

Vol 4(1), March 1, 2004
mi40004000133

The Doors of Consciousness and Perception

How Languages Play Special Songs

By Carolyn Kenny | [Author bio & contact info](#)



In 1998 I interviewed 30 Haida people in my own community, asking questions about the role of the arts in the revitalization of our indigenous society. The Native Elders would not or could not distinguish language from the arts. My own Haida mother told me that "language" is one of the arts. This idea comes home to me over and over again when I work in Native communities around the world. And, of course, a lot of the work in indigenous studies is done around language preservation. (<http://www.indigenous-language.org>; <http://wings.buffalo.edu/linguistics/ssila/index.htm>)

Some Native scholars and elders go so far as to say: "Our language is our culture." Verna Kirkness, esteemed Cree academic states in her book on *Aboriginal Languages* (1998), "The key to identity and retention of culture is one's ancestral language." (p. 103).

"What is lost when a language is lost is another world,' says Stephen Anderson, of Yale University. He says valuable ethnographic and cultural information disappears when a language is lost. David Harrison of Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, USA adds that each language lost leaves a gap in our understanding of the variable cognitive structures of which the human brain is capable. Studies of different languages have already revealed vastly different ways of representing and interpreting the world. Some Native American languages, for example, reveal a completely different understanding of the nature of time." (Knight, 2004)

In the 1960's the Maori people of New Zealand began a stunning revolution in cultural revitalization by taking their very young children out of the government educational system and starting a language and culture revitalization movement beginning with the Te Kohunga Rea, or "language nest". In these language nests, they placed very young children from 6 weeks to five years, Elders, parents and art materials. The only language allowed in the Te Kohunga Rea was the Maori language. That's it. That was the preschool and early childhood education. Over the years this movement has grown and now includes education at all levels, in which only Maori is spoken or read.

As part of my cultural learning and research I have visited the Maori schools many times. When one visits a Maori school, one can believe the principle that language is one of the arts as well as the principle that the arts, in general, communicate aspects of a culture and a society in a way that "translations" and "descriptions" cannot. Singing is part of every gathering for the Maori. When you visit a Maori school, you are usually greeted by 60-100 children, teachers, and staff, singing you into the school as a welcoming ceremony. I asked the principal of one of these schools why there was so much music and art everywhere in the school. She replied: "We need the arts (including the Maori language) to provide the spiritual and aesthetic

environment in which the children can grow and learn in the healthiest way possible."

It can safely be stated that the Maori people have saved their language and their culture because now the children are speaking and singing in their Maori language. The Maori culture is an example of how a people on the edge of extinction can save themselves.

At *Voices*, we attempt to embrace the many dilemmas involved with cross-cultural work. And in this issue, we have many articles that address various aspects of language. We know, as music therapists and traditional healers, that music is a language unto itself. Many of the scholarly works of music therapy researchers attempt to come to terms with this aspect of our work. More and more, music therapists are turning to the new arts-based research methods to help them translate the seemingly ineffable dynamics, processes, and nature of our encounters with our clients in music therapy (Stige, 2004).

At *Voices*, it has always been our goal to publish texts in several languages. Gradually, over the last year, we have offered more and more texts in languages other than English. Indigenous peoples often claim that the only good result of colonization was that we all had to share a common language (in North America and Africa and other continents that was English) and could therefore communicate with each other across language groups. At *Voices* we weigh that delicate balance of trying to offer the most accessible texts in a somewhat shared language and believing in the ability of each language to communicate something unique. Something is certainly lost in the translations. And we see how important original languages are when we consider the possibility of "extinction" for some peoples.

For the first time, you will be able to experience *Voices* in bilingual texts, side-by-side, to compare the texture and shape of symbols and signs, to attempt to read articles in their original languages, even if these languages are not your own, to see the beauty of form, even, perhaps to say some of the words so that you can "hear" the sound of a far away place. Language is so much more than text. In his book titled *Sensuous Scholarship* (1997), Paul Stoller reminds us about the importance of the spoken language, the arts, as a way to transmit knowledge. His work in indigenous societies has reminded him that knowledge comes in many forms. Not only do we lose a lot in the translations between languages, but we also lose a lot in the "translation" from oral to written forms. As music therapists, we know this so well. And as a client once told me so many years ago, "Lady if I could say it I wouldn't have to play it."

How do the arts shape our consciousness? And how do languages and texts shape the consciousness of our global readers in *Voices*?

Jose Arguelles, a Mayan scholar writes:

Art is a function of energy. Given the unity of mankind as a single planetary organism art is the expressive connective tissue binding together the individual organisms through energy transformations focused in the emotional centers of those organisms. Properly catalyzed through form, rhythm, color, light, sound and movement, emotional energy is directly related to the establishment of a dynamic equilibrium with the other forces of the phenomenal world. (1984, p. 147).

And George Leonard, in *The Silent Pulse*, has written:

At the root of all power and motion, at the burning center of existence itself, there is music and rhythm, the play of patterned frequencies against a matrix of time. We now know that every particle in the physical universe takes its characteristics from the pitch and pattern and overtones of its particular frequencies, its singing. And the same is true of all radiation, all forces great and small, all information. (1978, p. 3).

I wonder if the physicists studying String Theory today have read George Leonard?

It would be a sad day if we were deprived of the many different languages and musics of the world. We hope that your consciousness will travel to the lands and the people whose "voices" are represented here in the special issue.

References

Arguelles, J. (1975). *The Transformative Vision*. Boulder and London: Shambhala.

Kirkness, V. (1998). *Aboriginal Languages: A Collection of Talks and Papers*. Vancouver, B.C.: V.J. Kirkness.

Knight, W. (2004). Half of All Languages Face Extinction This Century [online]. *NewScientist.com news service*. Retrieved February 16, 2004, from <http://www.newscientist.com/news/news.jsp?id=ns99994685>

Leonard, G. (1978). *The Silent Pulse*. New York: E.P. Dutton.

Stige, Brynjulf (2004). Performance of Community [online] *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy*. Retrieved February 16, 2004, from <http://www.voices.no/columnist/colstige160204.html>

Stoller, P. (1997). *Sensuous Scholarship*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

To cite this page:

Kenny, Carolyn (2004). The Doors of Consciousness and Perception: How Languages Play Special Songs. *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy* Retrieved from <http://www.voices.no/mainissues/mi40004000133.html>

Moderated discussion

Add your comments and responses to this essay in our Moderated Discussions. Contributions should be e-mailed to either [Barabara Wheeler](#) or [Thomas Wosch Guidelines for discussions](#)

View contributions on this essay: [yet no contribution]

©2005. VOICES. All rights reserved

