

Lakota Language and Proud Names...

Back in the early 1970s when we were setting up the American Indian Press Association, we held several regional gatherings to meet with editors of tribal newspapers and other Native news publications to promote the idea of a national association. One such meeting, which was held in Albuquerque, was especially well attended, and among those in attendance were several young men who were the new wave of Indian radicals. This was before AIM was well known, and many of the angry young people had formed their own student organizations, patterned after other white, black and Latino radical youth movements of the times.

In some ways, those times were like the Cultural Revolution in China, and Indian Country had its own self-styled PC police that patrolled meetings and especially larger conferences to keep their bourgeois elders in line, politically and culturally. At the Albuquerque meeting this surly squad of juvenile militants swaggered down the aisle and sat front-and-center in the audience. They sat silently and glared at panelists and other presenters on stage, waiting to pounce on anything they thought was offensive to their cultural sensitivities.

At one point in a panel presentation, one of the young men rose to say that Indians in the newspaper business were as guilty as the white man's government and the missionaries in forcing assimilation on Native people. This was being done, he said, by making Indian people get their news only in English, using the printed symbols of an alien enemy culture – the alphabet.

The young man never said that we should stop doing so, or that perhaps we should discuss other options, such as developing alphabets for each of the linguistic groups among our tribal nations. However, he made his point and brought the meeting to a long silence as the panelists looked at each other for someone to address the young man's concern.

Then from the audience rose a huge man by the name of Harvey Wells, one of the earliest leaders of the AIM movement. In a booming voice, he directed his statement to the young militants, "The answer is that English is the lingua franca of intertribal Indian affairs." Then to the panel, "Now let's get on with this meeting."

We were all thankful for Harvey's clarification, although subsequently we all had to look up the term "lingua franca" to find out what the heck he was talking about.

As surly and as judgmental as that young radical was, maybe he had a point when one thinks of the mess linguists have made of Native languages. One can see foreign influences all over the place.

Take for example, my own Lakota name Red Willow, which was given to me when I was a little boy by a noted elder, John Red Willow, in my home village of Wanblee on the

Pine Ridge Reservation. I treasure that name and carry it with great pride. But in the Lakota dictionary it is spelled cansasa, which most people would pronounce like the name of the flat state Kansas. However, it is pronounced Cha SHA Sha, with a nasal “n” at the end of Cha.

Purists in the Lakota language will always write the Lakota expression of greeting or agreement as “hau” instead of “how.” Yet it is likely that that spelling came from the entry put in his Lakota dictionary by Father Eugene Buechel, SJ, who was from Germany. That is the German spelling of “ow,” such as in frau, or haus, instead of frow or house.

The use of the single letters “s” or “c” for the Lakota pronunciation of “ch” or “sh” is more like the Italian language uses for those consonants.

So, whoever you are, surly young radical (who is, in all likelihood, a tribal politician these days), maybe you should start a movement for new alphabets, like the Cherokee syllabary, to handle written tribal communication, so we can junk this mess that our Anglo scholars left for us.

Translation or interpretation is another thing. During the AIM activities surrounding the Yellow Thunder killing in 1972, I was sitting in the old OST office building listening to a small group of old men. They were talking about how none of this mischief would have been happening if the old chiefs like American Horse were still around. I asked them what the name American Horse is in the Lakota language, because I had never heard a specific Lakota word for American, as we have for German, Chinese, and French nationalities. One said it was Tasunka Wasicu, White Man’s Horse, but another said that the original name was Tasunka Milahanska, Cavalry Horse. In early days only the military was referred to as “Americans.” When I left several minutes later to meet with the tribal president, there still was no agreement among the elders.

I like what Sioux people are doing with their translated surnames, especially the likes of Ron His Horse is Thunder, who returned to his Dakota name from the name Ron McNeill, which is the name he carried for much of his life. He could have just accepted the name Thunder Horse, as it would usually be translated. But His Horse is Thunder is the correct way, and a much more dramatic way of saying it.

Perhaps the greatest name in Indian Country, along with Tecumseh and Geronimo and Sequoia, is that of Crazy Horse. The name has been stolen for a line of fashionable clothing, a posh nightclub in Paris, and even a brand name for a beer (although pressure from Indian people caused the brewer to cease and desist using it). But what is the true meaning of the name Tasunka Witko, which has been accepted to mean Crazy Horse? It certainly does not mean insane, I am sure, or goofy like a kid. The name is so greatly respected, and almost sacred among our people, that we would never tolerate making fun of it. But it must have some more rational meaning than the word “crazy,” or “foolish,” as the Lakota dictionary translated the word Witko.

A friend of mine during my growing-up years in Wanblee was Vincent Wolf Guts. His older brother Clarence returned from WWII, but kept his war stories to himself, including the fact that he was among the elite group of Lakota code talkers. A part of the process of trying to assimilate Indian people into the mainstream was to get them to change surnames. Often, they were urged to use only one of the two or more words in the name: for instance, changing Blue Horse to simply Blue. It was, they said, only meant to help tribal people from being embarrassed by whites that would ridicule their names. More likely, however, it was just another way of stripping the people of their tribal identity and their cultural pride.

Anyway, the story around home was that one of the Wolf Guts brothers had agreed to Anglicize his name, but chose only "Guts" to be his new name. This, of course, didn't set well with his would-be assimilators, and he was not bothered anymore to abandon his honored Lakota name.

I hope this article will encourage some discussion on preserving the integrity of our cherished language and the traditional Lakota names, not only for the benefit of Iyeskas like me, but for the benefit and pride of all of us.

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Charles Trimble is Oglala Lakota, born, raised on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. He was principal founder of the American Indian Press Association in 1970, and served as executive director of the National Congress of American Indians from 1972-78. He may be reached at cchuktrim@aol.com or his website iktomisweb.com.