

PRESERVING THE WOLASTOQEY LANGUAGE AND SUPPORTING WOLASTOQI LANGUAGE CARRIERS

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This paper arose out of a conversation between the co-authors concerning the Wolastoqey language, one of many First Nations languages in Canada which is currently considered to be endangered (Moseley, 2010). Connections are made to existing literature to explore the uniqueness of the Wolastoqey language, the historical reasons for the declining rates of speakers, and the role that government could play in the preservation and maintenance of First Nations languages. The personal experiences of Imelda Perley, a Wolastoqí Elder and Educator, identified hereafter as “Opolahsomuwehs¹, personal communication”, are intertwined throughout and give life to this discussion.

The Wolastoqí people are one of two distinct First Nations people in New Brunswick, and their name reflects their traditional territory and relationship with the land:

Some refer to us as the Maliseet² people, but our traditional name is Wolastoqiyik³, referring to Wolastoq—the original name for the St. John river. We are *people of the beautiful and bountiful river*. (Opolahsomuwehs, personal communication, May 8, 2012)

Unlike English, the Wolastoqey language is verb-based and relational (Leavitt, 1995). Even the Wolastoqey word for language, Latuwewakon, literally means “placing word upon word” (Perley, personal communication, May 8, 2012). For speakers, like Opolahsomuwehs, when Wolastoqí peoples are using English there is an absence of sacredness, an absence of a relationship with the earth, people, and all of creation: “If you are going through your life in another language, then you are missing out on the sacred gift of the relationships that you could have if you knew your language”

¹ Opolahsomuwehs is Elder Perley’s Wolastoqey name, which translates in English to Moon of the Whirling Wind.

² The term Maliseet is an exonym attributed to the Wolastoqiyik by the Mi’kmaq who referred to them as *Malisitchik*—literally “the broken talkers”—in conversation with early European colonizers (Chamberlain & Ganong, 1899, p. 8).

³ Wolastoqiyik is a noun referring to all of the people; Wolastoqí and Wolastoqey are adjectives that are used with animate and inanimate subjects/objects, respectively.

(Opolahsomuwehs, personal communication, May 8, 2012). Opolahsomuwehs' words speak directly to the point that Crystal (2000) drives home in his book *Language Death*, that "each language reflects a unique encapsulation and interpretation of human existence" (p. 44), and without knowledge of the language of our ancestors our relationships with our past and our world are broken.

The Wolastoqey language also contains a profound awareness of the local "fauna and flora, rocks and soils" (Crystal, 2000, pp. 46-47), as well as the history of New Brunswick and the people who inhabit this province. Due to the unique knowledge contained within local First Nations languages Crystal (2000) suggests they should be treated like natural and ecological resources, a precious reserve of information to be respected and protected.

Unfortunately, this line of thinking has not been a prevailing one in Canada's history. The endangered state of this unique, local language is tied to Canada's colonial past and assimilative education policies. The intent of over a century of federal day and residential schools for First Nations students was to isolate children from their families and communities, sever all ties with their languages and cultural traditions, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture (Hamilton, 1986). Integration of First Nations students into Anglophone and Francophone provincial schools also perpetuated language loss (Bear Nicholas, 2001). Nonetheless, First Nations languages like Wolastoqey persist – albeit precariously – a testimony to the strength of the people who carried them. "Today, some people are angry with our Grandparents for letting our language go, but I want to thank them for carrying our language despite everything they went through. Because of them our language is still alive" (Opolahsomuwehs, personal communication, May 8, 2012).

Opolahsomuwehs' generation is the last generation of fluent Wolastoqey language speakers (Michaux & Perley, 2009, p. 66). As a speaker and language carrier, she feels a profound responsibility to play a role in the revitalization of her language in order to ensure the continuity and preservation of her cultural heritage.⁴ In her classes, she emphasizes that language is more than a school subject and she is adamant that her language is not lost: "If I can still name my world in my language, then my language is very much alive. What's missing are the language carriers" (Opolahsomuwehs, personal communication, May 8, 2012).

Only about 500 Wolastoqey speakers remain. Given the endangered status of this language, the unique, ecological knowledge embedded within it, and Canada's historic role in the decline of First Nations languages, we, the coauthors, pondered whether the Canadian and New Brunswick governments have a responsibility to help preserve and protect the Wolastoqey language and support Wolastoqi language carriers?

⁴ For more information on the many language programs and activities that she has been involved with see Michaux & Perley (2009).

Constitutional law expert and lawyer, David Leitch (2006), asserts that the federal and provincial governments do have a responsibility and a role to play. Since the Supreme Court of Canada in *R. v. Van der Peet* defined *Aboriginal rights* as “the practices, traditions and customs central to the Aboriginal societies that existed in North America prior to contact with the Europeans” (as cited in Leitch, 2006, p. 112), and since it is certain that First Nations people educated their children in their own languages prior to European contact, Leitch (2006) claims they should have a constitutional right to publicly funded education in their languages under Section 35 (1) of the Canadian Constitution. Currently, the right to publicly funded education in a minority language is only afforded to the two official language groups, English and French. This right is largely based on the foundational premise that these two language groups constitute Canada’s “two founding peoples” (Leitch, 2006, p.118). Considering the history of First Nations peoples in Canada, isn’t it time Canadian governments acknowledge the original founding peoples and support the preservation and maintenance of First Nations languages?

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Biographies

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