
Why Care about Lënapei lixsëwakàn? Ethnography of the Lenape Language Loss

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The Delaware Tribe of Oklahoma, which originated in the Northeastern Woodlands, today struggles to preserve the Lenape language of their ancestors, whose last fluent native speaker died in 2002. The tribe's language reclamation efforts are in large part connected with the works of Jim Rementer, a non-Indian who came to live with them at the beginning of the 1960s, learned their language, and in the course of time became the director of their language project. However, the "old ways" – former cultural patterns – have long since been abandoned or dramatically changed, and together with them their attachment to the language. Those few Delawares who do try to learn it must study it as a second language, without a natural/traditional learning setting. The 11,000 Delawares live, go to school and work among a much larger non-native society, which makes mastering the language extremely difficult. Yet, despite this situation, efforts to protect the language continue to be made, and an impressive source base for contemporary and future learners (Delaware language grammar, internet dictionary, CD lessons) has been continually enlarged. Today, when political divisions within the tribe weaken the community cohesiveness, a well-documented language, "alive in Delawares' minds", remains one of the most valuable elements of their heritage, a source of their ethnic pride, but also a challenge.

Keywords: Delaware Tribe, Indian Territory, Lenape, endangered languages, language preservation and reclamation, ethnic identity

My prayer is that my grandchildren will know that the Delaware Nation¹ is still here and functioning. They will have heard their language spoken and their songs sung.

Dee Ketchum, 2001, (then) Delaware Tribe Chief
(*Delaware Indian News* 2001, 24(1): 1)

The Delaware Tribe of Oklahoma, whose members now all speak English as their mother tongue, is located in the two most northeastern counties of Oklahoma, Washington and Nowata, but has registered members living all over the US and in other countries. With a population of about 11,000, this is the twentieth largest Indian tribe in the US (USCB, 2002) and the largest of the Delaware groups living in the US and Canada. Like the majority of

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Native American groups today, the Delawares do not own their reservation. “The Delaware country”, drained by the Caney and Verdigris rivers, may seem quite indistinguishable to an outside observer, but to the Delawares it holds ‘a uniquely Delaware sense of place’ due to their 150-year presence in the area (Obermeyer, 2009: 181). The tribal office is in Bartlesville, Washington County, the town that grew from the 1873 homestead of a mixed family (Jacob H. Bartles, a white businessman, and Nannie Journeycake, daughter of the Delaware chief Charles Journeycake) (Weslager, 1991: 445).

Lenape, the language of the Delawares (*Lēnapei lixsëwakàn*), is not spoken on an everyday basis since all fluent native speakers have died out – the last one in 2002. Thus on Fishman’s Graded Intergeneration Dislocation Scale (GIDS) it occupies stage 8, the lowest: those languages ‘for which ample evidence is available but who have lost their native speakers to such a degree that these languages must first be learned as second languages before further sociofunctional repertoire expansion can be envisioned for them’. It is a language which is used – if at all – ‘outside of natural social settings’ (Fishman, 1991: 287). However, the Lenape language is very well documented and its archiving continues. This article discusses the historical and political reasons for the Delaware language loss, analysing both external and internal factors which have made language reclamation an extremely challenging task. It also offers a summary of contemporary efforts to preserve the language. By demonstrating how language (and language reclamation efforts) affect the group’s identity, the article points out the importance of having members of the community formulate their own language expectations and discusses conditions which may help reclaim the language.

In this study I refer to my ethnographic research on Delaware ethnic identity through participatory observation, formal interviews and casual conversations with tribal members conducted in August 2004. In addition to examining the literature and unpublished documents, I have communicated for the last seven years with Jim Rementer of Bartlesville, who has lived among and worked for the Delawares for about 40 years. Because of Jim’s life-long involvement with the Delawares and his efforts to preserve their language, his activities and opinions will be discussed here as well.

The people and the language

The Delawares originated in the northeastern part of what is now the United States of America, in the area that today is New Jersey, eastern Pennsylvania, northern Delaware and

southern New York State. The name “Delaware” (as well as the name of the river in the area where they lived), comes from 1610 and is an anglicized form of the name of the third Lord De la Warre, Governor of the Virginia Colony. It refers to various politically disconnected and mostly hunter–horticultural groups who never formed a “tribe” or a “nation”, and it was not used until the eighteenth century, when those groups had already left their eastern homelands and engaged in the struggle against British rule in Pennsylvania.

The Lenape language belongs to the extensive Algonquian linguistic family that covered large areas of North America: the Northeast, Middle Atlantic, Great Lakes area, Midwest, central Canada, and parts of the Great Plains. The people called Delawares spoke two dialects which had a common stem in the ancient past (Goddard, 1974: 103): Munsee in the north of their eastern homelands (northern New Jersey and southeastern New York), Unami in the centre (Northern Unami) and in the south (Southern Unami – below Trenton and Toms River). Both were further divided into sub-dialects (Goddard, 1978: 213–215; Kraft, 2001: 4, 7).

According to Gregory Anderson (2010: 129–130), Oklahoma belongs to the world’s ‘language hotspots’ – areas where the ‘global language extinction crisis’ is felt particularly strongly and which ‘have concentrations of the most diverse and fragile languages where rapid focused action is needed’. Oklahoma has the second largest concentration of the Indians in the US (the first being the Navajo reservation in Arizona), and the biggest concentration of Indian tribes. There are about 40 Indian groups in Oklahoma now, but historically there were about 70 (Wright, 1986). According to statistics provided by the Intertribal Wordpath Society, an organization promoting Native American languages of Oklahoma, all the Indian languages in that state are either not used any more or have only a few speakers left. Most of the tribes that originated in the Eastern Woodlands (the majority of which spoke one of the Algonquian languages) now suffer from language loss, with only a few – if any – native speakers remaining (e.g. zero among the Delawares, nine among the Sauks, three among the Ottawas).² A relatively better situation was found among some of the “Western” or Plains tribes that moved to the Territory earlier than others, which now live in the western part of Oklahoma: e.g. Kiowa, which has 400 speakers left; Arapaho, which has 100; Ponca, which has 33. The tribes removed from the Southeast fare better still (though the numbers are in each case only a small percentage of each tribe’s overall population): Chickasaws have 600 native speakers, the Seminoles and Creeks combined have 6,000, the Choctaws 4,000, and the Cherokees 9,000. Only five languages can be heard spoken by children (in all of

Southeastern tribes and among the Kickapoos).³ The Delawares, with no native speakers left, have suffered the most dramatic language loss.

Anthropologist William Newcomb, who conducted research among the Delawares in 1951 and 1952, observed: ‘At the present time no Cherokee-Delaware, whatever his age or acculturative status, habitually speaks Delaware; all speak English. It is within the last generation that this change has taken place’ (Newcomb, 1970: 114). Out of the 32 persons Newcomb spoke to, the youngest fluent speaker of Lenape was 26, which illustrated a general pattern that the older the person, the more fluent his/her knowledge of the language (Newcomb, *ibid.*). At the beginning of the 1960s, Jim Rementer, who was staying with the Thompson family in Dewey, Oklahoma, found that English was the most used language:

For my first three years I benefited by hearing Nora and her dad talking Lenape with each other, but once he was gone (1964) it was rare for two speakers to get together other than for short visits. It always surprised me that people who should have been speakers because they grew up in homes where Lenape was the most common language often could no longer use the language. I recall one time Nora and her cousin were shopping and Nora asked her a simple question in Lenape. A nearby blonde-headed woman kept staring at them. Nora thought maybe it was someone her cousin knew, so she asked, ‘Awèn hàch na opantpat? (Who is that blonde-headed person)?’ That’s a fairly simple thing in Lenape but the cousin didn’t understand (JR, August 13, 2011).

As in the past, the Delawares continue today to live as distinct groups, separated by their different histories, politics, dialects and geography. Apart from several small communities that live in their ancient eastern homelands and claim Delaware origin, there are four major groups: two in Ontario, recognized by the Canadian government; and two in Oklahoma, recognized by the American government. Oklahoma groups spoke Southern Unami dialects, and the groups in Canada spoke Munsee dialects. Additionally, the Stockbridge Munsee Band of Mohican Nation (today living in Wisconsin) have been in part composed of Munsee-speakers who migrated from their homelands in northern New Jersey at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Today these dialects are virtually extinct. In Canada, only a few speakers of Munsee can still be found (in one of the two Delaware communities there, Moraviantown),⁴ while in Oklahoma the few speakers of Unami remaining are only partial speakers (not fluent in the language). In Wisconsin there is not a single speaker left.

Historical overview

The Delawares were one of the first Native American groups who entered into contact with the Europeans. In 1524 explorer Giovanni Verrazzano saw them in New York Bay. The Dutch colonists started occupying part of the Delawares’ territory at the beginning of the

seventeenth century, followed by the Swedes, Finns and the British. At the beginning, their relationship with the Europeans was friendly, especially in Pennsylvania during the time of its first governor, William Penn (1680-1701), a Quaker. Soon, though, the Delawares sold and abandoned their eastern homelands, pushed out by the Pennsylvania colonists and their Indian allies – the Iroquois. In the middle of the eighteenth century they lived in western Pennsylvania and Ohio. During the American Revolution some Delawares supported the British, while others fought on the side of the colonists (they were the first Indian people to sign a treaty with the new US, in 1778). Within a few decades after the Revolution, groups of Delawares had dispersed in various directions, westward to Indiana and north to Canada. In 1866, after the conclusion of the American Civil War (1861-1865), in which the great majority of their men fought on the side of the Union⁵, they were pressed into signing a treaty with the US and moved again to protect themselves from the flow of white settlers into Kansas and pressure from the railroad companies. They settled in today's northeastern Oklahoma, then called Indian Territory. At that time, whites were not allowed to live in Indian Territory unless they were married to an Indian.

Before moving to Indian Territory the Delawares signed two treaties, first with the US government, and then with the Cherokee Nation who already lived in that area. The Cherokees had suffered their own tragic story of removal from their homelands in the Southern Appalachian Mountain region (e.g. today's Georgia) in the 1830s. The Indian lands in the east were needed for more and more numerous white settlers, and the solution was to resettle eastern tribes in the “wilderness”, the large territory west of the Mississippi River, recently formed after the 1803 Louisiana Purchase from France (Perdue, 2005: 47–48; Slotkin, 1986: 68–70).⁶ As usual in its pursuits with native peoples, the American government negotiated successfully with those parts of the nation that were more willing to sell their lands and move west (Perdue, 2005: 49). Despite protests by the majority of the Cherokees, the US Senate ratified the agreement, and in 1838 soldiers rounded up the Cherokees and began burning their cabins and crops. Thus began the infamous Trail of Tears of the Cherokees from the Southeast to the so-called Indian Territory, during which one in four Cherokees died (Perdue, 2005: 54; c.f. Thornton, 1991: 75–95; Perdue, 2000: 527–540). Therefore, the Delawares arriving in the Cherokee territory encountered a nation which had also taken its share of betrayal and abuse by the American government, and had learned a good lesson about survival of the fittest, which they were not going to forget in their transactions with the Delawares.

To those Delawares who agreed to leave their Kansas reservation after the 1866 treaty, the US government promised to sell a tract of land further south, in Indian Territory, ‘to be selected by the Delawares in one body in as compact a form as practicable’ (Haake, 2002: 419). At the same time the US government made a separate treaty with the Cherokee Nation in which the Cherokees agreed to accept other tribes onto their lands for a fee. There were two options for the tribes who would settle on Cherokee lands: they could abandon their tribal organizations and become part of the Cherokee Nation, or they could retain their tribal organization and have a separate part of the Cherokee land for themselves, for which they would pay. The latter option provided at the same time ‘all the rights of native Cherokees’ after further additional payment into the Cherokee fund (Haake, *ibid.*: 420; Adams, 1995: 51–61).

In 1867 the Delawares concluded a treaty with the Cherokees. This was supposed to be a confirmation of the provisions of the previous year’s treaty between the US and the Delawares, but it turned out to be not exactly so. There was no common tribal land base for the Delawares. Instead, individual Delawares received 160 acres each of Cherokee land, for which they paid one dollar per acre; they also paid 123 dollars per person for citizenship rights in the Cherokee Nation. Another change was that the newborn Delaware children were to become regular citizens of the Cherokee Nation. With these new conditions, continuation of the tribal entity seemed impossible. However, the Delawares continued to choose their tribal council, and the federal government continued to maintain relations with this body until 1979.

Since the very beginning, the treaty of 1867 was interpreted differently by the two tribes. The Delawares claimed that they had simply purchased land from the Cherokees along the western border of the Cherokee lands (it was 10 miles wide by 30 miles long) (Kraft, 2001: 514), which allowed them to reestablish the tribal organization there as promised in the 1866 treaty with the US. In addition they paid to exercise the rights of Cherokee Nation citizens in order to participate in the Cherokee budget and health care system. The Cherokees, on the other hand, claimed that, by signing the treaty, the Delawares had ceded their tribal sovereignty and had become Cherokees.⁷

Federal courts and the federal government have also had problems interpreting the treaty. As a result, the federal authorities have shifted their decisions on Delaware status throughout the twentieth century until, after the 2004 termination of their status as a federally recognized tribe by the US government, the Delawares again received official recognition from the American government in July 2009. The cost of recognition was high. They first had

to agree to sign an agreement with the Cherokees (2007) and later to amend their constitution accordingly, with parts of it dictated by the Cherokees.

This situation did not confer a satisfying political status on the Delawares, and indirectly influenced their capacity to preserve core community activities. It also deepened internal conflicts within the Delaware Tribe. The new Delaware government, chosen after the 2004 termination, pressed for cooperation with the Cherokees, which made some Delaware community leaders suspicious (c.f. Ketchum, 2006). Also, the politics of this new government (which changed as a result of the November 2010 elections) discouraged most people from taking part in weekly community gatherings in the tribal centre, where previously they would eat, talk and dance together. Their social and cultural activities were perceived by the tribal leadership as “playing Indian”, so many chose not to participate any more.⁸

More than 100 years of constant forced attachment and partial subjugation to a more powerful entity has had a twofold effect on the Delawares. On the one hand, it strengthened the sense of Delaware identity during difficult times. On the other, it confused some Delawares’ ideas about themselves.⁹ Although the usual interpretations of how US government ideology and politics limit tribal sovereignty hold true, on a micro-level – closer to Delawares’ everyday lives and their communal strategies – it is the Cherokee Nation that has managed to exercise its influence over the Delawares.

Change of Delaware mother tongue

The language shift started when the Delawares moved to Oklahoma and sent their children to government-run schools.¹⁰ It must have gathered pace with the breaking up of the Delaware communities after Indian Territory (later Oklahoma Territory) became the state of Oklahoma in 1907. This decreased the relative isolation of their rural settlements, absorbing Delawares more and more into the regional economy and pushing many of them to move to the cities (Obermeyer, 2003: 147). The Delawares’ situation was not unique. For example, Morris W. Foster, an anthropologist studying another Oklahoma tribe, the Comanches, observed that by the 1940s ‘many … families made a conscious decision to shift the everyday language of the home to English’. English was becoming the language of everyday communication, and – rather than Comanche – began to serve to describe the world they now lived in (Foster, 1991: 115). The use of English in schools and, later in the mid-twentieth century, exposure to

television at home must have played an enormous role in erasing Indian languages in the US.¹¹

The allotment of tribal lands at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the rapid settlement of Indian lands by whites after 1907 Oklahoma statehood, made any communal action among the Delawares extremely difficult. As a tribe the Delawares lost a big part of their land, and the distance between Delaware families and communities in northeastern Oklahoma began to widen: ‘the communal lifestyle has become a thing of the past’ (Kraft, 2001: 525–528; Obermeyer, 2007: 187–188). One can see parallels with the loss of cultural institutions among other Oklahoma tribes. Foster writes about an old Comanche medicine man who decided not to pass his powers and knowledge to the next generations and ‘to take this to the grave with him’ because the ‘modern day’ required Comanches to live like white men. He also feared that his powers could be defiled (Foster, 1991: 115). In the mid-twentieth century, Delawares explained that they no longer sought visions – which were a crucial part of their religion – because one had to be ‘morally clean’ to do so, and living in the world of the white man made that impossible (Newcomb, 1970: 112).¹²

Another important factor that contributed to the loss of the language was the centuries-old influence of Christianity and its adoption by “modernists” among the Delawares. Although Delawares in Kansas and later in Indian Territory had their own Baptist and Methodist ministers who preached in Lenape, they switched to English when whites gradually joined the congregations. However, Christian influence has much deeper roots that affect the very structure of the tribe: for several generations some of Delaware leaders have identified Christianity with modernism, and consequently rejected the ‘old ways’ as useless (c.f. Obermeyer, 2003: 169–170; Obermeyer, 2009). In August 2004 one of the older Delawares told the author that the grandfather of their (2004) chief was a Baptist pastor who would go to the Delaware Big House ceremonies organized at the beginning of the twentieth century and scold the participants for being “pagans”. The majority of the “modernists” were also more willing than the non-Christians to leave Kansas, sign the treaty with the Cherokees, and move to Indian Territory (Obermeyer, 2003: 48ff.).

It is very difficult today to find individuals whose parents are both Delawares, and thus natural language transmission is hardly possible even within the home. The lack of families with two Delaware parents cannot only be explained by the Delawares’ dispersal across a larger, Native American (non-Delaware) and white society. Paradoxically, traditional Delaware kinship rules work against family cohesion and, by extension, the community. ‘The Lenape traditionally calculate family relationships to many degrees. In Lenape there is no

word for “cousin”’ (Rementer and Pearson, 2002). All cousins are simply brothers and sisters, so dating and marriage are forbidden. Thus Delaware tribal members are, by their own social patterns, discouraged from marrying other Delawares, and intermarrying with whites and other Indians diminishes the chances of culture and language transmission (Newcomb, 1970: 109).

Likewise, in the first half of the century the formerly important ceremony of the Big House was abandoned, ironically, out of respect for their own culture. Delaware elders realized that it was no longer possible to save substantial elements of the ceremony such as vision quests, deer hunting and the singing of vision songs. The last Big House was held in 1924, although in 1944-1945 there were attempts to revive its practice. Delaware religion was to some extent a private matter, in which ‘favored individuals experienced a vision of a guardian spirit (*manito*)’ (Wallace, 1956: 2). The songs belonged to the individuals or to the families, not to the tribe as a whole, so once an individual or the family died, the song could no longer be sung (JR, August 2004).

However, today some individuals still attempt to preserve what is perceived as a traditional culture, which most notably includes the Lenape language. Among them is Jim Rementer, a non-Indian from Pennsylvania, who came to live with the Delawares in eastern Oklahoma at the beginning of the 1960s, and remained with them for good, learning their language, working on editing the Lenape grammar, teaching language lessons, developing an internet base of Lenape words and phrases as well as an interactive Lenape language CD Rom. In addition, he has been raising money for their language programmes by submitting language grant proposals to various institutions. He has also been a member of the Lenape Language Committee, formed at the beginning of the 1990s, served as the Secretary of the Culture Preservation Committee (CPC) of the Delaware Tribe and, since 1997, has served as Director of the tribe’s Lenape Language Project.

In 1963 Jim Rementer was adopted into the Delaware family of Thompsons, with whom he spent most of his time during his first years in Oklahoma. Five years later, another non-Indian arrived to eastern Oklahoma: Bruce Pearson, a graduate student of linguistics. Pearson, like Rementer, worked with Nora Thompson Dean until her death in 1984, as well as with several other elderly Delawares who could still speak the Lenape language. In those times very few young Delawares were interested in the preservation of their culture and language.

In 1974 Anna Davis and Elizabeth West taught Lenape language at the New Hope Indian Methodist Church in Dewey, Oklahoma, a few miles north of Bartlesville. Nora Thompson

Dean taught classes at Nowata in 1979 and 1980. Only a few were able to attend the classes, so in 1980 Dean developed several cassette tapes and booklets with Rementer on Lenape language lessons. In 1985 Edward Leonard Thompson, the Ceremonial Chief of the Delaware Tribe of Eastern Oklahoma and the last fluent speaker of Lenape, also taught language classes. Another language teacher was Lucy Blalock, who taught under the auspices of the CPC of the Delaware Tribe (formed in 1991) at the tribal headquarters in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. She had about 30 students then (Blalock, 1997: 38). After two years she continued teaching in her home in Quapaw, 90 miles west of Bartlesville until 1999; she died in 2000 (Rementer and Pearson, 2002; Oestreicher, 2001: 535). A few years before her death, Lucy Blalock helped to prepare a Lenape grammar (Blalock *et al.*, 1994).

This preservation and sustaining work was continued by Rementer, who used the recordings of Nora Thompson Dean and Lucy Blalock in his language classes. In 1999 the tribe produced a CD Rom of the Lenape language (Oestreicher, 2001: 535). ‘The program introduces numbers, common expressions, and familiar nouns. It includes sound files for authentic pronunciation as well as pictures for many objects, especially animals that might not be familiar to an urban population and cultural items that have no counterpart in English’ (Rementer and Pearson, 2002). Another grammar – a wonderful tool for both linguists and anthropologists studying Delaware culture – was edited by Jim Rementer and published recently (Rementer, 2011). This is a version of Southern Unami dialect grammar (the earliest known Unami grammar), originally published in 1824.¹³

In 2002 the Delawares received a grant from the National Science Foundation to create an online dictionary of the Southern Unami dialect. It counted over 12,000 words. Now it has grown to include lessons about spelling and grammar, sound files with samples of sentences (1,400 sound files), as well as photographs, and a total of 14,000 words of which 5,525 have single word sound files. The dictionary went online in 2006 (available at <http://www.talk-lenape.org>). Sound files in the online dictionary were created by digitizing the audiotapes made in previous decades with now deceased Lenape speakers (available at <http://www.talk-lenape.org/introduction.php>). In 2010 the Delawares successfully applied for an additional grant to improve their database and website (Rementer *et al.*, 2010). This has let them add a Lenape–English dictionary to the existing English–Lenape version. They have also developed a section with texts in Lenape, so users could listen to stories and conversations in their language. They are now able to digitize many more tapes that they have, as the 14,000 words currently in the online dictionary are not even half of those gathered by Jim Rementer, linguists Bruce Pearson, Ives Goddard, David Oestreicher, and others.

Thanks to the efforts of several now deceased fluent Lenape speakers, as well as of non-Indian linguists and Jim Rementer, the Lenape language is very well documented. Apart from the online dictionary and two grammars, there are published and unpublished materials that include Lenape vocabulary and language analysis, ranging from the writings of Moravian missionaries who worked among the Delawares in the eighteenth century to data gathered by anthropologists and linguists throughout the twentieth century. Moreover, the Delawares possess approximately 1,000 hours of recordings of language class sessions and language interviews conducted over a number of years with tribal elders. There are various teaching tools being spread among tribal members, like word-a-day calendars, a *Conversational mini-dictionary*, Christian songs in Lenape (recorded, transcribed and some of them accessible online), and Delaware folk stories in both Lenape and English. One member of the tribe chose Lenape as her “foreign language” requirement in college, and subsequently worked with Delaware children, teaching them words and songs in Lenape. She has created the Lenape Language and Culture Facebook page where Lenape words and phrases are exchanged among the Delawares (as of January 2012 there are 349 “members” of this virtual Delaware speech community). The page not only helps people to collectively learn words and phrases, but might also connect Bartlesville Delawares with tribal members spread all over America, thereby strengthening the sense of community.

Documentation, reclamation or revitalization?

Various terms are applied when language maintenance is discussed: “documentation”, “reclamation”, “revitalization” (or “resurrection”). Although there are definitional discrepancies in the use of those terms (c.f. e.g. Wetzel, 2006: 79; Rowicka, 2007: 28; Romaine, 2008: 19; Leonard, 2008), it is convenient to associate “documentation” with language preservation in the form of written and audiovisual records, grammars, dictionaries etc., while “revitalization” suggests bringing the language “back to life”, so that it is actually used on a daily basis. The latter would involve recreating a “speech community”, in the sense of a social unit of people who share a common language, ‘along with rules or norms for its use’ (Miller, 1996: 222), thereby making them distinct from other communities. Of course language documentation and its revitalization are not inseparable processes, and probably any language-oriented activity can serve both purposes (for example, an internet sound dictionary is a valuable resource for linguists and anthropologists studying the language and culture of the Delawares, as well as an aid to those who already possess some language competency to

increase their vocabulary and to learn the meaning and pronunciation of words). However, particular actions fulfil those two functions unequally: studying a published grammar serves the linguists and more advanced language learners, but is much less useful for beginners; whereas conducting casual conversations in a language can serve as proof of its vitality, they will fulfil a documenting role only if they are actually recorded.

I propose thinking of language “reclamation” as something between language documentation and revitalization: obtaining some level of language competency among a significant part of the community members that allows for at least limited conversational usage in some contemporary contexts. The actions to promote language use described above speak more of language preservation/documentation than its reclamation (or revitalization). The former is highly developed thanks to the efforts of Rementer and others. However, the only effective strategy of returning the language as a living thing to the community seems to be that of the Master-Apprentice Language Learning Program, as outlined by linguist Leanne Hinton (c.f. Hinton *et al.*, 2002). It has brought about some positive results in the revival of some of the Native American languages in California and elsewhere, and has also been applied among another Native American group, Loyal Shawnees in Oklahoma (c.f. Linn *et al.*, 1998; Sims, 1998; Rowicka, 2007; Charles, 2005).

Since late 1990s a variant of the master-apprentice programme has seemed to be effective among the Delawares’ neighbours in Oklahoma, the Miami Indians. Like the Delawares, the Miami Indians were relocated to Indian Territory from further north, and lost their last fluent native speakers even earlier than the Delawares, in the early 1960s. Today the Miami language is used on an everyday basis within one family, composed of the father and four children. Also, the Miami Indians now claim to have ‘hundreds of Miami people with some knowledge of the language and perhaps about fifteen people with conversational proficiency’. According to the chair of the Miami Language Committee, ‘many Miami families have incorporated the language into their daily communication’ (Leonard, 2008: 25–26; Baldwin, 2003). Such a programme – aiming at conversational proficiency on the part of the learner, which in turn leads to the revival of the speech community – requires two dedicated individuals who are ready to spend a considerable amount of time together, with frequent and regular sessions in informal immersion situations, such as doing everyday activities together and speaking about them at the same time, using only the native language (c.f. Hinton *et al.*, 2002; Mitchell, 2005: 188). The people will not start speaking the language of their ancestors just because there are grammar books, words and phrases they can read or even hear on an internet dictionary. The system of formal Lenape language classes did not

help either. Those are tools that should accompany people when they are learning the language, but the main instruction should occur through oral instruction and everyday life situations that are similar to the former natural context of Native American culture transmission. The “master” is thus not only a language teacher, but also a cultural instructor in the deepest sense – the one who passes on the memory (*passeur du mémoirs*) (Dołowy-Rybińska, 2010: 55). Doubtless, this is an extremely challenging task, considering that Jim Rementer, the most natural candidate to serve in the role of a master, is already overwhelmed with the tasks of a linguist, language activist and coordinator, which ideally should be fulfilled by several persons, or even teams of several persons (Berardo, 2002: 21–22).

Throughout their history the Delawares suffered numerous emigrations and constant uprooting, along with political, economic and cultural pressure from the whites and from other tribes. All this has had a twofold effect: on one side, the constant influence of greater powers weakened the political autonomy of the tribe; on the other it provided for a sense of common history and common experience, unique from whites and from other Native American groups, including other Delaware groups. Delaware cultural patterns and their most significant cultural institutions like the Big House (a ceremony of thanksgiving and renewal) were, one by one, being lost, along with the Lenape language. Hence it is crucial to understand what language preservation means today, given that the natural context of language use is gone. One cannot imagine a return to its everyday use because the Delawares live now in a mostly non-Delaware context, and the modern social setting does not encourage the use of the Lenape language, much less make it necessary. Most likely nobody would really want to replace English with Lenape.

Even if “resurrection” is impossible, however, there are always smaller or larger chances for some version of its reclamation, or “approximation”: the prosody, the grammar, ‘the rhythm of the language’ (Fishman, 2007: 167). Should the community choose to struggle for language reclamation, it should be understood as language “reinvention”, that is, conscious application of *parts of the* former language in new contexts and in a much-limited range. New contexts and range (e.g. place names, songs, speeches and short conversations) may seem modest, but their realization would nevertheless constitute a significant success and provide a stimulus for setting broader goals (Rowicka, 2007: 28; Linn *et al.*, 2002: 118).

Attitudes towards language reclamation

The words of the former Delaware chief quoted at the beginning of the article show that, at least in the minds of some Delaware community leaders, their language is strongly connected

to the culture and identity of the group. Yet the question remains: is it possible to use the language again when its natural setting, the culture, has gone through irreversible structural changes? Is it something that people desire? Of course, bringing back the language cannot be discussed without insight into people's attitudes towards the language.

For example, the Big House ceremony, of which the most important part was recitation of the visions, not only provided an institutional opportunity for younger generations to receive cultural instructions, but it also exposed them to the language. The attitudes of some Delawares show that this practice was declining in the middle of the twentieth century. One reason for the decline of the Big House ceremony was that many young Delawares did not want to attend, thinking it 'silly' or 'because they did not understand the Delaware language very well'. Also, the reciting of the visions during the last Big House ceremonies ever organized (during World War II) was ridiculed and visions were considered as having no 'power' (Newcomb, 1970: 110). Thus another natural context for language mastery ceased to exist.

Aside from individuals changing attitudes towards their culture and language, there are more objective obstacles to language use. People of mixed families, not living on their own reservation, do not have many occasions to be exposed to the Lenape language. Only 25% of the Delaware Tribe lives within 75 miles of Bartlesville, a minority dispersed among white society. Consequently, the prestige of the Delaware language has been in decline, with a growing feeling of shame among its speakers. This must have been another important factor contributing to the Delaware language shift. Lucy Blalock recalled how Delaware children were ridiculed when they tried to speak their language when among whites: '... when they got teased that just killed their spirit. They got ashamed' (Blalock, 1997: 38).

Now people do not feel shame, but the language is no longer spoken, or, as some people say, it is "sleeping". This means that it can potentially be spoken because the documentation exists, as opposed to being "extinct", which is when a language has neither the speakers nor the documentation to allow for its comprehension (Leonard, 2008: 26–27). In an attempt to learn about people's needs and expectations, in 1997 the Delaware CPC sent 4,350 questionnaires to the heads of the community families. They received 1,269 answers, indicating that in total 2,154 members of the Delaware households (about one fifth of the total population) wanted to learn the language. They cited as areas where they were especially interested in obtaining language competency: 'greetings', 'basic grammar', 'creating sentences', 'kinship terms', 'people', 'prayer words' or 'numbers'.¹⁴ On the one hand those answers show a dramatic lack of language competency within the community

(when those who show any interest in learning the language at all admit they do not know how to greet or count in the language), while on the other the desire to learn grammar and form sentences reveals a further wish to actually use the language rather than being merely satisfied by its ornamental existence. Further, the desire to learn prayer words and kinship terms reveals that the respondents link language fluency with “traditional” culture and community values. However, people should be aware that attempts to “reinvent” their language would mean changing the range and contexts of its use.

Still more important than people’s desires are their actions. Rementer notices: ‘Some people thought that it was enough to be a Delaware to learn how to speak Lenape easily. Nothing could be further from the truth; the Delawares learn the language just like any foreigner’ (JR, August 2004). For at least last two generations of Delawares, English has been their mother tongue – the language they speak at home. Janifer Brown, member of the tribal Culture Preservation and Lenape Language Committees, who partly mastered the language from Lucy Blalock and from Jim Rementer, recalls her experience with teaching the language:

They want to learn, but it seems like they want to plug it in and don’t want to spend the time to do it, and it does take time. I’ve taught two classes and helped with another one. About 50 people show up and maybe 30 people will stay for two–three months and then summer hits and ... nobody. They’re gone. If we don’t get them back in the fall ... (JB, August 2004).

Very often being a Delaware is also a matter of identity choice. Some of the community members discovered their Delawarenness at later point in their lives. In this connection the history of Janifer Brown is significant: ‘I didn’t know I was a Delaware Indian until I was 23. I was raised by my white mother. I didn’t even know I was Indian ... I received a notice that I was enrolled in the tribe’ (JB, August 2004). Thus, even though individuals like Janifer Brown feel a strong sense of Delaware identity, they must face particular barriers in their attempts to learn a culture and language in which they were not actually raised.

The importance of the attitudes of those who officially control tribal affairs and those who know the language to some degree cannot be overestimated. There have been plans to introduce signs with Lenape names for the streets in Bartlesville. Such an idea would not only have made a handful of Lenape names recognizable to Delawares and non-Delawares alike, but it would have also ‘raised Delawares’ spirits’, making them constantly visible in symbolic way in the area. The idea was dropped ‘as they were too busy fighting the Cherokee Nation (JR, August 14, 2011).¹⁵

On another occasion, the Delawares discussed a project to start a language summer camp for young people – a programme that functions well in other communities, e.g. among the Miamis who, like the Delawares, live in Oklahoma and have a language belonging to Algonquian family (Leonard, 2008: 24). The idea of the camp was abandoned, however, when one of the members of Delaware CPC mentioned troubles with ‘insurance for such an event and other drawbacks’ (JR, August 15, 2011). Jim Rementer recognizes the idea came too late:

... by that time it was being discussed we no longer had any fluent speakers who could come and spend a week doing the sessions. Lucy [Blalock] was getting too feeble and Leonard [Thompson] was almost deaf. I'm not sure my ability with the language is good enough anymore to do such a thing (JR, August 15, 2011).

Disappearance of natural domains of language use and the dying out of fluent speakers have contributed to a deepening sense of language incompetency among remaining speakers. Once a question about how to say ‘Welcome’ confused one of the late teachers, as she could not find the proper expression in Lenape. Later Jim Rementer found in his notes that another teacher had constructed the whole sentence '*Nulelintam eli paan*' ('I am glad because you came') to say ‘Welcome’ (JR, August 15, 2011). An even bigger problem is the instructors’ lack of awareness that, even if they are not fluent in the language any more, they are nevertheless the most knowledgeable of the language and the tribe’s only hope for the language to be resurrected.

Conclusion

The case of the Delawares from eastern Oklahoma suggests that a decline in a people’s sense of identity goes together with a decline in former cultural traits and in knowledge and use of the language. When the once-used means of transmitting cultural knowledge or the traditional learning institutions (like the Big House) are no longer a part of a community’s common experience, and when the culture does not stimulate a need for learning the language, language fluency is likely to be found among only a handful of tribal members dedicated to its preservation, and among scholars and a few enthusiasts. The chance of obtaining a higher level of fluency among the wider community is somehow greater in those Native American communities which live on more or less isolated territories or reservations.¹⁶ The results are often still less than expected, whether in the well-funded and well-developed learning setting

on the Oneida reservation in Wisconsin¹⁷, or in stubborn attempts at language preservation in the limited learning setting of the Oklahoma Delawares.

Although contact with non-Indian culture has brought about an irreversible cultural and linguistic dislocation, the Cherokee Nation's manipulation of Delaware status has affected not only the political autonomy of the Delawares, but also their community focus on language revival. As some of the examples in this article have shown, the energies that could be spent on language learning have often been directed instead towards the struggle against Cherokee pressure. In this regard it is significant to note that the Loyal Shawnee band, so called "Cherokee Shawnees" (another group with a history of being absorbed into the Cherokee Nation, but less actively claiming separate recognition than the Delawares), is receiving help from the Cherokee Nation in its language reclamation efforts (Linn *et al.*, 1998: 71).

In any case, Cherokee pressure is not the main obstacle to Delaware language preservation or reclamation. According to James Crawford:

Language shift is determined primarily by internal changes within language communities themselves ultimately speakers themselves are responsible, through their attitudes and choices, for what happens to their native language. Families choose to speak it in the home and teach it to their children, or they don't. Elders choose to speak the language on certain important occasions or to insist on its use in certain important domains, or they don't ... (Crawford, 2007: 50).

Cultural and political endangerment can motivate people to radical defence (Jackson, 2007), but some of the examples from the last century of the Delawares' transactions with the Cherokees show that inertia may be another result. Of course, external pressures contribute to language decline, but sometimes it seems that little resistance is offered. As Joshua Fishman (2007: 169) wrote, sometimes 'Languages do not die, they commit suicide ... Some of them begin to do it far before they have any need to'.

However, the languages are not all gone. Gone are their everyday functions, but that does not necessarily mean that the language is reduced to mere decoration. In the case of the Delawares, their language is still a viable means of sustaining Delaware identity, and therefore plays an important symbolic role, much like the Delaware Big House ceremony, even if that is no longer celebrated. As the anthropologist Brice Obermeyer has demonstrated, 'despite the passing of the ceremony's annual performance, [Big House is] present at every social gathering where Delaware people meet to reaffirm a sense of shared Delaware identity' (Obermeyer, 2007: 194). Just as the Big House is no longer an expression of Delaware religious beliefs, similarly the Lenape language is not a tool of everyday authentic

communication, nor do the Delawares form a speech community anymore. Yet both the language and the Big House are alive in people's minds and are constant points of reference for contemporary Delawares. Recurrent attempts to preserve the language, and the memory of it, prove that the language exists "there", even if only in the form of online databases or single words and phrases. While it is no longer a means of every-day communication, the language is becoming simultaneously much less and much more: it is becoming a source of pride and group identity. The question of whether the community can go beyond this to actual language reclamation, in the sense of the language being used in everyday life, is yet to be determined and will depend on what level of community involvement the Delawares are able to sustain.

Notes

- 1 The official name of the group whose language is discussed in this article is the Delaware Tribe of Indians, and they live in the northeastern corner of Oklahoma. The other, smaller group of the Delawares has a central site in Anadarko, Caddo County, in western Oklahoma – their official name since 1999 has been the "Delaware Nation". Dee Ketchum of course refers to eastern Delawares, using the word "Nation" in an ideological sense.
- 2 The exception among Algonquian tribes in Oklahoma is that of the Kickapoos who in 2006 probably had 400 speakers. All data in this paragraph comes from 2006 (available at <http://www.ahalenia.com/iws/index.html>).
- 3 Another study, however, offers a still darker picture of Oklahoma Native American languages, whereas Kickapoo is the only language still spoken by children on regular basis, with Choctaw and Cherokee to a much smaller extent, and the latter only in increasingly isolated areas (Linn *et al.*, 2002: 112–113).
- 4 At present, there may be three or four speakers with some level of fluency in Moraviantown, all in their eighties (e-mail communication with John O'Meara, 6 January 2012).
- 5 170 out of a total of 201 males between the ages 18 and 45 volunteered (Weslager, 1991: 416–422).
- 6 Native Americans who would choose to stay in their eastern homelands had to become "civilized", which means assimilated and absorbed into non-Indian society. Unfortunately, the Cherokees, 'Red children of the White Great Father' were, according to standards of the day, already civilized but at the same time attempted to remain independent, forming their own southern republic: they had their own constitution, newspaper, alphabet, and ran schools, churches, and plantations, and owned slaves (not unlike George Washington). However, when the gold on their lands was discovered, civilizing experiments proved of little importance. 'When the white "parents" found these Cherokee grownups unwilling to sell their land and remove, they assaulted the Nation' (Young, 1981: 505–506). Andrew Jackson was the main proponent of the Cherokees' and other southeastern Indians' removal and, after his presidential victory in 1828, their removal became inevitable. On the invention and fulfilment of the idea of 'Indian Territory' see e.g. Ronda, 1999.
- 7 Both the Delawares and the Cherokees seem to be victims of the treaties imposed on them by the US government, which pushed and controlled both tribes while signing the treaty, and which was responsible for drafting two different, sometimes opposite, deals on the same issue. The Cherokees were forced to admit other tribes (Delawares were not the only one) onto their lands, and their fight for the Confederacy during the Civil War (their leader, Stand Watie, was the last

Confederate general to surrender) put them in a position from which it was difficult to negotiate. In 1862 Congress authorized the President to abrogate existing treaties with those Indian nations which supported the Confederacy. The Delawares did not leave their land in Kansas voluntarily, but were pressed by the government, the railroad company and the settlers. Also, putting together two tribes which had fought on opposite sides in the just-finished civil war contributed to new intertribal troubles (Weslager, 1991: 428–429).

- 8 For more on tensions within the Delaware Tribe, provoked by the new deal with the Cherokees see Michael, 2010: 191–196; Obermeyer, 2011.
- 9 For example, to have membership and voting rights in the Cherokee nation, one has to obtain ‘a certificate degree of Indian blood’ card (CDIB) (Sturm, 2002: 178), which in the past was issued by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and from the mid-1970s has been administered by the federally recognized tribes. From 1979 each member of the Delaware Nation can apply for a CDIB at the Cherokee Nation Registration Department. This means that in the whole ‘Cherokee Country’ the Cherokees can substantially manipulate the official identity of non-Cherokee Indians, including that of the Delawares. In the case of Delawares enrolled in the Cherokee Nation the card states ‘Cherokee A.D.,’ which stands for ‘Adopted Delawares.’ Although the Delawares are not obliged to hold ‘blood certificates’, only with a CDIB card, which imposes Cherokee identity, is one officially considered Indian, and only then can one have access to federally funded services, which includes the provision of healthcare – crucial for Native Americans (Obermeyer, 2003: 174–196). Jim Rementer recollects: ‘When I first came to Oklahoma, some young Delawares thought they were Cherokee, because their parents and grandparents had Cherokee cards. I would ask them: “How come you are Cherokee if your grandmother was a Delaware?”’ (JR, August 2004).
- 10 Some Delaware families, who were not willing to send their children to government- and Cherokee-run schools, did construct their own schools (Weslager, 1978: 234–235).
- 11 For example, the anthropologist Art Einhorn observed the television-stimulated process of quick loss of the language among New York Onondaga and Mohawk children as early as the 1950s (e-mail communication, April 10, 2011).
- 12 Although the respect for “pure” Delaware language and culture may hinder their actual preservation, at least in some cases it does strengthen the sense of Delaware uniqueness. When I conducted my research among the Delaware community in Bartlesville in August 2004, an older man had no problem chatting with me in the Delaware tribal complex located east of the “white” town of Bartlesville, but he would not let me into his house in the rural area, saying that my presence would disturb the spiritual powers there.
- 13 In 1823 C. Trowbridge visited Delawares then living in Indiana to do research on their language and customs at the request of Lewis Cass, governor of Michigan Territory.
- 14 Data taken from the official website of the Delaware Tribe of Indians, ‘Language Revitalization. The Lenape Language Preservation Project’. Available at <http://www.delawaretribe.org/language.htm>.
- 15 For that matter, the Cherokees placed many street signs written in their language in Tahlequah, their capital city and elsewhere.
- 16 For example, Pueblos in Southwest, the Navahos in Arizona, St. Regis Mohawks on the border of New York State – Ontario – Quebec, various Lakota reservations in South and North Dakota, the Tlingits or Inuit in Alaska and in the Arctic, the Choctaws in Mississippi or Kickapoos in Oklahoma.
- 17 See the sad conclusion of Randy Cornelius, Oneida language instructor, about their immersion programme in the article of Johnsen, Hlebowicz, and Schüler, ‘Land and Language. The Struggle for National, Territorial, and Linguistic Integrity of the Oneida People’, in this volume.

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