
My language was broken.

Richard Silliboy

Micmac

Language is one of the biggest pieces of our culture to ensure we remain sovereign. You can have political sovereignty, but you can't have cultural sovereignty without the language.

Wayne Newell

Passamaquoddy

Native Language and Culture Coordinator, Passamaquoddy Tribe

Language

Language is one of the most fundamental ways in which members of a culture or community relate to each other. Language is how people understand the world in which they live and the values that they share. It is estimated that of the hundreds of languages originally spoken in North America, by the mid- 20th century, 2/3rds were extinct.

Nationally:

In 1819 Congress, for the first time, provided money for the education of Native children to instruct them in “the mode of agriculture suited to their situation and for teaching their children in reading, writing, and arithmetic.” Through the 1930s, the government mandated the education of Native children in religious and military-style day schools and off-reservation boarding schools. The goal expressed by General Richard H. Pratt, founder of Carlisle, one of the most infamous of these schools, was to “kill the Indian, save the man.”

Children were at times forcibly removed from their homes and placed in schools where they were not allowed to speak their language under threat of physical abuse. The schools were extremely effective, creating generations of Native people unable to speak their own language. For Native people who continued to speak their language, a deep sense of shame and fear was created, preventing them from teaching future generations of children the language in an effort to protect them from shame and abuse.

Maine:

Today, the tribes have varying numbers of fluent or native speakers left. Many Native people can speak a few words or understand other speakers, but are not fluent themselves. Each tribe has identified language retention as a major concern and is taking steps to record fluent speakers, connect elders with tribal youth to promote conversation, and develop language classes and immersion programs. Tribal dictionaries, CDs, and

publications in native languages help expose people to that language, and have created interest and a sense of pride for Native people.

Language Newspaper Headlines:

Last Words

Boston Globe Magazine

April 30, 2006

Of all the New England states, Maine is the only one to have *any* Native American languages from tribes recognized by the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs that are still ‘living’ – in other words, being spoken fluently.

The Passamaquoddy voice: Classes help keep an endangered language alive

By Alicia Anstead

Bangor Daily News

November 27, 1993

One of approximately one thousand fluent Passamaquoddy speakers, Allen Sockabasin spoke Passamaquoddy before he spoke English (which he learned when he entered Catholic elementary school). As a young child, however, he learned that ‘speaking Indian’ came with cultural baggage. ‘My parents loved us immensely and wanted the best for us,’ says Sockabasin. ‘They felt that Indian and its associated traditions would hold us back in the real world so they emphasized a good education in English.’

A project with real meaning: Tribal dictionary captures language, culture

By Diana Graettinger

Bangor Daily News

December 9, 2008

Thousands of years of oral tradition was unveiled in written form Monday with the release of the Passamaquoddy-Maliseet Dictionary.

Language, Maliseet Section:

Maliseet

In Canada, life on the reservations provided opportunities and a safe environment for Maliseet speakers to interact and speak their language freely. Before the 1980 Settlement Act, the Maliseet in Maine did not have a land base, and the widespread community made it challenging for fluent speakers to interact and speak Maliseet to each other. As a result the Maliseet have few fluent speakers left in Maine, the majority of the speakers reside in Canada.

Maliseet is closely related to the Passamaquoddy language. There are differences in dialect, but speakers of each language can understand each other. Currently there are no

formal Maliseet language programs offered by the tribe through the schools, but several tribal elders offer classes once a week for conversation and interaction. A new dictionary was recently published with the Passamaquoddy, the most extensive documentation of the language to date. The tribe also produces a newsletter for members that includes a language section.

Language, Maliseet Quotes:

I'm not fluent in Maliseet, and I don't feel bad about that. People try to make me feel ashamed sometimes, but I don't and why should I? My Grandmother was trying to protect us by not teaching us our language, given the racial and political climate of those times.

Brian Reynolds

Maliseet

Tribal Administrator, Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians

The language died out like a flame. There are more speakers in Canada because they live on a reserve, but for so long we didn't have that here.

Clair Sabattis

Maliseet

Some people are still ashamed to speak their language in public.

Clair Sabattis

Maliseet

Language, Micmac Section:

Micmac

The Micmac did not have a recognized land base in Maine until their Settlement Act in 1991, and language retention suffered from a widely dispersed community. As with the Maliseet, the majority of the fluent speakers are located in Canada.

Today there is a newsletter that has a language feature, teaching members new words with each issue. The Aroostook Band has also hired John Dennis, a fluent speaker, as the cultural director. Dennis has been working with the community to offer students after-school language programs, including cultural values and traditions. He works with the tribal Head Start program, teaching young children the language, and offers classes for all tribal members each week. There are language CDs available, and the tribe is trying to coordinate and secure a grant to purchase a language curriculum from a band in Canada whose language program has been particularly successful.

Language, Micmac Quotes:

The retention rate for language is really small, but it's getting better. Maybe ten years ago tribal people weren't too concerned about keeping the language, but within the past two-three years there's been more of a surge to teach the language to kids and develop programs for high school and post secondary schools.

Richard Dyer

Micmac

Housing Director, Aroostook Band of Micmacs

Teaching language through words in a newsletter, weekly classes, or through CDs and after school programs is an uphill battle, because it's challenging to learn a language by words alone.

John Dennis

Micmac

Cultural Director, Aroostook Band of Micmacs

The language in Maine was pretty much gone, so when we started to teach it again, we had to look to Canada to choose which dialect to teach. There are over twenty-six Micmac reserves in Canada, so we chose a dialect that was easier to read and write. We're now trying to teach basic conversational words and skills.

John Dennis

Micmac

Cultural Director, Aroostook Band of Micmacs

My mother went to St. Mary's school and was rapped across the knuckles when she spoke her language, so she didn't teach it to me. My mom still giggles when she speaks because she feels like she's getting away with something.

Richard Dyer

Micmac

Housing Director, Aroostook Band of Micmacs

My mother spoke fluent Micmac. She couldn't read or write, and we all spoke Micmac to her. But as I grew older, Micmac people would laugh when I spoke my language, and that bothered me. It confused me because I didn't know what they were laughing at. I didn't realize until later that they were laughing because I was going back and forth between Micmac and English in the same sentence!

Richard Silliboy

Micmac

Language, Passamaquoddy Section:

Passamaquoddy

The Passamaquoddy continue to inhabit their ancestral homeland 400 years after European contact. This continuity of place and community, and the rural nature of the

region, is a strength for language retention. Passamaquoddy children were educated in schools located on or near the reservation, and while they were not allowed to speak their language at school, the children came home and spoke it with their parents and elders, fostering an understanding that lasted through the eras of forced assimilation.

In early 2009, the Passamaquoddy Tribe produced a 1,200-page dictionary with 18,000 entries, including sentences and phrases, as well as words. The dictionary is available on-line with the ability to look up words in Passamaquoddy-Maliseet or English and hear the pronunciation. The tribe also received a grant from the federal Administration for Native Americans to continue to record sound files for the on-line version of the dictionary and to support development of a language curriculum to reverse the trend of language loss in both Passamaquoddy communities.

The tribe is currently working to bridge the gaps between the older fluent speakers who are less inclined to read or write the language, and the youth learning the language through programs offered in the schools, after school, and in immersion programs.

Language, Passamaquoddy Quotes:

If you look at a map of the east coast from Florida to Maine, it is void of native language until you get to the Passamaquoddy. A few tribes might have a few speakers left, but here about 15-20 percent still speak the native language.

Donald Soctomah

Passamaquoddy

Historic Preservation Officer, Tribal Representative to the State Legislature

The kids are learning language in school, but they're learning words and a few sentences. The last group to be born and raised in a reservation household that spoke fluent Passamaquoddy was about thirty-forty years ago. The grant we are working on now will prepare the next generation of native speakers.

Donald Soctomah

Passamaquoddy

Historic Preservation Officer, Tribal Representative to the State Legislature

Anyone over fifty is most likely fluent in Passamaquoddy and English, which is different from the previous generation, which spoke more broken English. English was used more for economic needs than conversation.

Wayne Newell

Passamaquoddy

Native Language and Culture Coordinator, Passamaquoddy Tribe

Technology has been our friend in trying to teach new generations of Passamaquoddy speakers because it allows us to develop our own high quality materials in print and electronic format. This has been a big break for us.

Wayne Newell

Passamaquoddy

Native Language and Culture Coordinator, Passamaquoddy Tribe

After the No Child Left Behind Act was passed, Passamaquoddy language teachers had to be certified by the state to teach in the schools, but there was no way for the state to test or assure competency in the Passamaquoddy language. So we had to work with the state to create a way for the Passamaquoddy tribe to qualify our own language teachers. Now they're certified by the state based on our recommendations and interviews with candidates. The state had to recognize that the tribe had the right to certify these teachers based on our own standards.

Wayne Newell

Passamaquoddy

Native Language and Culture Coordinator, Passamaquoddy Tribe

Language, Penobscot Section:

Penobscot

In the 1980s there were twenty-five fluent speakers on Indian Island, but given the age of the speakers and lack of language programs, it was clear that the language was threatened. The Penobscot tribe became very active in creating sound recordings of fluent speakers, so when the speakers pass on, future generations can hear the way the language sounds.

Micmac, Maliseet, and Penobscot languages are very similar to Abenaki, which still has speakers in Vermont and Quebec. The tribe is working with several Abenaki speakers to try to encourage more language programs and teach more speakers. But the Abenaki communities in Vermont and Quebec are spread out and distant from the Penobscot, making it challenging to create programs which will encourage fluent speakers.

Currently, the tribe is teaching Wabanaki languages in the school. Carol Dana, through her work with the Cultural and Historic Preservation Department, teaches language at the day care center on Indian Island, for the Boys and Girls Club, and offers a language class for the community twice a week. She is also working with other tribal members to produce a CD of stories and songs.

Language, Penobscot Quotes:

It's here, but not in a big way. There's not much interest in learning the language it seems. I think people think the language is done for so they're embracing Passamaquoddy instead. The other day I read in the paper about our language and one of the kids used the Passamaquoddy word for skunk, not the Penobscot word. I could understand it, but the words are different.

Carol Dana

Penobscot

Language Master, Penobscot Indian Nation

The language is being rejuvenated. It had fallen to the wayside, and people who moved here and may not have been as close to the community didn't care about it as much, but new generations and Native pride are taking it back as part of their identity.

Gabe Paul

Penobscot

The biggest threat to our language is easy - it's TV, computers, iPods® and iPhones®; it's English, everything is in English. The biggest strength is the children retaining it, but we have to teach it to them. The strength of our language is the power of that language and how ancient it is.

Gabe Paul

Penobscot

The fact that there's fluent Micmac and Passamaquoddy around still helps us because the languages are so similar.

Jason Brown

Penobscot

Abbe Museum Public Affairs Manager

People are always trying to divide us, and we do it to ourselves too- "Why are you speaking Passamaquoddy?" or "That's our language," but we're all mixed, we're all Wabanaki.

Gabe Paul

Penobscot