

**NIITIS'PO'SIIN
(REVITALIZING & PRESERVING THE BLACKFOOT LANGUAGE PROGRAM)**

Summary/Abstract of Audioessay /Podcast

**A PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER'S EDUCATION**

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NIITIS'POWAHSIIN
(Revitalizing & Preservation of the Blackfoot Language)

INTRODUCTION:

The audioessay NIITIS'POWAHSIIN (Revitalizing & Preservation of the Blackfoot Language) has been developed to explore efforts that have been and continue to be made to preserve the Blackfoot language on the Blood Indian Reserve. The research methodology used to produce the audio essay stresses the use of cooperative inquiry and respects the voices of the Elders and other key participants from the Blood community. Part of the strategy of revitalizing and preserving the Blackfoot language is interviewing and recording Elders, starting from their names and how they acquired their names. In the Blackfoot culture the first teaching in learning how to speak the Blackfoot language is your name. Your name identifies you and which clan you belong to.

My first interview in this project has to do with the importance of “name-giving” in the Blackfoot culture. In all I interviewed six (6) tribal members from the Blackfoot/Kainai First Nations, two of these interviewees were Elders, two Blackfoot/Kainai certified Blackfoot language teachers, one masters degree social worker and finally a former broadcaster with the local Blackfoot Radio Program. I feel these interviews are essential to get a wider spectrum of comments on how the Blackfoot/Kainai First Nations have attempted to preserve and revitalize their language, and their informed insights on how to move forward.

As Onowa Mclvor states in her article, *Strategies for Indigenous Language Revitalization and Maintenance*, “Through many devastating events such as genocide, colonialism, linguistic imperialism, new diseases, forced relocation, the upset of Indigenous economic, social and political systems, as well as the most likely influential factor – the enforcement of English-only residential schools for all Indigenous children – Indigenous languages declined in use and existence” (McCarty, 2003; Spolsky, 2002, as cited in Mclvor, 2009). The Blackfoot/Kainai First Nations language was particularly affected by the introduction of the residential school system. A lot of people went to these residential schools and their language life and culture was disrupted. It was forbidden to speak the Blackfoot language in these residential schools and if you were caught speaking the language you were severely punished. To avoid being punished we just didn't speak the language at all and as time went by, the language started to disappear. The Indian residential school system is only one of many other factors that have decimated the Indigenous languages of North America. Since those troubled times our Elder's from Delbert Mills 2011

the Blackfoot/Kainai First Nations constantly remind the young people s“Ne’Nii’sta’Ke’Tsi’Po’Siin” or “Don’t lose your Indigenous language”.

BEGINNINGS OF BLACKFOOT LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION:

Despite many hostile challenges, many Indigenous languages throughout North America have survived. Unfortunately, so many with just enough language knowledge left in the community to preserve what is left of the language and revitalize it, if urgent and determined action is taken. “Over the past 40-50 years, Indigenous people have begun a process of reclaiming their languages and working towards their revival and use” (McIvor, 2009). On the Blackfoot/Kainai First Nations the process of revitalizing and preserving the Blackfoot language started in the late 1960’s. The first task was to recruit local Elders that spoke the Blackfoot language fluently. Even though these Blackfoot language programs were deemed a success further exploration is needed to find new ways in schools and in communities to have more young people learn to speak the Blackfoot language.

BLACKFOOT CONFEDERACY:

The Blackfoot – Niitsi’powahssin – Siksikai’powahssin language belongs to the Algonquian family of North American First Nations languages. The Kainai, Piikani and Siksika First Nations of Alberta share this language with their North American cousins the Amskaapiikani of Montana. Slight and minor variations occur in dialect and terminology among the four groups. One of the aims of this research program is to encourage students to further develop their communicative, competence and cultural knowledge, skills and values in Blackfoot. Based on the participants shared experience and knowledge it is important that the focus in Blackfoot language program continue to be on interaction and meaningfulness, with special attention and emphasis being given to oral communication in real world situations and contexts .

CHALLENGES TO REVITALIZATION OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES:

In my research I used the article, “Building on Experiences of Maori and Hawaiian Language Revival” by the Indigenous Language Institute Across Borders Project 2007, I find similarities between the Maoris and the Indigenous peoples of North America in their mission to revitalize their languages. Kainai First Nations like other Indigenous groups in Canada encountered many challenges in trying to introduce Blackfoot language courses in the school curriculums. For example, the imposed requirement of certification to teach Blackfoot, a requirement repeatedly cited by the participants in this study who would like to see Blackfoot community speakers take a greater role in language education in and out of school. The Kainai First Nations people have also faced other regulatory and financial obstacles and barriers erected by the federal and provincial governments to discourage them from introducing Blackfoot language courses in schools on the Kainai First Nations communities. Similarly the Maori people faced great challenges, for example, in the article, “Building on Experiences
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of Maori and Hawaiian language Revival”, it states, “Teaching methods and institutions do not, in themselves, hold the answer to why there is a new generation of Maori speakers in New Zealand today. The Maori language is alive today because a grassroots movement of Maori fought for political changes several decades ago. Through great personal sacrifice and ingenuity, they transformed the role of Maori play in New Zealand society and elevated the status of the culture and language in New Zealand” (Building on Experience of Maori and Hawaiian Language Revival, p. 5, 2007). The Kainai First Nations have and must continue to struggle to have control of their Indigenous Blackfoot language and language programs.

ELDERS GATE-KEEPERS OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE AND CULTURE:

In my view Indigenous Elders hold the “key” to successful language revitalization programs in Indigenous communities because of their knowledge in speaking and understanding the language. As mentioned culture and language go “hand-in-hand” and most Indigenous Elders also hold valuable knowledge of cultural traditions in their communities. The Plains Cree from the Saddle Lake First Nations have a unique Indigenous Language Instructor’s Certificate program with heavy emphasis on the Elders as “gate-keepers” of Indigenous language revitalization programs. In the ILICP the Elder’s play a major role in the teaching of the Plains Cree language, as stated, in the report, “Indigenous Language Instructor’s Certificate, “This necessitated the establishment of a number of Elder’s Circles throughout a territory that includes speakers of many languages including, Dene, Cree, Blackfoot and Nakota among others. These circles are an attempt to share information and seek guidance from Elder’s as the holders and stewards of Indigenous Knowledge in these communities. While these circles are not necessarily an existing structure traditionally in Indigenous cultures, they utilize many traditional structures, process and procedures which in themselves, informed and guided the process as the project developed” (Steinhauer, King, Blair, Lamouche, p. 5, 2001).

METHODS IN TEACHING THE BLACKFOOT LANGUAGE:

In the schools on the Kainai First Nations Blackfoot language is taught utilizing the Elder’s in pronunciations and names to identify pictures as used in the Total Physical Response (TPR). Another method of teaching the Blackfoot language in Kainai First Nations schools is using the Accelerated Second Language Acquisition approach developed by Dr. Steven Greymorning from the University of Montana in Missoula, Montana. Dr. Greymorning states, “This method teaches students not only how to pronounce the words of Blackfoot but also how to use/speak the language. This is one of the ways a language is kept alive according to the participants in this study. They all believe language and language learning needs to serve a purpose. This is one of the reasons why they stress that teaching words in isolation should be avoided. Students need to see the utility of a language” (Greymorning, 1, 200).

These are just a few methods used by the Kainai First Nations to develop and teach the Blackfoot language in our schools. The Kainai First Nations were very active and determined to introduce Blackfoot language courses in the reserve’s school curriculum since their start in the 1960s. In a study by Blackfoot educators in revitalization of the Blackfoot language they developed a rationale to the

provincial education of Alberta for the importance of teaching Blackfoot, it states, “The Blackfoot language predates English and French as a spoken language in Alberta by thousands of years. Blackfoot is one of the two most commonly used indigenous languages in Alberta. Within this language is a unique worldview. This alternative worldview is one of the reasons why Blackfoot should be studied and included in the Alberta curriculum. Not only does inclusion of Blackfoot in the curriculum help Blackfoot-speaking First Nation communities preserve and revitalize their language but it also helps young Albertans, both First Nations and non-First Nations become aware of the Blackfoot worldview” (Alberta Education, p. 2, 2010). The Blackfoot educators also stressed the importance of revitalizing and preserving Indigenous languages world-wide and as stated in the study by H. DeKorne titled, “Indigenous Language Education Policy: Supporting Community –Controlled Immersion Education, “The vitality of most Indigenous languages in North America, like minority languages in many parts of the world, is at risk due to the pressures of majority(in most cases colonial) languages and cultures. The movement to revitalize Indigenous languages attempts to facilitate the transmission and survival of Indigenous languages despite pressure to assimilate and homogenize” (De Korne, p. 1, 2009).

CONCLUSION:

“Our language is about connections and relationships. This is the life and spirit of our language. If we could teach our children this, they would gravitate toward it because it is nurturing. The Blackfoot language is our universe and our university. If we could teach our children their language, it would open their lives and they will create their destinies over and over again” (Dr. B. Bastien, Keynote Address, Treaty 7 Education Conference, Calgary, October, 2004). Dr. Bastien is from the Piikini First Nation, who speaks the Blackfoot language fluently and is an instructor with the Native American Studies Program at the University of Lethbridge, Alberta is a great advocate for revitalizing Indigenous languages and stresses the importance of recognizing Indigenous identity by learning to speak and understand your Indigenous language. Throughout the research the majority of people interviewed had similar passion and stressed that Indigenous people start using Indigenous methodologies and approaches to address the importance of revitalizing and preserving the Blackfoot language in Indigenous communities in the Blackfoot Confederacy and beyond. The participants in this study focused on the importance on oral and contextualised language learning, they stressed the crucial importance of providing varied opportunities to speak Blackfoot in homes and communities. Two of the methods for language revitalisation suggested by the participants in the program are increasing cultural community based opportunities for youth to use their language individually and collectively, and digitally through online video programs, cell phone applications, social networking and video and audio sharing.

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