective. Without a firm understanding of language teaching methods and theories, most language programs do not succeed.

Perhaps the largest obstacle standing in the way of successful language learning is the lack of settings for language use. No matter how much one studies a language, if a speaking environment does not exist, it is impossible to achieve fluency. Canoe Journey offers a unique environment in which to establish a year round speech community rooted in traditional values. It has the potential to serve as a haven for language use removed from overwhelming social, political, and media forces dominated by English. If Canoe Families are able to establish themselves as language nests, in much the same way as the Maoris and Hawaiians have done, they would ensure the continued use of their languages into the generations to come. "Language cannot be perpetuated in a single domain such as school or the church. Children will need to be able to communicate their feelings, hopes, opinions and thoughts in (their language) in all domains of life if the language is to truly survive" (Warner, 2001).

Lack of cultural relevancy in language teaching also deters tribal members from learning. In a traditional setting for language learning, cultural learning is secondary to language, "teachers [are content that] students will be exposed to cultural materials *later*, after they have mastered basic grammar" (Hadley, 1993). While that view is not necessarily negative, it can discourage Natives who are not comfortable in a Western academic environment. In the author's experiences with academic language classes, keeping Natives enrolled in school is a challenge. Canoe Journey offers a solution to this problem by offering an environment of cultural immersion removed from dominant Western society.

5.0 Canoe Journey as a Language Teaching Model:

Canoe Journey can serve as an environment conducive to language learning and will be successful if rooted in theories of language teaching, learning, and acquisition. Traditional Western methods of language teaching have their foundations in explicitly teaching grammar and vocabulary through the learner's first language. Literacy is valued as much as, if not more than, spoken proficiency (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Through rote memorization and translation of vocabulary lists and texts, students intellectually learn the structure of a language. The limitations of these methods lie in their lack of emphasis in conversational proficiency. While the methods are useful in academic and linguistic contexts, approaches that promote conversational fluency are more valuable to native communities because spoken fluency is the goal. Furthermore, native languages lack a written tradition and their cultures place value on the oral tradition.

Several alternatives that draw from language learning in a natural setting have emerged over the past 30 years as effective methods suited for implementation in the Canoe Journey.

5.1 Approaches to Language Teaching:

In a traditional language learning environment, as experienced in high school or college, material is taught as any other academic subject. Rote memorization, translation, and instruction through the student's first language are typical. At the root of these language teaching methods lies an assumption that adults are unable to learn language in the way a child does, and thus need to learn through the same processes one would learn any other academic subject.

The basis for language immersion techniques lies in the premise that the most efficient way to achieve fluency is through immersion in an environment where the language is spoken. Immersion techniques

recognize the delay of traditional language teaching techniques in achieving communicative proficiency and seek to return to a more natural method of language learning. Immersion promotes learning at a rapid rate through use of contextually based language use. Within the approach of immersion there are various techniques for language teaching.

Interaction between language teachers and learners must be emphasized early on in learning. Wilga Rivers (1984) describes the importance of interaction and its necessity from the early stages of language learning. "Students achieve facility in *using* a language when their attention is focused on conveying information and receiving authentic messages. This is *interaction*." She goes on to describe interaction as a "collaborative activity" that "should be the norm *from the beginning of language study*... Interaction becomes essential to survival in the new language" [emphasis in original] (Rivers, 1984).

5.2 Canoe Journey for Language Revitalization:

The Canoe Journey offers a unique setting, which is its strength for language revitalization. Because it is removed from mainstream United States culture, it can facilitate full or partial immersion learning. Within Canoe Journey and the Canoe Family, several language learning settings hold different potentials for language use, and each has its own distinct advantages and disadvantages.

5.2.1 Language Learning Settings:

The six to eight hour period spent within the canoe each day, provides the most obvious and potentially effective setting for effective language teaching. It is an ideal environment in which to employ psychologist James J. Asher's Total Physical Response (TPR) approach. TPR takes advantage of the silent period of language learning by focusing not on learners speaking, but on them performing a physical task at the request of

a language teacher. This approach provides a low-stress environment ideal for adult language learners with high affective filters (attitudes that impede or block input necessary to language acquisition). Research in several fields has established that when words are associated with actions or images, instead of merely being translated into the learner's first language, a learner will benefit from increased retention of the vocabulary. Once proficiency is established by responding to simple commands, language teachers could elaborate on the complexity of the material by telling stories using the vocabulary learned and making observations about the surroundings from the canoe. There are countless opportunities to teach about wildlife, geography, and the vocabulary of location. For example, while paddling, we observed a bald eagle roosting in a tree. This would be an opportunity for the language teacher to teach the students the words for "eagle," "fly," "on top," and others that would add a depth of understanding.

These approaches could work particularly well in a canoe with a skipper who is a language teacher, as is the case in the Grand Ronde Canoe Family. Skippers could use only their language when giving canoe commands. The environment is rich enough that the skippers could teach canoe vocabulary, personal pronouns, words for the natural environment, locational terms and verbs.

Among tribes with fluent language speakers, full language immersion could be established in the canoe setting. In *How to Keep Your Language Alive*, Leanne Hinton stresses the importance of immersion and argues that "people learn best when we are surrounded by the language, don't hear any English, and don't have the language translated to us. Instead, we learn by hearing the language in such a way that we can understand what the general meaning is through context, gestures, and activities...many hours of immersion are necessary for extensive learning...absorption in the activity is when true learning starts" (2002).

Immersion techniques draw from the theory that language learning is best achieved by creating an environment mimicking that in which a child naturally acquires language. This approach is often referred to as the Natural Method. Full immersion requires that a skipper or language teacher in the canoe is fluent in the language being learned. While this is ideal it is still possible to achieve partial immersion in settings without a fluent speaker using the TPR approach.

The relaxed camp setting would provide more challenges to learning, especially if the goal is full immersion. The wide range of ages and language fluency could prove to be an obstacle for full immersion, but language use could be encouraged as much as possible. When members of the Canoe Family are eating and relaxed it may not be conducive to speaking their native language until conversational proficiency is achieved. Language teachers could, however, use this setting to teach common kitchen, food, and camp vocabulary until members of the Canoe Family are at higher levels of speech ability. A potentially effective technique to do so would be that used by Loren Bommllyn of the Smith River Rancheria of the North California Coast. When learning Tolowa, Bommllyn would reply in conversations first in Tolowa and then in English effectively creating his own environment for language use (Hinton, 2002). This instant translation proved a great tool for language learning and could be adapted by Journey language teachers. Moreover, the technique does not require fluent speakers so that it could be widely implemented.

Protocol offers a setting different from the ones described above in that it would be difficult to encourage language use from the learners. It could, however, serve to increase comprehension skills and motivate learners to succeed. When tribal leaders have knowledge of their language, it is common for them to use it for orations during protocol. Observing influential and esteemed individuals speaking in this way could provide

essential motivation for Canoe Family members to learn their language. In *Nurturing Native Languages*, Reyhner (2003) discussed this potential and emphasized how “one can maximize student motivation through strategic use of Indigenous Languages at special events.”

The year-round commitment required of Canoe Family members provides the opportunity for extended language teaching and learning outside of the Journey itself. Lessons could be learned from the language nests of the Maori and Hawaiian people. In New Zealand, Maori elders recognized language loss as a rapidly growing problem threatening their traditional values. This led to the establishment of language nests that provided settings in which children are at least half-immersed in the Maori language during primary and secondary school and exposed to the language in their homes. The goal is to provide environments for language use. Hawaiian language activists, who also have had success using the model of the Maoris, currently operate dozens of immersion schools and actively maintain settings for using language.

Canoe Families could establish themselves as language nests, using their language in regular Canoe Family meetings. Throughout the year, Canoe Families meet to practice songs and dances, share meals, and prepare for the Journey. These meetings serve to keep the Family as a cohesive social group. If conducted in their native languages, those meetings could serve as a means to accomplish language revitalization. Non-Journey Canoe events are also ideal language settings. Canoe races and various educational events held in the warmer months bring Canoe Families together in the Canoe setting.

6. Conclusion:

Further language loss in the Pacific Northwest is unacceptable. When an indigenous language dies, thousands of years of human experience and

thought evolution die with it. Unique ways of interacting with the world and each other are permanently lost. Culture lives through language, and to teach language most effectively, it must be done through culture.

Canoe Journey offers the opportunity for Native people in the Pacific Northwest to commit to a path of linguistic healing. While teaching settings removed from cultural relevance, e.g. a classroom, are valuable, they will not result in language revitalization. Recognizing the interconnectedness of language and culture and committing fully to it, in the form of the Canoe Journey, will lead language teaching efforts to success. The potential for language immersion and natural language acquisition in the Journey make it a unique and valuable setting for language revitalization.

This paper is meant to serve as a catalyst for language teachers who are unsure of how to implement their language programs. It is not a comprehensive approach to language teaching through the Canoe Journey, but a starting point for a discussion about the Journey as a language teaching tool. Each tribe has specific language needs that only members of that nation can solve. Therefore, each teaching approach will need specific techniques developed by tribal members and tailored to the language and the people. But the Canoe Journey holds the promise of creating a permanent haven for language use in addition to its cultural significance.

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