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*Lingua Yakama:
Sahaptin Language Education and Cultural Self-Determination*

ABSTRACT: *This essay asserts the significance of cultural self-determination, particularly as it pertains to the ways in which the Yakama people of the Pacific Northwest have been reclaiming their language. Cultural self-determination is understood here as the ability of a group to retain and pass on its language and traditions without help from outside forces. The author utilizes two Yakama lexicons, one compiled by a French missionary in the nineteenth century and one compiled by a modern Yakama researcher who is spearheading the pedagogy of her language, as well as scholarship on strong language education in the digital age.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; Indigenous; Washington; Oregon; Idaho; Yakama Nation; Sahaptin language; Father Charles Pandosy; Virginia R. Beavert; cultural self-determination*

Introduction

Throughout centuries of aggressive colonialism, Indigenous Americans have been resourceful in keeping important parts of their culture, such as language, alive in spite of systemic erasure. The effort of Indigenous people to maintain their myriad languages has taken a long and winding journey, one that is still moving forward as academia, and society as a whole, are becoming more pluralistic. The field of Indigenous linguistics has existed much longer than many might think, and some of the most notable examples of the creation of early language programming in the nineteenth century were brought about as a response to European colonization. Such efforts included the invention of the Cherokee alphabet by Sequoyah (ca. 1763-1843), as well as the dictionary created by Father Charles Pandosy (1824-1891) to serve the Yakama variant of the Sahaptin language. Moving into the twentieth century, there have been significant preservation efforts, such as with the Navajo language after its speakers, the “code talkers,” proved useful to American forces in World War II. However, other Indigenous languages, including the Yakama language, have been in danger of extinction or have already died out. The Red Power movement of the 1960s and its push for the proper teaching of Indigenous history in American schools and universities has influenced Indigenous American linguistic scholarship. The gradual move to save endangered cultures, particularly those indigenous to the Americas, has not only made academia more diverse and pluralistic, but also has the underlying effect of giving Indigenous Americans the tools they need to sustain their languages and cultural practices in the twenty-first century.

Although English versions would not be difficult for American students to understand, Father Pandosy’s textbook, *Grammar and Dictionary of the Yakama People* (1862), represents a first in the scholarship on Pacific Northwest Indigenous Americans.¹ The nineteenth century was a time marked by westward movements

¹ Charles Marie Pandosy, *Grammar and Dictionary of the Yakama Language*, trans. John Gilmary Shea and George Gibbs (New York: Cramoisy Press, 1862).

of settlers from both the United States as well as the British and French colonies of Canada. In an era when settlers were spurred west by starry-eyed ideas of Manifest Destiny, Father Pandosy, together with his order of French Catholic missionaries, had already reached modern-day Washington state and established the *Mission de l'Immaculée Conception* (1859) where they became prominent figures among the Indigenous peoples.² Father Pandosy's work as an anthropological linguist was so important that it was actively sought out and translated in the twentieth century after it was thought to have been lost in a war between the Indigenous nations that lived in and around Father Pandosy's mission.³

Today, the gold standard as far as Yakama lexicons are concerned is Virginia R. Beavert's *Ichishkíin Sinwit*, which was compiled over the course of several decades.⁴ Virginia Beavert is the prime authority on the Yakama language and also the top linguist in charge of creating the respective educational programming. Beavert teaches about Yakama life and language at Heritage University, located in Toppenish on the Yakama Nation's territory in southern Washington.⁵ Her devotion originates from a place of cultural self-determination to sustain her heritage in the face of pervasive cultural forces that she cannot control. Cultural self-determination, for the sake of this essay, refers to the ability of a group to retain and pass on its language and traditions without help from outside forces.

In the twenty-first century, the voices of Indigenous American students are among those clamoring to get louder in terms of representation among the various strata of society—in the arts, in politics, and particularly in academia, since average college graduation rates for Indigenous American students are less than the national average for students of all races.⁶ *I Am Where I Come From*, a 2017 anthology edited by Andrew Garrod, Robert Kilkenny, Melanie Benson Taylor, and Shannon Prince, chronicles the experiences of Indigenous American students at Dartmouth College, a predominantly white private university in New Hampshire.⁷ Despite Dartmouth being originally founded in 1769 to educate

² The Father Pandosy Mission Committee, "Father Pandosy, History," accessed April 2, 2020.

³ Pandosy, *Grammar and Dictionary of the Yakama Language*, vii-viii.

⁴ Virginia R. Beavert, Sharon L. Hargus, and Bruce Rigsby, *Ichishkíin Sinwit Yakama/Yakima Sahaptin Dictionary* (Toppenish: Heritage University/Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009). There have been several reprints since 2009. See also Virginia R. Beavert and Bruce Rigsby, *Yakima Language Practical Dictionary* (Toppenish: Consortium of Johnson-O'Malley Committees, Region IV, 1975).

⁵ Kathleen A. Ross, "Knowledge Brings Us Together," introduction to Virginia R. Beavert, Sharon L. Hargus, and Bruce Rigsby, *Ichishkíin Sinwit Yakama/Yakima Sahaptin Dictionary* (Toppenish: Heritage University/Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), ix-x.

⁶ Education World, "Reporters' Notebook: Native Americans Struggle, Build Pride," accessed April 2, 2020.

⁷ Andrew Garrod, Robert Kilkenny, Melanie Benson Taylor, and Shannon Prince, eds., *I Am Where I Come From: Native American College Students and Graduates Tell Their Life Stories* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

Indigenous students (albeit as Christian missionaries), resources and a sense of solidarity among Indigenous students are still hard to come by in this community. Melanie Benson Taylor, who teaches Indigenous American literature at Dartmouth, writes that initiatives to help currently enrolled Indigenous students thrive and form a whole, overarching culture are sorely lacking.⁸ In higher education, if campus administrations are unwilling or unable to help Indigenous students sustain their cultures as members of academia, it should be natural that such endeavors are elevated in the classroom.

I. Father Charles Pandosy

In order to appreciate the evolution of Yakama educational programming (and Indigenous language programming as a whole), we must first understand the life and times of Father Charles Pandosy. Jean-Charles-Jean-Baptiste-Félix Pandosy was born on November 21, 1824, in Marseilles, France.⁹ The son of a navy captain, Pandosy led a relatively charmed life, entering into university at the Collège de Bourbon in Arles and, in 1844, joining the Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée as a novice. In 1847, when Pandosy was twenty-two years old, the bishops of his congregation stationed in Canada called upon him to establish a mission for them. According to those within the church hierarchy, Pandosy was notable for his obedience which was comparable to that of the Jesuit San Luigi Gonzaga (1568-1591).¹⁰ Almost a year after he had left France, Father Pandosy was ordained a priest in Walla Walla, Washington. As a Catholic priest, Father Pandosy ran the Mission Saint Rose, where he would go on to interact and learn from the Yakama people.¹¹

Although they ultimately, too, were intended to proselytize local Indigenous peoples, the French missions, particularly the Mission Saint Rose, were different from what most people understand of Spanish missions in the western United States. The treatment of the Indigenous peoples in the French mission system was significantly less violent than that in the Spanish system, relying on a model of integration centered around diplomacy and the marriage of Frenchmen to Indigenous women as a means to establish legitimacy. Father Pandosy established a reputation for himself among the Yakama natives who lived in the area around Walla Walla and the Mission Saint Rose. In addition to famously researching their Yakama language, Father Pandosy repeatedly acted on their behalf, brokering and witnessing treaties between the Yakama and other Indigenous nations in the area,

⁸ Melanie Benson Taylor, "Introduction: Coming Home," in *I Am Where I Come From: Native American College Students and Graduates Tell Their Life Stories*, ed. Andrew Garrod, Robert Kilkenny, Melanie Benson Taylor, and Shannon Prince (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), 1-16, here 6.

⁹ Yvon Beaudoin and Gaston Carrière, O.M.I., "Pandosy, Charles," *The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate*, accessed April 2, 2020.

¹⁰ The Father Pandosy Mission Committee, "Father Pandosy, History."

¹¹ The Father Pandosy Mission Committee, "Father Pandosy, History."

such as the Cayuse and the eponymous Walla Walla.¹² In 1862, he published his seminal *Grammar and Dictionary of the Yakama People*, recording their language and its structure for future generations of linguists and anthropologists.¹³

II. Dr. Virginia R. Beavert

In contrast to Father Charles Pandosy, who, for all his diplomacy and integration into the social fabric of the Pacific Northwest's Indigenous peoples, was still an outsider, linguist Virginia R. Beavert is a member of the Yakama Nation and has dedicated her entire life to keeping her culture alive. Unlike Father Pandosy, who became a novice at the age of nineteen, Beavert started her academic career later in life, obtaining a Bachelor's of Science in Anthropology from Central Washington University in 1986 at the age of sixty-four,¹⁴ and earning her PhD in linguistics from the University of Oregon in 2012 at the age of ninety.¹⁵ Before entering the field of linguistics, Beavert was a member of the U.S. Women's Army Corps in World War II, and she has been a participant in the studies of countless non-Indigenous linguists who have conducted research on the Yakama people.

Born on the Yakama Reservation in southern Washington in 1922, Virginia Beavert grew up with a deep understanding of her traditions and the language gifted to her by her mother. As it happened, both Beavert's mother and stepfather also assisted linguists who were doing fieldwork among the Yakama. Much of her childhood was spent exploring the wide-open spaces of her reservation, foraging for plants, collecting small animals, and learning how to use them in food and medicine. By the age of twelve, Beavert had already started helping relay the foundational myths of her culture to outside anthropologists. Beavert's home environment as a child only heard Indigenous tongues: the languages of the Umatilla, Klickitat, and Salish peoples buzzed within those walls alongside her native Yakama. After being honorably discharged from the U.S. Women's Army Corps at the end of World War II, Beavert became deeply affected by the gradual disappearing of her own language while she had been working so far away from her home on Yakama land.¹⁶ Having spent so long not speaking or hearing her mother tongue, Beavert felt adrift, as if she herself was not Yakama anymore.

Many years later, Virginia Beavert began studying as a linguist in order to take up the mantle as the Yakama's own cultural sentinel, as her stepfather's health was failing. Almost immediately into her career as an undergraduate student at Central Washington University, Beavert began forging new paths into the scholarship on

¹² Duane Thomson, "Pandosy, Charles," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 12 (Toronto: University of Toronto/Québec: Université Laval, 1990), accessed April 2, 2020.

¹³ Pandosy, *Grammar and Dictionary of the Yakama Language*.

¹⁴ Virginia R. Beavert, *The Gift of Knowledge/Ttnúwit Átawish Nch'inch'imamí: Reflections on Sahaptin Ways*, ed. Janne L. Underriner (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 9.

¹⁵ "Yakama Tribe Elder Becomes U of O's Oldest-Ever Graduate," KVAL News & KIMA News, June 15, 2012, accessed May 20, 2020.

¹⁶ Beavert, *Gift of Knowledge*, 8.

Indigenous American culture. In the mid-1970s, her advocacy allowed Central Washington University to obtain funding for two keystone texts on Yakama scholarship: *The Way It Was/Anaku Iwacha: Yakama Legends* (1974) and the *Yakima Language Practical Dictionary* (1975).¹⁷ The childhood she had spent helping her parents relay legends to visiting researchers proved useful to Beavert, as it allowed her to build a strong network of outside linguists who would help sustain her culture alongside her and the next generation of Yakama natives.

During and after her stint as an undergraduate anthropologist, Virginia Beavert taught various aspects of the Yakama way of life at high schools on her reservation. These classes ranged from those on culture for high schoolers to language education at night for adults who were driven to reconnect with their heritage. Teaching younger members of her nation alongside studying the mechanical details of anthropological linguistics developed into a system that was doubly beneficial for Beavert: as she was directly sustaining key aspects of Yakama life, she herself was fostering a greater understanding of more advanced ways to sustain them. After obtaining her Bachelor's degree in 1986, Beavert's research on vowels in the Yakama language came to the attention of Sharon Hargus, another Indigenous linguist (and currently a professor of linguistics at the University of Washington).¹⁸ Through correspondence, both Beavert and Hargus pooled their research materials to create *Ichishkiin Sinwit*, the most comprehensive Yakama dictionary ever compiled and reprinted repeatedly since 2009. In her 2017 memoirs, Beavert asserts her mission statement as a Yakama linguist:

My language means that I, my relatives, and my tribal members, are human. We speak, process, and comprehend the Ichishkiin [Yakama] language in the same way other humans process their languages. The traditions and cultural heritage passed down by the Sahaptin people through generations identify our country and our inherent right to occupy our geographical place.¹⁹

The pluralization of academia, particularly the humanities, does not just mean the representation of the marginalized in hallowed spaces, but an increased knowledge that the latter can use to further themselves and to sustain their cultures against further erasure.

III. Modern Yakama Programming and Its Connection to Pedagogy

As of the 2000 U.S. Census, the Yakama Nation is made up of about 11,000 members living at their respective reservation at the Washington-Oregon border. Of those 11,000, the number of native Yakama speakers only ranges in the double

¹⁷ Virginia R. Beavert and Deward E. Walker, *The Way It Was/Anaku Iwacha: Yakama Legends* ([Yakima]: Consortium of Johnson O'Malley Committees of Region IV/Franklin Press, 1974); Beavert and Rigsby, *Yakima Language Practical Dictionary*.

¹⁸ Beavert, Hargus, and Rigsby, *Ichishkiin Sinwit Yakama/Yakima Sahaptin Dictionary*. In Yakama, "Ichishkiin Sinwit" literally translates to "(in) this language;" see [UW Departments Web Server, Sahaptin Dictionary](#), accessed April 2, 2020.

¹⁹ Beavert, *Gift of Knowledge*, 4.

digits.²⁰ Despite the risk of extinction that comes with so few native speakers, there is still a healthy number of people among the Yakama who are ready, willing, and able to assist in Virginia Beavert's effort to sustain their culture. In addition to these members of the Yakama Nation, outside scholars, such as Bruce Rigsby and Russell Hugo, have adapted their methods to the twenty-first century, utilizing the power of the digital humanities to keep the Yakama language alive.

In their 2015 anthology, *Endangered Languages and New Technologies*, Mari C. Jones and Christopher Connolly explore the application of various aspects of the digital humanities to the preservation of endangered languages, as well as our current array of digital tools to create engaging linguistic programming to keep them alive.²¹ As the field of linguistics finds new ways to interact with language, underrepresented groups such as the Yakama should be able to harness these ways for their own self-determined cultural preservation efforts.

Of the articles collected in *Endangered Languages and New Technologies*, Russell Hugo's "Endangered Languages, Technology and Learning: Immediate Applications and Long-term Considerations" is the most direct application to this present topic.²² Hugo aims to highlight the possibilities of using modern technology to create effective programming for at-risk languages, using the Indigenous nations of the Pacific Northwest as an example. Currently, many of the Pacific Northwest's Indigenous nations focus much of their preservation programming on vocabulary and one-to-one translation, and educators across Washington state truly believe in the ability of technology to help Indigenous students inherit their cultures. Although such a method uses "impressive culturally authentic media, such as photographs or video created by community members [...] many have limited language content (typically fewer than 200 words)."²³ While the memorization of commonplace nouns and simple verbs from an endangered language by using authentic media is commendable, it simply is not enough when languages such as Yakama are facing the threat of an increasingly homogenized language landscape—in this case a culturally homogenized landscape dominated by American English. To combat this, Hugo argues for the creation of more holistic programming that accounts not just for a language's simple vocabulary, but also for the way that a language's phonological, semantic, and grammatical systems operate, among others. Through such linguistically rich material, students are exposed to significantly more complex

²⁰ Census 2000 Brief, "The American Indian and Alaska Native Population: 2000," U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, U.S. Census Bureau (February 2002), 11 (s.v. "Yakama," far right-hand column: "10,851").

²¹ Mari C. Jones and Christopher Connolly, eds., *Endangered Languages and New Technologies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

²² Russell Hugo, "Endangered Languages, Technology and Learning: Immediate Applications and Long-term Considerations," in *Endangered Languages and New Technologies*, ed. Mari C. Jones and Christopher Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 95–110.

²³ Hugo, "Endangered Languages," 97.

material that can be practically applied much more quickly than a set of flashcards.²⁴ In this respect, both Virginia Beavert's 2009 *Ichishkíin Sinwit* and Father Pandosy's 1862 *Grammar and Dictionary of the Yakama People* hold up, as both contain solid resources pertaining to the Yakama language with regard to its word structure and grammar. As more of Beavert's Indigenous students inherit their mother tongue through her teaching, perhaps they could be the ones creating such robust learning content.

Another chapter of *Endangered Languages and New Technologies* that argues for the overhaul of current approaches to linguistic programming is Bernard Bel and Médéric Gasquet-Cyrus's "Digital Curation and Event-Driven Methods at the Service of Endangered Languages."²⁵ Just as Hugo argues for a more holistic approach to the creation of linguistic materials for students, Bel and Gasquet-Cyrus assert the need for a more holistic approach to the curation of such materials. Instead of serving as a symbolic, nigh-unusable showcase of a culture on the brink of collapse, Bel and Gasquet-Cyrus highlight the importance of curating linguistic materials with accessibility in mind, ideally bridging whatever gaps might exist between academia and heritage organizations.

Although the concept of colonies—as European powers saw them in the nineteenth century—is obsolete in this day and age, the increasing interconnectedness of the world still poses a threat to endangered languages. But while the hungry ghost of globalization threatens the existence of relatively small languages like Yakama, there is a rising number of anthropological linguists who are ready to stand with these endangered languages. Lise M. Dobrin and Josh Berson proclaim that, as linguistic preservation efforts steadily grow, they have had "the salutary effect of rehumanizing linguistics."²⁶ Virginia Beavert and her Indigenous colleagues all across the Americas are a prime example of this, for they are able to imbue their endeavours with a humanity that might have been absent in previous research conducted through non-Indigenous, Western lenses.

The primary problem that Bel and Gasquet-Cyrus take issue with regarding the intersection of digital curation and linguistic preservation is the idea that once fieldwork content such as interviews has been recorded, it languishes in inaccessible archives (digital or physical). To support their push for more accessible linguistic programming, they point to the work of Cecilia Odé (in the same volume), and emphasize that "by providing increased accuracy and

²⁴ Hugo, "Endangered Languages," 109. Hugo defines "linguistically rich" programming as "[containing] sufficient information related to each part of the language (in relation to the total input available to the learners:" Hugo, "Endangered Languages," 97.

²⁵ Bernard Bel and Médéric Gasquet-Cyrus, "Digital Curation and Event-Driven Methods at the Service of Endangered Languages," in *Endangered Languages and New Technologies*, ed. Mari C. Jones and Christopher Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 113-126.

²⁶ See also Lise M. Dobrin and Josh Berson, "Speakers and Language Documentation," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Endangered Languages*, ed. Peter K. Austin and Julia Sallabank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 187-211, here 207.

accessibility of data, [curated programming] should also be a valuable resource for communities of speakers and cultural heritage organizations.”²⁷

Conclusion

As scholars in the fields of linguistics, history, and the digital humanities continue to act in the name of preservation, underrepresented communities are using this trend of heightened pluralism to keep their own cultures thriving. Such devotion to the object of study has not only helped sustain these cultures, but has also gifted scholarship with new perspectives. As it stands, Virginia Beavert’s own history as “a native person who has been involved in [linguistics] as a ‘helper’ or assistant” has given her a unique perspective as both a researcher and a subject.²⁸ However, what makes her such an invaluable asset to the presence of Indigenous peoples in linguistic scholarship is her dual consciousness, writing about “ideas from the other side, as a Yakama person, and a Yakama scholar.”²⁹

So that endangered languages and cultures like Yakama may persist, scholars from all walks of life must learn to adapt language education to the minds and technology of the twenty-first century. Russell Hugo asserts the need for holistic language learning to replace simple memorization models that are sorely lacking in syntactic and phonological enrichment if anthropologists want to ensure the survival of a language. On the other hand, as a means to increase the visibility and speakership of a language, Bernard Bel and Médéric Gasquet-Cyrus both champion the notion of accessibility. Thus, if an endangered language is to have a fighting chance, archivists and language educators must build networks with speaker bases who know how to best disseminate educational materials.

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²⁷ Bel and Gasquet-Cyrus, “Digital Curation,” 117, referencing Cecilia Odé, “Language Description and Documentation from the Native Speaker’s Point of View: The Case of the Tundra Yukaghir,” in *Endangered Languages and New Technologies*, ed. Mari C. Jones and Christopher Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 150-160.

²⁸ Beavert, *Gift of Knowledge*, 4.

²⁹ Beavert, *Gift of Knowledge*, 4.