

The Ecological Dimensions of First Nations Languages

Frank Deer (University of Manitoba)

Abstract

For the better part of 40 years, many First Nations communities in Canada have been working toward establishing appropriate, ethno-culturally relevant education that operates using the model of mainstream primary and secondary public schooling. For many responsible for the development and delivery of First Nations education, the notion of what constitutes appropriateness and ethno-cultural relevance is usually governed by an understanding of the unique manifestations of indigenous knowledge, heritage, consciousness and tradition that may be associated with a particular First Nation. Important to these unique manifestations can be how they are reflected in their respective language. Culture, in the context of this discussion referring to the totality of a peoples' beliefs, worldviews and traditions, is said to have an essential relationship with its respective ancestral language. The notion of culture and language as inseparable phenomena may be better appreciated when one considers the richness of traditional meaning associated with an ancestral language, as opposed to maintaining a lexicographical preoccupation with translation that assigns primacy to the understandings acquired by those of the dominant culture (i.e., English language consumers). Because many First Nations cultures reflect an experience where a) survival depended one's ability to acquire resources from the natural environment, and b) spirituality and relationships at least existed in the context of the natural environment and, at most, depended on it to lead to their creation and maintenance, then it may be reasonable to expect that many First Nations languages reflect a peoples' relationship with a natural environment.

This presentation exploration of the ecological dimensions of Canadian First Nations with a focus on the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) and Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe) languages. With a focus on the linguistic supremacy that has accompanied the assimilationist activities that have impacted on the ethno-cultural identity of Canadian First Nations peoples, this exploration will compare how these two languages reflect indigenous understandings of their relationships with one another and with the natural environment. In advancing this comparative exploration, the author will make use of personal experiences as well as on the work of a current.