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“Language Keepers” : The Role of the Facilitator in Documenting
Passamaquoddy Group Discourse

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Introduction

Language Keepers is an innovative approach combining descriptive linguistics, documentary video, and community outreach to organize speaker groups to use heritage language in traditional and contemporary activities while recording it for language learning, dictionary development, research, cultural transmission, and revival.

In this paper we intend to focus on the native-speaking Facilitators and our observations about who they are, how their work evolved over the course of filming, and the importance of their efforts for the success of the documentation project. The authors are the first Facilitator and the Language Consultant on the *Language Keepers* project.

Language Keepers addresses a central dilemma in endangered language work: the decline and loss of public group discourse. When a language is no longer spoken in groups outside the family or in public, it cannot be effectively passed on or documented.

The loss of public speaking is a serious symptom of language endangerment.

Language Keepers, begun in 2006, is a project of the National Science Foundation and National Endowment for the Humanities Documenting Endangered Languages

Program. The project sponsor is Northeast Historic Film Archive. The documentation has taken place at the Passamaquoddy and Maliseet communities of Pleasant Point and Indian Township (Maine) and Tobique First Nation Reserve (New Brunswick, Canada). In all, the project has produced seven DVDs of 30 minutes each and one special language-learning DVD. (For more information on the project in general and the collaboration with the recently published Passamaquoddy-Maliseet dictionary, see Leavitt and Levine 2008).

The process

Before each shoot, a native-speaking Facilitator chooses the time and place and convenes a speaker group (from two to eight people). The group assembles and talks in Passamaquoddy-Maliseet for one to two hours, while the filmmakers record, using wireless microphones and other techniques to ensure high-quality audio documentation. The Facilitator then assists the film crew in logging the videotaped conversation. A log is simply a summary of subjects that were discussed with editing time code annotations so that the sections can be accessed from tape. From this log, video segments are evaluated and prioritized and then selected for transcription and translation. The transcription and translation texts are then used as sub-titles in the rough edit of the video segment. Next, a special committee reviews and makes corrections of the sub-titled version. In the final edit, the segments are arranged in chapters within a thirty-minute program on a DVD, which includes the transcription and translation of every conversation. Sometimes the film crew shows a conversation

back to the participants and other invited speakers for a discussion, which is also videotaped and may be included in a DVD program.

The results

As many as ten different Facilitators and 53 speakers contributed to 20 shoots conducted in three communities between September 2006 and July 2008. This resulted in a large collection of conversations in natural language covering a wide variety of styles and content, recorded in a broad range of settings. Some examples of the types of conversations include:

- Narrative: one person (usually the oldest member of the group) tells a personal story;
- Spontaneous, non-linear conversation: when the group is focused on one activity (e.g., strawberry-picking in a large field), the speakers are physically spread out and moving around;
- Rapid exchange, sometimes with all speakers talking at once: among a group of five sisters, when one recalls an event, the others join in with their memories;
- Discussions about contemporary issues affecting individuals or the whole community, for example, who is getting married to whom; or why kids spend so much time indoors now playing with video games; or economic disparities within the community. This type of conversation had become rare: speakers had told the project directors that Passamaquoddy was almost never used for

discussion among peers about modern-day life, and that they weren't sure it could be done any longer;

- Two people sharing information about a traditional subsistence activity, for example, trapping muskrat or hunting porpoise;
- Singing in Passamaquoddy accompanied by a traditional drum and rattles.

The conversations reveal the full spectrum of feelings and thought. There is humor, shared values, communion, enthusiasm, grief; as well as communication about traditional life-ways, including food gathering, preparation and storage, child-rearing, healing, learning, and social life. Words and phrases, both commonly used and unusual expressions, as well as patterns of the structure of the language naturally emerge and flow in the conversations and are reinforced (for a learner or researcher) through repetition and changes of context.

The role(s) of the facilitator

The Facilitator is critical to the project and to the resulting naturalness of the conversations. Besides convening the group, the Facilitator works during the conversation to allow the documentation to be natural, to flow smoothly, and to be sustained. The documentation remains, therefore, speaker-driven. Unlike elicitation, which depends on and is limited to prompts from a linguist, in this process the speakers talk in an un-self-conscious manner, quickly coming to ignore the filmmakers, who do not understand the language and know very little about the culture and traditions of the people.

In this way, no English is needed: the flow of Passamaquoddy is uninterrupted. This stands in contrast to other techniques for the production of language-learning books and audio materials, which use some form of script. Passamaquoddy Elder David Francis, who has been recorded many times for language learning and museum exhibition, shows his surprise when he asks on camera at the beginning of a session:

(DF) *Kpuwatomon ntitomon ntikolisomaniwihtomon?*

Do you want me to say it in English?

To which the Facilitator responds:

(MA) *Nama. Nkisi-tehc wikhomonen.*

No. We can write it out.

And the conversation continues thereafter entirely in Passamaquoddy. (Language Keepers 2009, Program 6, Chapter 4).

Profiles of the facilitators

It goes without saying that the Facilitator is a person steeped in the language and culture of his or her people. Margaret Apt was the obvious choice to be the first Facilitator, because she grew up in Sipayik speaking Passamaquoddy and she had been working for ten years with Co-PI Robert Leavitt and Passamaquoddy Elder David Francis on a dictionary database. David had taught Margaret how to use the Passamaquoddy writing system, and she worked for two years recording stories, transcribing them, and entering the words and example sentences into the database. So Margaret was a tribal member, an accomplished speaker, writer and translator of

the language, and she had experience working with an outside consultant to document the speech of Elders. She jumped at the chance to facilitate videotaped conversations since it was exciting to her to be able to listen to her Elders' stories and garner new words for the ongoing dictionary project. Although she did not have experience with filming and was not sure how to undertake group facilitation, she was willing to try it.

Like Margaret, six other Facilitators, Joan Barnes, Roger Paul, Brenda Lozada, Imelda Perley, Allen Sockabasin, and Wayne Newell all had experience with language work, in a variety of settings and each in his or her own way. They are committed language activists, teachers and/or transcribers who created or were involved in documentation and revitalization projects in the past.

Sometimes a speaker who had never taught and does not use the writing system became inspired to lead a group for filming. As we will see later, Deanna Francis is a medical doctor and traditional healer who has often been invited to speak, sing, and lead ceremonies around the country and in Canada. Her first exposure to the Language Keepers project was when Margaret asked her to attend a playback session of an edit of the conversation filmed at the Elderly Center where a group was playing cards. In the video, the participants are recalling their own and others' mistreatment by the nuns who taught them at the Reservation school. Deanna was so struck by what she heard and saw in the video, that she asked Margaret if she could convene a speaker group.

In one case, Hilda Lewis, a member of the project's Advisory Committee who had a strong commitment to language preservation and little previous experience with language work, stepped forward to facilitate a unique group: she and her five sisters. Hilda told the project directors that they regularly got together to play cards and reminisce. Besides the challenge of finding a time and place when all five sisters could be together, Hilda remarked after the filming that it was fun to speak Passamaquoddy for an uninterrupted hour, but that it was also tiring. This was another confirmation that extended conversations entirely in Passamaquoddy were rare, and that speakers were perhaps a little rusty.

Finally, it was Margaret Apt, the original Facilitator, who sought out Roland "Cuhwa" Newell. She was aware that his knowledge of the language and deep experience with life on the bay, and specifically porpoise hunting, would make for engaging video.

The facilitators' methods

Facilitators clearly play an essential role, yet because they tend to be keen listeners and act in a sensitive and unobtrusive way, they may not be easily identified in the video.

Before the session, the Facilitator chooses the setting. He or she invites the participants and explains to them the purpose and the process. During the

conversation, the Facilitator employs various techniques which contribute to a successful document. The following examples from the videos provide an overview of some of these.

- Creating a safe and comfortable environment: Imelda takes Raymond Nicholas to places that are familiar to him. She chooses the very woods he used to hunt in and then asks him to talk about hunting. (Language Keepers 2009, Program 5, Chapter 6).
- Providing information: Margaret Apt tells the group the story of how she was brought to that place as a young child and how she hated it there and later came to love it. (Language Keepers 2009, Program 2, Chapter 20).
- Keeping the speakers engaged: Joan Barnes asks leading questions, and provides encouragement and reassurance, commenting, for example, “*Naka motuweyu.*” (“And that’s hard.”), especially when the subject matter is emotionally disturbing. (Language Keepers 2009, Program 3, Chapter 5).
- Drawing out the more quiet or shy speakers and trying to make sure that everyone talks. For instance, Margaret with Clara Polches: “*Kil-lu tan, Clara, keq kil kwewitahatomon yut-te weckuwi-macekiyin?*” (“What about you, Clara, what do you remember from growing up here?”) (Language Keepers 2009, Program 4, Chapter 3).
- Moving back to Passamaquoddy when someone has used an English word or phrase. It can be a simple gesture: a speaker says a phrase in English, and the Facilitator gently reminds the speaker to continue in Passamaquoddy. For example, in this exchange, when Theresa Brown speaks in English, Facilitator

Joan Barnes's one-word answer both acknowledges Theresa and re-directs the conversation.

(JB) *Not yaka mecahkomiksitpon.* (She was nasty, that one.)

(TB) It might be her, then.

(JB) *Cipotu-te.* (Maybe.)

(Language Keepers 2009, Program 3, Chapter 5).

- Providing help with words or phrases in Passamaquoddy and modeling correct usage.
- Suggesting a topic in order to keep the conversation moving. Margaret asks: "*Nkoti-qecimulahpon Tepit naka Maliyan, tayuwe amsqahs nenawotiyeq naka eli-kisi-nipuwiyeq?*" ("I was going to ask David and Marion, when did you first meet, and how did you get married?")

(Language Keepers 2009, Program 6, Chapter 4).

- Prompting a speaker to continue. Maggie Paul says spontaneously: "*Nit-te nmihqitahatomon yut api-ktoqonultiyeq.*" ("I just remembered when we spent the night here.") And Facilitator Deanna Francis responds, just as enthusiastically: "*U, akonutomuwine!*" ("Oh, tell us about it!")

(Language Keepers, Program 7, Chapter 2).

- Telling a traditional story (using gestures, different voices, and repetition), knowing it will be useful for language learners of any age. For example, Roger Paul and his moose story. (Language Keepers 2009, Program 5, Chapter 1).
- Pressing participants (gently) for expressions of difficult memories that need to emerge in order for the group to heal. Facilitator Joan Barnes relies on the

trust and friendship she shares with her group to push for information about how some nuns used violent treatment toward children in school. For example: 1) that boys were beaten more than girls; or 2) the nuns taught the parents to spank their children; or 3) how some children resisted. (Language Keepers Program 3).

- Creating a whole situation with a purpose. As we will see, Deanna Francis watched one videotaped conversation and decided to form her own group for healing and language revitalization through song. Or Facilitator Cuhwa Newell with David Francis: These two men, who live 200 feet from each other and apparently never speak Passamaquoddy, have a true exchange of conversation which details how to shoot a porpoise. They trade knowledge about the natural history and techniques for survival in that particular place, including techniques for fishing and other food gathering, preservation, and distribution. In another case, Allen Sockabasin had the idea to do something he wanted and had not done in years. He created a conversation with his cousin, a hunter and trapper, around a traditional practice: trapping muskrat and used it as a basis for drawing out ideas about language teaching while in the process of doing traditional activities.

Challenges faced, experience gained: how the conversations evolved

The conversations changed as the project continued. The stories of three Facilitators, Margaret Apt, Joan Barnes, and Deanna Francis show how the process itself moved participants to take action. The first shoot, in September 2006, was a test of the equipment and of Margaret's ability to recruit speakers and establish a successful

conversation for documentation. There were two outdoor sessions, and two other sessions were brought inside because of inclement weather. In these indoor sessions, we observed the habit of long silences while waiting for the Elder to speak. This would be considered detrimental from a documentary point of view, yet it seemed to be the norm in this community. In later sessions, many speakers talked about having learned the language by listening to the Elders tell stories. And this was, after all, the kind of work that the Margaret had been doing in her research for the dictionary database.

As more videos were made, logged and transcribed, Margaret gained knowledge of the process, confidence in her abilities as a Facilitator, and trust in the film crew. She grew bolder and knew better how to explain the process and the purposes of the project to speakers. She was more willing to ask direct questions, which is not usually considered polite in this society. And she began to take on more challenging situations, and, as a result, the content was more profound. In early October, Margaret convened a group at Split Rock, site of heated controversy (put in simple terms) between speaker traditionalists and economic development advocates within the Passamaquoddy tribe.

By March of 2007, Joan Barnes, who had transcribed segments of the five previous conversations, suggested filming a game of “31” at the Elderly Center. Having studied the previous conversations in depth, and knowing her own group of card

players intimately, she knew she could press people to get to a deeper level of sharing than had been exhibited previously.

After filming the card game, the crew had the idea to make a rough edit and show this back to participants as well as to other speakers and to tape their discussion.

Margaret invited Deanna Francis, an Elder and spiritual leader for the tribe, to watch the video. It was Deanna's first encounter with the Language Keepers project.

Deanna was struck by the stories told about mistreatment by the nuns in the school.

In the feedback video, Deanna says, "I have so many emotions. . . somebody being treated so badly. Like Carlton; he didn't get his diploma because he didn't go to church." She felt the injustice of it so deeply and went on to say, "If we could look at how we used to live. . . we wouldn't lose what we have, because we could heal ourselves. . . . We have to think further back if we want to heal ourselves. . ."

(Paraphrase in English from Language Keepers 2009, Program 3, Special Feature).

A day after the feedback show, Margaret convened a group of friends to go pick wild strawberries. She later recalled, "The berry-picking session was moving around. It was freer, not so set up as the other conversations. It was something that I always liked doing, and I could do it in a place where I grew up. It's what I've always done, usually by myself. And I chose people who enjoyed doing the same things I did."

One of those Margaret included was Deanna Francis.

And then Deanna had the idea to convene her own group and spoke with Margaret about it. Her idea was to invite women who had been fluent speakers and had then lived off the Reservation for many years. “I wanted to invite people who don’t have much exposure to the language. Most people use English now in conversation around the Reservation. English is the dominant language,” Deanna said after the session.

Deanna led a walk out across a tidal flat to First Island, a place of spiritual significance, not only for Passamaquoddy people but also for some non-native visitors. The island is in Sipayik, a short walk from Deanna’s home, where the group gathered later for conversation and singing near the wood stove in her sunny living room. She said, “I noticed when we were on First Island—just the idea that the language was being used excited people. It was good to see that excitement well up. Everybody has that voice inside. It’s a matter of nurturing it.”

Deanna went on to say, “It was comfortable for me to be a Facilitator; I’m used to working with groups. Even though it takes more energy to facilitate.” As Facilitator, Deanna chose to use song. She did this, she said, to get everybody comfortable and to gain a level of trust and especially fun. “Endorphins come into play. People are more open to learning when they are excited, happy, in a good mood, receptive. When people are open, immersion can really kick in.”

Later on in the project, when Margaret began to think that it would not be natural if she were to appear in all of the conversations she began to mention the project to

other speakers who might be interested in organizing a group. In this new phase, she was able to show them video segments, and they could reflect on both how the process of filming could be used and how the product (the videos) could further their goals of language revitalization.

For Margaret, “Facilitating was fun. It was really interesting to be gathered together with Elders who had lots of stories to tell. I think we just scratched the surface. It was a good learning process for me: new Passamaquoddy words, new experience of the filmmaking process, and more practice transcribing and translating.”

What’s next for facilitators?

Facilitators are the most identifiable Language Keepers of their communities. In the process of convening and recording conversations, the Facilitators have discovered new possibilities for language maintenance and revival. Facilitators can, for example, use the videos to make more people familiar with the process and engage new speakers to become mentors. One speaker, Barbara Dore, a language and culture teacher at the elementary school at Pleasant Point, was inspired to watch the videos with her pre-school aged grandchild, who has already expressed a strong interest in learning Passamaquoddy.

Two Facilitators have initiated projects as part of the outreach phase of the *Language Keepers* project. Deanna sees a future in language immersion. She said, “I’m setting up want to set up a language nest in my house. People will come, and no English will

be used. We have to go to all lengths to save this language. We can't wait for the Tribe to set something up. They are too busy trying to work on the economic situation. I already have a few 20-somethings ready to do immersion. They heard the language, and they can pronounce it, but they cannot make sentences." She intends to use song: "Music is essential for immersion." Deanna is now teaching herself to read the language using the Passamaquoddy dictionary (Francis and Leavitt 2008) and old language-learning manuals.

Wayne Newell of Motahkomikuk, Bilingual Program Director and a Facilitator in the *Language Keepers* project, discovered the concept of language re-acquisition documented in the film "Réveil- Waking Up French (Levine 2003). Newell, in collaboration with language consultant Julia Schulz, will draw from the video program to see if hearing the language can trigger language memory among semi-speakers or fluent comprehenders of Passamaquoddy and encourage the development of the capacity to actually produce language.

The *Language Keepers* videos are as of this writing just beginning to be available in the three communities. We will have to wait until sometime in the future to report on the extent to which these videos are being used, in what ways, and by whom. We can be sure that the Facilitators, who guided the process of making the videos, will continue to play an important part in their use for language learning, teaching, and revitalization.

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Program 1 The Soctomah Sisters

Program 2 *Natuwisine* Let's Go Pick Berries

Program 3 *Nmihqelsultipon etolamotohtiyek* Cards and Memories

Program 4 *Sitomok* On the Shore

Program 5 *Kcihkuk* In the Woods

Program 6 *Elatkuhkalkiyiq* How Our Stories Are Told

Program 7 *Etucintuhtiyek* We sing so strongly

Levine, Ben. 2003. *Réveil: Waking up French — The repression and renaissance of the French of New England* (video, 81 minutes). Rockland, Maine: Watching Place Productions (www.wakingupfrench.com).