Learning the Grammar of Animacy

By Robin Wall Kimmerer

*Puhpowee* translates as "the force which causes mushrooms to push up from the earth overnight." In all its technical vocabulary, Western science has no such term, no words to hold this mystery.
To be native to a place we must learn to speak its language.

I come here to listen, to nestle in the curve of the roots, in a soft hollow of pine needles. To lean my bones against the column of white pine, to turn off the voice in my head until I can hear the voices outside it. The shh of the wind in the needles. Water trickling over rock, nut hatch tapping, chipmunks digging, beechnut falling, mosquito in my ear and something more, something which is not me, for which we have no language, the wordless being of others in which we are never alone. After the drumbeat of my mother’s heart, this was my first language.

I could spend a whole day listening. And a whole night. And in the morning, without my hearing it, there might be a mushroom that was not there the night before, creamy white, pushed up from the pine needle duff, out of darkness to light, still glistening with the fluid of its passage. Pubpowee.

Listening in wild places, we witness conversation in a language not our own. I think now, that it was a longing to comprehend this language I hear in the woods that led me to science, to learn over the years to speak fluent Botany. Which should not, by the way, be mistaken for the language of plants. In science I did learn another language, of careful observation, an intimate vocabulary that names each little part. To name and describe you must first see and science polishes the gift of seeing. Science is a beautiful language, rich in particulars, revealing the intricate mechanisms of the world. I honor the strength of that language which has become a second tongue to me. But, beneath the richness of its vocabulary, its descriptive power, something feels missing, the same something that swells around you and in you, when you listen to the world. The pattern of its surface hides an empty center, like a gorgeous tapestry over a scarred wall. Science is a language of distance which reduces a being to its working parts, the language of objects. The language we speak, however precise, is based on a profound error in grammar, which seems to me now, a grave loss in translation from the native language of these shores.

My first taste of the missing language was the word puwpowee on my tongue. I stumbled upon it in a book by Anishinaabe ethnobotanist Keewaydinoquay, a treatise on the traditional uses of fungi by our people. Puwpowee, she explained, translates as “the force which causes mushrooms to push up from the earth overnight.” As a biologist, I was stunned that such a word existed. In all its technical vocabulary, Western science has no such term, no words to hold this mystery. You’d think that biologists, of all people, would have words for life. But, I think in scientific language, our terminology is used to define the boundaries of our knowing, that which lies beyond our grasp remains unnamed. In the three syllables I could see an entire process of close observation in the damp morning woods, of the mystery of their coming, the formulation of a theory for which English has no equivalent. The makers of this word understood a world of being, full of unseen energies which animate the world. I’ve cherished that word for many years, as a talisman, and longed for the people who gave a name to the life force of mushrooms. The language that holds puwpowee is one that I wanted to speak. That word for rising, for emergence, became a signpost for me, when I learned that it belonged to the language of my ancestors.

Had history been different, I would today likely speak Bodéwadjimaanwin or Potawatomi, an Anishinaabe dialect. Like many of the 350 indigenous languages of the Americas, Potawatomi is threatened. The powers of assimilation have done their work. My chance of hearing that language, and yours too, was washed from the mouths of children in Indian boarding schools where speaking your native language was forbidden. Children like my grandfather, who was taken from his family, just a little boy of nine years old.

This history has scattered our people and I live far from our reservation; so even if I could speak the language, I would have no one to talk to, except perhaps at our yearly tribal gathering. A few summers ago, a language class was held there, so I slipped into the tent to listen.

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There was a great deal of excitement about the class because for the first time, every single fluent speaker in our tribe would be there as teachers. When called forward to the circle of folding chairs, the speakers moved slowly—with canes, walkers, and wheelchairs and a few under their own power. I counted them as they filled the chairs. Nine. Nine fluent speakers. In the whole world. Our language, millennia in the making, sits in those nine chairs. The words that praised creation, told the old stories, lulled my ancestors to sleep, rests today in the tongues of nine very mortal men and women. Each takes their turn to address the small group of would-be students. A man with long gray braids tells of how his mother hid him away when the Indian agents came to take the children. He escaped boarding school by hiding under an overhung bank where the sound of the stream covered his crying. The others were all taken and had their mouths washed out with soap, or worse, for “talking that dirty Indian language.” But, because he alone stayed home and was raised up calling the plants and animals by the name Creator gave them, he is here today, a carrier of the language. The engines of assimilation worked well. The speakers’ eyes blaze as he tells us, “We’re at the end of the road” he says. “We are all that is left. If you young people do not learn, the language will die. The missionaries and the U.S. government will have their victory at last.”

A great-grandmother from the circle pushes her walker up close to the microphone, “It’s not just the words that will be lost” she says. “The language is the heart of our culture, it holds our thoughts, our way of seeing the world. It’s too beautiful for English to explain.” I thought of puwpowee.

Jim Thunder, the youngest of the speakers, at seventy-five, is a round brown man of serious demeanor, who spoke only in Potawatomi. He began solemnly, but as he warmed to his subject,
his voice lifted like a breeze in the birch trees and his hands began
to tell the story. He became more and more animated, rising to his
feet, holding us rapt and silent although almost no one understood
a single word. He paused as if reaching the climax of his story and
looked out at the audience with a twinkle of expectation. One
of the grandmothers behind him covered her mouth in a giggle
and his stern face suddenly broke into a smile as big and sweet as
a cracked watermelon. He bent over laughing and the grandmas
dabbled away tears of laughter, holding their sides, while the rest
of us looked on in wonderment. When the laughter had subsided,
he spoke at last in English. “What will happen to a joke when no
one can hear it anymore? How lonely those words will be, when
their power is gone. Where will they go? Off to join the stories
that can never be told again.”

So, now my house is dotted with sticky notes in another
language, as if I were studying for a trip abroad. But, I’m not.
I’m coming home.

Nį tį je ezhyayen? asks the little yellow sticky note on my back
door. My hands are full and the car is running, but I switch my
bag to the other hip and pause long enough to respond. “Odanek
nde abyz,” I’m going to town. And so I do, to work, to class, to
meetings, to the bank, to the grocery store. I talk all day and
sometimes write all evening in the beautiful language I was
born to, the same one used by 70 percent of the world’s people,
a tongue viewed as the most useful, with the richest vocabulary
in the modern world. English. When I get home at night to my
quiet house, there is a faithful sticky note on the closet door.
Giskem i gisbiewagen! And so I take off my coat. I cook dinner,
pulling utensils from cupboards labeled enkwanen, nagen. I have
become a woman who speaks Potawatomi to household objects.
When the phone rings I barely glance at the sticky note there as I
dopnen the gikagon. And whether it is a solicitor or a friend—they
speak English. Once a week or so, it is my sister from the West
Coast who says Bozho, Mattoobewie ndaie—as if she needed to
identify herself, who else speaks Potawatomi? To call it “speaking”
is a stretch. Really all we do is blurt garbled phrases to each
other in a parody of conversation. How are you? I am fine. Go
to town. See bird. Red. Frybread good. We sound like Tomo’s
side of the Hollywood dialogue with the Lone Ranger. Me try
talk good Injun way. On the rare occasion that we actually can
string together a halfway coherent thought, we freely insert high
school Spanish words to fill in the gaps; making a language we
call Spanwatoami.

Tuesdays and Thursdays at twelve fifteen Oklahoma time, I
join the Potawatomi lunchtime language class, streaming from
tribal headquarters via the internet. There are usually about ten of
us, from all over the country. Together we learn to count and to
say pass the salt. Someone asks, “How do you say ‘please pass
the salt’?” Our teacher, Justin Neely, a young man devoted to language
revival explains that while there are several words for thank you,
there is no word for please. Food was meant to be shared, no added
politeness were needed. It was simply a cultural given that one
was asking respectfully. The missionaries took this absence as
further evidence of crude manners.

Many nights, when I should be grading papers or paying
bills, I’m at the computer running through online Potawatomi
language drills. After months, I have mastered the kindergarden
vocabulary and can confidently match the pictures of animals to
their indigenous names. It reminds me of reading picture books
to my children. “Can you point to the squirrel? Where is the
bunny?” All the while, I’m telling myself that I really don’t have
time for this and what’s more, have little need to know the words
for bass and fox. And since our tribal diaspora left us scattered
to the four winds, who would I talk to anyway?

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the world. It’s too beautiful for English to explain.

The simple phrases I’m learning are perfect for my dog. Sit! Eat! Come here! Be quiet! But since she scarcely responds to these
commands in English, I’m reluctant to try and train her to be bilingual. Once an admiring student asked me if I spoke my native
language. I was tempted to say “Oh yes, we speak Potawatomi at
home. Me, the dog, and the sticky notes.”

Our teacher tells us not to be discouraged. He thanks us
every time a word is spoken, he thanks us for breathing life into
the language, if we know only a single word. “But I have no one
to talk to,” I complain. “None of us do,” he reassures me. “But,
someday, we will.”

So, I dutifully learn vocabulary, but find it hard to see
the “heart of our culture” in translating “bed” and “sink” into
Potawatomi. I found learning nouns to be pretty easy; after all I’ve
learned thousands of botanical Latin names and scientific terms
in my life. I reasoned that this would not be too much different.
It’s just a one for one substitution, a job of memorization. At least
on paper, where you can see the letters. Hearing the language is
a different story. There are fewer letters in our alphabet, so the
distinction among words for a beginner is often subtle. With the
beautiful clusters of consonants of ab and mb and shve and kve
and mbk our language sounds like wind in the pines and water
over rocks; you really have to listen.

English is a noun-based language, somehow appropriate to a
culture so obsessed with things. Really speaking of course requires
verbs and here is where my kindergarden proficiancy at naming
things leaves off. Only 30 percent of English words are verbs, but
in Potawatomi that proportion is 70 percent. Which means that
70 percent of the words have to be conjugated, and 70 percent
have different tenses and cases to be mastered.

European languages often assign gender to nouns, so that one
has to learn la mea and el perro. Potawatomi does not divide the
world this way, into masculine and feminine. Nouns and verbs
both are classified not as male and female, but as “animate” and
“inanimate.” You “hear” a person with a completely different
word than you “hear” an airplane. Pronouns, articles, plurals,
demonstratives, verbs, and all those syntactical bits that I never
could keep straight in high school English are all aligned in
Potawatomi, so that we have different ways of speaking of the
living world and of the lifeless. You use different verb forms,
different plurals, different everything depending on whether
what you are speaking of is alive. It’s very complicated. These
verbs nearly halt my efforts.

In frustration I think to myself, “No wonder there are only nine speakers left.” I’m trying, I really am, but this complexity makes my head hurt and my ear can barely distinguish between words that mean completely different things. One teacher reassures us that this will come with practice. But another elder concedes that these close similarities are inherent in the language. Stewart King, a knowledge keeper and great teacher, reminds us that the Creator meant for us to laugh. So people deliberately built humor into the syntax, so that a small slip of the tongue can convert “We need more firewood” to “Take off your clothes.” In fact, I learned that the mystical word pulpwave is used not only for mushrooms, but for certain other shafts which also rise up mysteriously in the night.

My sister’s gift to me one Christmas was a set of magnetic tiles for the refrigerator, in the Ojibwe or Anishinabemowin, a language closely related to Potawatomi. I spread them out on my kitchen table looking for familiar words. The more I look, the more worried I get. Among the hundred or more tiles, there was but a single word that I recognize. Megwech—“Thank you.” The small feeling of accomplishment that the months of study had yielded evaporated.

I remember paging through the Ojibwe dictionary she sent, trying to decipher the tiles, but the spellings didn’t always match and the print was too small and there were too many variations on a single word and I was feeling that this is just way too hard. The threads in my brain were all knotted and the harder I tried the tighter the knots became. The pages blurred and my eyes settled on a word—a verb of course: “to be a Saturday.” Pfft—I put down the book with the anger of frustration. Since when is Saturday a verb? Everyone knows it’s a noun. I flipped more pages. All kinds of things seemed to be verbs…my finger finds: “to be a hill,” “to be red,” “to be a long sandy stretch of beach,” and my finger rests on wiikwegama: “to be a bay.” Things I know with considerable scientific certainty to be nouns and adjectives are presented here as verbs. “Ridiculous!” I rant in my head, “there is no reason to make it so complicated. No wonder no one speaks it. What a cumbersome language, impossible to learn, and more than that—it’s all wrong. A bay is most definitely a person, place, or thing; a noun and not a verb.” I was ready to give up this struggle. I’d learned a few words, done my duty to the language that was taken from my grandfather. Oh, the ghosts of the missionaries in the boarding schools must have been rubbing their hands in glee at my frustration. She’s going to surrender, they said.

And then I swear I heard the zap of synapses firing. An electric current sizzled down my arm, to my finger and practically scorched the page where that one word lay. In that moment I could smell the water of the bay, watch it rock against the shore and hear it sift onto the sand. A bay is a noun only if water is dead. When “bay” is a noun, it is defined by humans, trapped between its shores, and contained by the word. But wiikegama, to be a bay, the verb releases the water from bondage and lets it live. “To be a bay” holds the wonder that for this moment, the living water has decided to shelter itself between these shores, conversing with cedar roots and a flock of baby mergansers. Because it could do otherwise—become a stream or an ocean or a waterfall—and there are verbs for that, too. To be a hill, to be a sandy beach, to be a Saturday…all are possible as verbs only in a world where everything is alive. Water, land, and even a day. The language is a mirror for seeing the animacy of the world, for the life that pulses.
languages, we use the same grammar to address the living world as we do our family. Because it is our family.

To whom does our language extend the grammar of animacy? Not just our human relatives, but all our relations. Naturally, plants and animals are animate, but as I learn vocabulary, I am also discovering that Potawatomi understanding of what it means to be animate diverges from the list of attributes of living beings we all learned in Biology 101. In Potawatomi 101, I learn that rocks are addressed as animate, as are mountains and water and fire and places. Those beings imbued with spirit deserve their own grammar—including our sacred medicines, our songs, drums and even stories are animate. The list of the inanimate seems to be smaller—objects which are made by people, often fall in this category. Of an inanimate being, like a table we say “What is it? And we answer, Dapwen yeuwe. Table it is. But of apple, we must say “Who is it?” And reply, Mhinimin yeuwe. Apple he is.

Yeye—the animate “to be.” I am, you are, s/he is. To speak of those possessed with life and spirit we must say yeye. By what linguistic confluence do Yahweh of the Old Testament and yeye of the New World, both fall from the mouths of the revered? Isn’t this just what it means, to be, to have the breath of life within, to be the offspring of creation. The language reminds us, in every sentence of our kinship with all of the animate world.

English doesn’t give us many tools for incorporating respect for animacy. In English, you’re either a human or a thing. Our grammar boxes us in by the choice of reducing a non-human being to an “it,” or if it must be gendered, inappropriately a “he” or a “she.” Where are our words for the simple existence of another living being? Where is our yeye? My friend Michael Nelson, an ethicist who thinks a great deal about moral inclusion, told me of a woman he knows, a field biologist whose work is among others than humans. Most of her companions are not two-legged. Her language has shifted to accommodate her relationships. She kneads along the trail to inspect a set of moose tracks... “someone’s already been this way this morning.” “Someone is in my hat,” she says, shaking out a deerfly. Someone, not some thing.

When I’m out in the woods with my students who are learning the gifts of plants and to call them by name, I try to be mindful of my language, to be bilingual between the lexicon of science and the grammar of animacy. Although they still have to learn their scientific roles and Latin names, I hope I am teaching them to also know the world as a neighborhood of non-human residents, an animate world. Through our days in the woods together, the most important thing I hope that they come to know is, as Thomas Berry has written, that the “universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.”

One afternoon, I sat with my field ecology students by a wiiekegama, and shared with them this idea of animate language. One young man, Andy, splashing his feet in the clear water asked the big question. “Wait a second,” he said as he wrapped his mind around this linguistic distinction. “Doesn’t this mean that speaking English, thinking in English, somehow gives us permission to disrespect nature? By denying everyone else the right to be persons? Wouldn’t things be different if nothing was an “it?” I wanted to give him Awiaktis poem, “When Earth Becomes an It.”

Being swept away with the idea, he says, feels like an awakening
to him. More like a remembering, I think. The animacy of the world is something we already know. But, the language of animacy teeters on extinction, not just for native peoples, but for everyone.

We don’t have to figure out everything by ourselves, there are intelligences other than our own, teachers all around us.

by ourselves, there are intelligences other than our own, teachers all around us. Imagine how less lonely the world would be.

I still struggle mightily with verbs and can hardly speak at all. I’m most adept with my kindergarten vocabulary. But, I like that in the morning I can go for my walk around the meadow, greeting neighbors by name. When a crow caws at me from the hedgerow, I can call back, “Mno gizhget anishinabe!” I can brush my hand over the soft grasses and murmurs, “Bazho mishkibo.” It’s a small thing, but it makes me happy.

I’m not advocating that we all learn Potawatomi or Hopi or Seminole, even if we could. We came to these shores as immigrants speaking a legacy of languages, all to be cherished. But to become native to this place, if we are to survive here and our neighbors too, our work is to learn to speak the grammar of animacy, so that we might truly be at home.

I remember the words of Bill Tall Bull, a Cheyenne elder. As a young person, I spoke to him with a heavy heart lamenting that I had no native language with which to speak to the plants and the places that I love. “They love to hear the old language” he said, “its true.” But he said, with fingers on his lips, “you don’t have to speak it here,” then patting his chest, “if you speak it here. They will hear you.”

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