

Indigenous Voice: Language and Identity in America's Native Nations¹

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I was told to keep it short, a 20-minute talk, but they didn't say anything about using a foreign language like English.² How strange that with the tens of thousands of years of documented human history in this part of the world we so often begin with the arrival of the first white guy. When you look at all the documented human history all the white guy stuff is statistically insignificant.

I'm really happy to be here today. Where I come from people smarter, older, and wiser than me say, "When you go somewhere new you use our language first and foremost. You tell them your name and your clan and where you're from." So, I was just giving you a little Ojibwe introduction. My Native name is Waagosh, which means "Fox from the Eagle clan," and I'm from Leech Lake, which is in northern Minnesota. I am one of the very lucky people who gets to live and work around my home community. My family members have been buried in the very same plot of land longer than the American Philosophical Society has been in existence, and I get to live there and be there at the same time that I'm connected to the broader world and publish books and travel and so forth. I think this is one of the struggles that a lot of Indigenous communities are facing now. Of course, we are ancient and modern. We have struggles about everything, from economic vitality to political independence to even substance abuse, and at the same time we have to navigate the broader world and we have to code-switch to do it. At what point does the code-switching become assimilation? How much can a people change and still be the same people? And there's no such thing as the Native experience; there are many different Native experiences.

There are some communities where Ojibwe is the language used in the population of speakers and it grows as the population grows, such as the southern region in Canada. And there are other communities where there are no living speakers of that given tribal language. There's

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2 Dr. Treuer began his talk with an introduction in the Ojibwe language.

such a variety of experiences, historical and contemporary linguistic ones, that there's no way to encapsulate it all in a short talk like this. But I thought I'd give you a few thoughts about what's happening on the ground in some of these Native communities and how that really intersects, I think quite deeply, with the work of the APS.

One of my elders back home passed away a few years ago. His name was Tom Stillday, and he was the first person named chaplain for the Minnesota State Senate who was not from a Judeo-Christian background. He would open up the State Senate with a feather war bonnet and his pipe, and he was a great hoot, too, because he'd say, "I'm praying for politicians, and boy do they need it more than ever these days." One time we brought him to Bemidji State University to give the graduation banquet speech, for which he broke all the rules for a graduation banquet speech, because those are to be short—a couple good jokes, focus on the students, etc. I think he was about an hour and a half into his remarks before he said his first words in English, which were, "All you people who study Indians, study that," and he went and sat down. I of course was highly entertained, but he had some really good points. So often the books that have been written about Native people have been written by non-Native people who have hardly talked to one. And then the sources that were used were usually from the army chaplain writing in his journal or something like that. They really don't have a lot of Native voices or perspectives. And from everything from the academic enterprise, to our contemporary efforts to develop anything from a suicide prevention plan to an economic development initiative, we often get somebody from the outside coming in and saying, "We know better than you, what's best for you," using a data set from a totally different population, expecting the same results for this population, and then scratching their heads and saying, "How come we have all these problems? Why isn't that working?" So, it's imperative that we actually have Native people deeply engaged in and leading the work, and there's plenty of room for partnership.

I'm stunned at some of the very positive developments that have been happening in Indigenous language revitalization. Thirty years ago, the Indigenous language in Hawaii was illegal for use in public schools, and they were down to a thousand speakers, half of whom lived in one isolated community; the other half were elders scattered across the rest of the islands. Today there are over 20,000 speakers. Over 3,000 have learned it as their first language in the home, tripling the number of first speakers, and there are about 20 Hawaiian medium schools. It's pretty stunning to see what has happened. The efforts with Mohawk, Ojibwe, Cherokee, and Blackfeet are starting to gain some

momentum, and with others as well. It's really interesting to see what has been happening and what really can happen.

As a matter of perspective, if I put up my finger and said, "What is this?" I could start a fight oftentimes, if I didn't clarify in what language. In the language of body parts—well, it's a finger, right? But in the language of numbers, it's "one"; in the language of space, it's "up"; and in the language of frequent public speaking—"I got to go to the bathroom." So, who's right? They're all right. They're all right. This is what happens in our politics, too—somebody's up there talking about race and they're saying, "This here is a finger; it's not an elbow; it's not a toe. The rest of you people shhh." And someone else is saying, "That's a one, not a two; see, they just don't understand." If we can see things from multiple perspectives, how much more powerful we really are; how much better equipped we are to solve these big problems. So, to me, the work with languages is vital. It's vital for Native people, for our own identity, health, well-being, success, and so forth. But it's vital for everyone else. No one's got a monopoly on knowledge. No one's got a monopoly on perspectives. You know we should take everybody we want to give a good talking to and give them a good listening to; it's pretty amazing what we can learn doing things like that.

So there are a lot of reasons why Indigenous languages are important. I think some of them are pretty obvious to those of you in this room. A language—all languages—hold a unique worldview. One of the things I find really interesting about Ojibwe, my language, is that it's unlike English, which is heavily influenced by many other languages. English is a Germanic language—that's its structural form. But there's a lot of Latin and Greek—there are even around 20 Ojibwe words that are in everyday English usage—and it tends to pick up and collect things. So you have to know a little Latin to really understand that *sarcasm* means "to tear the flesh"—from *casm* (to tear) and *sarca* (flesh). And then you get a little deeper meaning behind the word. In Ojibwe, the morphemes, the smallest meaningful parts of words, tend to be known to everyday speakers. So, things like lexical expansion for new technologies is actually a little bit easier to do because you can just describe what you see. There's a TV—*mazinaatesjigan*—it's a box that reflects an image through light, but you'll often hear good speakers of Ojibwe say first of all it's funnier in Ojibwe because you have two meanings. There's the thick description and then there's what we associate the word with, and then it's like you're painting a picture because there's this deeper description and meaning that goes with things. So, for example, in Ojibwe the word for an elder—*gichi-aya'aa*—literally means "great being." The word for an elderly woman—*mindimooyenh*—means "one who holds things together" and describes the

role of the family matriarch. Now in English we have *old woman*, *elderly woman*, *aged woman*, *hag*, and languages both reflect the worldview of a people and shape the worldview of a people. So, how many elders do we get on the cover of *Cosmo*? In our way there is a beauty in every age. We talk about four seasons—spring, summer, fall, winter—four cycles of life; children are beautiful, young people are beautiful, adults are beautiful, elders are beautiful. But somehow language can have a more expansive or limiting view of what beauty and value is. There's just a different way of looking at things. If you're speaking in Ojibwe, you don't have to say something like, "respect your elders." It's kind of built right in with any word you could possibly use, and there are many, many more examples.

A language is also a tool that is used to carry forward cultural norms and traditions, and there are so many. I'm kind of stunned how much we still have in spite of the 500 pretty rough years that our people have experienced. A lot of people talk about the last of the "blank" and then fill in the blank. And, if it's not like physical death at least it's cultural death, and all you'll have left are the notes in the bookcases. This is a deeply enculturated way of looking at Indigenous communities throughout the world.

I remember one time I was giving a talk in France and it seemed like people never got too excited at academic talks in France, but there was a guy who seemed really excited, and he asked, "*Monsieur, monsieur*, where are the real Indians?" And I said, "Where are the real Indians? Where are the real Frenchmen? Because there's a castle across the road but there's nobody living in it. I don't see people riding up and down the street on horses with banners for Charlemagne. I don't even see berets and little pipes. Where are the real Frenchmen?" And of course it dawned on him that a stereotype about what it means to be French is not what it means to be French, that it's more connected to France and the language that is French, and a Frenchman can be French even traveling in China. Well, exactly. It's like that for us, too. We get to change over time but these things, this connection to land and a language, it's vital and important, informative for identity.

It's important for worldview, it's important for cultural norms, and for solving problems. When I look at the things that are going wrong in some Native communities, we're right where we should be, having been through all the crap that we've been through. But it's also quite amazing how much we still have of our cultural traditions. Sometimes it's hard for people to figure me out because I'm an academic guy and I publish books and I travel a lot and I'm well-spoken and so forth, but I also choose to live where I do for a lot of different reasons. It has not hampered my success. I've had offers that triple my salary at other big

institutions, but I spend a lot of my time harvesting wild rice and making maple syrup and sugar. I've got nine kids—I've been busy—and four grandkids now. They've been busy. And so we do these activities that keep us a little more recognizable to our ancestors, and it is so interesting, and I think quite beautiful and formative, for me to be engaged in that effort. If you want to know, "Well, what do you do aside from harvest? What are your ceremonies in your cultural round really like?" I'm happy to take you a little deeper after the talk to give you some sense of that.

Language is an important part of sovereignty. It really is. If we become assimilated, thoroughly assimilated with the ruling class, it's a lot harder to justify our existence. They're just profound challenges for maintaining the independence and vitality of Native nations, but a living language is one of the things that inescapably describes and supports that. A lot of folks are really struggling, too, to figure out how to help Native people do better.

In my own experience, and like all humans, I'm a complicated person. My father's actually not Native, he's an Austrian-Jewish immigrant, Holocaust survivor, who spoke nothing but German the first 13 years of his life and eventually made his way to Minnesota, met my mom, and here I am. My mother grew up in a little village called Bina on the Leech Lake reservation, population 400, where the average household income is still around \$20,000 a year. When my folks were getting started there were some humble times—a hand pump, an outhouse, no electricity, they picked wild rice, traded with the white farmers down the road for milk and eggs, those kind of things. But by the time I hit middle school my mother had become the first female Native attorney in the state of Minnesota, built a nice house, and the economic profile for our family started to change. It revealed the importance and power of education. But, unfortunately, our educational system, having been developed by white folk for the education of white folk, does a pretty good job of helping empower and teach white folk, but it's not doing so well for everybody else. I would say that our educational system is still a white empowerment program.

If you are an Indigenous learner, chances are you will never have an Indigenous teacher and you will never have anything in the curriculum that will teach you who you are and how your people help make the world a great and wonderful place. And it generates powerful disengagement. Think about this. A little over half of the students of color in the United States finish high school, even though that cohort of students now comprises the majority of the K–12 students in the United States. And with all of the well-known data that proves that education is a powerful lever that helps you gain access to opportunity—doesn't

guarantee it, doesn't make the world a fair place, but it's a powerful lever—we have an educational system that is taking the largest demographic group of students in America and is failing them, which means it is harder for them to become full load-bearing citizens with good jobs, paying taxes. It increases the chances that they will need extra help rather than be providing the help. It's not a good recipe for a healthy nation. Even if we had equity today, and we don't, our educational system with its racial disparities will engineer the economic, the racially predictable economic, disparities that we have.

I'm really happy to report that the first Ojibwe immersion school, which was actually created in Wisconsin, has a 100 percent pass rate in the tests, in English and math for the first 15 years of operation, even though Native kids across the country have about a 50 percent pass rate in their tests in English and math. If somebody's figuring something out maybe we should pay more attention to that. There's a lot more to say about the school. I've done a lot of work with them and I'm happy to share more.

In my own work, *The Assassination of Hole in the Day or Warrior Nation*, I've tried very hard to get the archives and the Indians talking to each other and I really do believe it can show historians a different way to conduct their craft. There are so many tools that can contribute to our work. One of Boas's early students, William Jones, was actually a fluent speaker of Meskwaki and ended up doing a lot of work with Ojibwe. They're both in the same language family, but so are English and German—they're not the same language—so it's just stunning to think about what Jones went through. Eventually Boas convinced him to head off to the Philippines. But his contributions to the Ojibwe linguistic world are still of great relevance and value for us today. It's not just the preservation of texts, although it does that, but it is something we actively use to reinforce and deepen our understanding of Ojibwe syntax and literature and poetry. And so his works have been published and then re-transcribed, and there are numerous linguists and Ojibwe folks who are working on those in all kinds of ways. Those stories are actually told at this immersion school through the work of William Jones. And it's just pretty incredible to see its real relevant and relatable value in Native communities today. So, it's not just the glass case. It's so much more. The emerging academic work and just basic curricular development work is all fed by this sort of material.

I feel like this is a time of great tests for all of us. Essentially, when you go back to the dawning of the agricultural age about 9,000 years ago, all human beings across the planet tended to be a little more communally focused with earth-based philosophical perspectives and religious traditions and so forth, and you can look at Jared Diamond's

Guns, Germs, and Steel or even Daniel Quinn's *Ishmael* to get a sense for how this stuff started to really change. But, coming out of the Fertile Crescent in the Middle East you had a very unique cultural development, and the production of food so much more efficiently enabled us to do all kinds of positive and negative things. Positive things like academic enterprise and the development of libraries, and negative things like waging war far more efficiently so we ended up with colonialism. That is something that has thoroughly dehumanized everyone. Sure, it's worse to be the victim of a colonial experience, but the perpetrators too have been thoroughly dehumanized.

Think about the experience of white men who comprise the majority of the serial killers and school shooters and so forth. The colonial experience has left lots of damage for us all to wade through. Our commodification of the planet and all of its resources, essentially to me, amounts to burning our house down to stay warm in the winter as we keep mortgaging our future for short-term corporate profit. Although there's no way to structure societies the way they were 9,000 years ago, there are more than vestigial remnants of different ways of looking at the world. In Indigenous communities, things that should pollinate everybody's garden are embedded in our languages and our ways of doing things. We have a lot to share with the rest of the world. When you look at the tests that we are going through as a nation and as a planet, democracy is a pretty new way of structuring a society. It's not been thoroughly tested, but we're getting some tests now, and the test cannot be that democracy is successful when it successfully homogenizes its population, when it cannot just tolerate but actually support a diversity of thought perspective and language.

So with that I want to say *meegwetch*—thank you very much for your kind time and attention.