

ORNAMENT AND IDENTITY

LANGUAGE RECLAMATION OF THE NATIVE AMERICAN GROUPS IN THE EASTERN UNITED STATES¹

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With very few exceptions, Native American languages along the Eastern Coast stopped being used between 1750 and 1850. Almost all of them are presently classified on the last levels of the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale: from “Shifting” to “Extinct”. The article presents the state of language disruption among the various Native American groups that originate from the Eastern Coast. It also reviews the efforts of its reclamation, as well as discusses the functions language reclamation may fulfil in situation when speech communities that would provide natural contexts for the language transmission no longer exist.

KEYWORDS: *Native American languages, Eastern tribes, endangered languages, language reclamation, speech community*

A FOCUS ON the languages of the Native American peoples who inhabit or once inhabited the Atlantic Seaboard of the United States and Canada reveals their today’s challenges. These begin with a lengthy period of contact with immigrating Europeans and then their descendants that produced destruction of many native communities, pushing inhabitants out of their homelands, and often amalgamating survivors with other peoples, including members of other tribes, as well as white and black people, to the extent that today their connection with their historical native groups sometimes is untraceable. This in turn confuses their sense of identity and makes extremely difficult their search for their heritage language. This is also a political issue as some of those tribes are not recognized as Indian

nations by the U.S. federal government, some of their non-Indian neighbors and sometimes even by other Indian tribes. Thus, what may be called ethnic revival and community rebuilding among the Native Americans in the East is paralleled by political struggle and cultural revival. Language reclamation is part of this larger process.

PRESENT SITUATION ON THE EASTERN COAST

The Eastern Coast at the time of contact with the Europeans was inhabited by the people speaking languages belonging to several linguistic families: Algonquian (covering the largest part of the coast: from Nova Scotia and New Brunswick in Canada along the Atlantic Seaboard southward to North Carolina), Iroquoian (present New York State and North Carolina), and Siouan-Catawba (North and South Carolinas). Also, further south, there

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were numerous, usually small groups speaking languages belonging to at least ten other families (e.g. extinct Timucuan in Georgia and Florida) and possibly many other which due to their scarce documentation cannot be ascribed to any family with any certainty, which is especially a case of the vast areas of Southeast (Goddard 2005).

With very few exceptions, languages along the Eastern Coast stopped being used between 1750 and 1850 (Rees-Miller 1998, 540; Rudes 2011: 190). Again, with very few exceptions, the languages of the Eastern Coast are presently classified on the last levels of the EGIDS scale: from “Shifting” to “Extinct”. EGIDS (Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale) is a 0-10 scale that measures the level of “disruption to the intergenerational transmission of the language” (Eberhard et al. 2019: s.v. *Language Status*). Level 0, labelled “International,” means the “The language is widely used between nations in trade, knowledge exchange, and international policy,” and level 10, labelled “Extinct,” means “The language is no longer used and no one retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language” (Eberhard et al. 2019: s.v. *Language Status*). The level 7, labelled “Shifting,” means “The child-bearing generation can use the language among themselves, but it is not being transmitted to children.” “Extinct” is the last, tenth level, and means “The language is no longer used and no one retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language” (Eberhard et al. 2019: s.v. *Language Status*). Those few exceptions among the languages of the Eastern Coast are the languages, which, although having high percentage of fluent speakers in each generation, are losing speakers. They are labeled “Threatened” (level 6b): “The language is used for face-to-face communication within all generations, but it is losing users” (Eberhard et al. 2019: s.v. *Language Status*). Micmac, the northernmost language among Eastern Algonquian languages, is

spoken by the Micmacs who live in several communities in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Quebec in Canada and in Maine as well as in the city of Boston. According to the 2011 Census of Canada (great majority of Micmac speakers live in Canada) over 8,000 people, which is less than half of the population, know Micmac, and 80% of them speak it at home. *Ethnologue*, the website documenting the state of language loss all over the world, in 2019 gives even smaller number of fluent speakers: 6,900 (Eberhard et al. 2019, s.v. *Mikmaq*). However, children learn some of it only in very few communities, and there are communities in which it is no longer spoken at all (*Aboriginal languages in Canada*: Table 1, Figure 2; Golla 2008: 62).

Much more vibrant are Central Algonquian languages of Subarctic Attikameks (three communities in south-central Quebec), Montagnais and Naskapi (eastern Quebec and Labrador). For example in the same 2011 Census 5,100 Attikameks declared speaking their language (over 97% said they were using it at home), but these 5,100 composed almost the total population of Attikameks. Since it is used by all generations and by almost all the members of Attikamek communities, its transmission seems secure (*Ethnologue*; *Aboriginal languages in Canada*: Figure 2; *First Nation Profiles: Atikamekw Sipi*). Montagnais is spoken in several (but not all) communities by the majority of the population. Naskapi and Attikamek yet few years ago were classified as “developing” (level 5 on the EGIDS scale: “The language is in vigorous use, with literature in a standardized form being used by some though this is not yet widespread or sustainable”, Eberhard et al. 2019, s.v. *Atikamekw*), but recently Naskapi was reclassified and put on a higher, fourth level – “Educational” (“The language is in vigorous use, with standardization and literature being sustained through a widespread system of institutionally supported education”) (Eberhard et al. 2019, s.v. *Naskapi, Language Status*).

Montagnais is considered a “threatened” language (level 6b on the EGIDS scale) (Eberhard et al. 2019, s.v. *Montagnais*; Golla 2008: 64-65).

The other language of the region with a large percentage of Native American mother-tongue speakers (but still labeled “threatened”), and the only one of the Iroquoian family, is that of the Mohawks (Northern Iroquoian branch) who live on several reservations and reserves in the United States and Canada, in upstate New York, Ontario and Quebec. There are probably more than 3,000 Mohawk speakers, most of whom come from Akwesasne (St. Regis) community that spreads over the Saint Lawrence River on both sides of Canadian-American border. Mohawk is being taught at immersion primary schools (including pre-kindergarten programs) in the communities of Kahnawake (Kahnawake Survival School) and Akwesasne (Freedom School), both started in 1979-1980, as well as at immersion schools on other Mohawk reservations. There are also other schools on the reservations (e.g. Mohawk Board of Education of Akwesasne runs Mohawk immersion classrooms in the Skahwatsi:ra Program) on and off the reservation. In Akwesasne, traditional teaching classes have been organized for the students who complete primary schools. Various programs are organized to teach the language to the adults (e.g. on the Six Nations reserve, Ontario) or to the tribal staff (Akwesasne) (Golla 2008: 63-64; Eberhard et al. 2019, s.v. *Mohawk*; e-mail communication with Elvera Sargent, former manager of the Akwesasne Freedom School, April 13, 2013).

All the other Iroquoian languages fare much worse: other Northern Iroquoian languages either are “dormant” (Nottoway, once spoken in southeast Virginia; Wyandot historically of Quebec; today Wyandot descendants live in Canada and in Oklahoma), “nearly extinct” (Tuscarora and Onondaga), “moribund” (Cayuga: not more than 40 speakers in Canada, and only among older generation; Seneca: no more than 100 fluent speakers on the three

Seneca reservations in western New York State; Oneida: perhaps only about 60 Oneida speakers in the reserve in southern Ontario, and probably no fluent speaker left in Wisconsin and upstate New York Oneida communities (Eberhard et al. 2019, s.v. *Nottoway*, *Oneida*, *Onondaga*, *Tuscarora*, *Wyandot*; Dubinski 2012; Hlebowicz et al. 2004). Further south the Cherokee, a Southern Iroquoian language, has survived and is spoken by some of the Cherokee descendants in their homelands in western North Carolina and the descendants of the Cherokees moved to Indian Territory / Oklahoma in the nineteenth century.

Other Eastern Coast languages still in use are Mikasuki and Muskogee (Creek) in Florida, spoken by Miccosukee and Seminole people (in four of five Florida Seminole communities Mikasuki is spoken, in the fifth one Muskogee). Muskogee is also spoken by between 4,000 and 6,000 Creeks and Seminoles in Oklahoma. Muskogee is considered a “shifting” language whereas Mikasuki – “threatened” (Eberhard et al. 2019, s.v. *Mikasuki*, *Muskogee*; Golla 2008: 43, 63).

Passamaquoddy-Maliseet, an Eastern Algonquian language of the people living in New Brunswick and Maine, is the only other Native American language on the Eastern Coast that can be still heard in spoken form. Out of between 3,000 and 4,000 Passamaquoddy and Maliseet living in both countries, several hundred speak the language (a majority of whom live in Canada). The most fluent are 60 years of age or older. A couple of years ago the language was classified as “shifting” (level 7 on EGIDS scale), but according to the most recent edition of *Ethnologue* it is already declassified as “moribund” (level 8a on EGIDS scale) (Eberhard et al. 2019, s.v. *Malecite-Passamaquoddy*; Golla 2008: 60).

As this overview indicates, the present condition of American Indian languages in the East is grim. Altogether, several thousand speakers spread across this vast territory could comprise a small town. Today the great majority of Indian



communities on the Eastern Coast no longer use their mother tongues. In many cases, disappearance of languages has been only a part of a general decline of traditional culture and one of the manifestations of tribal identity's erosion. Four hundred years of contact with more powerful European colonizers gradually changed Indian communities into tiny pockets of people living on obscure reservations (e.g. Pequots in Connecticut or Pamunkeys, Mattaponi in Virginia) or dispersed among much greater non-Indian populations, intermarrying with other ethnic groups and even seen as "coloured", "Mullatoes" or "Black", not Indians anymore. Until the 1960s, when ethnic revival in the United States started, many people who had Native American blood did not claim it. The issue of first importance was survival, and Indian identity could imperil that.

Forced assimilation was not a direct reason for language decline and loss. Boarding schools that largely contributed to eradication of Indian languages elsewhere started functioning after the Civil War (as a national system in 1879), after many Native American languages in the East were no longer used or already were on the verge of extinction. The language loss here began much earlier, in the seventeenth century, when the native people became engaged in the English economy. More direct than forced assimilation reasons are exposure to popular culture and people's motivations and attitudes towards the language, as well as a sense of "worthlessness" (Linn et al. 2002: 105).² What good was a language that kept people from functioning in a world that

was constructed by English-speaking people, when the domains of native language use were rapidly disappearing? A telling example of changing attitude towards the language comes from a contemporary project of teaching / learning of the language that was initiated among the Passamaquoddies in at the Passamaquoddy and Maliseet communities of Pleasant Point and Indian Township (Maine) and the Tobique First Nation Reserve (New Brunswick, Canada). Small groups of tribal members were put together and asked to speak the Passamaquoddy language, and various topics were suggested. Two men spontaneously engaged in conversation about techniques for fishing and other food gathering and preservation. These two individuals had never previously used their language to speak to each other, and only the creation of the new context (filming of the language use) stimulated them to do so. These two men live two hundred feet from each other (Apt and Schulz 2012: 7).

RECLAMATION EFFORTS

Today Native American groups along the eastern coast are developing or engaged in various language-reclamation projects. Even some groups whose languages are extinct or even in some cases impossible to retrace are considering some sort of "revival," or borrowing of better-preserved languages from other groups. One of the most publicized programs of language revitalization is taking place among the Wampanoags in southeastern Massachusetts, whose language (Wôpanâak, one of the dialects of Massachusetts language) became extinct in the middle of the nineteenth century. The project started in the middle of the 1990s as a common effort of a tribal member Jessie Little Doe Baird and a late linguist Ken Hale from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). They went over numerous texts written by seventeenth century missionaries (including

2 Of course, non-Indian society ways of "forgetting" about Indians (removing them from national consciousness by denying their role in regional histories and denying their mere existence), practiced from the colonial times, must have contributed indirectly to this sense of worthlessness. See for example how the eighteenth-century local historians of the southern New England produced the image of "gone Indians" (O'Brien 2010).

the Bible translated into Natick, a dialect of Massachusetts language) and numerous documents (such as wills and deeds) written in the Massachusetts language, including more than 150 documents written by Indians.

It is probable that nearly 30% of the Wampanoag people were literate by the late seventeenth century. Many read and wrote in their language thanks to the efforts of a missionary, John Eliot, who believed that only studying the Bible in their own language would provide for true conversion of the Indians to Christianity (Bragdon 2000: 180-181). Analysis of the texts and linguistic comparison with other Algonquian languages helped to reconstruct the grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary of the language. Four remaining Wampanoag communities united to reclaim the language, as classes were organized within the communities (in one course, students were allowed to speak only Wôpanâak). Classes were taught by Baird who, in the meantime, had obtained an M.A. in linguistics at MIT. Classes also involved new language adepts within the tribe, as a dictionary also was compiled which by 2013 contained about 11,000 words. Teaching materials also were developed. Baird's daughter was raised in both English and the Wôpanâak language. In 2010, Baird received a five-year grant of \$500,000 from the MacArthur Foundation to continue and develop the reclamation project. In the same year a documentary was released, titled *We Still Live Here (As Nutayuneân)*, about the Wampanoag language's rebirth (Shatwell 2012).

Another Eastern Algonquian language which became extinct, even earlier than Massachusetts, is Quiripi, spoken by the native people of coastal western Connecticut and the Unkechaugs³ of the eastern Long Island.

3 The Unkechaugs were formerly sometimes known as Pootspatucks, from the name of one of their earliest settlements, and then their reservation, situated on the Pootspatuck Creek (Strong 2011: XI, 6-7).

The last fluent speaker among the Unkechaugs died at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The major source of knowledge about the language is a list of 202 words gathered by Thomas Jefferson in 1791 – when the language was already moribund – while he visited the Unkechaug reservation. In 2009, the tribe established the Unkechaug Nation Revitalization Committee with a \$40,000 grant from the Long Island Community Trust. Lessons were taking place in the kitchen of the Unkechaugs' chief, Harry Wallace, the instruction material was Jefferson's list, several other nineteenth-century documents containing fewer Quiripi words, as well as tape recordings of the Western Abenaki speakers from St. Francis in southern Quebec, made in the middle of the twentieth century, preserved (and forgotten for several decades) at the Dartmouth College Library, and sent to the Unkechaugs' chief in 1996 at his request. The Unkechaugs cooperated with another Long Island group, the Shinnecocks (whose language is not well enough documented to allow any sure statement about it, but might have been related to Mohegan-Pequot of Connecticut) as well as with Mohegans who have their own reclamation program, including participation in Mohegan language classes via an Internet connection with the Uncas Conference Room at the Mohegan Tribal Office (Strong 2011: 28-32, 278, 281-284).

“Revitalization” is also underway of the “Powhatan” language, e.g. the language spoken by Virginia Algonquians, which became extinct during the eighteenth century. Unlike the language of the Massachusetts, it has no rich documentation, but there are two word lists gathered by the first Virginia colonists at the beginning of the seventeenth century (altogether 600 words). The language was “revived” not by the descendants of the Powhatan people, but by the makers of a film, Terence Malick's *The New World* (2005) who wanted to “achieve authenticity with respect to the



languages spoken by the English colonists and Virginia Algonquian people” (Rudes 2011: 189).

The task of making a live language for the sake of the film dialogues out of a list of words was undertaken by a linguist, Blair Rudes. To form words and sentences he used grammars of other well-documented Algonquian languages: Munsee Delaware and Natick. He also supplied vocabulary that borrowed words from other Algonquian languages (Western Abenaki and Conoy). About half of the words in the film dialogues were not among those on historical Powhatan wordlists. He also had to teach Indian actors the pronunciation; he assumed it was not too much different from Algonquian languages for which sound recordings exist, namely Munsee Delaware and Penobscot. This was a fascinating experiment in resurrecting a moribund language for the film continuities, but according to Rudes the filmmakers did not stop there: in one of his publications he wrote that all linguistic materials gathered and created during the time of the filmmaking were copied and sent to Virginia tribes, and Rudes volunteered to assist them in possible language reclamation efforts (Rudes 2011).

Rudes died in 2008. The film gave inspiration to many people who previously did not believe language resurrection was possible. Ian Custalow, a linguist from the Mattaponi tribe, who has been studying Virginia Algonquin since 2001, said that his weekly classes of Powhatan language for Mattaponis and Patowomecks gather about 30 students in each community. He also teaches some Rappahanocks and Mattaponis on an individual basis (Custalow, email communication, April 23, 2013).

Other tribes have much better language documentation, including published sources as well as talking online dictionaries. Such is the case of Delawares in eastern Oklahoma, who migrated there from New Jersey and Pennsylvania in the nineteenth century. Today, no Delaware speaks this language, and the task

of documenting it is carried by a white person, Jim Rementer (with the help of a linguist Bruce Pearson, among others, who continue the tradition of linguists’ involvement with the Delawares⁴), who has come to live with them 40 years ago, and learned the language from then living elders. Among the Oneidas in Wisconsin the mission of carrying the language into the future was being fulfilled by the oldest speaker, Maria Hinton, who was 103 years old when she passed away in July 2013. Maria Hinton dedicated her life in preserving the language, taking part in producing Oneida teaching materials, including an Oneida dictionary (1996) that later she read word-by-word so that all entries were recorded and downloaded online, making pronunciation of all of them available. For decades, Oneidas cooperated with European-American anthropologists and linguists, and today the University of Wisconsin in Green Bay maintains *Oneida Language Tools*, a website that includes Oneida grammar, a talking dictionary and some of the 800 Oneida texts which were gathered in 1939, read and recorded on tapes by the next generation of Oneida speakers between 1974 and 1985, and now digitalized. There is also a primary school in which classes are conducted in Oneida and English, and the Oneida instructors’ center on the reservation. However, neither determination of a several individuals in documenting Delaware language, nor huge effort of the whole Oneida Tribe in Wisconsin in preserving and teaching the language, have not yet produced at least one fluent speaker (Hlebowicz 2012; Johnsen et al. 2012).

Also, the Passamaquoddy-Maliseets have impressive language documentation, and there is a strong effort to keep it alive through classes at the University of New Brunswick and various teaching programs that engage people of all generations. There exists a *Passamaquoddy-Maliseet*

4 Mark Harrington, C.F. Voegelin or David Oestricher, to name few of them.

Language Portal with an 18,000-word dictionary (only Passamaquoddy-Maliseet – English, not *vice versa*) and large archives of videotaped conversations with fluent speakers. Also, each word in the native tongue may be linked to audios so that a word or a phrase in which it is used may be heard. There is also a list of video-recordings with subtitles in both native language and English (Golla 2008: 60). Whether the language is to be transmitted to the younger generation, which now has no fluent speakers, remains to be seen.

Some North Carolina groups, such as the Monacan and Saponi-Haliwa have attempted to reintroduce the Tutelo language on the basis of common linguistic ancestry (Kobert 2007). Tutelos from southern Virginia moved to Canada in the eighteenth century and in 1883 an anthropologist, Horatio Hale, published a study of their language, discovering that it belonged to Siouan family. The last fluent Tutelo speaker died in the 1990s. Although the Saponi historically were closely related to the Tutelos (which encourages them to “borrow” their language) there is not enough documentation to decide what language the Monacans spoke (Goddard 2005: 16-18).

The Lumbees of Robeson County in North Carolina, one of the largest Indian tribes in the United States (in 2010 U.S. census more than 73,000 declared belonging to the tribe), a people without a surviving Native language (although a particular version of Lumbee English is recognized by scholars). Not even a heritage language can be traced because it is difficult, maybe impossible, to discern the tribal roots of the modern Lumbees. They are descendants of Indian families who lived on the Lumbee River in the middle of the eighteenth century, and descend from various Native American groups (Blu 2004: 319-320). Recently, however, there has been a proposition to introduce the Lakota language to the Lumbees, suggesting that part of the tribe comes from Cheraw and other people belonging, like the

Lakota, to the Siouan-Catawba language family. The reason for this choice is that Lakota is a live language with an active “language consortium” developing teaching materials and an online dictionary, whereas Catawban languages of the east are extinct (Clarke 2007). However, the Catawban languages’ relationship to the western Siouan to which Lakota belongs is tenuous. Recently, some Monacans have considered trying to learn Lakota as well, but Karenne Wood, a Monacan tribal council member and anthropologist, says that first their people need to reflect on whether and why they would want to bring the language back and what it means for their sense of themselves that the language is no longer spoken (e-mail communication with K. Wood, April 30, 2013).

Somewhat similar is the case of the much smaller group (about 3,000 people) from southern New Jersey whose members call themselves Nanticoke Lenni-Lenapes but whose members until few decades ago considered themselves simply Indian or Black, or “colored.” Like some of the Lumbees, Native American people in southern New Jersey started looking for their tribal roots, and concluded that the name “Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape” would be the most adequate since they live on the lands once inhabited by peoples later called Delawares or Lenapes (who moved out in various directions, and whose main groups now live in Ontario and Oklahoma). Many Native people (Nanticoke, speaking another Eastern Algonquian language) from the other side of Delaware Bay migrated to Salem and Cumberland counties of southern New Jersey and mixed with them. In order to strengthen their newly-discovered tribal identity, the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenapes continue their attempts to associate with Delaware groups in Oklahoma which include sporadic language classes offered by members of the tribes who moved to the west (Hlebowicz 2009). Another New Jersey group, from the north of the state, of more controversial Indian ancestry, who called themselves “Ramapo Mountain



Indians,” and more recently started using the name Ramapough Lunaape Nation, have announced online their efforts to revitalize Munsee (northern Lenape) language whose few speakers remained among the communities who migrated to Ontario. Previously, the people of Ramapough were attending classes of the Unami (southern Lenape) language operated by a scholar, David Oestreicher, who in turned learned it from the Delawares in Oklahoma (Oestreicher 2001: 564; *Ramapo Munsee Language*).

DISCUSSION

The obvious obstacle for language reclamation is the lack of speech community. By this I do not simply mean a group of people that speaks the same language, but the group of people that shares the same culture, values, and identity, and forms a community, and where language’s role is to stimulate as well as express the group’s uniqueness.⁵ Thus the language is not merely an instrument of communication, but a powerful stimulus of group (and therefore individual) identity, transmitted through generations and bonding the people since “time immemorial.” Such an ideal definition obviously calls to mind Benedict Anderson’s concept of face-to-face community vs. imagined community (Anderson 2006), and this is precisely the challenge that Native American groups, along with many other groups in the world, face: how to preserve (or, in the great majority of cases, revive) its sense of uniqueness – the sense of community in a contemporary world in which face-to-face communities are no longer possible: due to “globalization,” multiple contexts of human’s lives, migrations, prevalence of other than face-to-face interactions, etc.

A great majority of Native American peoples in the East do not transmit the language

through generations, and there are no natural contexts for the languages’ use. Contemporary language reclamation projects are trying to provide new contexts for their once-mother tongues, but this requires a lot of determination on the part of the people, and significant numbers of people within each community must be determined to make the projects work.

Another problem is the use for language reconstruction of the vocabularies and texts produced in colonial times. Those texts were usually written by European-American missionaries and colonizers for purposes other than language preservation (“creating authority, making money, or saving souls” – Murray, 2001: 613). Probably many religious texts of the seventeenth century that were translated into Indian languages were unidiomatic and might have sounded odd to Indians then (Strong 2011: 286). Now they are used as a point of departure to learn their languages; however, they, as well as lists of Indian words, are “possible utterances”, not the actual languages, and we do not know how close they are to original languages, and even less how close the “revived” languages are going to be to those of their ancestors. What worked for the purpose of a film script may not necessarily work in real life. Just as problematic is the reconstruction of vocabularies, grammars, and assumed pronunciations through borrowings from related and better-documented languages. For some they are merely “authenticating and decorative devices” (Murray 2001: 594) as much as they were for white travelers in the past. For others, they are more serious matters of identity, and with the help of linguists quite much is being achieved.

Language reclamation among the eastern tribes is generally understood as an attempt to actually restore the spoken language so that community members can converse in it. What is being achieved unavoidably must be far from it, at least in a short period of time: the people will not suddenly stop speaking English and begin using the language of their ancestors. Still, reclamation projects have stimulated

5 More on speech communities in Morgan 2014.

or strengthened language documentation in many communities which is the first condition of language survival – if not this generation, any future generation will have an opportunity, should this be their inclination, to use the sources and materials that are now being gathered and produced in their own attempts to revive their languages.

Although Native American peoples in the East have various histories of their languages' decline and survival, it seems that only when a substantial proportion of a given tribe or nation has managed to stay in one relatively isolated area (Mohawks, Oneidas in Ontario, Micmacs, Maliseets, Passamaquoddies and the Seminoles and Miccosukee), their language has survived, at least among the older generations. It survived naturally, without special effort, because until quite recently it was not considered worth preserving by the people. Paradoxically, in the past, these were often the individuals among the whites who sought to document Indian languages, even if for other purposes than preserving it for the people so that they could continue speaking it. Now the languages on the Eastern Coast (as well as virtually all the Native American languages), to use Ernest Gellner's metaphor, need to be "gardened" or "cultivated", and it seems that today a broad consensus exists to support this.

There are two main reasons for such an approach: 1) (especially important for linguists) diversity in itself is valuable and keeping small language alive is a big step against homogenization. Michael Krauss reminds us that each language has its beauty as well as that in each language is embedded the knowledge of the world and way of perceiving the world (Krauss 2007: 18–19). How senseless it would be to let all those things go; 2) language reclamation is crucial for the identity and sense of uniqueness of Indian communities. Some groups are doing it because they want to preserve and strengthen this important part of their cultures and identity that has been threatened (e.g. Oneidas,

Mohawks or Passamaquoddy-Maliseets), some others are trying to reconstruct something that already for several generations was not a part of their world, but they still feel that it belongs to them and want that it defines their identity (e.g. communities in New England, New Jersey, Virginia, North Carolina). Many languages just died too fast. Individuals' and communities' determination today provides a little bit of optimism. But only a little bit.

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