CHAPTER 1

The Native Languages of Wisconsin

KAREN WASHINAWATOK AND MONICA MACAULAY

In this chapter we introduce the native languages of Wisconsin. All of those still spoken in the state are seriously endangered, yet there are strong programs in place to preserve and revitalize each one. Figure 1.1 shows the native population of Wisconsin as of 2010. Figure 1.2 shows the federally recognized tribes of Wisconsin, and as it makes clear, the state had and still has quite a diversity of native languages. Three language families are represented in the state: Algonquian, Iroquoian, and Siouan. Ojibwe, an Algonquian language, is (or was) spoken by the Red Cliff, St. Croix, Bad River, Lac Courte Oreilles, Lac du Flambeau, and Sokaogan bands of the Lake Superior Chippewa.[1] The Potawatomi and the Menominee speak languages related to but distinct from Ojibwe. The Stockbridge-Munsee represent a group that came together as they were forced westward and that includes the Mohekans (also known as Mohegans), the Munsee Delaware, and the Lenape. They no longer speak their native language(s).[2] All of these—Ojibwe, Potawatomi, Menominee, and the original languages of the Stockbridge-Munsee—belong to the Algonquian family of languages. The Oneida language is Iroquoian (related to languages like Mohawk and Cherokee), and the Ho-Chunk language is Siouan (related to Lakota, Dakota, and Assiniboine, for example).[3] At least two other tribes were in Wisconsin historically, the Miami and the Mesquakie (also known as the Fox). Both speak Algonquian languages,

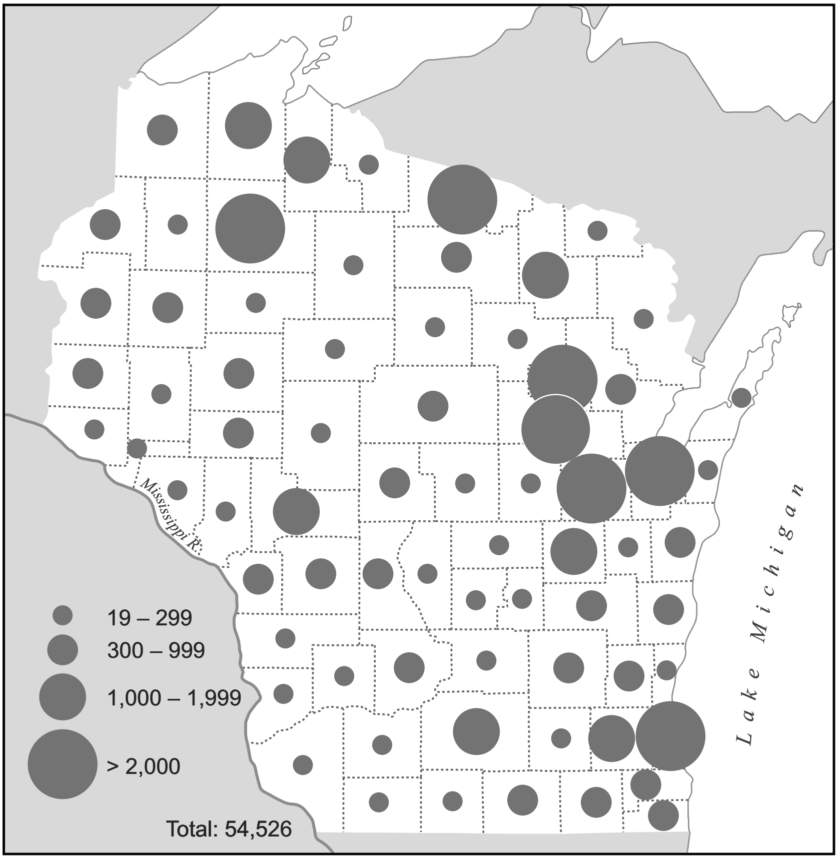

FIGURE 1.1. Native American population in 2010, by county (Data from 2010 U.S. census, table DP-1, "Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics")

but they were both displaced from their Wisconsin homes and so no longer have a presence here.

Even today, then, Wisconsin's native languages are a diverse set: three Algonquian, one Iroquoian, and one Siouan. The tribes and their languages (and language families) are summarized in table 1.1. Again, all of these languages are either extinct or very endangered. The Algonquian languages of the state have somewhere from zero to maybe twenty-five fluent native speakers each, all elderly. Oneida probably has a few hundred, and Ho-Chunk likewise has a few hundred.

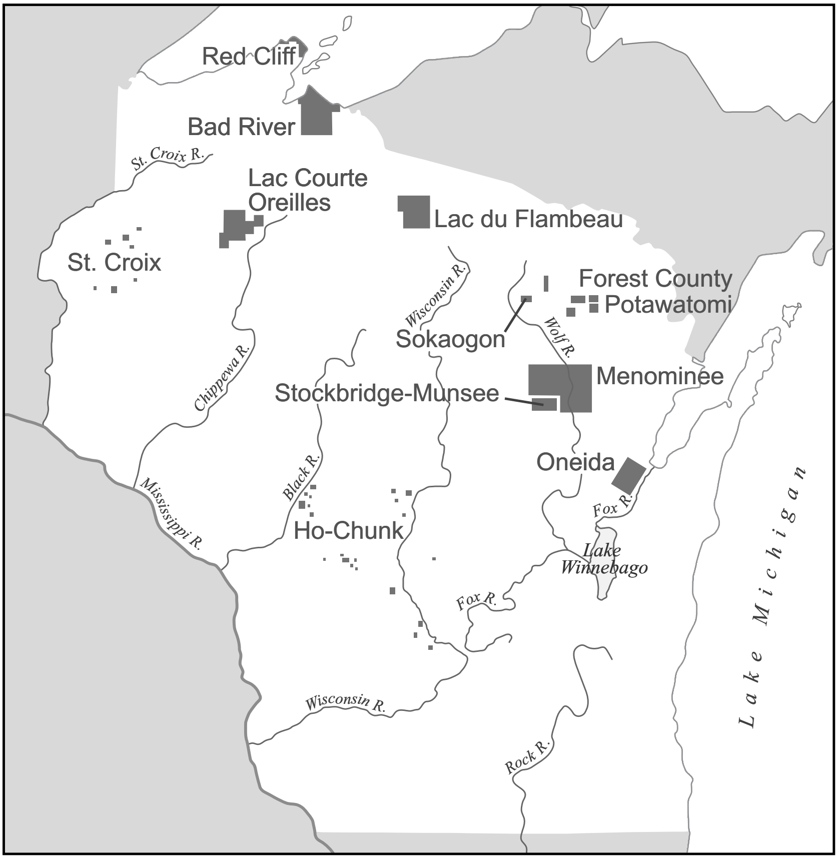
Red Cliff
Bad River
St. Croix R.
Lac Courte Oreilles
Lac du Flambeau
St. Croix
Forest County Potawatomi
Wisconsin R.
Sokaogon
Wolf R.
Chippewa R.
Menominee
Stockbridge-Munsee
Oneida
Black R.
Mississippi R.
Fox R.
Ho-Chunk
Lake Winnebago
Lake Michigan
Fox R.
Wisconsin R.
Rock R.

FIGURE 1.2. Tribal areas in Wisconsin (Boundaries have been generalized from geographic data available as 2010 Tiger/Line shapefiles from the U.S. Census Bureau)

Why Don't We Know Exactly How Many Speakers There Are?

Speaker counts can be done by a community or tribal nation, by linguists, or by the U.S. Census Bureau. Everyone agrees, however, that it is surprisingly hard to do *accurate* speaker surveys. The main problem is that not everybody defines the word *speaker* the same way. Do we mean someone who spoke the language as a first language? Would that include someone who spoke it as a child but hasn't spoken it since

TABLE 1.1. Tribes, languages, and language families of Wisconsin

Tribe / band	*Language*	*Language family*
Red Cliff	Ojibwe	Algonquian
St. Croix	Ojibwe	Algonquian
Bad River	Ojibwe	Algonquian
Lac Courte Oreilles	Ojibwe	Algonquian
Lac du Flambeau	Ojibwe	Algonquian
Sokaogan (Mole Lake)	Ojibwe	Algonquian
Potawatomi	Potawatomi	Algonquian
Menominee	Menominee	Algonquian
Stockbridge-Munsee	Mohegan, Munsee, Lenape	Algonquian
Oneida	Oneida	Iroquoian
Ho-Chunk	Ho-Chunk	Siouan

then, having replaced it with English? (Such people are sometimes called "rememberers.") Would we count someone who grew up hearing their parents speak the language, could understand their parents, but always responded in English (actually a very common situation)? With such complexities there's really no clear answer to how one decides whether someone is or is not a speaker of a language—instead there's a continuum with lots of intermediate categories that are hard to define.

What Does It Mean for a Language to Be Endangered?

Just as we can think of who counts as a speaker in terms of degrees, so too can we represent the endangerment of languages on a spectrum. UNESCO commissioned a group of experts to work on the issue, and one of their contributions was the development of a set of nine factors for assessing the robustness of a given language (see Brenzinger et al. 2003 for more details). They stress that their assessment factors should be used together to gain an accurate picture of the status of a language; for our purposes we can just consider the first one: intergenerational language transmission. Table 1.2 provides a list of "grades" for languages based on who in a community uses the language.

Wisconsin Talk : Linguistic Diversity in the Badger State, edited by Thomas C. Purnell, et al., University of Wisconsin Press, 2013. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uwm/detail.action?docID=3445349.

TABLE 1.2. Intergenerational language transmission

Degree of endangerment	*Grade*	*Speaker population*
safe	5	The language is used by all ages, from children up.
unsafe	4	The language is used by some children in all domains; it is used by children in limited domains.
definitively endangered	3	The language is used mostly by the parental generation and up.
severely endangered	2	The language is used mostly by the grandparental generation and up.
critically endangered	1	The language is used mostly by very few speakers, of the great-grandparental generation.
extinct	0	There are no speakers.

Source: Brenzinger et al. 2003, 7–8.

The premise of this table reflects most linguists' agreement that the crucial question for language retention is whether children are still learning the language; that is, when children in the community are no longer acquiring it as a first language, the language is in serious trouble. You may have experienced trying to learn a language as an adult—undoubtedly you found that it just gets harder and harder the older you get. So if children are not learning a language any more, it's unlikely that there will be fluent native speakers from that generation on, and the chain of natural transmission of a language from one generation to the next will be broken.

Why Are These Languages Extinct or in Danger of Becoming Extinct?

Each language has its own set of circumstances, but Stephen Wurm talks about language loss in terms of changes in the "ecology of language" (1991, 2). Wurm points out the similarities to the extinction of plants and animals—something changes in their environment and they are no longer able to survive or thrive. It is in many ways parallel to languages, except that with language extinction the changes in "environment" are generally changes in the cultural and social settings in which the language was previously used. One way the environment in which plants and animals live can be changed is by an invasion by another species that takes over the territory—and that happens with languages too. With Native American languages, of course, the colonization of North America especially by the Spanish, the French, and the British set into motion the cultural and social changes that eventually caused a partial or in many cases a complete shift to Spanish, French, and/or English.

Until recently, government policies not only encouraged such a shift but often mandated it.[4] One such policy, the development of boarding schools for Indian children, played a huge role in the repression of Native American languages and cultures. The first government-run school was the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, founded in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, by Richard Henry Pratt in 1879. Several more were developed soon thereafter; at the height of the program, there were approximately five hundred (see below). The premise was that taking native children away from the influence of their parents and other tribal members and then teaching them to become part of white culture and society would eliminate poverty and other aspects of what was seen as the "Indian problem" in the United States. Pratt is famously quoted as having said, "A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one. . . . In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him and save the man" (http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4929). In other words, eradicate everything about his or her native culture, including the language.

Imagine the shock and fear these little kids must have experienced—they were forcibly removed from their homes and families and were sent far away to institutions that were run like military schools. Their hair was cut (which was traumatic for those in whose culture it was a sign of mourning and for those who believed that cutting the hair destroyed a person's spiritual power), their clothes were replaced with gender-appropriate uniforms of the times, and they were punished for speaking their native languages. These schools lasted for almost a hundred years, and produced tens of thousands of children who emerged with severe cases of what Amnesty International describes as posttraumatic stress disorder caused by extreme human rights violations (Smith 2007).

Beyond the harm to individuals and community structure, the damage these schools did to the survival of Native American languages is incalculable. When the children went home again, they often found they no longer fit in. They had missed out on an entire childhood of acculturation, including the long process of becoming speakers of the community language. Some were able to regain their footing, but many could not. And many, when it came time to raise their own children, refused to speak their native language to them, speaking English instead. They simply couldn't stomach the thought of their children going through the pain and suffering that they went through. And of course, many of them had been so thoroughly indoctrinated at the boarding schools that they had come to believe their languages were "inferior" in some way.

The state of Wisconsin had its share of government boarding schools (see fig. 1.3): the Tomah Indian Industrial School (1893–1941), the Hayward Indian School (1901–34) and the Lac du Flambeau Indian Boarding School (1896–1906).[5] In addition, religious institutions founded boarding schools for Indian children—for example, the Winnebago Indian Mission School of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, which was founded near Black River Falls in 1878 and moved to a new school building in Neillsville in 1920, and St. Joseph's Catholic School in Keshena, which was opened on the Menominee reservation in 1883.[6]

Wisconsin elders' memories of boarding school vary between appreciation for the sustenance provided (which may not have been luxurious but was sufficient compared to the meager food available at home) to unfortunate memories of another type. One Menominee elder, for example, recalled punishment that resulted in the death of a sibling. The family was never able to achieve closure over the situation, since there were no repercussions for the perpetrator. We also note that children who were sent to boarding schools were trained only for industrial and menial labor rather than for professions that would have provided better pay.

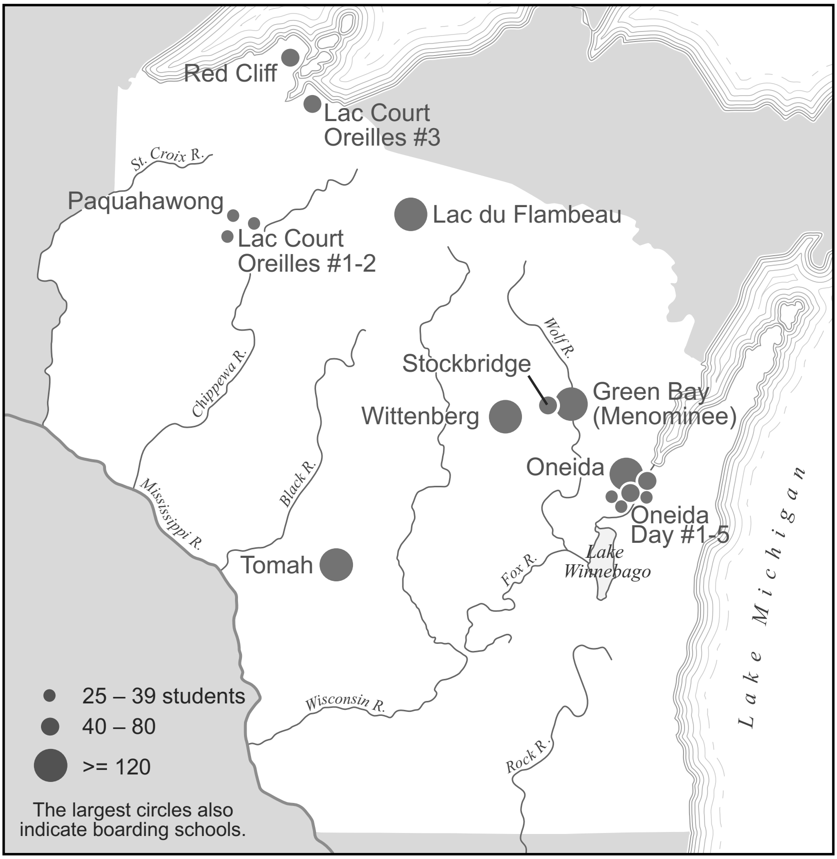
Red Cliff
Lac Court Oreilles #3
St. Croix R.
Paquahawong
Lac Court Oreilles #1-2
Lac du Flambeau
Wolf R.
Chippewa R.
Stockbridge
Green Bay (Menominee)
Wittenberg
Oneida
Mississippi R.
Black R.
Oneida Day #1-5
Lake Michigan
Lake Winnebago
Fox R.
Tomah
25 – 39 students
40 – 80
>= 120
Wisconsin R.
Rock R.
The largest circles also indicate boarding schools.

FIGURE 1.3. Indian schools and enrollments in Wisconsin in 1899 (Data from *Statistics of Indian Tribes, Indian Agencies, and Indian Schools of Every Character* [1899])

What Can Be and Is Being Done about the Situation?

Native American language revitalization projects are sweeping the nation, and Wisconsin is no exception. Every tribe has language preservation and revitalization programs in progress. The various languages are taught in day care, in schools, and in colleges, and other specialized programs are in place.[7]

If you search around on the web, you'll find that almost every tribe has a website that talks about its language preservation programs. The Ho-Chunk have, for example, an extensive website dedicated to their language.[8] It contains language lessons, as well as audio clips of the language. The mission statement of their language department is an eloquent yet concise statement of the goals of all of the state's language preservation programs: "[This] division is dedicated to ensuring the Hoocąk language continues to be a 'LIVING LANGUAGE.' As a sign of respect to our elders, and the speakers that have come before us, we will continue to speak our language, celebrate our customs, respect the Hoocąk value system and teach our future generations the Hoocąk way of life."[9]

Many tribes also have a tribal body that oversees language revitalization efforts. For example, the Menominee Language and Culture Commission (MLCC) was established by tribal ordinance in 1996.[10] The ordinance requires "that the language be used in tribal business whenever possible, and be taught in all of the schools on the Menominee Reservation—from day care to the tribal college" (Caldwell and Macaulay 2000, 18). The MLCC also regulates and oversees research by outside scholars. Such ordinances are a practical and efficient way of organizing the language work that goes on within a given tribe.

A number of models for language revitalization are being practiced in Wisconsin. Immersion programs are one of the best ways to get kids speaking their heritage language again. It is one of the most promising methods of language preservation because little children have that amazing ability to just soak up language like a sponge. To do successful immersion, the kids have to be in situations (including classrooms or other locations) where nothing but the language in question is spoken. Of course, this means that there have to be enough fluent speakers available to provide the immersion, which can be a stumbling block when there are only a handful of remaining speakers.

Nonetheless, several immersion programs have been started around the state in recent years. For example, in 2007 the Ho-Chunk opened an immersion day care center for children from three months to five years old.[11] From all reports it is going very well, and the kids are picking up the language beautifully—that's what children do. And the Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe opened Waadookodaading, an Ojibwe language immersion charter school, in 2001.[12] They have developed their own curricula and are adding grades gradually, as they are able to.[13]

Another popular and successful model is the Master-Apprentice program. In this approach, a master (a fluent native-speaker elder) and an apprentice (a younger person, usually a young adult, who wants to learn the language) are paired in one-on-one interaction. In a very real sense, this model is a form of intensive immersion. The pair spends a predetermined number of hours per day together (usually a half day), speaking only the native language. How exactly these programs work varies a bit, of course, but most are funded by a language preservation grant, and each member of the pair is paid for their time. In an article about the Master-Apprentice approach, Leanne Hinton addresses the potentially controversial issue of paying the participants, noting that "the practical side of the issue is that often this stipend can make the difference between an apprentice who works full time and thus is too busy or exhausted to take full advantage of the program versus an apprentice who can cut back on work hours and devote himself more fully [to the program]" (2001, 219). Ideally, a master and an apprentice are able to work together in the program for three years; at the end of that time, it is hoped that the apprentice will be reasonably fluent and have an extensive vocabulary. Most apprentices go on to become language teachers in the schools and other places where the language is taught in the community. As Hinton says, in many cases the master and the apprentice develop an ongoing relationship, "and the master will also be involved in all the future language activities of the apprentice" (2001, 223).

Language revitalization is a tough road to follow. The sheer amount of work that it takes can be daunting, and participants can get discouraged. But it can also be exciting and exhilarating, and many members of the native communities of Wisconsin are devoting their lives to it. We know a young Menominee man who is speaking only his heritage language to his children, and hearing the first baby-talk Menominee to be spoken in well over half a century is truly inspiring.

NOTES

1. The names can get confusing: what we will call Ojibwe can also be spelled Ojibwa or Ojibway. Chippewa is the Anglicized name for Ojibwe. And the native name for the tribe is Anishinaabe or some variant thereof.

2. They do have some language reclamation projects underway, though—they have decided to focus on Lenape and have started a Headstart immersion school.

3. There are also different names and spellings for Ho-Chunk: sometimes you'll see it spelled Hocąk or Hoocąk—the *a* with a little hook under it represents a nasalized vowel (like in French). They were formerly called the Winnebago, but they have now rejected that name in favor of their own name for themselves.

4. This is in stark contrast to the robust native language opportunities—in the form, for example, of schools and newspapers—that immigrants to Wisconsin enjoyed, as described in chapters 2 and 3.

5. Much of our information about Wisconsin boarding schools comes from Loew 2001; we highly recommend this book for further information on the Native Americans of Wisconsin.

6. The Winnebago Indian Mission School is currently called the Winnebago Children's Home; for its history, see http://www.usgennet.org/usa/wi/county/clark/pinevalley/churches/winnebagoschool/winnebagochildrenshome.htm.

7. Even the University of Wisconsin–Madison offers four semesters of Ojibwe, which can satisfy the language requirement for majors in the College of Letters and Science.

8. See http://www.hocak.info.

9. Hoocąk Waaziija Haci Language Division, http://www.hocak.info/mysite/HTM%20All/Mission%20Statement.html.

10. See http://www.menominee-nsn.gov/MITW/cultureCommission.aspx.

11. See http://www.hocak.info/mysite/HTM%20All/Wahooceg%C4%AFkra%20-%20Daycare.html.

12. See http://www.waadookodaading.org.

13. A very nice video of Ojibwe language revitalization programs, including Waadookodaading, can be found at http://www.tpt.org/?a=productions&id=3.