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BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Call Number:
 Title: American Indian culture and research journal.
 ISSN: 0161-6463
 Imprint: [Los Angeles, American Indian Culture and Research Center, University of California]
 Article: POWERS, WILLIAM K.; Saving Lakota: Commentary on Language Revitalization.
 Volume: 33
 Number: 4
 Date: 2009
 Pages: 139-eoa
 Verified: <TN:75924><ODYSSEY:206.107.42.63/ILL> OCLC

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COMMENTARY

Saving Lakota: Commentary on Language Revitalization

WILLIAM K. POWERS

Losing a Native language is like losing a relative. It is gone forever, never to return except in fond memories of words and phrases handed down by parents and grandparents but only scarcely used or understood by the current, bereaved generation. Gone the language, gone the tradition. The message is that memories of past speech are not enough to sustain a tribe, a tradition, a people. We need to talk.

Voices resound on all the Lakota reservations: "We are losing our language. We are afraid because as goes the language, so goes the culture." Is it really a dilemma? Yes. A recent one? Hardly. I heard these sentiments for the first time sixty years ago at Pine Ridge. Elderly men and women criticized the younger generation: "They don't even know their language. They don't even know their relatives." A foreshadowing of the future, perhaps; a Lakota prophecy, maybe. But presently the reality of a Lakota Oyate without its own language has surfaced accompanied by a near hysteria over how to delay what is perceived to be THE END.

Recently I received two announcements. The first was an invitation to a conference on language-immersion classes being held by the staff of Sitting Bull College, which is located on the Standing Rock Reservation. Sacheen Whitetail Cross, tribal education manager of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe, heads the conference. The program is associated with the Lakota Language

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Consortium, which has just produced the *New Dictionary of Lakota* under the editorship of Jan Ullrich, a Czech national and exceptional lexicographer, who has devoted nearly two decades to revising written Lakota. Appended to the invitation was an advertisement that read: "Want to Learn How to Protect Your Native Language? Immersion Symposium. 'Putting it All Together.'" Several days later, I received an issue of *Wicah'pi*, which is the newsletter of the Oglala Lakota College (OLC) at Pine Ridge.¹ The headline read "OLC Establishes Lakota Language Preservation Program," and later in a piece by Thomas Shortbull, president of OLC, the headline read "Language Immersion: A Key to Saving a Culture." Both are clearly intended to alert Lakotas to the present situation, one of which they are clearly aware: too few Lakotas speak Lakota, and the possibility of losing their Native language is imminent.

Historically the Lakota have spent much of their history protecting, defending, or simply ignoring the fact that certain factions have been in favor of Lakotas forsaking their language in order to hasten the ultimate state of being "civilized," while others rode in like the cavalry responding to their cries to help save their language from its portending doom. Interestingly, not only have non-Indians attempted to mandate English as a second (soon to become first) language of every Native American, but also Lakotas have been involved.

For example, when Carlisle Indian School opened in 1879 under the auspices of the federal government, thus becoming the first federal Indian school in the United States, it was two prominent Lakotas who were in favor of sending their children to Carlisle to learn the white man's culture, particularly its language, so that they would no longer need to rely on faulty translations by the *iyeska* (offspring of Lakota women and white men who "spoke white," that is, were bilingual and served as interpreters).

None other than Red Cloud of Pine Ridge Reservation and Spotted Tail of Rosebud Reservation sent fifty children from Pine Ridge and thirty-four children from Rosebud to Carlisle, representing the first tribes to enroll at the school. This was not by accident. Three years after Custer, the "Sioux" were the perfect guinea pigs for the white man's educational system because by all white standards they were considered the most hostile.² It was a perfect *quid pro quo*: fed up with reliance on the *iyeska*, who frequently were accused of mistranslation (particularly in the killing of Crazy Horse), the chiefs wanted their children to learn to speak English. Lakota speakers would do their own translations. However, none of the chiefs planned for their children to abdicate Lakota as a first language.

One year later the chiefs were en route to Washington, D.C., as part of a delegation to meet with the Great White Father. Henry Pratt, notorious architect of Carlisle and its headmaster, invited Red Cloud and Spotted Tail to visit the school to witness their children's progress. But when they arrived, the chiefs were shocked to see their "scalped" boys, wearing military uniforms, marching past in review, reminiscent of the soldiers who defeated the Lakota and those whom they had defeated. But they became even more enraged when they discovered that none of their children could yet speak English. They threatened to take them back to the reservation. Some left, some stayed.

Those who stayed were required to speak English only. Those who did not were frequently incarcerated according to prevailing military law.

Between 1886 and 1888, another faction entered the reservations, the Jesuits, or the Black Robes, who founded St. Francis Mission on the Rosebud Reservation in 1886 and Holy Rosary Mission at Pine Ridge Reservation in 1888. By this time, Crow Dog had assassinated Spotted Tail, the most vociferous against Carlisle's failure to teach his children English. But Red Cloud welcomed the Black Robes at Pine Ridge because they had promised to educate their children and teach them English. The Episcopalians, or White Robes, who had been there since the establishment of the reservation, already were teaching Lakota children in their Native language. The Episcopalians took a different tact. They encouraged the retention of the language and even recruited Lakota priests who could preach in the Native language. However, the two denominations differed quite remarkably. The Jesuits forbade the speaking of Lakota in school yet ironically became extraordinarily adept at preserving the language. This was owing to the work of Eugene Buechel, SJ, who during a fifty-year period collected words and formalized the grammar while serving as a priest at Holy Rosary and St. Francis missions and ultimately produced a Lakota grammar-dictionary (edited by his amanuensis, Paul Manhart, SJ, who also continued translating Buechel's work after his death), a collection of stories, bible texts, and other tracts.

At the same time, the federal government required Lakota children to attend boarding schools because it believed that separating children from their parents would greatly enhance the "civilization" process, particularly by forcing them to learn English. Many have written about the severity of treatment by government disciplinarians in forbidding students to speak Lakota. The Jesuits seem to rank first with respect to punishment. Some Lakotas who received corporeal punishment at the mission schools are still alive. Jesuits dealt out punishment to "the older boys" by beating them with a paddle. While their screams were broadcast over a public address system, children played in the school yard below, the loudspeaker blaring their potential fate if they dared speak Lakota.

But after all the intimidation, including beatings and incarceration, an interesting thing happened to the Lakota language. Nothing. Despite all the threats to innocent students caught in the culture wars of priests and politicians, despite self-righteous pronouncements of superiority of English over Lakota, the language survived. The students grew up, returned to their natal homes for the summer break still fluent speakers capable of teaching their children its engaging sounds when they left school. Upon returning to their families, demanding elders were quick to put their children to the test by immediately asking "Nahanci Lakoliya he?" (Do you speak Lakota?) In a humorous story widely told on the reservation, an old woman asks her returning grandson if he still speaks Lakota. He replies, "Hau, kukuksi!" At this point she begins to chase him with an umbrella. The grandson runs away in terror as the old woman pummels him. What he should have said is "Hau, kungsi." *Kungsi* means grandmother, *kukuksi* means pig. Whether the story is true, or whether it is simply the Lakotas' penchant for punning

is dubious. I suspect the latter. The point is that the language survived because children came home to a family and community that spoke it. Lakota persisted through the recognized natural immersion afforded by daily conversation in the home, the community, at reservation-wide events, even in texts written in the form of letters to family and friends. People demonstrated their cultural resilience through the positive application of spoken and written Lakota.

Although younger Lakotas frequently blame the boarding school system for forcing them to lose their language and culture, both survived very well. The facts show that the Lakota did not entirely abdicate their language at the boarding schools in which opportunities existed to speak it secretly and even augment it with the silent language of traditional communication, sign language.

When I arrived at Pine Ridge in 1948, some Lakotas anticipated—actually feared—that the language would disappear because the younger generation was more interested in things other than expressing Lakota traditional values in their Native language. This was a period in which some young people refused to speak Lakota or claimed that they couldn't speak it, at least in public. After all, white culture was all-consuming. In addition to the schools there were employment opportunities based on knowing English; it was another means of survival. At boarding and day schools there were new forms of recreation, such as kitten ball, basketball, baseball, and football. Teachers taught special classes for boys in which they learned trades such as carpentry, masonry, and animal and farming skills; they taught girls classes in sewing, cooking, and other skills geared to make them perfect housewives. Clearly, government and parochial policies ordained that these children, once "civilized," would soon become members of the white working class. However, it did not mean the language was dead. The children, particularly teenagers, and those who lived in reservation towns were prone to speaking English, a particular form of dialect frequently called "reservation English." But the "country" kids spoke Lakota as a first language. In 1950, I lived in a community called Loafer Camp with a family of parents, both bilingual, and ten children, five bilingual and five monolingual in Lakota. When the younger ones started school they too would become bilingual outside the home, but they remained totally Lakota inside the home, a safe haven for Lakota culture.

Today, a half century later, after a remarkable history of resistance to language deprivation, where is the resilience of the language? Where is the resilience of the tradition? Slipping away? Making an exit? Evaporating? Or is it simply pausing? Perhaps it is a diminishing reservation population owing to Lakotas leaving the reservation seeking education, employment, or simply the excitement of the cities. Is it the absence of elders who speak the language? Is it the presence of elders who don't want to teach their young ones? Maybe it is a majority of young ones who do not want to learn. Why are some elders saying: "why should they?" What is the value of speaking Lakota today? Where is the moral center of being Lakota? What is the answer? Is there an answer?

A new faction of educators has entered the picture, all of whom hope to make some progress in helping the Lakota retain their language. This is

assuming that a substantial number of Lakotas want to retain their language. This new faction comprises academically trained linguists who offer different paths by which a dying language, if it is truly dying, may undergo revitalization.

I cannot deny that after sixty years among the Lakota I do have some prejudices regarding revitalization of the Lakota language. Very broadly, I am of the mind that it is Lakotas who should make decisions about the future of their language and of their culture—not the government, missionaries, or linguists, all of whom, however, have something important to say about the state of the Lakota language. As every Lakota knows, although consensus is an expressed means of agreement in traditional Lakota culture, it is virtually impossible to achieve in contemporary life. I believe that intercommunity and interreservation disputes to some extent contribute to the problem in as much as it often affects the language. For example, the orthography, a major stumbling block in saving Lakota, frequently serves as a distinctive reservation, tribal, and individual marker. I have heard the spoken language used in tribal council meanings to distinguish social class. The old discriminatory markers "full blood" and "mixed blood" derive from the ability to speak English and thus hold better jobs on the reservation. Public debates were once argued exclusively in Lakota, but more recently they are argued in English as fewer Lakota speakers are elected to the council. Today, Lakota speakers seem to be more influential because they can switch to Lakota when they seek support from other Lakotas while their opponents are frustrated by their inability to understand their own Native language. Unfair? Possibly, but it does bode well, at least symbolically, in tribal council meetings in which the language still functions and tradition frequently triumphs.

Some individuals would dispense with reading and writing. At OLC, the idea is to teach students only how to *speak* Lakota the first year. According to Bryan Charging Cloud, director of the OLC Lakota Language Institute, there are plans to translate books into Lakota in the second year because "you can't read until you learn to speak." This is a novel approach, and there is no evidence for it. Reading and writing are indisputably beneficial to learning the spoken sounds of the classroom. It does seem a shame that an immersion program would disregard this mandatory procedure. After all, most of the young children in the program do not speak Lakota, and thus they are learning Lakota as if it were a foreign language. I know of no language program that does not use books to support their conversational programs, including Native American programs (for example, Cherokee, Cree, Hopi, Navajo, and Inuit).

Furthermore, immersion programs were not created to teach students a dying language per se. They were meant to quicken the process of learning a foreign language for persons who wanted or needed to learn that language in a short time. The difference between the traditional immersion program and one meant to preserve a dying language is that the purpose of the former was to expedite the student's ability to join an extant speech community, one not their own.

Thus, all Lakota-language programs should really emphasize that Lakota is a written language and has been for 175 years, beginning with the early

work of missionaries who developed a written system of the eastern dialect, Dakota, which serves as the basis for all subsequent dictionaries and grammars in Lakota and Dakota. Furthermore, a large corpus of written Lakota is already published and available.

This brings up a number of problems in regard to saving Lakota: who teaches it, and will teachers agree on a singular alphabet? What will this alphabet finally look like? What other means of teaching Lakota are available? There are many options, particularly since the adaptation of typewriters (a usual determinant of creating new alphabets in the early days) to computers, which offer untold promises in Lakota-language education. Since the 1970s, partly owing to the establishment of reservation colleges, the method of writing Lakota has been left up to individual teachers associated with different reservations and schools within each reservation as well as varying orthographic rules. The many idiosyncrasies of writing Lakota were based on a long line of scholarly variations starting with written Dakota. Congregationalist missionaries under the auspices of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions lived among the Santee and Yankton for the purpose of creating a written form of their language. Among these missionaries were Samuel and Gideon Pond, Stephen R. Riggs, and Thomas S. Williamson, who with the assistance of Native speakers Michael Renville, Reverend David Grey Cloud, Reverend James Garvie, and Walking Elk developed the first written Dakota. Over time there was a plethora of written materials—dictionaries, grammars, newspapers, and religious tracts. There were others who contributed to the analytical aspects of Lakota such as Franz Boas, the founder of American anthropology, and Ella C. Deloria, a Native speaker who collaborated with Boas on the language's structural aspects.

The written form of Lakota, the western dialect, was thus predetermined by the Dakota scholars and essentially utilized by Buechel when he began studying Lakota. For clarity, I call this form the Buechel system, even though there are variants (to say the least!). Although Riggs included some Lakota versions in his Dakota dictionary, Buechel clearly was the first to focus on Lakota. His system was taught to the great-grandparents and grandparents of contemporary Lakotas and functioned as a viable written language. Even though there were numerous errors in Buechel's grammar and dictionary, his overall work is to be admired and respected. After the 1970s, however, competing writing systems came into effect. No matter which system is used, it is important that written Lakota continue.

In any kind of immersion program, whether for kindergartners or high school students, it is mandatory that students have access to written versions of the conversational aspect of each program, which they can consult during or after conversational drills. Even more important is the fact that there are now computer programs making new approaches to teaching Lakota perhaps more relevant. Teachers and participants in the immersion program should understand that reading and writing Lakota is not only a support system for the spoken language but also a sign of respect for the culture; it means the culture stays viable by keeping pace with innovative education. Lakotas have

a concept called *yulakota*, which means to make or transform a foreign idea into something compatible with Lakota culture. Thus, in theory, there are no new adaptations that are potentially incompatible with Lakota culture as long as they continue to sustain Lakota culture. Reading and writing certainly are no exceptions.

One should consider that once fluency is achieved, bilingual speakers should be literate in both languages just like the old people were. After all, nearly two centuries ago, Dakotas and Lakotas learned to read and write in their Native languages before they spoke English. It was the purpose of the early missionaries to teach them how to read and write in their own language so that it would be easier for them to read and write English. In the early days, students were even encouraged to practice cursive writing so they actually could use the language pragmatically as a form of communication within their own traditional context. People wrote letters and cards to family and friends. Secretaries of the prevalent Jesuit St. Joseph and Mary sodalities kept records of their activities in Lakota. "Penmanship" was a Lakota value. Today, the old forms of communication have been replaced by e-mail and cell phones easily adaptable to Lakota. The old-timers, the *ihceewicasa*, were literate then, why not now? Is it really more "traditional" Lakota to be illiterate in their own language, as some would have it?

Some scholars have given a lot of thought to what should be required as preconditions for learning a dying language. Many of these preconditions already exist on the reservations. For example, educational programs already flourish in the lower schools and colleges. Many are bilingual and bicultural. Lakotas like to create their own educational materials, and some exceptional ones already exist such as the series of comic books created at the Little Wound School at Kyle on the Pine Ridge Reservation.³ Also, there are attempts by larger communities to use Lakota in advertisements in newspapers and on radio programs such as KILI at Pine Ridge and KINI at Rosebud, both of which have declined in Lakota-language programming. Christmas cards as well as invitations to community events are written in Lakota. Mainly, there is a continuous interest in preserving the culture through other social and religious means, such as powwows, Sun dances, *inipis*, *hanbleceyas*, naming ceremonies, and other ceremonies traditionally conducted in Lakota. These are all positive support systems that can assist in reviving language. Lakotas always have been proud of their heritage, and if they are truly concerned with its potential demise, some kind of compromise is necessary.

However, there is a downside. In the past, the success of keeping a language alive largely depended on the dominant society's support. Unlike, say, Quebec and Ireland, as two well-known examples of people who fought to retain their language, the dominant society comprised a majority of their countrymen who were behind their struggle. In the Lakota case, the dominant culture is the United States. The question is: does America support the goals of ethnic groups? I think not, at least not with the vigor needed to encourage their cultural retention. Arguments today are concerned with the fact that the politicians seem to be afraid that immigrant groups may usurp

English as the "official" language of the United States. For Lakotas to succeed, they must give their own direction to these programs through some form of interreservation authority that can regulate teaching Lakota. To date, individual reservations tend to favor opposing writing systems, which is anathema to saving Lakota or any other language.

The solution is an interreservation system of teacher training and creation of training materials and programs. Because the Lakota dialect is uniform with the exception of some words and expressions, there must be a way of codifying the way the language is written. I truly believe that if this does not happen, programs will fail.

Presently, most teachers are fluent speakers who have had little or no training in how to teach a language. In the 1970s when I was teaching at the Oglala Sioux Community College (now OLC), I noticed that language students were usually required to learn the usual introductory words and phrases (for example, "yes," "no," "how are you?") as well as categories of words such as names for relatives, colors, numbers, and weekdays. Once I asked a teacher what he did if a student asked about a particularly difficult (compared with English) concept. He replied, "I say 'class dismissed.'"

Unfortunately, this system is still used, and children do not normally progress to more difficult language concepts. Teaching how to teach is a difficult procedure that requires time, dedication, and direction. Without this knowledge it would be difficult to have high expectations for a program that leads to fluency in the language. With small children, teachers who are fluent in Lakota may conduct immersion programs so that the children can learn simple words and phrases until they progress into more advanced classes.

As every Lakota teacher knows, a major problem is the kind of diacritics that individuals select in writing the alphabet. Perhaps this is the greatest disagreement, but the only solution is to accept a singular way to write the language. Lakotas must agree on the selection. A difficult task? Yes and no. If one compares all the dictionaries of Lakota (and Dakota) written by Lakotas and non-Lakotas the similarities would greatly outweigh the differences. Most vowels and consonants are the same; therefore, if one can read one system, one variety, then one can understand the others. Ironically, most Lakotas agree on that. The major disagreement, and partly responsible for the need for Lakota teachers to create their own resources (including variations on the Buechel system), is the fact that since the early 1970s each new rendition of the alphabet has inserted more diacritics making it, for some, more difficult to read.

It started primarily with Alan Taylor and David Rood, distinguished linguists at the University of Colorado who created a new written system that enabled readers to pronounce Lakota with precision. At this point, the age-old name *Lakota* was changed to *Lakhóta*. The phoneme *kh* represented a strongly aspirated sound written originally as *k* in Buechel's original grammar. Other changes were *ph* (written *p*) and *th* (written *t*). There were also stress marks over words containing more than one syllable. The change in orthography influenced some scholars, who then began to use the Colorado method. However, Lakotas were offended in part because they

regarded the change as needless and believed it made the language harder to read. There was also some sense that they were annoyed that still more white men were tampering with their language. Albert White Hat, a Lakota linguist at Sinte Gleska University at Rosebud, states that he partly wrote his 1999 grammar to show that a Lakota lexicographer had more insight into the inner workings of the culture through language. His grammatical examples reflect true Lakota life, and he was successful in his choice of stories, his choice of old words, and how the language was adapting. However, with the help of his editor, Jael Kamfe, he revised the orthography by using yet a different set of symbols. *Lakhóta* became *Lakota*, which essentially differentiated Rosebud from Pine Ridge, whose system is closer to Buechel's. A Pine Ridge teacher, upon seeing White Hat's grammar, remarked, "That's the way they do it at Rosebud."

Finally (although other dictionaries and grammars have been produced in Europe), the Lakhota Language Consortium produced several types of publications by 2009 including the *New Lakota Dictionary*. In order to spell the name of the people, the Lakhota Language Consortium system requires three diacritics (*kh* + wedge + accent mark) whereas Buechel's system requires none. It should be emphasized that Buechel's grammar, which he published in 1939, contained diacritics in order to differentiate between series of phonemes. However, when Manhart supervised the publication of Buechel's posthumous dictionary, he took the liberty to reformulate accent marks into yet another system. In his final statement on orthography, Buechel wrote, "When the student masters Lakota he may omit these marks as the Indian does."⁴ This is exactly what old Lakotas did when they wrote. It is the same with millions of speakers of English, who wade through a very complicated orthographic system without the benefit of diacritics every day!

However, there is the practicality of learning to read Lakota and pronounce it properly. No question, the Lakhota Language Consortium orthography and materials are the most precise. They should be on every language teacher's bookshelf. They exceed all other programs because they use advanced technology to enhance their other written materials. The materials for younger children are vibrant and appealing in subject matter as well as through the use of colorful illustrations. The *New Lakota Dictionary* was produced with the assistance of three hundred Lakota speakers from all reservations and contains forty-three thousand entries with clear definitions and historic references. Student not only learns words but also learn Lakota culture. Johnson Holy Rock, Ben Black Bear, and Delores Taken Alive endorse this work and write: "With this Dictionary the next generation can carry the language on. . . . If you are proud to be Lakota, you should also be proud to speak the language and learn it properly."⁵

Can the average teacher use them? Only if they have some training, which is available. What about students? It is easier for young children who have no other knowledge of writing Lakota. After all, young children are the most resilient of all students. They learn to read and write in whatever script is placed before them. But do we need all those diacritics—double consonants, dots, slashes, aspirates, wedges, n's with a tail, apostrophes, umlauts, and

whatever hen scratching the next lexicographer decides to use? Once they become conversational, probably not.

Once children learn enough conversational Lakota through verbal drills and written assignments, they will be able to read any current orthography, and they will continue to learn from all resource materials. They will learn much about their historic as well as present culture and what it means to be Lakota. The only thing Lakota lacks at the present is an agreement regarding what methods are most critical to preserve in order to save the language. Look at it this way, if Lakota survives, kids actually will be able to misspell it! The possibility of conducting an interreservation spelling bee exists, which at present is unthinkable.

Time and money are wasting. If the alert has been sounded, it should be heeded now. Disagreement should not be the cause of killing a language—and culture. A dying language cannot wait twenty years for its revitalization. What better reason for acting immediately than a timely Lakota saying, *Mahoce kin ecela tehan yunke*. Only the earth lasts forever.

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NOTES

1. The word *star* is written *wicah'pi* in the Buechel orthography and *wičáh'pi* in the Lakota Language Consortium version. The OLC version cited here is *wicha'pi*, which does not conform to either orthography. However, it is comprehensible for fluent Lakotas.

2. I have written the term *Sioux* in quotation marks for two reasons: 1) the term, although historically popular (it still appears in scholarly books), is a derogatory term derived from a French corruption of an Ojibwe word for the Lakota roughly translated as "little snakes" and 2) symbolically, the quotation marks unite Lakota scholars with Native and non-Native scholars who have chosen to follow the Lakota preference for using their own tribal name in speech and literature. The word *Lakota* means "allied."

3. The comic book series was produced under government grants in the 1980s at Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations and copyrighted by both tribes. Most were bilingual and the text resembled more the type of orthography used by Lakotas when writing letters in the 1940s and 1950s; i.e., words were separated into syllables, and diacritics were not used at all. The comics were completely created by Lakotas, including story line, editing, art, and production, and although immensely popular at the time, few exist today.

4. Eugene Buechel, SJ, *A Grammar of Lakota*, ed. Paul Manhart, SJ (St. Francis, SD: St. Francis Mission, 1939), 2.

5. Jan Ullrich, *New Lakota Dictionary* (Bloomington, IN: Lakota Language Consortium, 2008), vi.