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## **Learning Language Through Ceremony**

by

**Loretta M. DeLong**

I am, and have been all of my life, a strong advocate of teaching the Native Languages to children as soon as they can absorb the knowledge. Perhaps that intense advocacy came as a result of feeling cheated of that privilege when I was a child.

Recently, I became a member of a group of people on Turtle Mountain Chippewa Reservation who are asking, "How important is it to teach Native Languages in our school system?" and, if indeed it is important to educators, parents, community, and students, then "How are we going to teach the language in our school system?" A survey of parents, staff, and students within the Turtle Mountain system was conducted in the Spring of 1995 with surprising results. Surprising because the results were markedly different from reported results of surveys done several years ago. The majority of people surveyed reported that they thought teaching the language was very important. Not everyone agreed on which language should be taught, but the three major languages identified as, "should be taught," were Chippewa, Cree, and Mitchif. No one really had a firm idea on how language should be taught, but some suggestions were given as to the relevancy of beginning as early in life as possible.

Recognizing the importance of rituals and ceremonies in transmitting major concepts and issues in the everyday world that we live in has prompted me to learn the language of those rituals and ceremonies. Knowing the language enables me to feel the essence and know the full impact of the messages given. My personal interest in the concept of learning Native Language through participation in rituals and ceremonies was sparked and strengthened in its focus as I realized the power and importance of ceremony and ritual in the lives of adolescents. At no time in life is ritual and ceremony so important as in the adolescent stage of life. This is a time of changes that affects the physical, cognitive, social, and psychological domains of these young people. It is suggested that we all go through an adolescent stage of sorts every seven years. If that can be half believed, then we all are thirsty and hungry for those rites of passage and the marking of major events that can mark milestones in our life passage.

Family is the guiding point in my life. My children are grown and I have two grandsons that shine bright and wholesome in this sometimes dreary world. I also have many nieces and nephews and also two great-nieces and one great-nephew. All of these children appear to learn specific parts of information more readily when preparing for major events in their lives such as the following: a Naming Ceremony, Pipe Ceremony, Baptism, First Communion, Moon Ceremony, Sunrise Ceremony, Memorial Rites, Healing Ceremony, Shaky Tent, Sun Dance, the Sweat, Marriage, Graduation, etc. All of these have special language and special meaning. When children learn of these, they want to know the language. In our cultural teachings, we always apologize to Gitchi Manito for not speaking our Native language when participating in ceremonies. In this way, we conduct ourselves as Anishinaubaug, or the original people of good intentions. We are forgiven because it is a collective understanding that bad things happened to our ancestors who spoke the language and lived the old ways and were afraid to pass it on to their children. But now there are means available to all of us to learn the language, and it is a responsibility of who we are as Anishinaubaug to teach this in our schools and in our homes. One of the ways that will have the most profound effect should be through teaching the Ceremonies.

Last year I began taking my nieces with me to Ojibway Ceremonies. My nieces are 13, 10, and 11. They were unfamiliar with the Ojibway words they would hear in the ceremonies, so I prepared a list of the essential nouns, verbs, and adjectives they should begin to recognize and understand. I utilized phonetic transcriptions of the spoken language.

These parts of speech of the Ojibway language are as follows: NOUNS, ADVERBS, ADJECTIVES, NEUTER VERBS, TRANSITIVE VERBS, and IMPERSONAL VERBS. VERBS are the very essence of the Ojibway language; IMPERSONAL VERBS are unique to only the Ojibway language. As such the verbs do most of the describing and adjectives are minimal (Eklund, 1991). English vowels take the following sounds: a-ah, i-ee, e-ay, o-oh (Broker, 1983). Rules of pronunciation that need to be followed consist of the following: (a) The vowels are A, E, I, O, OO, and Y, although Y is only used when it appears at the end of a word; otherwise it is a consonant. U is not a vowel in the Ojibway language. (b) The consonants are: B, D, G, J, K, M, N, P, S, T, W, Y, and Z. (c) The double consonants are SS as in MESSY, SH as in SHOWER, NG as in RING, and CH as in CHILD. Chippewa language sounds do not require the F, L, Q, R, U, V, or X; nor does the language require C or H as single letters. Nineteen letters of the alphabet are used (Eklund, 1991).

The NOUNS I used with my nieces were:

- 1) Gi'-tchie Man-i-to—Great Mystery, Creator, Great Spirit
- 2) Gee'-sis—Sun
- 3) Nee-ba-gee'-sis—Moon
- 4) An-ki'—Earth
- 5) Ni-bi'—Water
- 6) Mush'ko-day-wushk'—Sage
- 7) We-skwu' ma-shko-seh'—Sweetgrass
- 8) Ah-say-ma'—Tobacco
- 9) Gi-shee-kan'-dug—Cedar
- 10) Na-ga-moon'—Song

The VERBS I used were:

- 1) nu-mu-di-bin—Sit down
- 2) we-se-nin—Eat
- 3) mi-ni-qu-aen—Drink
- 4) pi-zin-dun-da-uh—Listen
- 5) wau-bin—See

The ADJECTIVES I used were:

- 1) Kichi—Large
- 2) Na-manj—Left
- 3) Na-wach—More
- 4) Wika—Late
- 5) Machi—Bad

I prepared the list as stated in the directions to the assignment. I then described the verbal sounds of each of the vowels and consonants. I showed my nieces how to break up the syllables to enable a better understanding, and I had them practice saying, listening to each other and me, and writing out the words. We did this twice a week in person and over the phone.

Since this practice had begun before I took the class, the original intent was to pilot a method about how to teach the language through the ceremonies to the young people (and learn myself). My nieces were intrigued and gave a concerted effort to learning the words; not only that, but I also gave them literature on the ceremonies, the language, the culture, and the history, so nothing was in isolation.

Before we went into the sweat for the Sweat Ceremony, I instructed them to listen carefully to the prayers and the way in which each person spoke the language and I would ask them what they recognized when we came out. When we were discussing this later, they told me the words they had recognized. They had recognized all the nouns and could pull them out of the sentences the speaker was using. They, however, did not know how the nouns related to the rest of the sentence. They could sense certain meanings, but were unsure. I guess that is one part of the language we do not talk about very often. If people listen very carefully they can catch some meaning. By leaving themselves open to this, it happens more readily. In Ojibway, one sentence could tell a history and part of it has to do with the meaning behind the verbs. It is difficult to learn the language if you do not have an understanding of the collective culture of the people.

One of my nieces is a Jingle-Dress Dancer. As such, she needed to understand why there is a special dance like this and why it is a ceremony. She was involved in every step of making her dress; she prayed as we worked on the jingles to make sure the good medicine from the prayers went into each jingle. Each member of her family participated to ensure that we were one. She had to understand the language in order to create the dress and experience the vision of a woman who could dance the healing ceremony of the people. For this we put together other lists of words and read of the vision and the different stories associated with the Jingle Dancers. This was special to her, and she learned what she had to know.

When my nieces and my daughter and I attended the Moon Ceremony, we had to know basically the same nouns, verbs, and adjectives as for the other ceremonies. We went into the background of the ceremony. It is only for women to celebrate because of Grandmother Moon. We try to meet on the fullest day of the Full Moon and give prayers and celebration to the life forces that flow through women, given to us to maintain through our special relationship to Grandmother Moon and Mother Earth. We are called "Buffalo Girls," and we have a special song to come out and dance by the light of the moon. In this way, we honor who we are and it is special.

In a Naming Ceremony, if it is not done when a child is young, you are told by your spiritual leader what you must do to get a name. It involves knowing about the four directions, the colors, the vision, and the relationship to greater powers and, as such, you need to know the language. My nieces are now preparing to receive their names, and thus the verbal and written language of the Ojibway is important for them to learn.

My nieces were very anxious to learn. Because of that, they were not typical in their development and mastery. They read through lists, practiced the words verbally, and learned how to write them out. I did not notice any frustration. It seemed, because we all worked on it together, we could laugh at our mistakes and go on from there. We also had illustrations to help in the identification of the nouns, not only with the words listed, but with others we used as well.

There is a scene in the movie, "Where the Spirit Lives," that exemplifies the importance of relating the language to common, relevant objects and things we do in our everyday life. That is the best way to remember.

My nieces and daughter are also reading books relating to all the ceremonies and the culture of our people. The continuing education is ongoing for them because they want to partake of all the ceremonies and not feel like outsiders.

The reaction to looking at and trying to read and understand sentences was sometimes hilarious. When you don't know how to say some of the words, the first translations can be quite humorous. Sometimes the way in which males and females say things are a little different and when you don't know that, you don't always want to chance saying certain things.

One other aspect of the Ojibway language and perhaps other languages as well is that almost every teacher of the language will teach it differently than another. It is not that it changes the meaning, but rather the emphasis or focus changes. The way to get beyond criticism is to simply say that this is the way you have been taught. Those were some points I tried to get across to my nieces. Thus, the importance of listening to speakers of the language. Actually, the differences in the way the language is spoken are minimal and the differences are to be respected.

I used several books in trying to understand and in assisting my nieces. Among those used the most were *Night Flying Woman: An Ojibway Narrative* by Ignatia Broker, *The Mishomis Book* by Edward Benton Benai, *Chippewa (Ojibwe) Language Book* by Coy Eklund, *Ojibway Ceremonies* by Basil Johnston, *Chippewa Cree Language* by Ida Rose Allard, the *Turtle Mountain Chippewa Language Beginners Handbook*, and tapes by Charlie White Weasel.

In summary, my experience with attempting to learn the language is slow and painstaking. It does not appear so with my daughter and my nieces and maybe my grandson, who received his name this year and is only four. My experience has been solitary; theirs is with a group and with me as a guide. I can remember being around speakers of Dakota and Lakota and picking up the words and meanings really fast in a social situation to the point that I knew more than I knew in my own language. As a child, the language of my culture was spoken by the adults, but I was never included. I can still hear the words and the meanings, but I never practiced them because there was no place or situation where this could be done. Even now, one of the arguments for not teaching the language is that there is no place to speak it. I believe it is a responsibility of this generation of educators to work with the elders and create the places for communicating in the Native Languages. I believe we can begin at the earliest ages for children so that they can teach their parents. Perhaps, through teaching the language of our people, the relationship to the Seven Teachings or Gifts which are WISDOM, LOVE, RESPECT, BRAVERY, HONESTY, HUMILITY, and TRUTH, and through the Ceremonies that mark the passages of our life, we can create new generations of people that will truly become the leaders and visionaries of the future.

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