

## 1.1. THINKING AND LANGUAGE:

### POINTS OF VIEW ON THE WORLD

- A people's language *reflects* their knowledge of the world and their beliefs about it. At the same time, the language they speak *determines* the nature of what they know and believe.
- A people's language is also evidence of how they *reason, make judgements and relate to one another in society.*

### LANGUAGE AND COMMUNITIES

As the young blueberry-raker (see Introduction) puzzled over the old woman's words, he was thinking about a question that everyone finds fascinating at some time: why do words mean what they do? Why did the word for "river" also mean "personal territory"? In looking for the answer, he discovered that the language he had in common with the old woman could be understood as a record of their past. It expresses the accumulated knowledge and understanding shared by his people.

It has been said that language and the ideas it makes possible set human beings apart from the other creatures that live on the earth. One of the things that language does is to give communities of people a way to share their experiences, both past and present. Individual ways of talking add to the richness of expression, which grows and develops through many people's contributions. In this way, through the circle of listening and speaking, children learn what the members of their community know and feel. It is no wonder that language is so powerful a part of personal identity.

Each time that a community of speakers divides — whether it is a nation or a small village — it takes a great many generations before the groups can no longer understand one another. Yet even though (languages have changed and developed so slowly), there are several thousand languages spoken in the world today. We take it for granted that (they have different sounds and different words.) What we sometimes forget is that each one gives people a unique way of understanding and talking about the physical world, life's experiences and community history. Each speaker is at the centre of a unique language circle, shared only by the other people who speak the same way.

### SPEAKING AND THINKING

People who speak different languages think about the world in different ways. In one respect, this means that each language has its own way of using the evidence that comes to the brain through the five senses. How this evidence is organized depends on how a particular language puts it into categories. Speakers of different languages *know* different things about the world around them. This section of Chapter 1 presents a few examples of how knowledge and language are related.

• Having language is part of being human.

• Language is important to personal identity.

• To share a language is to be part of a community.

• People who speak different languages think differently.



## WITHOUT MY LANGUAGE

Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk, upon being banished from England  
(Shakespeare, *King Richard II*, Act I, Scene iii)

A heavy sentence, my most sovereign liege,	<i>liege: master</i>
And all unlook'd for from your Highness' mouth:	
A dearer merit, not so deep a maim	<i>maim: wound</i>
As to be cast forth in the common air,	
Have I deserved at your Highness' hands.	
The language I have learn'd these forty years,	
My native English, now must I forego:	
And now my tongue's use is to me no more	
Than an unstringed viol or a harp,	
Or like a cunning instrument cased up,	
Or, being open, put into his hands	
That knows no touch to tune the harmony:	
Within my mouth you have engaol'd my tongue,	<i>engaol'd: jailed</i>
Doubly portcullis'd with my teeth and lips;	<i>portcullis'd: blocked by a gate</i>
And dull unfeeling barren ignorance	
Is made my gaoler to attend on me.	<i>gaoler: jailer</i>
I am too old to fawn upon a nurse,	
Too far in years to be a pupil now:	
What is thy sentence then but speechless death,	
Which robs my tongue from breathing native breath?	

### THE CONCEPT OF "SHAPE"

In English and French, speakers do not necessarily connect the *shape* of an object with the nature of the object itself. The words used to describe shape do not depend on the properties of certain objects. For example, speakers can imagine a *square* without picturing a particular object of that shape. In languages like Maliseet and Micmac, however, speakers think of shape *only* as a property of objects, and shape is mentioned only by including it as part of the word that names or describes the object. Maliseet and Micmac speakers identify the shapes of objects, but they do not talk about shapes in isolation. These different ways of thinking depend on language.

Shapes are one example. Other properties of objects are also *taken for granted* by speakers of any language, but these perceptions, too, may actually involve quite different ways of thinking. People who live in different places or environments — seacoasts, mountains, deserts — may have different daily activities. Fishermen certainly think differently, in this sense, from office-workers in a large city. But these people, if they all speak English, probably perceive the world around them in pretty much the same way. The fisherman takes note each morning of the wind direction and the phase of the moon, which may go unnoticed to the city-dweller, but both of these workers would think of the moon and the wind as "things" which move, and would know that their appearance or strength changes with time.

• People who speak different languages perceive the world differently.



THE DESCRIPTION OF SHAPES IN MALISEET & MICMAC

Shape (Maliseet/ Micmac)	English Translation	Sample Verb	Object Described
-ap <sup>s</sup> k-/-ap <sup>s</sup> g-	lump-like (3-dimensional + rounded)	kinap <sup>s</sup> kosu/maqap <sup>s</sup> g <sup>e</sup> g	big pumpkin
-ek-/-aq-	sheet-like (2-dimensional + single)	wol <sup>e</sup> kte/welaq <sup>t</sup> eg	tablecloth
-anok-/-anq-	layer-like (2-dimensional + multiple)	spanokahte/pasanqiy <sup>a</sup> q	thick book
-atok-/-tq-	string-like <sup>1</sup> (long + flexible)	apsatokosu/aps'tqasit	thin rope
-alok-/-alq-	hole-like; hollow (2- or 3-dimensional)	piskalokahte/maq <sup>t</sup> ewalq <sup>e</sup> g	dark cave

But people who speak another language may not think of the wind and the moon in this way at all. For example, in Maliseet and Micmac there is not a noun, “wind.” Instead, speakers use only a verb — *weju's'g* (weh-JOO-Z'g) in Micmac — whose meaning is similar to that of the English verb “blow” or “be windy.” The wind is not a “thing,” it is an *action* or *process*. In a story, the wind can be named only by describing this action. Wocawson (w'-JOW-s'n) is the Maliseet name of the great bird who flaps his wings to make the wind. But he is not “the wind”: his name means “it is windy,” and in this sense he is the spirit of the wind, the part of the wind that is alive. In fact, when the wind blows too hard, and people can't go about their daily business, Glooscap (GLOOS-kahb), with his extraordinary powers, ties down one of It-Is-Windy's wings — weakening the *action*, but not the bird himself. (See the story of Wocawson later in this section. See Chapter 2 for more about Glooscap.)

The moon, too, is named by a verb in Maliseet, *nipawset* (neeb-OW-sed) — literally, “walks at night.” It turns out that many features of the world expressed as *nouns* in English are *verbs* in Maliseet and Micmac. These include not only weather conditions and the moon, but also tides and landforms, time, illnesses, and many others.

SNOW AND RAIN

Are snow and rain things or are they actions? In English they can be either. In Maliseet and Micmac, however, *snow* is a verb until it reaches the ground; only then does it become a noun. The noun — *wast* (wahst, Maliseet), or *wastew* (WAH-stehw, Micmac) — means only “fallen snow.” For snow which is still in the air you say *psan* (psahn) or *pesaq* (BEH-zakh), “it snows.” If you want to say, “I like the falling snow,” you have to say, “Nulitahatomon etoli psak” (noo-lee-dah-HAH-d'm'n eh-d'-LEEP-sahg) or “Welap<sup>t</sup>m etlipsaq” (weh-LAHB-d'm eh-d'-LEEP-sakh), literally, “I like it snowing.”

The fact that wind and storm, snow and rain, cold and heat are verbs rather than nouns shows that they are not thought of as “elements” which cause weather conditions. Rather, they are actions or processes. This way of thinking about them also shows that if people have the right knowledge and use it wisely, *they can be part of what happens in nature*. Maliseet and Micmac elders say that this is what Glooscap teaches in the legend of Wocawson.

<sup>1</sup>-atok-/-tok-: This is also used figuratively in referring to a story, as in *mettokot* (MET-t'-g'd), which means “it comes to an end” (a story; or a wire, chain, etc.).

WOCAWSON

• Many words that are nouns in English are verbs in Micmac and Maliseet.

• Instead of being the results of impersonal forces beyond human control, natural phenomena are processes in which people can participate.



## Section 1.1

• Speakers of Native languages do not think in a linear way, as speakers of European languages do.

• Native-language speakers do not isolate parts of the environment by type.

• School subjects are categories, too. But not everyone learns by dividing knowledge into categories.

## WAYS OF THINKING

Ideas about shapes and weather illustrate only a few of the ways in which people may think differently. They point to deeper differences in the nature of people's knowledge, their approaches to reasoning, and their ways of creating new ideas. It has been observed, for example, that speakers of North American Native languages do not necessarily organize their reasoning according to a linear sequence of causes-and-effects or evidence-and-conclusions, as do speakers of European languages. Instead, they may keep a number of related ideas in mind, without putting them in a fixed order. (See "Norman's Model Dogsled," later in this section.) To European-language thinkers this approach may seem scattered and unfocused. Native-language thinkers, on the other hand, may find the linear way of thinking rigid and narrow. They commonly approach an idea or a topic from many different angles at once, thinking in a circle rather than a line. This same way of thinking in a circle is often a part of people's spoken language. Notice, for instance, how Murdena Marshall speaks about Chapel Island (especially in the first paragraph of her words, which can be found in Section 2.8).

## CATEGORIES

Maliseet and Micmac do not have many of the category names which English takes for granted. For example, there are no Maliseet or Micmac words which mean *shape* or *colour*. The absence of words such as *weather*, *mineral* and *plant* reflects the fact that speakers of Maliseet and Micmac think of trees, earth, climate and waterways as wholly interconnected and interdependent parts of nature, which cannot be isolated from one another. (Interestingly, there are words for *animal* and *human being* — reflecting an important distinction.)

In English, it is possible to think of developing or exploiting a resource — timber or salmon or hydro power, for example — without regard for the effects on nature as a whole. With such a perspective it is natural to think of well-meant human intervention as "land management." People who are not farming or developing a resource aren't "really" using the land, and therefore they don't own it. This is one of the arguments used by early settlers against aboriginal land rights. But before the arrival of European languages in North America, this kind of "resource development" was quite literally *unthinkable*.

## TEACHING AND LEARNING: ARE THEY THE SAME OR DIFFERENT?

Nowadays, school studies are another familiar example of the influence of categories in our daily lives. Reading, mathematics, chemistry and history are separate disciplines. Each discipline has its own method of study, special terminology, and areas of application. Each one tends to be taught in isolation, especially at the more advanced levels. In traditional Native communities, by contrast, parents and elders teach younger people by sharing experiences with them, not by isolating the knowledge and skills required by certain disciplines. Native children traditionally participate in the daily activities of adults, rather than practising them in an artificial setting. For example, knowledge about the life-cycle and habits of fish would be acquired not by studying biology or zoology, but through participating in what English-speakers might call travel, fishing, aquaculture, storytelling, economic development, history, art, environmental studies, law and so on. From each repeated experience, children learn more about the lives of fish, their relation to other beings and their "place" in nature. All learning is interrelated in this way, and it is not broken up into subjects.



## NORMAN'S MODEL DOGSLED

by Jennifer MacPherson

*Jennifer MacPherson taught a Grade 2 and 3 class in Igloolik, a northern Inuit settlement. One day she observed eight-year-old Norman at work, building a model dogsled out of Lego blocks:*

He was carefully putting together an Inuit sled, a qamutik, from the Lego pieces he had selected. I was surprised at how well proportioned it was — the runners were curved up at the front and the crosspieces were separated just as the napu on a real qamutik would be. . . . Later as I came by him again Norman was fashioning dogs — his father ran a dogteam and always used it for hunting. . . .

In relation to the qamutik the dogs were perfectly proportioned. . . . The dogs were attached to the qamutik with pieces of string, fanned out as is the style of the region, with the lead dog well in front and the others on successively shorter traces. The strings came together before they were attached to the front of the qamutik. This was a perfectly proportioned model of what Norman saw his father use every day. . . .

Norman showed an extraordinary ability to deal with shape, with space, and with size which seemed inconsistent with his general disinterest in the number-based mathematics we offered in school. From my cultural perspective, which includes a highly developed numerical conceptualization used to describe features of shape, space and size, it is almost impossible to separate the descriptor (the number) from the feature (shape, space and size). Norman seemed to demonstrate a sophisticated ability to deal with the ideas of shape, space and size without resort to number.<sup>1</sup>

*Norman's teacher, thinking in English, would have used numbers to measure and describe the proportions of the dogsled and the relative positions of its parts. But Norman, a speaker of Inuktitut, relied upon his visual impression of the sled and dogteam as a whole, without analysing its components. (The extremely sophisticated skills and knowledge of Inuit life have developed without using numbers.) Hunters, for example, can travel enormous distances over the seemingly featureless landscape and return home. Women are able to sew complicated parkas and other clothing without the use of patterns. Men and women have been able to draw accurate maps of vast areas — thousands of square miles — which they know only from travel by foot, dogsled and kayak. They have a different way from English-speakers of knowing the land.*

(From *For the Learning of Mathematics*, June 1987)

• In the Native tradition, skills are communicated through example.

## LEARNING TO KNIT COWICHAN SWEATERS

YOU JUST HAD TO watch your grandparents or your parents to learn. No one taught me; I picked it up on my own. That was sort of a traditional way, for grandparents to let you learn on your own. They were just there to answer questions. . . . You show it to them and ask if there's any faults. I guess that's where we spoil our children. We try to show them and now they're not interested.

— Irene Cooper, Esquimalt, British Columbia, quoted in Meikle, *Cowichan Indian Knitting*, 1987.

The vocabulary of education reveals another important difference between Maliseet and English thinking, and also about the kinds of relationships that exist between people who have different roles in a community.

### TEACHING AND LEARNING IN MALISEET AND MICMAC

English Word	Maliseet	Micmac	Literal Translation
teach	nto <u>keh</u> kikem <sup>1</sup>	g <u>eg</u> ina'muei	I teach
teach something	nto <u>keh</u> kikemin	g <u>eg</u> ina'muei	I teach (how to...)
teach someone	nto <u>keh</u> kikima	g <u>eg</u> ina'maq	I teach her/him
teacher	nuto <u>keh</u> kikemit	n <u>uj</u> igina'muet	one who teaches
learn, study	nto <u>keh</u> kims	g <u>eg</u> ina'masi	I teach myself
learn, study something	nto <u>keh</u> kimsin	g <u>eg</u> nu'tmasi	I teach myself (how to...)
learner, student <i>or</i>	nuto <u>keh</u> kimut, <i>or</i>	g <u>eg</u> ina'masit	one who is taught, <i>or</i>
pupil	etolo <u>keh</u> kimut		one who is being taught
my pupil	etolo <u>keh</u> kimuk	g <u>eg</u> ina'maq	one whom I am teaching
school (education)	<u>keh</u> kitin	g <u>in</u> a'masuti	there is teaching
school (a building)	ihtolo <u>keh</u> kitimok	g <u>in</u> a'masutio'guom	where there is teaching
subject	e <u>keh</u> kitasik	g <u>eg</u> nu'tmas'g	what is taught
lesson	<u>keh</u> kitasu	g <u>eg</u> nu'tmas'g	it is being taught

<sup>1</sup>The verb-root *-kehki-* or *-gegi-* (“know”) is combined with other roots to form the words in the chart; for example, the Maliseet word *ntokehkima* also contains the root *-im-*, which means “affect (someone) by talking”; literally, “I cause him to know by talking.” This same root, *-im-*, is found in Micmac words such as *elgimig*, “I sent him there (by telling him to go).”

• Micmac and Maliseet do not make a distinction between learning and teaching.

This chart shows how English and Maliseet or Micmac differ in their understanding of what teaching and learning are. (In English, knowledge passes from a teacher to a learner.) Today, English makes a clear distinction between the two roles by using different, unrelated words for the activity of each. (In Maliseet and Micmac, on the other hand, only one word is used for both ideas; the root *-kehki-* (GA-kee) or *-gegi-* (GEH-gee) — “know” — is common to all the words listed in the chart (sometimes *-gegi-* is shortened to *-g-*). Everyone is a *knower*. The language makes no fundamental distinction between learning and teaching. In practice, children do not learn some-



thing; they teach themselves how to do it, by watching, listening, imitating and participating. This idea of teaching is quite different from the one found in the English word. In this way, languages reflect how people relate to one another in their communities and societies.

## Section 1.1

- Everyone knows how to learn. But people work together in different ways to learn.

### BE A GOOD STUDENT!

English: "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again."

Mohawk: "Watch and listen and do it right, watch and listen and do it right."

When you hear the English expression, your mind is on the goal; it will be difficult to attain, and you may fail and feel discouraged, but the obstacles are worth overcoming. To be successful, you must complete the task.

When you hear the Mohawk expression, your eyes and ears focus on what is happening now; patience and attentiveness are required. With these, success is assured.

The two expressions demonstrate the contrast between two ways of thinking about education. In English, education is the acquisition of skills and knowledge which will be useful in future activities.

In Mohawk, education is participation in ongoing adult work, where the "subject" is the real-life task currently in progress.

- Native thinking emphasizes the process of learning while non-Native thinking emphasizes the goal.



*Micmac News*

## KOLUSKAP NAKA WOCAWSON<sup>1</sup>

(From a version written down in Maliseet-Passamaquoddy about 1900.)

Skicinuwok *wolamsotomoniyal* kci sipsol. *'Toliwiyawal Wocawson, nuci putuwet. Tolawsu pihcetu lahtoqehsonuk. Nit epit kci ponapskuk, mehtaluktek. Tan etuci macilqenuwit, nit tehc petson.*

Neket Koluskap *mec yali wiciyemat* skitapiyi, *puskiw na nekom mace suku 'tulok. Sipsuhke.*

Neqt neke *ehtahsikiskahkil wocawson, wisokolamson. Ahaciw pomolamson, kospon te peciwehse naka petamoqessu. Kotama Koluskap kisi yali sukiw. 'Titomon, "Wocawson, wot kci sips etolawsit lahtoqehsonuk, not nit elluhket."*

*'Qiluwahan. Komac pihcetu oliye, on yaka moskuwan. 'Totoli mskuwal epilit kci ponapskuk, wapeyit kci sips. 'Tiyani, "Muhsumi, kotama kotomakitahamawiyik qenosok? Kil nit kisihtuwon mecokiskahk, wecawsok, eliwehsek. Kusami macehlak kunoskiyik."*

Neketok kci sips *oli ikotohom. "Yut ntihinehpon wisoki nihkaniw. Pihce kiskul, mesq wen etolewestuhk, nil te amsqahs nutaqsiyanpon. Nil te na amsqahs macehlukpon nunoskiyik. Mecimi tehc na nmacehlak tan eli wolitahatom."*

Nit *etuci* Koluskap *wonakessit. Etutsonit, petkil* ote aluhkihuk. *'Toli wihqehlal yuhtol kci sipsol tahalu tehp motehehsim. 'Kolonomuwan toqiw wonoski, naka 'poneqahkan eli psikapskiyak nisonul kci ponapskul. Nit te na etoli nokolat.*

Nit neke *'cimaciw, skicinuwok yaliyawolotuwok, 'kekiw tehc. Mecimi woluwipon, kakehsukoniw, kakehs pemoluhkemkil, naka kisuhsok, kospon te neke 'samaqan tukcokiyak. Etuci paqtek, Koluskap kotama 'kisitahapiyatomuwon 'tul.*

On nit te *mihqitahaman* kci sipsol, on *macahan, naci nomiyan* apc. *Eli te nokolatpon, nit te apc eli mskuwat, Wocawson ipocol askomawsu. 'Teweponan, 'punan* apc ponapskuk, naka *'tapqehtuwan* peskuwol wonoskiyil. Neke *'cimaciw kotama tutolamsonihkew* tahalu pihce.

*Mettokot.*

<sup>1</sup>All *verbs* are shown in italics. The corresponding English words in the translation opposite are also in italics.



## GLOOSCAP AND IT-IS-WINDY

*(Translated sentence-by-sentence from the Maliseet-Passamaquoddy)*

The Indians *believe in* a great bird. They name him *It-Is-Windy*, the one who blows. He lives far away in the north. There he sits on a great rock, where the clouds end. Whenever he moves his wings, then the wind comes up.

At that time when Glooscap (GLOOS-kahb) still went around among men, frequently he too went off paddling in his canoe. He hunted birds.

Once long ago, it was windy every day; the wind blew strongly. It went on blowing more and more, until at last it gusted and a storm came up. Glooscap could not paddle about. He said, "*It-Is-Windy*, the great bird who lives in the north, he is the one who is doing this."

He searched for him. Very far away he went, and then he found him. He found him sitting there on the great rock, a great white bird. He said to him, "Grandfather, do you not pity your grandchildren? You are the one who is making bad weather, windiness, gusting. You move your wings too much."

In spite of [these words] the great bird went on yawning. "I was here at the very beginning. In distant days, before anyone was speaking, I was the first one heard. It was I who first moved my wings. And I will always move them as I please."

Then, at that point, Glooscap got up. He was so powerful, he grew up to the clouds. He picked up this great bird as if he were a duck. He held him by both of his wings, and he threw him down where there was a crack between two great rocks. And that is where he left him.

From that time on, the Indians went about, all day long. It was always calm, for many days, for many weeks and months, until at last, at that time, the water became foamy from stagnation. It was so thick that Glooscap could not steer his canoe.

And then he remembered the great bird, and he went off, to go see him again. Right where he had left him, that was where he found him again, because *It-Is-Windy* lives forever. He lifted him up, put him on the rock again, and opened one of his wings. Ever since that time, it has not been as windy as long ago.

*It [the story] ends.*