

Methods of Madness: The Tuscarora Language Committee

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The Tuscarora Nation is one of the six nations of the Haudenosaunee (people of the Longhouse) presently situated in western New York. Traditionally, it is believed that the Tuscarora originated near the St. Lawrence Valley along with the other five nations (Hale, 1883; Johnson, 1967), eventually separating and migrating southward into present day North Carolina. In 1722, after devastation of their land base during the Tuscarora War, they journeyed north and were taken into the Iroquois Confederacy, joining the Cayugas and Oneidas as one of the Younger Brothers; the Mohawk, Seneca, and Onondaga were considered the Older Brothers. We have since been relocated to reservation lands about twelve miles southeast of Niagara Falls, New York.

At one time, the Tuscarora language, a member of the Iroquoian language family, was spoken as the mother tongue, transmitted across the generations, and used for all informal and formal situations. In the 1800s, owing to the proximity of the non-Native society and the influence of boarding schools, the language began to lose its importance. Today, we have about four or five fluent Elders remaining, all in their seventies and eighties, and the language is in the shadows of extinction.

The Tuscarora Language Committee came into existence in the fall of 1995, developed from a final paper I had written for a course taken at the American Indian Language Development Institute (AILDI) at the University of Arizona. A language revitalization program, tailored to our own individual first language communities, was based on our needs and on what stage our language community was in. The Tuscarora language, according to renowned sociolinguist Dr. Joshua A. Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale, could be classified as being in stage seven, where language users are "socially integrated and ethnolinguistically active populations but beyond child-bearing age" (Fishman, 1991, p. 89).

Our remaining handful of Tuscarora Elder speakers have become involved in our language revitalization efforts and are willing to help promote and restore their first language. At one time, there were also Tuscarora speakers located on the Six Nations Reserve in Ontario, Canada, but, at this time, I am unaware of any fluent speakers remaining, although there may be several residents from one of the other Haudenosaunee communities with some familiarity with Tuscarora.

My first task upon returning from AILDI, with my revolutionary language saving, intergenerational mother tongue transmission-friendly proposal in my inexperienced, ready-to-conquer-the-world hands, was to present my plan to the Tuscarora Nation Chiefs' in Council, our traditional form of government. This would be a first for our Nation, a first step in the right direction towards language loss reversal. After the monumental presentation and subsequent approval, the Council brainstormed names of community members who might be recruited

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for the project—those willing to take on the awesome responsibility of language revitalization. We began with, and still maintain, about ten enthusiastic, committed, and willing volunteers, each cognizant of the dangerous situation into which our language has fallen. We are from a fairly wide cross section of the community: teachers, homemakers, students, professional and blue-collar workers, Elders, Council representatives, and young people. The proposal was agreed upon, with some minor changes; long term and short term goals were accepted; and the wheels began to turn forward.

The following is a list of our accomplishments thus far:

- Our first task was to introduce ourselves to the community via an informational flyer, produced at no cost, which we inserted in every mailbox on the territory; a Tuscarora Language Committee (TLC) member donated the use of their copier and paper.
- Next we developed a simple questionnaire designed to determine the language attitudes of the community. Again, we distributed the questionnaire to every mailbox and waited for responses, but they proved to be few and far between. Solution: set up a booth at our yearly local Community Fair, give free tickets to win a basket of goodies (donated by a TLC member) to any adult filling out a questionnaire. The results showed an interest in language revitalization, and many people made helpful suggestions—at no cost.
- An informational brochure was developed and distributed at community functions. The minimal cost for professional printing was donated by a TLC member.
- We set up interactive displays at our annual Community Fair, at the Nation school's Culture Night, and at other community events.
- We installed Nation boundary signs written in Tuscarora, which were donated by a generous and concerned non-Native from the surrounding area.
- We printed Christmas cards and Valentine's cards written in the language, which were made on my home computer and sold at minimal cost to cover the expense of paper and envelopes.
- Conversational vocabulary tapes were sold at cost.
- We wrote a newsletter. Copies were made from a TLC member's home copier at no cost.
- We produced a calendar written in Tuscarora using the program *Publisher* and scanning old pictures gathered from the community for each month. The cost of this project was mostly time; the only expenses were the paper, plastic binding, and minimal printing costs. A TLC member was able to have them bound at school, at no cost.
- Using the profits from the calendar sales, we were able to purchase micro-cassette recorders for our Elders, enabling them to record on the spur of the moment any words that might suddenly occur to them out of the blue.

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- The TLC initiated the instalment of a sign to be written in Tuscarora and to be constructed at the Tuscarora Indian School on our Nation territory. The cost was covered by the operating school district's budget.
- An official orthography has been introduced and established, developed by Marianne Mithun, an Iroquoian linguist, and me.
- We have met with community organization and club leaders to help them utilize relevant Tuscarora vocabulary within their respective groups.

One of our guiding principles—the “method in our madness”—is that promoting your language efforts and developing revitalization strategies does not necessarily require a lot of funding. All of our accomplishments, although not extravagantly produced, have been at little or no cost. All of our language advocates are operating on a volunteer basis. We have no budget, no grant writers, and no administrative overheads or salaries. If there is a cost involved in producing materials, we find a way to circumvent those costs utilizing local resources and taking advantage of the generosity of our supporters.

Of course, we do have goals and wish-lists: visions of professionally bound and printed children's books overflowing with colour, volumes of video taped interviews with Elders, summer language camps, and even fleeting thoughts of actual libraries to house archival materials and archaic manuscripts. These are all jam on the fry bread. What we need now is for people to take our language situation seriously and to take steps towards language renewal; each one of us needs to become responsible. Steps such as these do not require money.

We are aware of foundations with private grants willing to sponsor our wish-list projects, and perhaps the time will come to take advantage of those funds. But, for now, we are willing to take the low road toward progressivism and “big bucks” dependency and to lean towards true independent grassroots strategies. Freedom from webs of bureaucratic red tape, at this point, takes precedence over data gathering and budget monitoring. There is so little time to accomplish so much. We waste no time squabbling over money because there is no money to squabble over. All around Indian country, I have witnessed the perils of the so-called advantages of money and seen the focus of language revitalization programs shift to money gathering away from language saving. Contrary to how it may sound, I do feel there is a need for certain projects to be funded, and I appreciate those who are generous to these projects and understand the need to prevent language extinction; however, I also feel that the human spirit of giving needs to be nurtured by the accomplishments and rewards of hard work. The old adage tells us, “Where there is a will, there is a way,” not “Where there is a dollar, there is a way.” Our ancestors prophesied our weakening due to the pitfalls of the “shiny metal,” and it is becoming more obvious every day.

We are still likened to babes when it comes to language revitalization. Ireland has been fighting their battle for over two hundred years. As long as the Creator allows our mouths to speak, our ears to hear, and our minds to believe, we will continue our battle to protect the Tuscarora language. Whether or not our unborn

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faces will hear the Creator's gift of words tomorrow depends on what we do today.

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