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In Other Words: Artist's Statement on the Cover Image

Bernard C. Perley

The cover image is a *Going Native* cartoon first published in *Anthropology News* on September 19, 2019, in celebration of the International Year of Indigenous Languages, personal discovery, and reverse linguistic imperialism. I learned Maliseet as my first language, but the American school system offered neither support for Maliseet language instruction nor accommodation. By the time I finished high school, my primary language became English. My personal experience of grappling with linguistic imperialism includes traumatic episodes that I've shared elsewhere. For this celebration I focus on the creative energies that could serve as important catalysts for tipping endangered languages toward language life and vitality.

The cartoon required my close collaboration with a fluent speaker of Maliseet, Henrietta Black, my mother. She is a respected Maliseet elder residing on Tobique First Nation, New Brunswick, Canada. She has the remarkable gift of being able to translate from English to Maliseet and Maliseet to English instantaneously, and she provided the Maliseet translation of my English text. She was patient with me as I worked through the translation while continually making grammatical and spelling errors as well as my incessant questions about the semantic properties of Maliseet words.

Please refer to the cover image for the following.

Have you ever wondered what the first peoples of Native North America thought when they encountered Europeans for the first time? As a person indigenous to North America, I am reminded on a daily basis that linguistic imperialism is a reality I must endure my entire life. I have to learn foreign language place names, read maps inscribed with those names, and listen to stories that rewrite Native lands into colonial places. The greatest and most painful erasure is the persistent silencing of indigenous voices. This cartoon became a way of imagining "in other words" the first moment of encounter between the Native peoples on the Atlantic coast and the Viking explorers. So, I turned back the clock a thousand years to imagine what the first peoples of the Americas thought when they first saw strangers strolling on their beaches. Who were these strange creatures that waded ashore on Native land? Were they human? As a member of the Wabanaki confederacy, the people of the dawn, I imagined walking along a familiar beach to see for the first time a Viking in full armor. It would be a

strange sight. Despite the stranger, it is still my Wabanaki world. The familiarity of my world is punctuated by my encounter with the stranger who embodies the strangeness.

The first frame sets up the encounter between Wabanaki worlds and Norse worlds. It also positions the reader-viewer to assume the Indigenous perspective. How do these Wabanaki observers make sense of the anomalous apparition in their world? The first task is to recognize the stranger as “strange” and the second is to reconcile the foreignness of the anomaly within the Wabanaki world. The two Wabanaki humans posit the possibility of inclusion and acceptance. In this first frame, as is typical for my mother, she translated without hesitation the English text as follows:

KEKW NIT!?!

WHAT IS THAT?

PĚMAWHSOWIN NĚT?

IS IT HUMAN?

I wanted to know more. How was the English word *human* translated? I had understood *PĚMAWHSOWIN* as a person. She glossed *PĚMAWHSOWIN NĚT* as “a living thing.” Wow! I have a whole lot more to learn about the semantic properties of Maliseet words.

During the translation for the second speaker’s text, a couple of things came up.

NATSAKITONEH.

LET’S CHECK.

LAWESTOWIK CIPĚTOTE
PĚMAWHSOWINOWIW.

IF IT HAS LANGUAGE
IT MIGHT BE HUMAN

How would one translate the English expression “let’s check” and the word “language”? My mother decided on *NATSAKITONEH*, which translates as “let’s go see.” Instead of “language,” my mother used *LAWESTOWIK* to indicate that “if it talks” it might be human. She decided to afford the stranger the possibility of speech rather the possession of language. She is thinking in Maliseet and I am stuck in English. To paraphrase E. E. Evans-Pritchard, I’ve been using English idioms so long that I think in those idioms. Damn! I’ve gone anthropologist!

The rest of the English text is as follows:

Panel 2:

KWE PILOWIKOWIN!

HELLO STRANGER!

PĚMAWHSOWIN KIL?

ARE YOU HUMAN?

(Gibberish from the Norseman in response.)

Panel 3:

IYASIS! PĚMAWHSOWINOWIHTAKWĚT NIT?

WHOA!
WAS THAT
NOISE HUMAN?

KĚTAMA!

NOPE!

KAT NĚT PĚMAWHSOWIN!

NOT HUMAN!

The last line emphasizes the harm that can be done to others when the presuppositions latent in our respective language ideologies reify our prejudices. I hope the cartoon provides a cautionary tale reminding us to try to see encounters from both sides. It was important for me as the creator of the *Going Native* series to provide a cartoon in an indigenous language—namely, Maliseet. Presenting the cartoon in an Indigenous North American language allows me to highlight the reality that many indigenous people face on a daily basis: we are continually confronted with alien languages. The cartoon also provides an opportunity to address the historical linguistic imperialism that sought to demean, trivialize, and dehumanize the languages of the Native peoples of the Western hemisphere and other colonial contexts—and to have fun while doing so. Today, we participate in reverse linguistic imperialism not as a silencing mechanism but as an opportunity to learn Indigenous languages to understand indigenous worlds. The Maliseet translation of *Going Native* is *SKICINOWI PĚMAWHSOWIN*, which means “living like a Native person.”

Welcome, everyone, to Native North America.