11.5: Mohawk Culture and Language

In this unit, Dr. Kanatawakhon-Maracle mentions some of the elements of Mohawk culture that are embedded in the grammar of the language, and we discuss the idea that living languages are always changing.

What I also do too is that I include culture with the language. I'll be teaching them a particular word or phrase or expression but then I'll tell them where it comes from — why it is this way — why we say it that way — why we don't say this word. I mean, the word *nyaweh* in Mohawk gets interpreted as 'thank you' in English but that's kind of the beginning.
and the end of it. We don’t, the reality is, if you follow older tradition, which is the way I was raised, you don’t say *nyaweh* for every little thing; you don’t use it the way it’s used in English. In English it’s just thank you thank you thank you — it becomes meaningless; it becomes a grunt, quite literally, in the English language, because people just use it so freely that it starts to lose its meaning. In Mohawk, *nyaweh* is used, or should only be used, between yourself and the Creator even when you say *nyaweh*, you know you see something beautiful, you see a sunset, a beautiful flower, nice majestic scenery or whatever, stuff like that, then you say *nyaweh* because now that *nyaweh* is directed towards the Creator and it’s showing appreciation for what you’re dealing with. When we sit at the table and we eat, the first one that gets up says *nyaweh*, not for the food, you know, but for, for the opportunity to sit with other people and share food. We’re getting into the habit of using it much the same way it’s used in English — you’ll hear young, young speakers, more contemporary ones that are using or learning the language, they’ll use *nyaweh* the same way they do and I said, No! (laughter).

[CA: Well I wonder, is there, is there a tension there that, so, on the one hand, you want to honour the traditions and the things you’ve learned from the Elders and from the older people and, on the other hand for a language to stay alive it has to change, right? Is that, so, if people are changing the language some, it’s because it’s still a living language…]

I don’t know — there are certain things that we don’t, we don’t want to change, that we don’t particularly want to update because then it starts to erode our uniqueness. If you’re going to speak Mohawk the way you speak English, why don’t you just speak English? You can update certain things but other things you can’t. Like negating a future situation — in English, you can say, “Oh, it will not snow today!” How presumptive you are! (laughter) Because, just because the sky is blue, but there’s a cloud and you know the clouds — if there’s one cloud there’s another cloud and another cloud and another cloud and by the end of the day we could see snow, which is all within the realm of the “will” because the “will” is in the in future. We cannot negate the future.

[CA: So that’s, so that’s a cultural attitude that shows up in the grammar of Mohawk? That you don’t use negation with the future?]

You can construct a negative future. Nobody does. Fluent speakers don’t. I mean, why would you? You know, because it interferes… We have other ways of kind of getting around it right but … most people just wouldn’t. You just would not say, “it will not snow.” We can create what amounts to it, a negative sort of thing and we use it with the non-definite, which is like saying ”it would not” or “there’s a possibility that it won’t” It would not… but the thing is that you cannot directly say, “it *will* not” so we go to a very fuzzy sort of a non-definite situation and we negate that. Cheating in a way but at the same time, it is an important cultural part of the language. I mean, the fact that you have a culture that that doesn’t negate the future — they deal with the future in a different sort of way — so those sorts of things, I think they have to be kept in language because they are the sort of things that add to the uniqueness of a particular language.

Word order in Mohawk. English has a set word order: subject-verb-object. Mohawk… Mohawk’s word order is, is quite literally whatever comes out of your mouth. What joins it all together are pronominal prefixes and that works. But because the pronunciation of Mohawk, the pronunciation of a word in Mohawk is set; however, due to the situation in which that word may occur within, within a statement or sentence, the accent on that word may shift. So okay fine, so if I say *kahiatónhsera* for “book” then the accent is on *tón*. *Kahiatónhsera*, okay fine, but if I say *kahiatonhseráke*, “on the book” that accent shifted to the penultimate syllable. So accent shifts on a word depending upon where that word occurs. English is a language blessed with one or two syllable words which actually puts English speakers in an odd situation since most of them seem to have a hard time pronouncing a word that has more than one, more than two
syllables, (laughter) which makes my name really hard for them, “Oh, Kanatawakhon, oh, I can’t say that!” It’s worse if they see it written.

But the thing is, in Mohawk, word organization, word position is dependent on emphasis, so if I want to say, “The boy is walking on the road,” what am I saying?

“The BOY is walking on the road?” “raksá:'a ire ohaháke”.

or am I saying,

“The boy is WALKING on the road”? “ire raksá:'a ohaháke”.

Or am I saying,

“The boy is walking on the ROAD”? “ohaháke ire raksá:'a”.

So I shift my words around, there’s actually six arrangements of that, the three words and it’s all depending on, on emphasis. Also dependent upon if you’re answering a question. Because, “What did you buy?” “A COAT I bought.” Because the question what is asking, is asking for information which is then placed first which puts it in an emphasized position. That’s a very important part of the uniqueness of a language. So there are three very unique things with the language that we don’t want to, we can’t lose by modernizing it or contemporizing it. The language is set.

The culture that goes with the language … if you stop using a stone axe then eventually the word for stone axe is going to disappear unless for some reason … And then some vocabulary we’ve created in the past that we’ve carried through into the future like oháhsená, “a light” now is used primarily in reference to artificial lighting but originally it referred to something that looked very much like this bone oháhsa with the –ra suffix so then oháhsená just kind of gives the impression or gives the appearance of this particular bone and if you look at that bone and you look like a candle — yeah — so the thing is so we called the candles oháhsená, then lamps showed up. Well, more or less the same shape, oháhsená. Then lights, lamps, you know, living room lamps and stuff showed up, okay, oháhsená. Nowadays oháhsená refers to anything that throws artificial light, you know, ceiling lights, wall lights, the whole bit. So that is a word that has followed through time because even though we had your basic application but the shape kept changing.

[CA: That’s a natural semantic drift that happens in most languages…]

Yeah.