Lessons in the Old Language
by Matthew C. Bronson

In the very earliest time
When both people and animals lived on earth
A person could become an animal if he wanted to
and an animal could become a human being.
Sometimes they were people
and sometimes animals
and there was no difference.
All spoke the same language
That was the time when words were like magic.
The human mind had mysterious powers.
A word spoken by chance might have strange consequences.
It would suddenly come alive
and what people wanted to happen could happen--
all you had to do was say it.
Nobody could explain this:
That's the way it was.

-- Nalungiaq, Inuit woman interviewed by ethnologist Knud Rasmussen in the early twentieth century.

The "old language" that unites the human and more-than-human worlds is a recurrent archetype in the stories of indigenous 1 peoples, those who have lived in intimate proximity with a particular bioregion for time immemorial. The Cheyenne version adds another chapter to the Inuit story:

Long ago, people and animals and spirits and plants all communicated in the same way. Then something happened. After that, we had to talk to each other in human speech. But we retained the "old language" for dreams and for communicating with spirits and animals and plants.

In the Abrahamic version (based on earlier Sumerian tales), the Tower of Babel saga, the "something" that "happened" in the opening story is further elaborated. The first common tongue was abolished by a (slightly insecure?) god. He feared that people would use it to cooperate in building a tower that would eventually challenge his heavenly reign. Language has always been connected to the primal question of what it means to be human and our relationship with nature, the invisible and unknown, the "Great Mystery."

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The word in its primordial force runs through us like a current: what we say still comes alive, as in Nalungiaq's story, or dies in the telling. Indeed, the power of language to create reality is a constant of the human experience. But this and other lessons of the old language have been largely obscured in the transition to modernity and industrial-technological civilization. When we contrast indigenous and western languages and worldviews, we can begin to reclaim aspects of the old language that undergird both.

Lesson One: Language Creates Reality

I live in Sonoma County in the Northern California Wine Country. A few years ago, I was entering a restaurant very near my home and noticed a sign in front that said "Native Grass Garden-Do Not Disturb." My first response, naturally, was to trample over to the sign to see what the fuss was about. I knelt down and admired the soft, variegated green foliage, the tiny pointed leaves and small yellow and orange flowers. Suddenly it occurred to me that these were exactly the same plants that I had been mowing down on my John Deere sit-down mower the day before...but I had been thinking of them as "weeds"! This was a lesson in the power of labels, of the trances induced by the word-worlds that are enacted every time someone categorizes in speech or thought.

Is this a question of "mere semantics" as some might argue? The plants remained "the same" regardless of any label I might apply in this view. But the effect in the real world was as tangible as in Nalungiaq's story where what people said came to be. Having labeled the plants in my yard "weeds," I mowed them down. The "native grasses" at the neighboring restaurant remained untouched because a conservation-minded gardener had, by contrast, elevated them to a place of respect with his label.

Among indigenous peoples, the concept of "weed" does not exist. Every plant has a purpose or it would not be here. The entire field of ethnobotany consists of attempts to articulate in western terms the web of life as it is perceived through native eyes and the categories of native languages. Comparative ethnobotany reminds us that the Linnaean system of categorization is but one of an infinite number of possible taxonomies available to humankind. The categories we use in our everyday speech and thinking, like the formal categories of Linnaeaus for plants, are inherited as part of socialization and constitute in large measure a collective sense of "reality." In the view being advanced here, language always mediates experience in some measure. Yet the path of least resistance is to accept the habitual categories in lieu of the complexities of experience. Language creates reality rather than merely describes it as the First Peoples still remember.

The first lesson may seem obvious, but is worth restating in more modern terms: all words hypnotize to some extent, that is their function. Language in its very essence is a form of thought control, an attempt to configure the reality of a person or a group in alignment with one's own. Words matter, literally, in that what is said becomes true if someone is willing to believe it. Madison Avenue has not forgotten the principles of the old language and we forget them at our peril. The rapport between words, between sentences, between people and groups that allows all communication to take place is an energetic phenomenon. Rapport is the vestige of the old language. In an indigenous view, embodied in the opening story, this rapport can extend to the living world.

Lesson Two: You Can Get Over It and Reanimate the World

It is a time of deadly crises on every front, crises grounded in the unquestioned and toxic dichotomies of everyday language. The battlefields of history are also littered with living bodies turned into corpses by polarities: Hutu/Tutsi, us/them, good/evil, Christian/pagan,

man/nature, you/it. The insidious grammar of dominance requires that one pole dominates and one pole is dominated.

Animacy as a category of human thought is deeply entwined with the pronouns we use every day as speakers of English. This seemingly trivial grammatical fact is directly related to Nalungiaq's observation that words in the old language "can suddenly come alive." It also has implications for the current environmental crisis and for attempts to cultivate a more intimate relationship with the more-than-human world.

Let's begin by looking more closely at how English treats personal pronouns, especially third person singular: he/she/it. At first glance, English just divides the world into a "natural" division of those beings that are male, those that are female, and those entities neither male nor female, like things, concepts and abstractions. The masculine entities go in one column, the feminine entities in another, and the "neither" choices in a third. But how accurate are these distinctions when we use these pronouns in the real world? Without linguistic reflection, we might conclude that this is just how other European languages do it -- masculine, feminine, and neuter. But anyone who has learned another Indo-European family language knows that gender is treated differently in those languages than in English. In Latin, German, and other European languages, everything is masculine, feminine or neuter even when it doesn't really make "sense" to us. Why would a table be feminine? Why would sun and moon, generally neuter in English, be respectively masculine and feminine in French but just the opposite in German?

Recent research summarized by Lera Boroditsky shows that speakers of these languages do, in fact, attribute gender characteristics to "inanimate" objects based on the categorization system of their language, even though it is "arbitrary." This is another example of how the label constructs the experience, often at an unconscious level.

On first approximation it looks like the English pronoun system makes a distinction between gendered animates and non-gendered inanimates. But the nuances of this system are surfaced when a speaker is linguistically uncomfortable -- specifically when referring to other peoples' human newborns and newly acquired pets, for example. Many English speakers inadvertently call such entities "it" until other information intervenes, which could be in the form of a direct contradiction of pronoun from the parent or owner ("she is six months old.") The social stress evident in such incidents bears witness to how deeply engrained this grammatical pattern is in the lives of English speakers.

If you are talking about a bug, a whale, a tree, a mountain lion, a spirit or any single non-human entity whose sexual gender you do not know or perhaps even care about, you are forced by the patterning of the English language to use the pronoun "it".

English, generally speaking, divides humans and animals into he and she. But that is not the whole story. Ships are usually called she, but only after they are commissioned, "animated" with the life of a crew and mission. When they are decommissioned, they are called itagain. Cars and pickups are often given (usually female) names and pronouns as well. Note that the use of the female pronoun confers respect, agency and a sense of life to the treasured object. English grammar is essentially "inanimist." That is, speakers typically re-animate the largely inanimate world envisioned by default in its pronoun system only in these exceptional cases.

If you are talking about a bug, a whale, a tree, a mountain lion, a spirit or any single non-human entity whose sexual gender you do not know or perhaps even care about, you

are forced by the patterning of the English language to use the pronoun it. In order to say that something is animate, a speaker must know and care about the sexual gender, otherwise the referent is automatically demoted to the pronoun we reserve for inanimate things. English grammar does not easily allow a plant or insect or animal or spirit or planet into our conversations without automatically demeaning it.

What models are available in the languages of First Peoples? In an alternate worldview embodied in the grammars of other languages, pronouns do not have any sexual gender. According to Sakej Henderson, before the Invasions, the Algonquian languages, which make up the largest language family of Native America, did not verbally distinguish between male and female for any class of people. They did not even have words in general use like man & woman, boy & girl, sets of words beyond person and childdistinguished only by sexual gender.

The distinction between animate and inanimate assumes greater importance in these languages without sexual gender. Generally, the animate is used for breathers (with no exceptions the way we have in English) and the inanimate for non-breathers, so humans (two leggeds), animals (four leggeds), plants and trees (the green tribes) are considered animate, just like for English-speakers. Animate includes other things that might be more problematic for us: clouds, rocks, spirits, things considered sacred (so a pipe used in ceremony is animate while an everyday tobacco pipe is inanimate). What is calledanimate in the Algonquian language is no longer just a fixed property of an object the way it is in English. Animacy can evoke in grammar the relationship of respect that a speaker has with that object.

Animacy in these languages can be a judgment call on the part of speakers. That is, if Algonquian speakers refer to clouds as animate, they can be evoking their sacred relationship with clouds. This may also, but does not necessarily, entail that the clouds are "living" for them in English terms.

The difference between English and Algonquin perspectives can be shown in an example. Among the Mikmaq people of Nova Scotia, there is a noticeable difference in speech between those who have grown up and lived all their lives on the reserve and those whose parents moved them to cities in their childhood for English education. They come back in their late teens or early twenties to reclaim their heritage and language, to experience what reservation life is like where everyone speaks Mikmaq most of the time instead of English. The off-reservation newcomers often use the animate gender like they are used to talking about things in English, so old-timers notice that the newcomers are overusing the equivalent of it all the time for objects like plants or rocks or whatever that would generally be considered animate in Mikmaq.

At the far end of this animacy spectrum we have the Mikmaq spiritual leader, called the Grand Captain, who in modeling Mikmaq speech for the tribe always refers to everythingas animate -- thereby displaying that he lives in a respectful and loving relationship with an animate universe. The Algonquian use of animacy says at least as much about the speaker as it does about some objective universe.

While living on the Cheyenne Reservation in the early '70s, a story circulated among the Cheyenne, a story about a young maiden long ago who was combing her hair in the evening with a typically inanimate comb, and the comb suddenly becomes animate and tells her that enemies are sneaking in at the bottom of the camp. It tells her that she should go warn her brothers and cousins (a few teepees away) so that they can repel the enemy; she throws down the again inanimate comb as she runs out and the camp is

saved.

So something can be animate or inanimate "by itself," or animate because of respect, or because of extraordinary circumstances. Stoves and refrigerators and branches broken off of trees may be normally inanimate, but a special relationship with one can be honored with animacy. A tree can be animate, the broken branch inanimate, but a figure carved from the wood of that branch can be animate.

English lacks an animate third person singular pronoun. This is evidence to support the suspicion that the English language is currently complicit in it-ing Mother Earth to death. Perhaps this is worth considering as English continues making progress as an all-consuming world language -- no language comes without its own attitudinal baggage.

In my backyard, I planted a Pacific oak some fifteen years ago and named it "Grandma" in honor of my one hundred five-year old grandmother who had just passed away. This now towering, majestic tree is truly an animate presence in my life, one that I imbue with agency and mood: "She is getting ready for winter." "She is welcoming the spring with her blossoms." The simple act of naming has changed my relationship with this tree and, by extension, helped to engage me in intimate communion with the more-than-human world in which I am embedded. I note that it is very hard to kill, or mow over unconsciously, something you have named and thereby conferred with animacy. I invite readers to practice using language in a similar fashion in order to reanimate aspects of their personal relationship with nature and with the "others" in their lives.

Lesson 3: God is Not a Noun in Native America

The emphasis on nouns built into the grammar of English and other Indo-European languages is so intrinsic to its speakers' way of thinking that it is challenging to imagine how it could be otherwise. But Algonquin and many other native languages have chosen a different path, a verb-based grammar in which nouns are derived from roots as needed but are not necessarily part of every sentence. The contrast between the two systems can be reflected in this statement: god is not a noun in Native America.

The toughest question from Europeans that Indians have ever had was: "Who is your (noun) god?"2 Comparatively speaking, English is very noun-heavy, forcing its speakers to utter at least one noun-phrase per sentence in order to make sense. We need nouns, and the noun-phrases they are part of, in order to make complete sentences. Referring traditionally to persons, places and things (including concepts), nouns can be seen as temporary snapshots of a flux of activity. These snapshots are the basis upon which cultural modes of logic and reasoning are based.

When we say "god" in English, we are using a noun, and easily imagining him as a person, a separate entity somehow fixed in time and space (an old man with a beard, for example, as in "May He watch over us."). Imagine what a different reading of the Bible one would have if the word "it" were substituted systematically for "he" or "him" in referring to god. "It is watching over you" does not have the same ring to it.

Why is this iconic image expressed in English so hard to construe in indigenous language terms? Many indigenous languages rarely use nouns and are much more verb-centered. Sakej Henerson says that his people can speak Mikmaq all day without uttering a single noun. The Hopi term rehpi means "flashed" and would be properly used when, say, one saw lightening in the sky, without any implication at all that "something" flashed: the flashing and "what" is flashing are coterminous3.

What if god were a verb, an unfolding dynamic processing?

From the Native American point of view, the word "god" as a noun is a grammatically induced hallucination, like the dummy "it" in "it is raining." The closest Lakhota equivalent is tanka wakan [thaka waka] (sometimes reversed in sacred speech), which is an adjectival-verbal construction. This phrase has routinely been mistranslated as the "Great Mystery" but is better glossed as "the Great Mysteriousing." Such mistranslation is not trivial as it obscures the deep differences between a verb-based and noun-based worldview.

English speakers can attempt to step back from the way English has colonized their imaginations and turned everything into a noun. This is, in large measure, an exercise in "getting back to the roots." The root word that we translate as "god" from the Hebrew Bible, is actually a verbal expression, YHWY is one transliteration, often pronounced as [ehye] or [yahwe], "I am." The shamanic, originally verbal, insights of the Old Testament prophets have been translated into a noun in the transition to modernity, a now familiar pattern.

What if god were a verb, an unfolding dynamic processing? Perhaps it would be harder to fight and kill as so many have done in the name of "god" if the Native view were more widely held. Verbal thinking is complementary, dynamic and contextual, rather than dichotomous, static and universal. Problem situations and people are much harder to categorize as "things" that one must confront and destroy in a verbal-based reasoning with fully animate subjects."

As a practical application, I recommend turning the abstract categories with which English-speakers habitually frame "problems" into complete sentences with verbs and objects. Terms like "Freedom" are slippery and even dangerous in the wrong hands. A sentence like "Appalachians are freeing themselves from the hold of mining interests" brings this abstract signifier down to earth. The world comes alive again in verbal thinking.

A respectful appreciation of the languages, stories and life ways of First Peoples can remind us in the Global North of the vestiges of the old language that still connect us with each other and the more-than-human world. Moreover, the sacred lessons embedded in native languages can point us toward an ancient, more sustainable and humane future.

Poignantly, 90% of the world's languages are dying and will be gone within decades, displaced by the cold, placeless tongues of global commerce and colonization. Millions of voices like Nalungiaq's are going silent and with them the local wisdom borne of millennia of intimate and sustainable communion with place extinguished. The very fabric of life on the planet is also under siege by the same forces. The problem of endangered languages and cultures is, thus, everyone's problem. To paraphrase the great Japanese poet Issei, "if we look carefully into the dragonfly's eye, we can see the mountain behind our shoulder."

Footnotes:

1: "Indigenous" refers in this article to those who have lived in an intimate and sustainable relationship with a particular bio-region for time immemorial. This would be true of people from the Pacific and Asia as well as the Americas. "First Peoples" is a term from Canada that is officially used to refer with respect to those who were here prior to

conquest, and is extended in solidarity to everyone in that post-colonial situation, from Australia and the Americas to Siberia. "Native American" is used to refer to the indigenous peoples of North and South America. The cited points on grammar (Algonquin, Cheyenne, Micmaq, Lakhota) are specifically drawn from this latter category as I am not elaborating any claims here about languages outside the Americas.

2: The impetus for this lesson comes from something Sakej Henderson, an Algonquin elder, told Dan Moonhawk Alford years ago: that the toughest job that Indians have ever had was explaining to the whiteman who their "Noun-God" is. Moonhawk related the downright plaintive quality with which this was said to him -- it was the ultimate frustration of people who have something truly beautiful to share with others who will not or cannot listen.

3: As pointed out by linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf