Learning the Grammar of Animacy

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Abstract

Puhpowee translates as the force that causes mushrooms to push up from the earth overnight. Biologist Robin Kimmerer was stunned that such a word existed. For all its technical vocabulary, Western science has no such term, no word to hold this mystery. You would think that biologists, of all people, would have words for life. But in Western scientific language, terminology is used to define the boundaries of our knowing. What lies beyond our grasp remains unnamed. A citizen member of the Potawatomi Nation, Kimmerer immersed herself in a Post-it note world of words from this almost-lost language and unexpectedly crossed into an unsuspected grammar of verbs—and a connective new worldview.

Keywords: interbeing, Potawatomi, language learning, animacy, consciousness

Ni pi je ezhyayen? asks the little yellow sticky note on my back door. My hands are full, and the car is running, but I switch my bag to the other hip and pause long enough to respond. Odanek nde zhya, I am going to town. And so, I do— to work, to class, to meetings, to the bank, to the grocery store. I talk all day and sometimes write all evening in the beautiful language I was born to, the same one used by 70 percent of the world's people, a tongue viewed as the most useful, with the richest vocabulary in the modern world. English. When I get home at night to my quiet house, there is a faithful Post-it note on the closet door. Gisken I gbiskewagen! And so, I take off my coat.

I cook dinner, pulling utensils from cupboards labeled emkwanen, nagen. I have become a woman who speaks Potawatomi to household objects. When the phone rings I barely glance at the Post-it there as I dopnen the giktogan. And whether it is a solicitor or a friend, they speak English. Once a week or so, it is my sister from the West Coast who says Bozho. Moktthewenkwe nda —as if she needed to identify herself: who else speaks Potawatomi? To call it speaking is a stretch. Really, all we do is blurt garbled phrases to each other in a parody of conversation: How are you? I am fine. Go to town. See bird. Red. Frybread good. We sound like Tonto's side of the Hollywood dialogue with the Lone Ranger. "Me try talk good Injun way." On the rare occasion when we actually can string together a halfway coherent thought, we freely insert high school Spanish words to fill in the gaps, making a language we call Spanawatomi.

Tuesdays and Thursdays at 12:15 Oklahoma time, I join the Potawatomi lunchtime language class, streaming from tribal headquarters via the Internet. There are usually about ten of us, from all over the country. Together we learn to count and to say pass the salt. Someone asks, "How do you say please pass the salt?" Our teacher, Justin Neely, a young man devoted to lan- guage revival, explains that while there are several words for thank you, there is no word for please. Food was meant to be shared, no added politeness needed; it was simply a cultural given that one was asking respectfully. The missionaries took this absence as further evidence of crude manners.

Many nights, when I should be grading papers or paying bills, I am at the computer running through Potawatomi language drills. After months, I have mastered the kindergarten vocabulary and can confidently match the pictures of animals to their indigenous names. It reminds me of reading picture books to my children: "Can you point to the squirrel? Where is the bunny?" All the while I am telling myself that I really do not have time for this, and what is more, little need to know the words for bass and fox anyway. As our tribal diaspora left us scattered to the four winds, who would I talk to?

The simple phrases I am learning are perfect for my dog. Sit! Eat! Come here! Be quiet! But as she scarcely responds to these commands in English, I am reluctant to train her to be bilingual. An admiring student once asked me if I spoke my native language. I was tempted to say, "Oh yes, we speak Potawatomi at home"—me, the dog, and the Post-It notes. Our teacher tells us not to be discouraged and thanks us every time a word is spoken; thanks us for breathing life into the language, even if we only speak a single word. "But I have no one to talk to," I complain. "None of us do," he reassures me, "but

someday we will."