Daghida: Cold Lake First Nation Works Towards Dene Language Revitalization

Heather Blair, Sally Rice, Valerie Wood, John Janvier

The Daghida Project is a research alliance between the community of Cold Lake First Nations and the University of Alberta sponsored by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. As is the case in many First Nations communities in North America (Blair & Fredeen, 1995; Crawford, 1995; Kirkness, 1998; Zepeda & Hill, 1991), the people of Cold Lake are very concerned about the risk of losing their language. In this paper, we will outline the context of language loss on the Cold Lake First Nations (CLFN) reserve as well as describe the collaborative research project between the academic community and that of Cold Lake First Nations and the efforts supported by this project to revitalize the Dene Suline language.

The Cold Lake First Nations Dene Suline[1] live near Cold Lake, Alberta, approximately 300 kilometres northeast of Edmonton on the Alberta and Saskatchewan border. They originally lived in family groups on lands encompassing roughly 150,000 square kilometres, although the reserve lands that they now inhabit represent less than one percent of their traditional territory. They were a nomadic people who maintained both summer and winter camps, travelling between them by foot or dog team. After the signing of Treaty Six in 1876, many families worked on their reserve farms in summer raising cattle and horses. In winter, they continued to travel north to hunt, trap, and fish.

In the early 1950s, the federal government turned the traditional Dene Suline territory into an air weapons range (Canadian Forces Base 4-Wing Cold Lake). The people lost access to their lands and were relocated to three small reserves near Cold Lake totalling approximately 18,720 hectares in size. Most children were sent to Catholic residential schools off the reserve. The schools had an especially devastating effect on the Dene language and way of life not just because the children were discouraged from or actively punished for speaking their Native tongue in these schools, but because normal linguistic and cultural transmission between the generations was disrupted. The entire community was adversely affected by the near-total separation of the family unit, which was maintained except for the few weeks each year that children were returned to their families. Elders and children lost the ability to communicate with one another. With this linguistic loss went the loss of songs, games, stories, and ceremonies—in short, a loss of community.

The last 50 years have seen a steady decline in the numbers of Dene Suline at Cold Lake able to fully communicate in their heritage language. A 1998 survey carried out in accordance with the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Registration System identified 285 fluent or conversant speakers of Dene Suline out of an official band membership of 1,908 (First Nations of Alberta, 1998). Thus, less than 15% of all band members speak an Aboriginal language to some degree of competency (a small proportion of the band population is Cree).

For reasons of history and circumstance, this band is the most southern of all Dene Suline-speaking communities in Canada and is geographically isolated from other Dene Suline speech communities. Consequently, the dialect spoken at Cold Lake is particularly conservative and rich in phonological and lexical contrasts that have been lost in more northern dialects. Indeed, many Cold Lake Dene regard their dialect with pride as the "purest" form of Dene Suline.

At this point in time, the Dene Suline language situation at Cold Lake is critical. A 1990 report for the House of Commons by the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs placed Chipewyan as a whole on the endangered list, one of only two Athapaskan languages in Canada, along with Carrier (spoken in British Columbia), not to be deemed on the verge of extinction (Government of Canada, 1990). Indeed, only three Aboriginal languages in Canada were given excellent chances of survival—Cree, Ojibwa (both Algonquian languages), and Inuktitut (of the Eskimo-Aleut family)—unless an aggressive intervention in the form of indigenous language and literacy policy, planning, and program development is instituted and supported. Language planning at the community level is essential if these languages are to survive (Blair, 1997, Fettes, 1992).

Without such measures, the Dene Suline language and the distinctive dialect spoken at Cold Lake will be nearly extinct within a few decades. A way of speaking, a way of thinking, and a way of life will be lost forever. The people will be left with no connection to their past and no special connection to each other—creating the conditions for individual and social breakdown, as is already attested on this and other reserves across Canada. Knowing this, the Cold Lake community is struggling to reverse decades of language loss and systematic desecration of their culture. Forced dislocation from their traditional hunting grounds was terrible enough, but this exile was compounded by the removal of several generations of children from their families during their formative years. These children were deprived of their linguistic and cultural heritage at the same time they were being raised in artificial and frequently abusive environments. Many grew up knowing neither how to be a parent nor how to be a Dene. These individuals, now adults encompassing the majority of Dene aged 45-65, represent the broken link between still-fluent speakers (in their 60s and older) and those who are essentially monolingual in English (aged 40 and younger) on and around the Cold Lake reserve.

Valerie Wood, Daghida project co-ordinator from CLFN, describes her family as a case example to demonstrate the nature and extent of this loss:

> I am the youngest member of my family who can still carry on a conversation in Dene, and I am 45 years old, born in 1955. I have six older and two younger siblings, all of whom were born between 1940 and 1960. All of my older siblings still speak Dene. My younger siblings have a good deal of comprehension and can speak some basic words and phrases, but they struggle with pronunciation and probably would make grammatical errors. My vocabulary likely reflects that of a 12-year-old because that was the age when I left the community to

> attend high school in the nearby town. Prior to that, I attended school on the reserve where I often engaged in speaking Dene with my peers on the playground. There were no in-school programs at that time, and Dene was passed down through oral tradition. My younger siblings attended upper elementary in town because motorized school bus travel was available by that time. Before that we were "bussed" to school by horse-drawn wagons. The introduction of television also had a significant impact on Dene language in the Cold Lake community. Many of these changes took place in the late '60s and early '70s.

Valerie went on to pursue a university degree; she took courses in linguistics and has participated with members of her family in field research with Dr. Sally Rice from the University of Alberta. This research relationship spawned the Daghida Project.

The Daghida Project

The Daghida Project is a three year enterprise funded through a Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the University of Alberta. The project goal of linguistic and cultural restoration is captured in the Dene word daghida—a term coined by Valerie Wood that proclaims "we are alive." The overall project includes three major components: (a) sociolinguistic, linguistic, and psycholinguistic research; (b) language retention and language education efforts; and (c) cultural preservation and revival.

As a project team, we have begun to address all three components simultaneously as we examine current policy, assess language loss, document speech, inquire into Dene language acquisition, collect and develop language teaching resources, expand Dene language teacher education opportunities, record traditional and cultural knowledge, and archive the community's historical documents.

The complexities of language loss and revitalization efforts necessitate an overall comprehensive language plan. The conceptual framework for language planning outlined by Fishman (1991, 1994), Haugen (1985), and Ruiz (1984, 1988, 1990, 1994) forms the foundation for the first two components of our project. This language planning model outlines essential areas of work. The status-planning component deals with the value and role of language, the existing use of the language, and the goals for its use in both the long term and the short term. The corpus-planning component deals more specifically with the language itself and the details of how to build, rejuvenate, and record the language. The community's goals for their language and literacy form the basis for implementing programs and developing materials to support language revitalization. In order for a language plan to be effective, one aspect cannot take place without the other; in fact, they need to happen simultaneously. A good language plan also includes a schedule, a system of implementation, and a way to evaluate

what is happening. This planning is ongoing, and some components are more clearly defined at this time than others are.

Sociolinguistic, linguistic, and psycholinguistic research. Without a clear picture of the speech community at Cold Lake First Nations, it is difficult to plan for language revitalization. In order to construct a language profile of this community, we are developing a language use interview survey scheduled to be administered in homes throughout the reserve during the fall of 2000. This sociolinguistic survey will address not only the current language use in the community, but also the attitudes and level of commitment of community members toward language revitalization. The analysis of these data will provide a framework for the status-planning component of the project.

On the corpus side of language planning, codification and elaboration of the language are critical, and the Daghida Project provides an excellent opportunity to investigate and document this indigenous language and its speakers on many levels at once. Naturally, there is a critical need to collect basic linguistic information about the language and to analyze it in the form of a grammar and a dictionary. Such collection will involve field recordings and transcriptions and also archive quality recordings of the most fluent speakers engaged in both storytelling and conversation. Our chief aim is to produce materials for pedagogical and linguistic audiences. That is, we need materials that have a practical learner application as well as materials about the language that can be used by linguists interested in comparative aspects of this Athapaskan language. Because much of the basic language data that we will record from Elders will be comprised of traditional stories and legends, family narratives, and community histories, all of which have deep cultural significance for the Dene Nation as a whole, we hope to convert much of this linguistic raw material into the seeds of a Dene literature for use by current and future speakers.

We also envision a multi-tiered lexicon project, the purpose of which will be to produce a bilingual dictionary (Dene to English and English to Dene) containing dialectal information (there are two major dialects—the so-called "t" and "k" dialects) as well as forms that vary across generations. We also anticipate an entire lexicalization component. Its objective would be the coining and adoption of new Dene terms for novel or introduced concepts. Creating new terms in the language is critical if the language is to be relevant in modern society, and it is essential if primary and secondary educational materials are to be developed in the Dene language and used in bilingual classes. But in order for any "invented" lexicalizations to stand a chance of acceptance, we need to determine the dominant lexicalization patterns in the language so that any coined terms will seem congruent with existing ones and thus be more likely to be adopted by today's speakers.

Existing grammatical materials for Dene are scant and relatively incomplete. Currently, there is no published comprehensive grammar of the language for either classroom or scholarly use. At the very least, we plan to write a university level Dene language textbook. Such grammatical materials may prove useful for teaching adults on the reserve as well. It is our intention, too, to develop

a Dene language Web site where speakers and scholars can find language materials such as a dictionary, a grammatical sketch, and sample Dene texts in visual and audio format.

Because the language is endangered, language acquisition (in both a first and second language context) is a dominant concern. Relatively little is known about children's acquisition of Dene either traditionally or in more contemporary situations. Thus, many questions need to be researched: Do adult speakers make the same kinds of lexical and grammatical accommodations when speaking to infants as English speakers do in middle-class households in North America (which is the context from which most of our knowledge about child-directed speech has been collected)? Do such models extend to this cross-cultural context? Moreover, what, typically, are the first lexical or grammatical categories to arise in Dene children's speech? With respect to adults or older children learning Dene as a second language, do either the structure of the language or certain cultural practices suggest particular teaching methods? Might we need to reformulate teaching goals or materials to fit this language and its speakers?

The opposite side of acquisition is attrition. As is the case in most indigenous societies worldwide, the strongest speakers are the Elders, and, more likely than not, their language differs greatly from that of the generation behind them. At Cold Lake First Nations, the Dene spoken by speakers in their mid-fifties and younger is considerably weaker than that of older speakers. Younger speakers lack many of the grammatical contrasts present in the Elders' speech (for example, they cannot produce a full verb paradigm or they do not know the full range of classificatory verb stems), and their vocabularies are somewhat compromised. At present, we lack any evidence except anecdotal reports as to how and to what degree the different generations vary in their active and passive knowledge of Dene. Two morphological studies are currently underway that attempt to investigate speaker awareness of the morphological structure of the language. Two groups of speakers are being tested in these studies—40-60 year olds and speakers older than 60—in an attempt to discover which aspects of the language are fairly robust and "known" by all speakers and which aspects are the first to be lost by weaker speakers. This research is valuable both for language-specific reasons (results might enable us to target those aspects of the language that most need reinforcement in a teaching situation) and for universal ones. Comparative psycholinguistics, which studies language universals, is a relatively new field, and practically no research has been conducted on speakers of Amerindian languages. Psycholinguistic theories of how languages are represented and processed mentally are vulnerable because they are based only on speakers of English and highly related European languages. By bringing to the discussion psycholinguistic data from speakers of North American Aboriginal languages, which differ structurally in major ways from European ones, it is hoped that we can gain a better idea of the universal and the language-particular aspects of natural language processing.

A related cross-cultural study planned by participants in the Daghida Project involves the recording and analysis of gesture use by both children and adult

speakers of Dene. McNeil (1992, 1997) and others have claimed that the gestures accompanying speech, in both shape and timing, are linked to lexico-grammatical structure. Again, gesture data have been collected from a variety of European languages, but nothing is known about gesture use by speakers of languages that are genetically and structurally unrelated, such as the Athapaskan languages. The Daghida Project, based as it is on a partnership between a First Nations community and a university research community, offers a rare opportunity to record a language in use and to study the prosodic and gestural behaviours of its speakers, their introspective awareness about the language, and their response patterns to a number of standard psycholinguistic tests such as semantic priming, lexical decision, or sentence processing tasks. Through this research, we hope to gather basic data that will add to the knowledge about language use in general.

Language retention and language education efforts. Ongoing or proposed project activities in the Cold Lake First Nations community in terms of Dene language retention and language education include the establishment of an Elders' advisory group, an adult Dene language and literacy class, Dene language festivals, cultural and linguistic immersion camps, an immersion day-care or Head Start program, and school age curriculum development as well as teacher education and language education at the post secondary level. The Elders' advisory group is being established to ensure the preservation and protection of the culture and language in its entirety. It is their responsibility to approve of and advise on project activities such as the documentation of the language and to provide guidelines for cultural renewal efforts. They are an essential language resource for the community, and their role in all language retention activities is critical if this language is to be saved.

Many young parents on the CLFN reserve understand very little Dene and do not speak, read, or write the language. Consequently, they are ill equipped to transmit the language to their children. Because, as parents, this generation is essential to language transmission (and thus revitalization), we felt the need to work with them from the outset. In response to this need, we established weekly adult language classes. These classes are offered at various times throughout the week to ensure that there is sufficient opportunity for everyone interested to attend. The primary goal of these classes is to promote oral Dene language use. Efforts are therefore aimed at teaching participants useful conversation skills and at creating an environment that encourages and supports Dene language practice. A literacy component will be added eventually as a practical orthography becomes standardized.

Another forum for adult language and literacy development is the Dene Language Café, where any interested community members can come to share a meal and converse in Dene. This is a weekly informal event that fosters recognition of the importance of the language for everyday use.

We have also planned a language festival to be held on the reserve. This event is meant to foster positive attitudes toward Dene language and culture at all ages. This will be a day during which the school children and parents join

elder community members in a range of language games and activities. A scavenger hunt in Dene and traditional activities like making bannock will be included. A community pledge board will be set up at this event, and community members will be asked to make a personal commitment to use the Dene Suline language over the year ahead. These pledges could include promises to speak to a grandchild regularly in Dene or to answer the telephone at home or at work in Dene.

A series of culture and language immersion camps have been planned that will increase cultural awareness. These will be scheduled at different times throughout the school term in accordance with the appropriate season for various cultural activities. The camps will involve Elders, adults, adolescents, children, and all interested members of the community, as well as Dene speakers from other Dene communities. Small groups will engage in traditional activities such as hunting and fishing, hide preparation, beadwork, cooking, berry picking, and so forth using the Dene language. Initially, these camps will be weekend affairs, but ultimately a two-week summer camp or full summer camp is envisioned.

One of our future goals is to establish a Dene immersion day-care at Cold Lake. Because of the limited number of Dene speakers trained in Early Childhood Education, this type of program will likely remain a long-term goal for some time. However, an Aboriginal Head Start program has recently opened, and we will be integrating some Dene language programming into their daily activities.

The LeGoff School (K-8) at CLFN is the only school in Western Canada that is still administered by the Department of Indian Affairs. The federal, rather than local, control of the school may explain the lack of cultural programming currently being offered to students. At present, each grade receives only 80 minutes of Dene language instruction per week, and only one Dene language teacher, John Janvier, is responsible for all grades. John does not have his provincial teacher certification, and he has very few second language resources to employ in his classroom. The Daghida project team is working directly with him to acquire curriculum materials and resources from other Dene communities in Western and Northern Canada. The Dene Ke curriculum from the Northwest Territories as well as supplementary materials, posters, children's story books, audio tapes, and CDs from Saskatchewan have been collected and are now available for his use while we work toward the development of local material.

Despite their limited resources, the LeGoff School has initiated some unique programs that promote First Nations languages. For example, in the mid 1990s, they started an annual Native Speech Contest. The contest is now held on a rotating basis among neighbouring Cree and Dene reserves in the Treaty Six area of Alberta. For this event, the children recite a short speech, which they have written, in their Aboriginal language. They are then judged by a panel of Cree and Dene speakers. For the past two years, the children from Cold Lake First Nations have won this contest and proudly brought the trophy home to the LeGoff School. Although the speeches are rehearsed, the speech contest has

contributed to elevating the status of First Nations languages both on this reserve and on neighbouring ones.

In addition to language education at the community level, the Daghida Project is involved in language education at the university level. The University of Alberta is currently developing an introductory Dene Suline class to offer on campus in 2001-2002. This will be a first time offering at the University of Alberta and will draw both fluent and non-fluent speakers from the university community.

Recognizing the need to develop and support human resources, the project supports its participants in professional development opportunities. For example, because the need for trained Dene teachers is great in Alberta, during the summer of 2000 the project funded one individual who attended the American Indian Languages Development Institute (AILDI) based at the University of Arizona in Tucson. We have also collaborated with a committee of Aboriginal language teachers, teacher educators, and linguists from Alberta and Saskatchewan to develop the Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute (CILLDI). Similar to AILDI, this Canadian summer institute will provide both graduate and undergraduate courses for teachers and researchers working toward language preservation. Also in the summer of 2000, the first Institute was held on the Onion Lake reserve in Saskatchewan, hosting a total immersion Cree class for senior undergraduates, Cree language teachers, and graduate students from both the University of Alberta and the University of Saskatchewan. For the summer of 2001, CILLDI will expand offerings to include courses in Dene, Cree, Linguistics, and Aboriginal languages curriculum and pedagogy.

Cultural preservation and revival. The third component of the project consists of a variety of long-range activities to be carried out in different locations, including the Dene Suline Koe (language centre) at Cold Lake First Nations and a proposed Dene Suline Interpretive Centre at K'ai Hochila ("Willow Point"). There is an urgent need to collect archive-quality materials from highly proficient Native speakers such as personal narratives, traditional stories, genealogies, knowledge about places and traditional place names, community histories, songs, as well as accounts of traditional skills such as trapping, fishing, tanning, and crafts. This cultural knowledge will be recorded, videotaped, and transcribed, and these materials will be archived in analog or digital format, as appropriate, for use in the schools, for multimedia display at a proposed interpretive centre, for public broadcast via radio or TV, and for internet transmission via a community Web site. Community youth and young adults are seen as critically instrumental in the production and distribution of these materials, as well as in the maintenance of a Cold Lake Dene Web site

The archiving of materials for the project will be done in conjunction with the Learning Systems Enterprises at the University of Alberta, who will conduct museum training at Cold Lake First Nations through their certificate program in the planning, production, and self-management of museums. Learning Systems will also assist in the development of the interpretive centre.

During the summer of 2000, the Cold Lake First Nations hosted the Dene Suline Gathering. This is an annual reunion of northern and western Dene, an

opportunity for young and old to come together for a few days of socializing, story-telling, dancing, banqueting, and displaying of crafts, much of which usually takes place in Dene Suline. It is also an opportunity for the Dene Suline people from across the western provinces and territories to discuss issues of common concern including the loss of language and culture. Language activists from these provinces and from the territories met at this annual event to share resources and strategies for language revitalization efforts.

Summary and Conclusion

The Daghida Project is a unique language renewal partnership incorporating linguistic, educational, and cultural components. It is our hope that it will provide a model that will be useful to other communities. This collaborative endeavour has united the community of Cold Lake First Nations and the University of Alberta in comprehensive and ongoing linguistic and cultural revitalization efforts and provides both a breadth and depth of expertise between the two communities.

Note

[1]Previously, these people were known as Chipewyan. This term is of Cree origin and is increasingly disfavoured as a referent of ethnicity in the Prairie Provinces. In this paper, Dene or Dene Suline will identify the people who belong to the speech community associated with this indigenous tongue.

References

Blair, H. (1997*). Indian languages policy and planning in Saskatchewan: A research report.* Regina: Government of Saskatchewan.

Blair, H., & Fredeen, S. (1995). Do not go gently into that good night: Rage against the dying of the light (The case of Aboriginal language obsolescence in Canada). *Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 26*(1), 27-49.

Crawford, J. (1995). Endangered Native American languages: What is to be done and why? *Bilingual Research Journal, 19*(1), 17-38.

Fettes, M. (1992). *A guide to language strategies for First Nations communities*. Ottawa, ON: Assembly of First Nations.

First Nations of Alberta. (1998). *Indian register population*. Alberta: Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Affairs.

Fishman, J. A. (1991). *Reversing language shift*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Fishman, J. A. (1994). *Response to papers on reversing Navajo language shift: Tribal, community, and school perspectives*. Paper presented at the National Association for Bilingual Education, Los Angeles.

Government of Canada. (1990). *You took my talk: Aboriginal literacy and empowerment* (Fourth Report of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs). Ottawa, ON: House of Commons.

Haugen, E. (1985). The language of Imperialism: Unity or pluralism? In M. Wolfson & J. Manes (Eds.), *Language and inequality* (pp. 4-17). Berlin: Mouton.

Kirkness, V. (1998). *Aboriginal languages: A collection of talks and papers*. Vancouver, BC: Westwood Publishing.

McNeill, D. (1992). *Hand and mind: What gestures reveal about thought*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McNeill, D. (1997). Growth points cross-linguistically. In J. Nuyts & E. Pederson (Eds.), *Language and conceptualization: Language, culture, and cognition: Vol. 1* (pp. 190-212). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Ruiz, R. (1984). Orientation to language planning. *NABE Journal, 8*(2), 15-34.

Ruiz, R. (1988). Orientations in language planning. In S. McKay & C. Wong (Eds.), *Language diversity: Problem or resource* (pp. 3-25). Boston: Heinle Publishers.

Ruiz, R. (1990). Official languages and language planning. In K. Adams & D. Brinks (Eds.), *Perspectives on official English: The campaign of English as the official language of the USA*. New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Ruiz, R. (1994). Language planning considerations in Native American communities. Paper presented at the American Anthropological Association Conference, Washington, D.C.

Saskatchewan Indigenous Languages Committee. (1991). *Sociolinguistic survey of Indigenous languages in Saskatchewan: On the critical list.* Saskatoon, SK: Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations.

Zepeda, O., & Hill, J. (1991). The condition of Native American languages in the United States. *Diogenes, 153*, 18-43.