

00:04

Dene Elder Paul Disain said, "Our language and culture is the window through which we see the world." And on Turtle Island, what is now known as North America, there're so many unique and wonderful ways to see the world.

00:17

As a person of Indigenous heritage, I'm interested in learning Anishinaabemowin, which is my heritage language, because it lets me see the world through that window. It lets me connect with my family, my ancestors, my community, my culture. And lets me think about how I can pass that on to future generations.

00:34

As a linguist, I'm interested in how language functions generally. I can look at phonetics and phonology -- speech sounds. I can look at morphology, or the structure of words. I can look at syntax, which is the structure of sentences and phrases, to learn about how humans store language in our brains and how we use it to communicate with one another.

00:55

For example, Anishinaabemowin, like most Indigenous languages, is what's called polysynthetic, which means that there are very, very long words, composed of little tiny pieces called morphemes. So I can say, in Anishinaabemowin, "niwiisin," "I eat," which is one word. I can say "nimino-wiisin," "I eat well," which is still one word. I can say "nimino-naawakwe-wiisin," "I eat a good lunch," which is how many words in English? Five words in English, a single word in Anishinaabemowin.

01:32

Now, I've got a bit of a quiz for you. In a one-word answer, what color is that slide?

01:37

Audience: Green.

01:38

Lindsay Morcom: What color is that slide?

01:40

Audience: Green.

01:42

LM: What color is that slide?

01:43

Audience: Blue.

01:44

LM: And what color is that slide?

01:46

(Audience murmurs)

01:47

Not trick questions, I promise. For you as English speakers, you saw two green slides and two blue slides. But the way that we categorize colors varies across languages, so if you had been Russian speakers, you would have seen two slides that were different shades of green, one that was "goluboy," which is light blue, one that is "siniy," dark blue. And those are seen as different colors. If you were speakers of Anishinaabemowin, you would have seen slides that were Ozhaawashkwaa or Ozhaawashkozi, which means either green or blue. It's not that speakers don't see the colors, it's that the way they categorize them and the way that they understand shades is different. At the same time, there are universals in the ways that humans categorize color, and that tells us about how human brains understand and express what they're seeing.

02:35

Anishinaabemowin does another wonderful thing, which is animate, inanimate marking on all words. So it's not unlike how French and Spanish mark all words as either masculine or feminine. Anishinaabemowin and other Algonquian languages mark all words as either animate or inanimate. The things that you would think to be animate are animate, things that have a pulse: people, animals, growing plants. But there are other things that are animate that you might not guess, like rocks. Rocks are marked as animate, and that tells us really interesting things

about grammar, and it also tells us really interesting things about how Anishinaabemowin speakers relate to and understand the world around them.

03:13

Now, the sad part of that is that Indigenous languages are in danger. Indigenous languages that possess so much knowledge of culture, of history, of ways to relate to one another, of ways to relate to our environment. Having been on this land since time immemorial, these languages have developed here and they contain priceless environmental knowledge that helps us relate well to the land on which we live. But they are, in fact, in danger. The vast majority of Indigenous languages in North America are considered endangered, and those that are not endangered are vulnerable. That is by design.

03:54

In our laws, in our policies, in our houses of governance, there have been stated attempts to eliminate Indigenous languages and cultures in this country. Duncan Campbell Scott was one of the architects of the residential school system. On tabling a bill that required mandatory residential school attendance for Indigenous children in 1920, he said, "I want to get rid of the Indian problem. Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department; that is the whole object of this Bill."

04:34

The atrocities that occurred in residential schools were documented. In 1907, P.H. Bryce, who was a doctor and an expert in tuberculosis, published a report that found that in some schools, 25 percent of children had died from tuberculosis epidemics created by the conditions in the schools. In other schools, up to 75 percent of children had died. He was defunded by federal government for his findings, forced into retirement in 1921, and in 1922, published his findings widely.

05:08

And through that time, Indigenous children were taken from their homes, taken from their communities and forced into church-run residential schools where they suffered, in many cases, serious emotional, physical and sexual abuse, and in all cases, cultural abuse, as these schools were designed to eliminate Indigenous language and culture. The last residential school closed in 1996. Until that time, 150,000 children or more attended residential schools at 139 institutions across the country.

05:42

In 2007, the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement came into effect. It's the largest class action lawsuit in Canadian history. It set aside 60 million dollars for the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. The TRC gifted us with the ability to hear survivor stories, to hear impacts on communities and families and to gain access to research that explored the full effect of residential schools on Indigenous communities and on Canada as a whole. The TRC found that residential schools constituted what's called cultural genocide. They state that, "Physical genocide is the mass killing of the members of a targeted group, biological genocide is the destruction of that group's reproductive capacity. And cultural genocide is the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group." The stated goals of Duncan Campbell Scott. So they find that it's cultural genocide, although as children's author and a great speaker David Bouchard points out, when you build a building, and you build a cemetery next to that building, because you know the people going into that building are going to die, what do you call that?

07:01

The TRC also gifted us with 94 calls to action, beacons that can lead the way forward as we work to reconciliation. Several of those pertain directly to language and culture. The TRC calls us to ensure adequate, funded education, including language and culture. To acknowledge Indigenous rights, including language rights. To create an Aboriginal Languages Act aimed at acknowledging and preserving Indigenous languages, with attached funding. To create a position for an Aboriginal Languages Commissioner and to develop postsecondary language programs as well as to reclaim place names that have been changed through the course of colonization.

07:42

At the same time as the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement came into effect, the United Nations adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People in 2007. It states that Indigenous people have the right to establish and control their own education systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. In 2007, when that was brought into effect, four countries voted against it. They were the United States, New Zealand, Australia and Canada. Canada adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People in 2010. And in 2015, the government promised to bring it into effect.

08:27

So how are we collectively going to respond? Here's the situation that we're in. Of the 60 currently spoken Indigenous languages in Canada, all but six are considered endangered by the United Nations. So, the six that aren't are Cree, Anishinaabemowin, Stoney, Mi'kmaq, Dene and

Inuktitut. And that sounds really dire. But if you go on to the Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger through the UNESCO website, you'll see a little "r" right next to that language right there. That language is Mi'kmaq. Mi'kmaq has undergone significant revitalization because of the adoption of a self-government agreement that led to culture and language-based education, and now there are Mi'kmaq children who have Mi'kmaq as their first language. There's so much that we can do.

09:20

These children are students in the Mnidoo Mnising Anishinabek Kinoomaage, an immersion school on Manitoulin island, where they learn in Anishinaabemowin. They arrived at school in junior kindergarten speaking very little, if any, Anishinaabemowin. And now, in grade three and grade four, they're testing at intermediate and fluent levels. At the same time, they have beautifully high self-esteem. They are proud to be Anishinaabe people, and they have strong learning skills.

09:50

Not all education has to be formal education either. In our local community, we have the Kingston Indigenous Language Nest. KILN is an organization now, but it started six years ago with passionate community members gathered around an elder's kitchen table. Since then, we have created weekend learning experiences aimed at multigenerational learning, where we focus on passing language and culture on to children. We use traditional games, songs, foods and activities to do that. We have classes at both the beginner and intermediate levels offered right here. We've partnered with school boards and libraries to have resources and language in place in formal education. The possibilities are just endless, and I'm so grateful for the work that has been done to allow me to pass language and culture on to my son and to other children within our community. We've developed a strong, beautiful, vibrant community as well, as a result of this shared effort.

10:49

So what do we need moving forward? First of all, we need policy. We need enacted policy with attached funding that will ensure that Indigenous language is incorporated meaningfully into education, both on and off reserve. On reserve, education is funded at significantly lower levels than it is off reserve. And off reserve, Indigenous language education is often neglected, because people assume that Indigenous people are not present in provincial schools, when actually, around 70 percent of Indigenous people in Canada today live off reserve. Those children have equal right to access their language and culture.

11:29

Beyond policy, we need support. And that doesn't just mean financial support. We need space where we can carry out activities, classes and interaction with nonindigenous populations as well. We need support that looks like people wanting to learn the language. We need support where people talk about why these languages are important. And to achieve that, we need education. We need access to immersion education primarily, as that is most certainly the most effective way to ensure the transmission of Indigenous languages. But we also need education in provincial schools, we need education for the nonindigenous populations so that we can come to a better mutual understanding and move forward in a better way together.

12:14

I have this quote hanging in a framed picture on my office wall. It was a gift from a settler ally student that I taught a few years ago, and it reminds me every day that we can achieve great things if we work together. But if we're going to talk about reconciliation, we need to acknowledge that a reconciliation that does not result in the survivance and continuation of Indigenous languages and cultures is no reconciliation at all. It is assimilation, and it shouldn't be acceptable to any of us. But what we can do is look to the calls to action, we can look to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People and we can come to a mutual understanding that what we have, in terms of linguistic and cultural heritage for Indigenous people in this country, is worth saving. Based on that, we can step forward, together, to ensure that Indigenous languages are passed on beyond 2050, beyond the next generation, into the next seven generations.

13:13

Miigwech. Niawen'kó:wa. Thank you.

13:15

(Applause)