11.3: Preserving Mohawk

The next several units are excerpts from a conversation with David Kanatawakhon-Maracle, a Mohawk instructor at Western University. In this unit, Dr. Kanatawakhon-Maracle talks about how, for a language to survive, it must be widely spoken.

A YouTube element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/essentialsoflinguistics/?p=225

Video Script

I've been a language teacher for years, you know, and trying to teach and there's always been this segment of people out there who “really support what you’re doing” and stuff like that and I’ve gotten into the habit of just ignoring them
because their support is verbal; they’re not in my classes; they’re not learning the language. Real support for an Aboriginal language is getting out there and learning that language and learning to speak it, you know, so, to help bring that language back into its own. I don’t expect any community to work towards, you know, sole monolingualism — that’s just not does’t make sense — however, bilingualism is a fairly normal way to be with a large percentage of the world’s population. And, and, for, you know, my grandparents, my grandfather was bilingual, you know, and my great-grandparents were bilingual and they could use English when they needed to and they used Mohawk when they needed to and, or by choice or whatever.

I speak Mohawk and English so the thing is I can also, you know, use both languages. I … the difference I guess is that I also read and write Mohawk as well. So I’m a speaker and I’m literate which is the sort of thing that we would want to teach students especially at the university level because there’s a lot of stuff written in Aboriginal languages that are presently not available in English or, you know or probably doesn’t necessarily have to be available in English if they’re speakers of the language.

People have always said you know, “Oh yeah, we know that the language should be in the home.” No! The language should be in the street! If the language is surviving — if the language is truly an important part of being — it’s in the street; it’s in the stores; it’s outside of the home. When you keep the language in the home it dies, because the speakers of the language eventually leave that home and then they go into the street where they’re speaking English all the time and they meet somebody else who is also speaking English and eventually … the next generation is being raised by two English-speaking people and of course then the language is, is gone.

[CA: Would you say that that attitude that says “oh the language is for at home,” is that, is that another legacy of colonialism where it was shameful to speak an Aboriginal language?]

Yeah well let’s keep it.

[CA: Yeah, it’s private, but not outside the house.]

Yeah and the real problem is that when when the language is only spoken in the home especially in contemporary society where people are, spending more and more time at home in front of some sort of technical device — in times past they were out going from home to home and all people were speaking the language and visiting and the language is very much alive — but once it becomes ensconced within the home and people get to the point where, sure they can talk to their parents, but they can’t really understand their neighbours.