

"LANGUAGE AND FOOD: A WORLD VIEW IN VERBS"

PHOTO ESSAY

DIGGING IN: FACILITATING DIALOGUE AND ACTION

KEY THEMES AND TERMS

Indigenous language, verb-based language, polysynthetic language, commodity, social cohesion, ceremonial cycle, Indigenous knowledge systems, Truth and Reconciliation process, Mohawk words: *Kanien'kéha*, *Tyonnhekwéwen*

CATALYZING CONNECTIONS

DECODING QUESTIONS

- *Description*: What did you feel while reading Ryan's story?
- *Personal Connection*: Does this story connect to your personal experience or stories in your family?
- *Common Themes*: What social issues/themes are raised in this story? Is there a common issue shared across social contexts?
- *Social Analysis*: What are the historical and social processes that created this situation?
- *Planning for Action*: What can be done? What can I/we do?

SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

- What language(s) do you speak? What do you know about how it reflects a particular worldview?
- Why is language important to a culture, to a community?
- What is the difference between a noun-based and a verb-based language? How does that difference influence the way you think?
- How does a Mohawk word like *Tyonnhekwéwen* reflect a way of understanding food?

INTERGENERATIONAL AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

What historical forces have contributed to the loss of Indigenous languages?

How are people like Ryan and his community working to recover their language?

How can the connection to original food like corn connect people to their ancestors?

How can ceremonies around foods connect us more to natural cycles?

What teaching/learning strategies does Ryan use to get his community to learn the language and cultural practices at the same time?

In response to Ryan's story about language and food, Legacies collaborator Maria Blas shares a word in her Indigenous language of P'urepecha that also reveals a non-western worldview around food:

"The word that we use to refer to ceremonies for food in P'urepecha is *Kestzitacua*. It means 'offering' of 'sacred food' distributed to family and friends after a big ceremony. During the Day of the Dead festivities in early November, it refers to offering at the burial ground the preferred food of the ancestors who are no longer with us. Similarly to Mohawk, the word refers to the food not as an object, but as a verb, as a process of offering food with sacred meaning in ceremonies which are social, either for the living or the dead. This reveals another belief that the ancestors are with us, and we communicate with them regularly through food."

Another example of a word that is seen not as a noun but more as a verb, in this case in Spanish, is *comida*, the subject of the photo essay "Comida: The Core of Food Sovereignty". Read that essay and consider the broader conception of the word to incorporate processes and relationships.

INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

Deborah (editor): I always wanted to learn an Indigenous language, because I was aware that language shapes how we think, and I've felt the limits of English, my maternal and a colonial language. In the fall of 2018, I audited the Mohawk language class of Ryan DeCaire, Legacies collaborator and the first professor of Mohawk at the University of Toronto. The first day we learned the Mohawk greeting for "How are you?" When Ryan explained that "*Skennen'kó:wa ken?*" literally means "Is there still the great peace in your territory?" I was moved by its deeper social and ecological connotations: a person is always seen as embedded in a place and connected to a broader community with historical meaning and commitment."

Even within our exchange, we witnessed Ryan teaching Mohawk, and Chandra, like many activists, trying to learn it in intensive courses. They now have access to many online tools, and practiced with each other when we brought Chandra into a conversation via Skype.

Ryan suggests that his students “want to understand what it means to be Canadian, after having been lied to for their whole lives. They feel a responsibility to right the wrongs that have been done in the past.” What are the wrongs he is referring to? What could they do to help “right the wrongs”?

Three out of four of the 90 Indigenous languages in Canada are said to be endangered. On June 21, 2019, the Canadian government approved through Royal Assent the Indigenous Languages Act, “to support the reclamation, revitalization, maintaining, and strengthening of Indigenous languages in Canada.” Research the schools and universities as well as educational offerings on reserves that are teaching Indigenous languages.

Consider how Canadian citizens can support the Indigenous Languages Act, and ensure that these languages are revitalized and maintained.

DIGGING DEEPER: RESOURCES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND ACTION

VIDEOS

Browne, Christene. “Speaking in Tongues: The History of Language - Episode # 1 Let There Be Words.” Syncopated Productions, Inc. February 27, 2009. Video, 3:03. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OuUAPVFFCRQ>.

CBC Radio. “How Ryan DeCaire is working to preserve Indigenous culture through language.” *CBC/Radio-Canada*, last modified May 21, 2018. <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/how-ryan-decaire-is-working-to-preserve-indigenous-culture-through-language-1.4669832>.

Wilbur, Matika, and Adrienne Keene. “Can Our Ancestors Hear Us?.” *All My Relations*. July 2, 2019. Podcast, MP3 audio, 1:25:50. <https://www.allmyrelationspodcast.com/podcast/episode/491847a3/ep-9-can-our-ancestors-hear-us>.

BOOKS AND ARTICLES

Government of Canada. “Indigenous languages legislation.” Last modified June 28, 2019.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/campaigns/celebrate-indigenous-languages/legislation.html>.

ORGANIZATIONS

There is a resurgence of interest in and support for the preservation and promotion of Indigenous languages around the world. What efforts are you aware of in your area?

Native Languages of the Americas website. "Native Languages of the Americas: Amerindian Language Families." Last modified 2014.
<http://www.native-languages.org/linguistics.htm>.

The University of British Columbia. "Aboriginal Language Organizations." Accessed July 1, 2020. <https://fnel.arts.ubc.ca/resources/aboriginal-language-organizations/>.