Observations on the Last Stage of a Vanishing Algonquian Language

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Introduction

The information contained in this paper was gathered during fieldwork undertaken from December 1989 to August 1990 in Oklahoma primarily to collect ethnohistorical data on the Sauk of Oklahoma, since 1988 officially known as the Sac and Fox Nation. In this paper I present a situational description of the final period of the Sauk language. Linguistically, Sauk belongs to the Central Algonquian Languages and is closely related to two other dialects: "The Sauk, Fox and Kickapoo speak three dialects of a single language, for which there is no name... it is usually referred to simply by hyphenating the names of the three tribes: Sauk-Fox-Kickapoo... Of the three dialects, Sauk is the least known... [and] is spoken by the so-called Sac and Fox of Oklahoma and by the remnant of the Nemaha Sauks of Kansas" (Goddard 1978:584).

At the beginning of my fieldwork I was informed by two brothers, born around 1910, why they do not remember how to speak their ancestral Sauk language anymore:

When we got caught speaking Indian [at Concho Indian School near El Reno, Oklahoma] they jerked pieces of homemade lye soap into our mouths and twisted the soap a couple of times so it got in your teeth. It would last a couple of days to get rid of the bad taste. The next time they'd catch us they beat us with a flexible electric cable, finger-thick, and about 40 inches long. A few times like that and you soon forgot your native language.

The younger sisters of those seven- and eight-year-old boys were already actively discouraged to speak Sauk after their parents had learned what had

1 Citations as given here (and sometimes without reference) are not always transcribed from a tape. Those interviews not transcribed were closely re-written immediately after the actual interview. Data without reference indications are taken from my fieldnotes.
happened to them. "From then on," the sisters recall, "mom and dad didn't teach us any Indian, in order not to face any disadvantages in school."

On the other hand, it still was possible for children to be raised in Sauk during that period. Depending on the strength of family cohesion the acquisition of the language could have been accomplished before a child was send to school, so that s/he would not forget it entirely. I quote a Sauk tribal member, born 1924:

It hurts very much to see that language fading out. We still grew up on it. Now, how short a time did it take to become suppressed by the English language. I had to learn English at Chilocco Indian School [near Newkirk, Oklahoma]. That was as hard as it would be for a White man to learn my language. Nowadays, after coming 'back home', after retiring, once in a while I speak Indian with my sisters. My grandchildren approached me once wishing to learn Sauk; but after a couple of lessons they gave up complaining, "oh grampa, that is so hard!"

Throughout my fieldwork, I noticed people very seldom refer to their language as "Sauk" or "Old Sac'n Fox". The enforced pan-Indian boarding school situation uprooted tribal identity thoroughly, a feature which would stick to individuals an entire lifetime. In the schools the rich linguistic variety represented by students of various tribes was simply equalized to "Indian" and never properly referred to as the "Sauk language", "Kickapoo language", etc.

A Brief History of the Gradual Decline of Sauk

An accurate account of the paedagogically practised linguistic elimination at the Sac and Fox Agency School near Stroud, Oklahoma, is given by Carl Butler, who is today eighty years old:

There was a boarding school, called Sac and Fox Indian Mission . . . A lot of children would be going to school there and that was one of the reasons [tribal] people liked to camp there . . . The parents would want to be close to their children, [since] the children would get lonesome and run away and go home, so they stayed as much as they could around that area . . . I finally got to the age where I had to go, because that was the law, you had to go to school. That was along 1916, 1917 . . . and I didn't talk English. All I knew was just a few words. A lot of things that people said — I didn't know what they meant . . . When they sent me to school, I had some difficult times there because of that . . . One day the teacher was up there near the blackboard . . . She was writing on the blackboard and talking at the same time, and I didn't know what was going on. A boy sitting in front of me was a relative of mine, and I tapped him on the shoulder. I guess, I talked a little too loud and she heard me. I was asking that boy, "what was that lady saying?" Before he could tell she turned around and she seen me leaning over talking to this boy.
She caught me and said: "Carl?" I knew my name and I knew when they was calling me. "You come here to the front." So I got up, out of my seat and went up there to the front. She said, "let me have your hand." She got my hands, held my hand's palms up ... and she really thrashed my hands, lashed me over with that ruler — and it hurt, you know, and I was a little boy! I said, "it hurts", and I was mad, ... scared and I was ashamed, too, being in front of that class. All the boys and girls [were] looking at me and she gave me a thrashing there. When she got through she said, "sit down". And she said — I guess, that's what they told me — "don't you ever catch me hearing you [sic] talk Indian." I could hear that word 'Indian' ... so I pieced it together, and they told me, too, that she told me "don't ever get caught again", so I watched that. (Butler 1985:15-16)

Besides the language issue, this narrative illustrates how some of the harsh effects of boarding school policies were minimized by the Sac and Fox by moving their camps close to the school. In this case the common problem of Indian boarding schools, i.e., the runaway child, was avoided. The strains of cultural and linguistic alienation, however, could not be overcome by Sac and Fox children and youths who attended more distant schools such as at Concho, Chilocco, and Fort Sill in Oklahoma, Haskell and Lawrence in Kansas, and, especially, famed Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania. Although, at an earlier occasion in 1890 a group of Sac and Fox had gone to Chilocco to raid the school and liberate a number of Sac and Fox children, who had been transferred without consultation with the parents (Hagan 1958:251).

The typical educational predicament of the time is perhaps best illustrated by a statement by Richard H. Pratt, founder and superintendent of Carlisle: "The end to be gained, is the complete civilization of the Indian ... [and] the sooner the Indian loses all his Indian ways, even his language, the better it will be" (Pratt 1964:266).

However, there is a striking paradox in this policy of many federal and diverse denominational schools toward assimilation of Indians, in this case the Sac and Fox Indians, into Anglo-American culture: in the fall of 1912 government researcher Truman Michelson of the Smithsonian Institution traveled to Carlisle in order to record linguistic data on Sauk: words, phrases and grammatical sketches, working with eight Sauk girls as his informants (Michelson 1912).2 One wonders whether they got punished after not only talking but even helping to preserve their native language. Although, among other things, the school was established to discourage native languages, Michelson always had permission to do his research (this was not the only occasion he recorded Indian languages at Carlisle), which reflects one of the most critical contradictions about the expansion of the American frontier:

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2The girls were Sadie Ingalls, Stella Ellis, Ruth Moore, Emma Newaste, Cora Battice, Fannie Keokuk, Jane Butler and Sarah Mason.
the divide and conquer of the pioneers versus the combine and preserve of scholarly conservationalism. In short, only the "museum Indian" was a "good Indian".

The resignation of the Sauk language as the official means of tribal communication came not by chance together with the desolate economic, administrative, and socio-cultural condition of the Sauk Tribe during the decade before the Oklahoma-Indian Welfare-Act of 1936. In a summary of reasons for the linguistic cession correlating with tribal economic hardship, the following main historic circumstances can be suggested:

- the impacts from the Allotment Act of 1890
- inability to handle land issues
- alcoholism and diverse diseases
- intra-tribal separation (factional and geographical) between the northern and southern Sauk
- the Great Depression, Dust Bowl Years and consequences
- west migration of Sauk families causing loss of linguistic and cultural knowledge
- inter-tribal and interracial marriages promoted a common language as well as off-reservational pan-Indian boarding schooling
- long-term impacts, deriving thus far back from relocation rigors, etc., caused a ceremonial and cultural vacuum that was to be compensated by modified pan-Indian events. Thus, also on the inter-tribal level there was a growing need for a universal language.

The decades preceding the 1920s had seen endless general directives from Washington through the Sac and Fox Agency at Stroud and later the Bureau of Indian Affairs Agency at Shawnee, Oklahoma for the efficient substitution of Sauk family names and the Sauk language by English (OHS 1890). As of the 1910 Census, 36 out of 347 Oklahoma Sac and Fox residents (total enrollment at the time: 541) were reported of being unable to speak English. These are a mere 10.4% monolingual Sauk speakers (6.7% of the total membership) in relation, for example, to the Navajo Nation, whose inability to speak English was as high as 86% by the same census. From these census figures a relatively high number of bilingual Sauk individuals

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3 John Collier's Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 was rejected by a strong Oklahoma Indian lobby behind Oklahoma Senator Elmer Thomas and Representative Will Rogers. Early in 1935, Collier, Thomas, and Rogers "drew up [a bill] to fit the Oklahoma tribes. After considerable further modifications, this "Thomas-Rogers bill" became law on June 26, 1936, as the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act" (Prucha 1984:327). It enabled tribes "to participate in self-government, corporate organization, credit, and land purchase provisions similar to those of the Indian Reorganization Act."
can be assumed: exact figures were not available, so I estimate that 50% or more of the population were bilingual at that time. In comparison to other tribes these numbers appear to be quite normal, but it is yet dramatic to note how fast a decline Sauk was about to face during the following decades.

With United States involvement in the First World War, military and industrial opportunities attracted Oklahoma Indians more into the white world than ever before. The English language grew as an establishment of monolingualism within Indian communities, alongside which native linguistic integration rapidly diminished. This was the case at least for smaller tribes like the Sauk in Oklahoma. During the Dust Bowl years, unfavourable farming conditions in the Midwest and the Great Depression added more confusion to the cohesiveness of Sac and Fox communal life. The need for jobs caused many Sac and Fox families to move to other western states, such as California, Nevada, Texas, and Utah. Therefore, consequent changes within the tribe were inevitable for the years to come. From that era into the Depression the changing of times and customs also became more and more visible for tribal individuals, after all, as is stated by an elder: “We could notice the changing of the time, the way of life. We got to see things change from that time up to now. You know, if somebody had said, way back there, I’d never have believed it. I thought it [traditional Sauk life] was going to go on forever, but it all changed” (Butler 1985:18, 77).

The Second World War again contributed to the decline of Sac and Fox isolation. Intermarriage, and at the same time discrimination against Indians, became “a stimulus for learning and for using habitually the language of the dominant [society]” (Carman and Pond 1955:133).

After WWII there was a second Sac and Fox exodus towards the West and this was, in the recollection of many Sauk elders, the time when the last main reductions of the traditional culture occurred, as stated by this elder: “Many of the men who came back from the wars overseas were restless and wanted to leave this area [Central Oklahoma].”

A great many of the people who left, although already bilingual, were still fluent and knowledgeable about ceremonies and the language. Due to the loss of such specific tribal knowledge a ceremonial vacuum correspondingly came to be filled with more secular inter-tribal practices, as for example earlier the powwow. This created a unique situation for the multi-tribal Indian population in Oklahoma. After the Second World War, just in time for the following years of the federal policy of Termination and Relocation, the English language became the irreversible basis of communication. In an unprecedented situation, a strong socio-communal dynamic initiated inter-tribal and intra-tribal cultural exchanges. Thomas (1965:80) suggests that “by the mid-part of the twentieth century . . . [through] inter-marriage and inter-tribal activity . . . Indian languages were ceasing to become the
daily language, and English, as the *lingua franca*, is fast replacing the native tongues in Oklahoma."

After these years of turmoil the Sac and Fox officials tried to focus upon tribal and political cohesiveness, homogeneous leadership, and a significant emphasis upon economic development by supporting thorough education for tribal individuals. As a matter of course, the retention of their ancestral language, however, necessarily had to be sacrificed for economic success, i.e., fluency in English.

*Language as a Political Symbol*

Because, according to Radcliffe-Brown (1957:107–108), "the continuity of a language depends on continuity of social structure, . . . on culture", and on economic security, Sauk as the official language and as a domain of tribal communication probably went into decline in the decade between 1935–1945. Its continuity from then on was only to exist within a decreasing number of tribal individuals.

One elder of the tribe recalls the "good old days" when the councils until about the 1920s were still held in the native language in the shade of the tribal groves:

The language was strong then, everybody talked Indian. They’d have their gatherings . . . council meetings . . . Just the men, old men. They talked Indian, just all Indian and they’d have an interpreter. They was just real outspoken . . . they just put it right on the line: "don’t be getting these halfbreeds over here . . . If they ever get control of that, you’re lost. It’ll make you full-bloods cry, they’re going to rule the roost” . . . I heard the old people say that to each other: “. . . You try to get in [council and] try to hold on to this Indian [language as] long as you can . . . When it’s gone, you’re gone.” (Butler 1985:31, 64–65)

Outsiders did not yet have influence upon matters if they could not speak Sauk. In 1909 there were still only two out of twelve members of the all native-speaking Sauk National Council "who could sign their own names or speak fluent English" (Snow 1970:17, 28). But during the 1910s Sauk proficiency ceased quickly as a prerequisite to serve in the National Council, which had been established under the supervision of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1885. To quote the traditional "old men" from the above citation, such "linguistic carelessness" came to be a self-fulfilling prophecy and a crucial step down in tribal integrity through a gradual shift of languages from Sauk to English: "Communal identification, group solidarity, and the signalling of difference and limitations against outside [and subversive inside] influence" (Trudgill 1983:151) did not work for the Sauk people anymore since their language was severely suffering from a loss of its unifying dynamics. After the introduction of a democratic and parliamentary
system under the auspices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1936, a gradual take-over of tribal power by what traditional Sauk refer to as the "Red Apple Clan" has been taking place. The occasions when native speakers could address their council in Sauk became fewer and fewer. According to a tribal elder, one of the last times when a Governing Council was (partly) held in the Sauk language was around 1948 or 1949:

One of the tribal elders usually gave a speech in Sauk before the council started as to how to behave during the meeting. The last time I remember, it was Thomas Morris Sr. who did this speech. They were allowed to speak for about 45 minutes to inform the old people [who could not speak or refused to learn English] about the agenda and reminded people to be civil on things they wanted to discuss.

After this, the language was not officially used anymore; however, the last official Sauk interpreter, Willy Wiles, still translated the council’s affairs to the elders until about the mid-50s, which thus marks the final linguistic cession in favour of English as official language of the Sac and Fox. Until today, the language has remained as a symbol for old values. Speaking the language actively today is seen as commitment towards the tribal past and as a link to the spiritual world — but also, as has to be admitted, it serves an attitude of “who’s the better Indian”.

Language as a Symbol of Sacredness

There are three different religious groups active in Sac and Fox society today — Peyote, Christian, and Traditional — and there are still a few native speakers of Sauk among all the three of them. While Peyote and Christianity predominates among the northern Sauk, religious prevalence of the southern Sauk is the Drum Dance including a few Christians of the Nàgo-we Methodist Church. Sauk as a spoken language had a significant role in the worship of all three groups. It still is an important means of liturgical conduct, although less for the Christians of the Sac and Fox Only Way Church, since they no longer have a preacher who can preach in Sauk. For the other two groups, however, there still is an important need for native linguistic leadership.

The Only Way Indian Church of the Sac and Fox was founded under that name in 1912. Among the eleven pastors the church had up until today there were six strong Sac and Fox preachers: George Butler, one of the church’s founders; Billy Harris, an interpreter and informant to Milwaukee ethnologist Alanson Skinner; Orlando Johnson, who headed the church together with then deacon Dickson Duncan; Reverend Robert J. Falls, who

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4 Indian slang referring to a person who is “red on the outside and white inside”, i.e., an Indian thinking “White”.
pastored the church for 30 years; and Reverend Allen K. Morris. Harris, Johnson, Duncan, and Butler are said to have been especially influential by preaching the gospel in Sauk. A significant statement by a woman on the symbolic role of Sauk in Sac and Fox religious groups can be seen in the following:

To talk about religion in that language is much smoother than in English. Oh boy, it gets ahold of you! Actually, you’re the loser if you don’t speak your Indian language. Orlando Johnson, for example, was a tremendous preacher because he could preach in Sauk. He didn’t have to scream like that Cherokee preacher. It always sounded so sacred and it really touched you inside. The tribe should definitely do more for the protection of that language.

A similar account concerning the ceremonies of the traditional Sauk religion, the Drum Dance, was stated by a young woman. Being asked whether she can understand the narratives, myths, and prayers by the ceremonial leaders, she denied this but spoke of the importance of the ceremonial conduct in Sauk, “because that’s what makes it so special. To me that language reassures the presence of the spirits — and I think that goes for most people.” Yet, the attendants of Drum Dances seem to be more interested in comprehension of Sauk because of the believe that “the creator can hear you better if you talk to him in your native language.”

As regards to the Native American Church chapter of the Sac and Fox we see an interesting, and probably the only case of creative perpetuation of the Sauk language. In response to the constant need of new peyote songs, Carl Butler, an active elder of the tribe, has been composing Peyote songs in the Sauk language since a number of years. Because of his prominence and fame as a Peyote Roadman his songs are spread all over the United States: “People call me from all over the country to send ’em my songs. Or they send blank tapes and ask for a copy. It makes you have a good feeling: that part of you is somewhere else, is helping somebody to rejoice” (Butler 1985:41). He thinks about possible topics for his songs while he is doing his beadwork and other craftsmanship in his workshop-room. Among drums, fans, eagle bone whistles, gourd rattles, buckskin hides, etc., he also has his ever-ready tape recorder. If he comes up with an idea he records it immediately, listens to it, corrects, listens again, and smooths it out until he thinks it is acceptable. Butler sings the songs in Sauk and then gives the English translation and further instructions, for almost nobody but a handful of fellow Peyotists can understand this language. However, a Sac and Fox Peyote Service is probably still the best place to observe Sauk in its full vitality as a spoken language, whereas in the Drum Dance Services the speeches are rather limited to static narration and ritual.

One of Butler’s next projects will be the recording of all the Sauk stories he knows. In the same manner as with the songs he will supply each
story with a translation. At this point I see one hopeful example for some continuity of Sauk in an active state. But one wonders who after him will have the knowledge, the energy and the charisma to do a similar work?

_Tribal Endeavors to Save the Sauk Language_

Today there are at most some 30 Sauk speakers left, none younger than 56 years of age. The majority of these people are between 65 and 90 years in age so that in the next 20 to 30 years the language may well be extinct. Serious efforts undertaken to keep it alive are too weak to be successful. A poorly attended language class is the only attempt to hold back the deterioration. This class was initiated and offered to the Sac and Fox public out of the personal concern of a dedicated woman, Oma H. Patrick. However, the project has not been supported by the tribal government as much as a successful large-scale language revitalization would require. Mrs. Patrick, a woman in her mid-60s, is a native speaker of Sauk. However, some elders claim she is not completely fluent, which she admits. Even though she is not a trained linguist or language teacher she is doing her best to get some of the basics across in order to enable people to understand the prayers and speeches in the Drum Dance ceremonies, which are mainly held in Sauk.

The class uses a primer book printed in 1975 (McCormick 1975), which contains the Sauk alphabet (known as the Fox Syllabary; cf. Goddard 1988:194), some basic vocabulary, common phrases, four mythological stories and a pictorial dictionary. Some elders express pride in the syllabary, although it leads to much confusion. They say: “this [syllabary] is ours; it’s been handed down till today since ancient times.” The book offers no strategies how to deal with the teaching of the syllabary. Since this syllabary originally was designed for people whose native language is Sauk, it does not fit the reverse situation of today, since English is everybody’s first language. Unfortunately, the primer book contains several mistakes and is not very suitable to serve the purposes of effective language training. Although a good start, efficient language maintenance basically requires a broader public initiative from inside the tribe.

During a weekly Sunday-language class there are about ten to fifteen people coming and going. During each semester this number always decreases to about five students. Some of the fluent elders in the back often

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5 In the meetings of Sac and Fox Language Delegates during the 1970s there was much discussion whether or not to use the syllabary in the primer book: “The syllabic alphabet will ultimately pose some problems later on. [Mrs. McCormick] had explained to the consultants and the two language specialists she would like to devise an alphabet on the International Phonetic System. But she was advised that this was the Sauk alphabet and the entire staff would like to use it” (Sac and Fox Business Committee, Minutes, May 5, 1973).
argue with the instructor, with each other and with the primer book, correcting its contents. It is difficult for the teacher to decide who of the elders is right or wrong. Someone says “we pronounce it this way” but others reply, “no, it’s got to be that way.” Others criticize the faulty word order, the spelling, or the way the phonetics are provided in the book. After long discussions an agreement on one version is decided upon, which, however, can never be reached when the Kickapoo elders attend class, with their even farther remote pronunciation. A week later, this version might become over-ruled again, causing the need of re-thinking in student’s minds from week to week.

At any rate, during class students read and repeat the words and sentences. Sometimes there is much correction from the teacher and at other times there might be ten strikingly different versions of pronunciation, but yet, there will be full consent from the jury bench. One woman keeps on bringing her grandchildren to class. I wonder how children can respect this language that creates so much confusion; how can they seriously learn and gain from it if there seem to be no grammatical rules to abide by as they in contrast might have experienced from learning foreign languages in school?

There is never any homework because the instructor is afraid that people would not return to class. Except for perhaps two or three self-motivated people, nobody learns any vocabulary and pronunciation by heart. Consequently, even after months no progress is visible. According to an analysis by William Leap (1981:229) on American Indian Language Maintenance “progress in language acquisition will be evident after nine to twelve months” of class, provided, a specially designed program will be applied.

I observed a frequent misconception among tribal people concerning the learning or re-learning of their native language. Asked about the attitude towards learning Sauk one person replied: “Hey, I ought to be able to pick that language up with a snap — ’cause I’m Indian.” In some cases they attended class a couple of times, realized how hard it was and then dropped out.

This attitude might not be common, though it is congruent with the general opinion it would be a “piece of cake to save that language”. I do not doubt the seriousness of those who attend class and others, also Sac and Fox officials, when they talk about a language project. However, there appears to be no real awareness or professional estimation concerning financial, technical and linguistic necessities. After the first two language projects in 1970 and 1973, a third official attempt was made in August 1990

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6 The dispute over the pronunciation is longstanding as can be seen from an account of the Sac and Fox Business Minutes during the days of the first language project: “... there are disputes in the language class as to Sauk or Mesquakie intonations” (Sac and Fox Business Committee, March 10, 1973).
with an amount of $5,000 which was made available for the revitalization of the Sauk language. But the Annual Governing Council did not approve the sum and the issue was tabled until the next meeting. Even if they had approved it there would have been no conception — in the absence of any kind of proposal — of how to spend the money in a meaningful way.

The treatment of the native language in such an arbitrary way is characterized by a few tribal elders as "they forgot where we come from." The economic and administrative affairs of the tribe "have gotten too far ahead" for those elders. "I was tempted to speak in Sauk to that Business Committee the other day," one elder admitted, "to show them that tribal matters have gone too far." These elders are psychologically pulled back and forth between their intra-tribal double-world, i.e., between their traditional world and a modern Sac and Fox corporate world.

Language Acquisition and Oral Tradition as a Joint Curriculum

The language class was a notable success in regards to what one might call "the instruction of oral tradition". Partly due to the sometimes distracting discussions on linguistic issues in class the older people often got carried away in talking about traditions and the "better times way back". Also, after the grammar session the class usually talked about tribal life as it was when these elders were young. This was the most interesting part of the class for everybody involved. Questions concerning the traditional clan life and about function, importance and purposes of the clans, etc., always reflected a greater preference for historic narratives than rehearsing Sauk grammar. Other favorite issues were genealogy (i.e., meanings of individual Sauk clan names), origins of ceremonial customs, and sometimes contemporary tribal politics. Therefore, because of the great interest in the past, and as an intriguing factor, oral tradition should be a solid institution of a future Sauk language project.

The dynamic interaction between language and culture vividly came to life within these discussions. The interdependency of this connection has already taken its toll on the Sauk language, which, if not revitalized, would only play a passive role in the future by being degraded from a lively to a static level — similar to the ancient languages of Latin and Greek, for instance.

As an observer I was not able to learn the Sauk language entirely because it is not spoken enough. My initial question — How could I learn their modes of thinking? — remained valid only until I realized that almost every Sauk elder speaks like a poet. There still seems to be a native language-pattern of thinking underlying the structure of their expressions in English which is different from the general usage of English by younger people. Taking into account the ruling principles of interaction between
language and culture, there is, according to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, on the long run, no chance for a survival of both. We still see some remainder of Sauk here and there, but I am sure it only can be preserved with an enormous effort and I do not yet see how the Sac and Fox Nation could accomplish that effort — financially and educationally.

**Group Estrangement**

The relationships between the three religious groups of the Sac and Fox are significantly poor and constitute a serious reason for the loss of the language. Many of the Sauk-speaking elders have not seen each other for years. At the same time, there is a majority of those still fluent who would love to get together just to talk Sauk, perhaps once a month. However, prejudice, estrangement and in some instances family bias have so far been the obstacles to such meetings. The still living potential of the language has not yet been activated and nobody dares to start an initiative.

The tribal public does not contribute any support as a result of linguistic unawareness and everyday preoccupation. But I am well aware of the difficulties of studying a foreign language after an eight hour day of hard labor. The tribal government, as well, does not do much because the preservation of the language cannot promise any revenues. There is, at the whole, a good awareness and interest in traditions among the Sac and Fox. The native language, however, no longer can be seen as the most dynamic element in their cultural world. In most cases, by institutionalized naming practises, although strongly rooted in religious beliefs, the language symbolically survives in a rudimentary manner. These reflections are not meant to be an accusation but are intended to bring people back together soon for the re-thinking of a severe language problem on a broader level, and finally to come up with an efficient salvage programme.

**Feasibility of Revitalization**

The attempts of a few dedicated tribal members for the recovery of their language during the 1970s lead to the conclusion that there would need to be a definite engagement from inside the tribe. A realistic estimation reveals, however, that in principal there is not a large enough population to keep the language successfully alive. On the other hand, the Oklahoma Kickapoo, for instance, are even fewer in number and many of their families still raise the children in Kickapoo. Their strong awareness of language necessities is stated by their Bilingual Education Committee:

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7 As of 1950 the Kickapoo in Oklahoma numbered about 800 enrolled people, of which there are about 350 people residing in the State of Oklahoma (Wright 1951:167).
Language is the crucial and most effective means of transmitting cultural values, and often times, we feel "our language" is so vital that it borders on the domain of 'sacredness'. Consequently, not being able to understand the Kickapoo Language is considered to be one step away from being Kickapoo. Thus we strongly feel that to 'forget' or 'not acquiring' the Kickapoo Language would have unfortunate results for our future generations. Recording the language is a long and tedious process which will not be completed in one's lifetime. Languages, just as human beings themselves, constantly change, but we believe we have succeeded in our first step toward a deeper understanding of the Kickapoo Language and Culture. (Murdock et al 1987:ii)

There is, however, a series of problems in Sauk language endeavors, which I will briefly list:

1. Before a language project could be started, first of all there would need to be a tribal commitment and official consensus within tribal membership that there really is a language problem (Leap 1981:222). Only by means of a strong commitment, intra-tribal apathy and unawareness towards the value of their language can be overcome.

2. A thorough needs assessment of the Sauk language (survey, research, analysis) would be needed as a data base for a proposal and for the management of program implementation.

3. The potential speech community of the Sauk is small, but it does not seem to be too small for trying a language retention.

4. There is no tribal reservation community, something which would be needed to watch closely over the continuation of language acquisition.

5. There is no tribal school to serve the same purpose.

6. Relative geographical and social distances within a community of 750 people of the former reservation area have to be overcome before drawing on a broad language retention plan.

7. The economic reality demands a great deal of the Sac and Fox Nation which does not leave them much free resources to support a costly long-term language program.

8. Funding: there are more than 45 agencies just in the U.S. Department of Education plus others (Leap 1981:225) by other organizations, which have to be studied to find the best help available.

9. The socio-cultural improvements that could be achieved for the tribe with a well-prepared program have not yet been clarified and therefore, it would need to be pointed out to tribal officials and language delegates.

Even after overcoming all these problems there is, again, one playing so crucial a role in language acquisition: "Speakers-to-be need practice using their newly acquired familiarity with the language in real-life situations . . . They can only get practice through participation in the day-to-day experience within the home and the tribal community" (Leap 1981:225).
In this respect, referring to the idea of modern international student exchange, a former Sac and Fox Chief stated: "The old Algonquian league needs to form a modern alliance for a cultural and economic exchange. That way we could try, in a joint venture, to reestablish our lost values, traditions and language. I'm thinking of the Shawnee, Potawatomi, Kickapoo, Mesquakie, Menominee and possibly the Ojibwa."

The new language of the Sauk would surely not exactly resemble the old Sauk language in all its original characteristics. Since language and culture can never be the same throughout the course of changes, it is not so important to retrieve it as identically as it was a hundred years ago. Most important is the fact that whatever people take from their history for their immediate future is a help to interpret their sense of life and to build up an identity. Traditions are valuable only as long as they are lived. The smallest attempt to maintain them is already of greatest importance. It is an essential step into a direction to prevent the disappearance of more and more small, but important cultural settings in the world.

**Conclusion**

A logical or rather more realistic reaction to this cluster of problems normally would be: Why bother? Why should one waste time and effort to stop evolution? Why to resist the tide of a dominant culture?

I am not primarily interested in a mere linguistic and grammatical preservation of this language, I would like to hear it communicate again. I think, and I know this seems idealistic, in the humanities we have a special responsibility towards the plurality of ideas. We are facing ecological devastation and we must react to save our environment. As well, we are facing mental deterioration and we need to protect the varieties of humankind. To me the Sauk language is part of the creation as well as the Amazonian rainforest. And there is no difference between the silent death of that language and the well published gradual dying of the African elephant. Both will barely survive this century leaving humankind reduced by two more unique creations: one biological, the other mental. At the bottom line the loss is the same. At this point, it becomes quite clear: we still believe in evolution, whereas things already have turned into a devolution which must and can be stopped.

I wish we all had more confidence in the importance of anthropology and in linguistics and I would like to see a greater number of students and scholars in applied fields, because it is very important what we are doing in ethnography and linguistics.
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