

Claire Darmstadter

Hey everybody I am so lucky to be joined today by Monica Macaulay, Professor of Language Sciences at UW-Madison specializing in the Menominee language. Thank you so much for taking a couple of minutes to chat with me!

Monica Macaulay

Sure!

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah so there's a lot of ground we can cover and your cv is very long, but first can you just give us a really general overview of your educational and linguistic background and how you kind of ended up doing your current work here at UW?

Monica Macaulay

Let's see, I got my phd in linguistics at UC-Berkeley long long ago and I wrote my dissertation on the Mixtec language, which is an indigenous language of México, and I worked on that for a long time and then eventually my husband and I got jobs at Madison and it was a good time for me to look for something new to do and I was very excited to be moving to a state that still had lots of indigenous languages that were spoken, and somehow I just wound up focusing in on Menominee and I have never looked back since.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah so I was very excited to hear that UW-Madison offered a course in Menominee actually this spring. I would imagine that you were pretty instrumental in that process, so can you talk a little bit about how that came to be, is this the first time a course in that language is offered, and what kind of students might be interested in taking it?

Monica Macaulay

I'm pretty sure it is the first time it's been offered, and I was only instrumental in that I suggested the person who was the teacher, but it was arranged by American Indian Studies and they've been trying to offer more of the indigenous languages of the state and luckily there's a wonderful second language speaker named Luke Besaw, who actually got his degree at UW -Madison with a major in linguistics. I'm very proud of that and he you know, since we're doing everything online he didn't have to be here and so he's giving us a distance class. And in terms of the kinds of students taking the class, it's funny because they're not all students, but of the students, I'd say there's maybe half of them are Menominee and are just interested in learning more about their heritage language and then half are linguistics majors, and linguistics majors tend to be language nerds and they just like taking lots of languages so it's fun for them, but then it's funny because there are several professors who are taking it including me and just people who are interested in the language and then also a couple of faculty who are themselves Menominee or descendants or something like that so it's really got a wide range of people in it.

Claire Darmstadter

And so you mentioned that you're not necessarily a native speaker of the language and you might not have that tribal affiliation, so even though you are working with a group of people in the language and you're very closely connected with them, do you ever feel kind of uncomfortable or apprehensive to work in that space where you don't necessarily have as close a cultural or ceremonial connection with the language? Do you find yourself kind of drawing upon their knowledge in your work or what does that partnership kind of look like?

Monica Macaulay

Oh sure I feel uncomfortable sometimes, I think that's only natural, and I would say I've been working with them for over 20 years and it's really been a learning experience for me. I started at a time when I still didn't really understand a whole lot about just the many issues involved and I think, well like I said it's been a real learning experience for me and I have had to learn proper ways to interact, proper ways to show respect. I feel like they have trained me in many ways, and it's been a really wonderful journey, and sure sometimes I do feel like you know I just it's clearly not my culture but what I do is I just try to be an ally and see what I can do.

Claire Darmstadter

Can you talk a little bit more specifically about some of the projects you've done with them? I know there's a dictionary that's been in the process of being worked on, and there's also the Endangered Language Fund which you have a very prominent position in or at least you did. I know that there's a College of the Menominee nation and an early education preschool program in the works, so how would you kind of interact with that space and all the different efforts they have to revitalize this language?

Monica Macaulay

Whenli first started out I worked with a number of the first language speakers, all just amazing wonderful elders. Sadly most of them have passed on at this point. But working with them, I did get to help on a dictionary. And we actually have done two dictionaries. We did one that was a beginner's dictionary, and then one that is more of just a regular Menominee/English English/Menominee bilingual dictionary. And over the years, I guess I've transitioned more and more into trying to help out with what they're doing with language revitalization. And I mostly work with the Menominee Language and Culture Commission, which is the group that oversees, as you might expect, language and culture on the reservation. It's through them that this new immersion preschool has been started, which is just incredibly exciting. It's so wonderful. They come and they tell me about, you know, oh, today, this little kid said a four-word sentence. And it's just so exciting. Menominee baby talk for the first time in many, many decades. So it's very, it's a very exciting and wonderful thing that's going on there right now.

Claire Darmstadter

Yes, I will leave links to all those different articles and resources and all those things in the transcript, because I think the articles and all that is just super inspiring and interesting to check out that also kind of sad that we've reached a point where these things have to happen. And so despite Act 31, and other education efforts, many Wisconsinites do not have a very strong or accurate understanding of Indigenous or American Indian Tribal Affairs or cultures or just how

they engage with a state. So are there any kind of misconceptions you could walk us through, or maybe resources or classes people would take if they wanted to learn more about the people and their culture?

Monica Macaulay

I think there is a lot of ignorance, you know, I'm really just focused on the languages. And so I don't have a ton to do with the educational efforts around Act 31 and stuff. But, I have taught a class off and on for a long time called Survey of North American Indian Languages. And what I try to do in it, it has no prerequisites, you don't have to know any linguistics. And it satisfies the Ethnic Studies requirements. So I get a lot of people — and the first day I say, why are you here? And I tell them an okay answer is to satisfy the Ethnic Studies requirement, like, that's okay. And my goal is just to dispel misconceptions in the class, and we just sort of talk about the languages of, of North America, mostly, we talk about what has happened to them, we talk about the future, I think more and more, as I've taught it, you know, in the beginning, I was sort of focused more on *oh, they're endangered. And there's, you know, it's really scary to see all these languages that are no longer being spoken.* But my attitude has kind of changed. And so the way I'm teaching, it has kind of changed, because now I feel like there's a lot of hope. And there's a lot of really incredible work going on. And so now I try to focus on the hopeful side of it a lot more. So that's a class people can take. And I think just becoming more aware of the fact that the Native languages of the state are extremely important and are still being spoken and still being taught. And they are certainly not things of the past. They are things of the present.

Claire Darmstadter

Yes, that is so true. And if I had time in my schedule, I would definitely take that course, because it sounds fascinating. And so the last question I always ask everybody is we tell little kids all the time that it's a superpower to speak more than one language. So can you give me one reason, if you can boil it down to one you can answer in whatever language or mix of languages you want, why the superpower to speak more than one language?

Monica Macaulay

That's a really hard question. I guess I would say, I mean, maybe this is almost a little bit trite. But it really is true that when you learn another language, you're not just learning a bunch of grammar, you're learning about a culture, and you're getting a little window into another culture. And I just think that that should be something that everybody should be fascinated by. And specifically, with respect to the Algonquian languages, I dug up this quote, that's just one of my favorite quotes. And this kind of encapsulates how incredibly different languages can be from one another, which I also think is really good education for people to realize. So this is from the linguist Edward Sapir from his 1921 book, and he wrote — so I work on Algonquian languages; that's what Menominee is — he wrote *single Algonquian words are like tiny images to poems.* And I just love that because the words are really long and really complicated. And every single one of them tells you a whole story. And so learning a language like that just opens a door that would never be open for you probably, if you didn't if you didn't explore it in that way.

Claire Darmstadter

Yes, well thank you so much. So well said; I know you're very busy right now, so I appreciate you giving me a couple minutes to chat, but I hope the rest of the semester goes well and all your work sounds amazing. So I wish you the best of luck with that.

Monica Macaulay

Thanks so much.