

THE COEUR D'ALENE LANGUAGE PROJECT  
SUMMARY OF OBJECTIVES AND CONTENTS

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Eighth International Salish Conference  
Eugene, Oregon  
August 13-15, 1973

The late Oswald George, former Chairman of the Coeur d'Alene Tribal Council, once said that work done by professional linguists on Indian languages has only scratched the surface of Indian language and culture. My own conviction maintains that the language and culture (of any peoples) are mutually reflective, and are therefore inseparable. For this reason, linguists can only analyze the more technical aspects of a language, but in such a study, the ideological, spiritual and aesthetic realms, essentially the feeling of the language, are tragically overlooked. It is my purpose, as a full-blooded Coeur d'Alene, to try to facilitate real understanding of my tribe's language.

The Coeur d'Alene language is the only language I really understand, because my dear mother, Julia Theresa, purposely did not allow me to speak any other language until I started grade school at Sacred Heart Mission, DeSmet, Idaho, in the fall of 1918. For some months I had to use an interpreter, one of the older boys, whenever I wished to speak. Gradually the day came when I could speak English to some extent.

The result is that, today, I still do not understand English to my satisfaction nor to that of others. I will be forever grateful to my mother for this inability, for it has kept me in the realm of my native culture, the Coeur d'Alene.

The general public attitude toward the Coeur d'Alene language is that such language is inadequate for any purpose whatsoever. People have looked upon this language as something to be ignored and even shunned. The original

cause of this degeneration was the idea of outsiders to replace this language with "a far superior" language, English. The concomitant objective was to "civilize" the Coeur d'Alenes. The tragedy of it all is that something very precious has gradually been destroyed. The primitive, natural way of the Coeur d'Alene has been removed, and both the Coeur d'Alenes and their non-Indian neighbors have suffered.

Now, however, this highly invaluable heritage of America is coming into the light on a very large scale as Indians and non-Indians alike are finally beginning to recognize the need for awareness and preservation of the Indian tradition. This upsurge of interest has occurred none too soon, for as we know, much of the Indian legacy has been buried beneath decades of cultural assimilation. Indeed, Indians have learned much from the white man, but the traditional Indian lifestyle, with its spiritual richness and cultural beauty, could also be greatly beneficial to whites. Assimilation is invariably harmful, causing cultural disintegration and personal anomie. Now, however, as the Indian identity is being reestablished, perhaps this imbalance can be remedied.

What is to be done? My friends, it is my firm conviction that not only the Coeur d'Alenes, but missionaries and our other friends as well, must reawaken, study and speak the Coeur d'Alene language. This is the secret key to the understanding of Indian nature and culture. Of this I am certain, because I have heard or read so many translations of the Indian's language that are sadly inaccurate. Such translation is but a gross misrepresen-

tation of the American Indian manner and character. I intend to repair this damage through the Coeur d'Alene language project.

I am presently involved in preparing a descriptive analysis or grammar of the Coeur d'Alene language with the kind financial assistance of the Research and Cultural Studies Development Section of the Institute of American Indian Arts. The project began officially on April 15, 1973. It is outlined to include a history of the Coeur d'Alene language, a section on pronunciation supplemented by a recording, a descriptive analysis of Coeur d'Alene's internal structure, verbal illustrations in the form of traditional songs, prayers and wisdom stories, a Coeur d'Alene-English dictionary containing approximately 18-20,000 entries and an English-Coeur d'Alene cross reference dictionary containing approximately 20-22,000 entries. Emphasis will be placed on literal translations of Coeur d'Alene terms which usually cannot be directly transcribed into word-for-word English equivalents. This is a highly important aspect of the project, since literal translations of Coeur d'Alene terms will enable the reader to better understand the perceptions of Coeur d'Alene speakers, and thereby to gain an insight into the culture.

At this juncture, I would like to bring to light a point that could be highly significant to students of language, its roots and its interrelations. Linguists, including the great Franz Boas of Columbia University in New York, have stated that the Coeur d'Alene language is the key to all languages. Some linguists since Boas' time have attempted to limit this hypothesis to include only the Salish Indian languages. A paper of this length is inadequate

to prove or disprove such contention as that given above. My forthcoming volumes on the subject should, however, explore this hypothesis more fully. I would like at this point, though, to give a few illustrations showing that the Coeur d'Alene may actually be the key to all languages.

Take the English term "accost": "I accosted him or her". This word means "to speak first". Coeur d'Alene has the word "skusEn", which means "I said to him". Thus the English "accost" and Coeur d'Alene "skusEn" appear to be derived from the same root. Here, I am afraid, the English scholar world jumps to the conclusion that the Coeur d'Alene term is rooted in the English. The fact is, however, that the Coeur d'Alenes used this word long before Columbus or any other navigator ever "discovered" these shores.

Another illustration: The Coeur d'Alene word, "sig<sup>v</sup>En", means "I asked him" (for some information). Changing the letter "g" to "q", one finds strong similarity to the English term "sequence", which means "the state of following in orderly series; result". When a Coeur d'Alene says "sig<sup>v</sup>En", "I asked him", he infers that he wants results, namely information, etc.

Coeur d'Alene also has the word "tal". This means "from the". The Spanish language has the term "del", which means the same.

There are myriads of other illustrations which could show that Coeur d'Alene may be the key, if not to all, then to many, many languages. This concept will be illustrated much more fully in the development of the language project.

The project, to my great appreciation, has met with much enthusiasm from

many individuals. The following is an excerpt from a letter received by Mr. Noel Campbell, Tribal liaison for the project, from Cecil D. Andrus, Governor of the State of Idaho:

"We are very fortunate here in Idaho to enjoy a way of life which reflects a basic balance and harmony between man and his environment. An important part of heritage is the lesson we have been taught by your people to respect nature and life in the many magnificent forms in which it surrounds us. For that reason, Lawrence Nicodemus' work is important not only to the Coeur d'Alene Tribe; it is important to all of the people of Idaho."

Upon its completion, the book should be highly valuable for many reasons. It will be of great importance to linguists and hopefully will inspire other tribes to research their own languages. It will serve as a guide for Coeur d'Alenes and non-Indians who wish to learn more about the tribal traditions. It will be the means of communication between the Indians and non-Indians that will come nearest to true understanding. And most importantly, it will record and preserve a language and the cultural heritage within, which would otherwise be lost.