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Language preservation a focus throughout Indian Country

By Jim Kent

Rapid City, S.D. – Language is the vessel to a culture; it's the mirror of the face of a nation. Indigenous languages – and the cultures they're a part of – are in a crisis across the United States and, without the dedicated efforts of those remaining Indigenous speakers and tribal leaders, may border on extinction before the end of the century.

According to Santa Fe's Indigenous Language Institute, only 175 of the estimated 300 original American Indian languages are still spoken today.

Of those, most speakers are middle-aged adults or tribal elders. The Institute reports that few languages are spoken widely by Indian children and that, without significant support toward preservation, only 20 Indigenous American languages will survive the next 60 years. But what form should preservation of an Indigenous language take, and how much hope is there that any efforts toward preservation will succeed?

The answers to these questions depend on who you speak to and are as varied as the Lakota, Blackfeet, Cherokee and native Hawaiian cultures.

When the federal government placed American Indians on reservations in the late 1800s, it passed a variety of laws that severely impacted their cultures. Arguably, the most devastating was the requirement that all Indian children attend government, and later Christian, boarding schools. Here students were dressed in military uniforms, had their traditional long hair cut short and were taught all that was expected to make them "successful" in a non-Indian world.

One of the rules most stringently enforced at boarding schools – right up to the latter part of the 20th century – was the banning of all Indigenous languages. Lakota elder Ivan Star attended the Holy Rosary Mission on the Pine Ridge Reservation. He said he remembers many negatives about his time there, but being denied the right to speak his language still stands out the most.

"They never allowed us to speak Lakota, and that was the only language I knew at the time," Star recalled. "I guess I always felt like they tried to take that out of us, take that Indian-ness out of us in a forceful manner – a brutal manner. I remember being punished sometimes...being swatted with a very thick razor strap. It was about three or four inches wide and it was cut at one end and it had a metal D-ring at the other end of it. And that's what they used on me, just for speaking Lakota."

More than a century of "taking the Indian out of the child" resulted in several generations of American Indians who had little or no knowledge of their language. For most tribes, including the Lakota, the language is more than a collection of spoken words; it's the very essence of their culture. Indigenous Issues Forum director Ruth Yellow Hawk recently co-sponsored a nationwide language contest that required students to research the history of one Indigenous word. She said that for American Indians, language is everything. Sponsoring the contest was Yellow Hawk's way of contributing to the preservation of Indigenous languages.

"It's so important," she commented. "A lot of people talk about family values, you know, and things like that. And I think that for so many of us that loss of language is truly...it equates to a loss of identity, a loss of instructions."

Lakota elder Rosalie Little Thunder spent almost an hour explaining the history of the word "tiospaye" – or family – to students taking part in Yellow Hawk's language contest. She said she tries her best to teach the meaning behind each word to those who seek to learn the language. But Little Thunder thinks that the responsibility for continuing the language should be shifted from where it's taught today.

"I would definitely take it back to community and families," she suggested. "Take it out of the schools, quit pretending that's the only place to learn Lakota. It isn't. We need to provide support to families and parents and communities who want to do this."

Like many Lakota speakers, Dolly Red Elk, learned the language from her grandmother. As a Lakota language instructor at the Rapid City extension of Oglala Lakota College, she does her best to teach her students the history behind the words her grandmother taught her. But Red Elk feels it's more essential right now to give her students the basics.

"In order to keep the language going," she explained. "Then I always tell the students, you learn this and as years go on you'll be able to learn the words that we spoke a long time ago with Grandma."

Larry Swalley is trying to help preserve his language with a different approach he hopes will appeal to Lakota youth. Swalley has produced a CD that combines the language with historical information about the culture, because he feels there's much more to the Lakota language than just the words.

"The language, the whole culture of the Lakota...comes from the song of our heartbeat," he remarked. "It's not something that can quickly be put into words. It's a feeling, it's a prayer, it's a thought, it's an emotion...all of these things are in the language."

Many language preservationists feel that the most secure road toward seeing languages survive for future generations is through a "language immersion school". Darrell Kipp is the director of the Piegan Institute, on Montana's Blackfeet Reservation. He believes the only way to keep a language alive is by "immersing" children into the language – and culture – beginning at kindergarten.

"Unless you teach children, and they become fluent speakers, most languages cannot survive," Kipp commented. "A language cannot be adequately recorded on CD-Rom or technology. You really want the language to thrive in a dynamic way, and to grow, and this has to be done through the actions of children as they expand and bring dynamics to the language."

The Piegan Institute is in its fifteenth year of operation and Mr. Kipp feels comfortable that the school is making strides toward reviving the Blackfeet language. He gives a good deal of the credit for that success to the Aha Punana Leo – an immersion school in Hawaii that his Institute was modeled after. Spokesperson Luahiwa Namahoe said the Aha Punana Leo was founded in 1985 after a survey of all the islands showed that only 30 Hawaiian youth spoke their Native language. As on the U.S. mainland, the federal government banned the Hawaiian language from the school system in the 19th century. But Namahoe said that things are different now.

"The children...when they come into our school system, English is forbidden," she explained. "So they are immersed in Hawaiian. They are taught to play and fight and brush their teeth and eat their meals and go to the playground and cut and color and glue and get dirty...they do it all through the medium of Hawaiian. It takes them about three months to become fluent in the language, and that's because they're spending 30 hours to 40 hours per week in Hawaiian. Their English is not compromised, because English is all around us."

Senate bill 91, introduced last year by Hawaiian Sen. Daniel Inouye, aims to provide for the support of Native American Language Survival Schools. But former principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation Wilma Mankiller insists that the only way Native languages will be preserved is by the efforts of Indigenous people, themselves.

"It doesn't do any good to sit around wringing your hands and complaining about it," Mankiller advised. "There are models out there that people can look at and then get to work in their own communities to help maintain and preserve their language."

Whether through traditional teaching methods, immersion schools or the technology of CDs, the goal is to keep the language alive – something once forbidden by federal law. Ultimately, success will depend on how much effort Indigenous people are willing to dedicate to the task. As Dolly Red Elk pointed out, even when she was forbidden to speak Lakota, her desire to maintain her identity gave her the strength to fight against the system and find a way to preserve her language for herself, and now, her students. So, who won the “language battle” at her boarding school?

“I did,” Red Elk replied. “Because I can proudly say I kept the language in me and I kept my culture. So, I am Lakota. I can say that and be proud to say it.”

The Indigenous Language Institute – 505.820.0311 or www.indigenous-language.org/; the Piegan Institute – 406.338.7740 or pieganinstitute.org; and the Aha Punana Leo – 808.935.4304 or <http://www.ahapunanaleo.org/>.