

Unlocking the 'Rosetta Stone' of a dying language, ARTDAILY, April 24, 2023



A workbook outlining translations in one of the classrooms at the Onkwawenna Kentyohkwa (Our Language Society) Mohawk language school, on the Six Nations of the Grand River territory near Brantford, Ontario, Canada on June 16, 2022. The school teaches Mohawk to adults in the area. (Brett Gundlock/The New York Times)

by Ian Austen

**SIX NATIONS OF THE GRAND RIVER.-** When Brian Maracle returned in his mid-40s to the Mohawk community near Toronto that he had left when he was just 5, he didn't have a job and knew almost no one there.

But perhaps the biggest challenge facing him was that he neither spoke nor understood much Kanyen'keha, the Mohawk language. More than a

century of attempts by Canada's government to stamp out Indigenous cultures had left Maracle and many other Indigenous people without their languages.

Now, 30 years later, Maracle has become a champion of Mohawk and is helping revive it and other Indigenous languages, both in Canada and elsewhere, through his transformation of teaching methods.

"I never studied linguistics, don't have any teacher training. My parents weren't speakers," he said in his office at an adult language school he founded about two decades ago in his community, the Six Nations of the Grand River territory, southwest of Toronto. Yet linguistics academic conferences now feature him as a speaker.

Innovative approaches like Maracle's are crucial, experts say, to overcoming the suppression of Indigenous languages and cultures in Canada.

From the 19th century into the 1990s, thousands of Indigenous students were taken from their homes, sometimes by force, and placed into Canada's residential schools system. There, they were forbidden from speaking their languages and from practicing their traditions in what a national commission later characterized as "cultural genocide."

The system failed to entirely eradicate Indigenous languages, but its effect was nevertheless devastating for the 60 Indigenous languages found in Canada.

Today, restoring Indigenous languages has been a component of Canada's push for reconciliation with its Indigenous people, a top priority of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government. Four years ago, the government passed the Indigenous Languages Act, which formally recognizes the importance of these languages and requires the allocation of money — more than 700 million Canadian dollars to date — for teaching them.

But none of that was around when Maracle arrived at Six Nations, and the program that was available, he found, was ill-suited for adult students.

"Indigenous languages are extremely different from English," said Ivona Kucerova, the director of the Center for Advanced Research in Experimental and Applied Linguistics at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. "But typically what you see is that the local Indigenous language teaching methodologies are designed to teach Western languages."

Maracle said the problem with his first, unsuccessful lesson was that the instructors, generally Mohawk elders without training as language teachers, were tossing out "whole words."

“They just expected by dropping a word on you and saying it louder that you’d somehow figure it out,” Maracle said. “They didn’t understand how the language really is structured.”

A small grant allowed Maracle and three other people from Six Nations to try to determine exactly what that structure was.

Maracle found the answer about 25 years ago in the office of David Kanatawakhon-Maracle, no direct relation, a lecturer at the Western University in London, Ontario.

“There were little bits of paper all over this big table,” Maracle recalled. The lecturer told Maracle words he had been longing to hear: “He said, ‘I think I’ve got a new way of teaching the language.’”

There were about 60 slips of paper on his office table, and they “were the Rosetta Stone of all the things that you need to be a competent beginning speaker,” Maracle said.

Kanyen’keha is a polysynthetic language, where a single word can function as an entire sentence. Those words are made up of morphemes, small elements that change their meaning depending on how they are combined.

The slips of paper contained the morphemes, which are the building blocks for the entire language.

“This was huge,” Maracle said.

Understanding that these elements were the key to unlocking the language was the breakthrough Maracle needed to attain fluency. But other students at the school he helped start in 1999 were still struggling. It became apparent that someone needed to build a curriculum and teaching program around the morphemes, including a color-coded system for grouping them, which Maracle did through trial and error.

One essential discovery was figuring out that learning Kanyen’keha requires “looking at the world with Mohawk language eyes,” he said.

In comparison with other languages, Kanyen’keha relies heavily on verbs. Objects are generally described by what they do. The word for “computer,” for example, roughly translates as “it brings things up.”

So its speakers, Maracle said, need to analyze the world in terms of action rather than objects.

“We don’t teach you how to say ‘pencil,’ ‘chair,’ ‘shoe’ for six months,” Maracle said. “Because the language is a verb-based language, the names

of things are less grammatically important.”

Kucerova, the director of the linguistics center in Hamilton, regards Maracle as a linguist despite his lack of formal training. She said tests showed that his students emerged with a university-level fluidity in two years.

“I have never seen anyone else bring adult learners to that level of language, to be able to speak at this level after two years,” she said, adding that Mohawk ranks with Arabic in terms of difficulty for English-speaking students. “That’s really astonishing.

“I became literally mesmerized by the extent of his work,” Kucerova said. “He’s figured out this improbable, but linguistically extremely smart, method of delivering this radically different language to adults.”

Born in Detroit, Maracle spent most of his first five years in Six Nations but later in his childhood lived in Buffalo and Rochester in New York, and Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, as his father, a carpenter, moved for work.

After graduating from Dartmouth College, he studied journalism and worked as a reporter for The Globe and Mail newspaper. He was also the host of an Indigenous radio program for the Canadian Broadcasting Corp. before moving back to Six Nations.

Maracle, 76, recently retired from the language school he founded — Onkwawenna Kentyohkwa, or Our Language Society — but he remains active in a number of its programs.

The school has its offices in an Indigenous community services building in the village of Ohsweken, Ontario, the sprawling First Nation’s administrative center. It can afford to accept only about a dozen students a year; its first grants from the federal government arrived just in 2021. Before then, it was largely financed by the community.

There are no concrete figures of current Kanyen’keha speakers in the area, but the local branch of the Royal Bank of Canada, Canada’s largest financial institution, now has signs in Kanyen’keha and employees who speak the language. Signs in the language around the community warn motorists to not text and drive.

The school’s students have included Marc Miller, the current federal minister of Indigenous relations who, after some part-time studies, became the first lawmaker to address Canada’s Parliament in an Indigenous language since Confederation in 1867.

Maracle said the most important difference he has seen is that Kanyen’keha is no longer spoken only by older people, but used more often by the

young, in their homes, with their immediate families and in everyday situations.

“I think people are finally coming around to the realization that the public schools and technology are not going to save our languages,” he said, adding, “You have to enable young adults to become speakers so that they can raise children as first language speakers.”

This article originally appeared in [The New York Times](#).