

VIEWERS' DISCUSSION GUIDE TO

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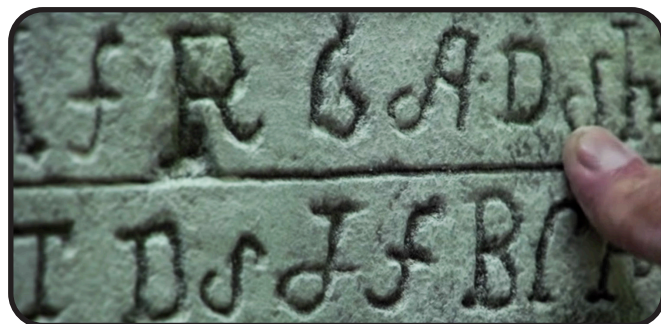
FIRST LANGUAGE

the race to save Cherokee

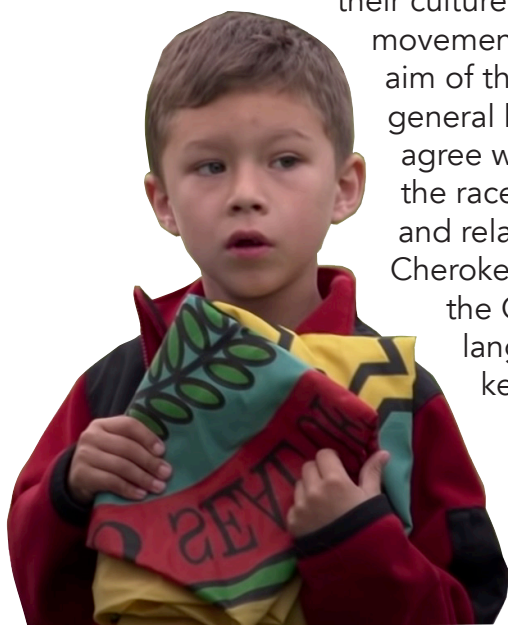
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INTRODUCTION

This discussion guide is the companion to *First Language - The Race to Save Cherokee*, an Emmy award-winning film by the Language & Life Project at NC State University. The film brings attention to the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians as they fight to revitalize their language. The Cherokee Indians have been living in the southern Appalachian Mountains since at least 1000 CE. Later named one of the "Five Civilized Tribes," they, along with the Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks, and Seminoles,



maintained complex agrarian civilizations in what is now the Southeastern United States even as colonial settlers encroached on their ancestral homes. Despite boasting a literacy rate well above that of the European Americans throughout the 19th century and producing the Cherokee Phoenix, one of the earliest newspapers in North Carolina, the Cherokee language became critically endangered in the 20th century mostly as a result of government policies. Among the most destructive policies was the creation of Indian Boarding Schools, which separated children from their culture and punished them for speaking their heritage language. This movement was spurred by Captain Richard H. Pratt, who described the aim of the so-called civilization program by noting his belief that "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." These and related linguistic imperialist policies resulted in a sharp decline in Cherokee language throughout the 20th century. The Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians have recognized the cultural loss should the language fade entirely, and are now taking extraordinary steps to keep their language alive.



This guide explains key concepts and terminology used throughout the film and also contains additional resources that can be used to further explore various topics discussed in the film. The guide also features discussion questions to be answered before, during, and after watching the documentary.



KEY CONCEPTS & TERMINOLOGY

Language Revitalization

Language revitalization refers to efforts made to increase the use of a language that is in danger of becoming endangered or extinct. Language revitalization can have different goals and various tactics to reach those goals, but these efforts aim to improve both fluency of speakers and increase the number of speakers of a language. One critical component of such efforts is to expand the domains in which the language is used by community members.

Heritage Language

A *heritage language* refers to a language of ethnic/linguistic minorities maintained in an environment in which there is a different primary/dominant language. By contrast, the *dominant language* is the language spoken by the dominant social, economic, and cultural power of the area in question and is the language used for governmental, educational, and other official communication. (For the purposes of this documentary, the heritage language is Cherokee and the dominant language is English.)

Linguistic Imperialism

The term *linguistic imperialism* is not specifically mentioned in the film, but it plays an important role in why the Cherokee language is in danger of extinction. In a broad sense, it is the forced imposition of one language onto a group of speakers of a different language. This imposition is often related to social, economic, and cultural power. (In this case, English was forced upon the Cherokee, leading to a situation of language loss for the Cherokee Indians.) Beginning in 1870 (with the last residential schools closing as late as 1973), the United States federal government began sending American Indians to off-reservation boarding schools. Segments from [First Language](#) and [Voices of North Carolina](#) touch on this tragedy, and you can read (or listen to) more here:

[American Indian Boarding Schools Haunt Many Boarding Schools \(Museum of the American Indian\)](#)

Although the policy of removing children and re-educating them in boarding schools no longer exists, endangered languages such as Cherokee still struggle to survive in the midst of social, economic, and cultural pressures.

Bilingualism

François Grosjean, an international authority on the topic of bilingualism, gives this definition of *bilingual* individuals: “[b]ilinguals are those who use two or more languages (or dialects) in their everyday lives” (Grosjean 4). Note that this definition emphasizes a regular use of the languages over any designated levels of fluency for the languages in question.

The Cherokee Tribes

There are three federally-recognized Cherokee tribes in the United States: the Cherokee Nation (Oklahoma), the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians (Oklahoma), and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (North Carolina).

The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, upon whom this film is based, resides in the Qualla Boundary in the far western part of North Carolina. The Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians

separated from the other Cherokee groups over cultural differences in the early 1800s. They were able to avoid forced removal under the 1830 Indian Removal Act in part because William Holland Thomas, a white man who had been adopted and raised by the tribe, purchased land with tribal money (Indians were not permitted to own land).

Trail of Tears:

The *Trail of Tears* refers to a series of forced relocations of American Indians from their homelands to "Indian Territory" across the Mississippi River. These extended from the 1830 Indian Removal Act and lasted throughout most of the 1830s. To read more about the Trail of Tears, see these pages on the History Channel's website:

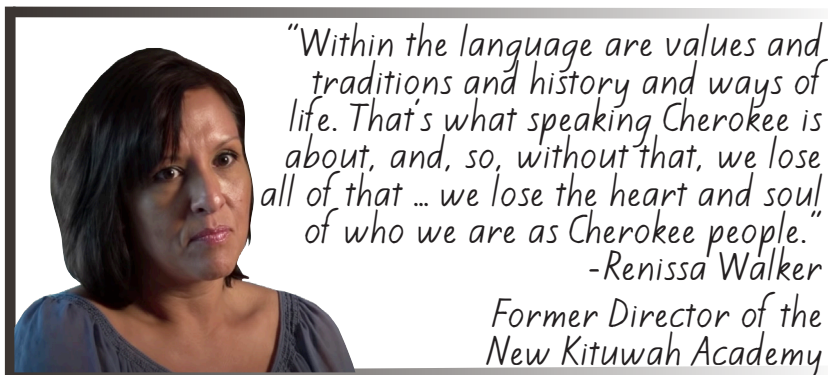
[Trail of Tears](#)

[7 things you may not know about the Trail of Tears](#)

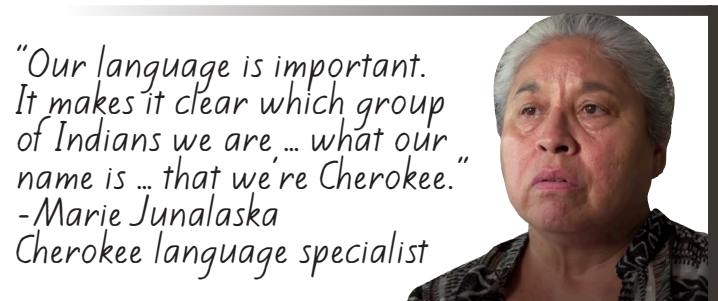
The Cherokee Syllabary:

A *syllabary* differs from an alphabet in that each character in a syllabary represents a syllable, whereas each character in an alphabet represents an individual sound. The Cherokee syllabary was created by Sequoyah in the early 1800s. Whereas English has 26 letters, the Cherokee Syllabary originally had 85 characters to capture the different sound combinations of the language.

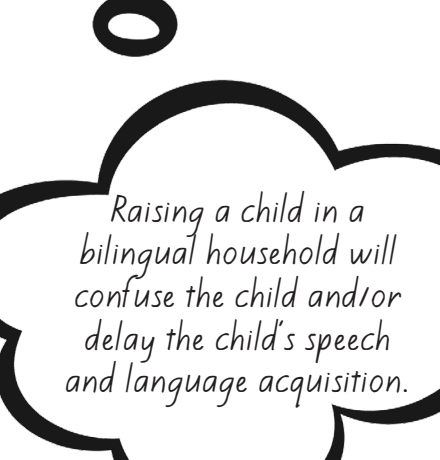
To learn more, watch this [video](#) featuring Lawrence Panther, a Cherokee translator and language instructor.



In the Cherokee tradition, by becoming fluent in the language, one inherits the shared cultural history of the tribe; thus, many feel that, to be fully Cherokee, one must also speak the language.



The name Cherokee is of uncertain origin. One theory is that comes from Muscogee word "Cilokki" which means "the people with another language." The Cherokee's original name for themselves was "Aniyunwiya," which translates profoundly as "the real people." Regardless of the origin of the term, it is clear that the language is a critical part of the group's cultural history.



Raising a child in a bilingual household will confuse the child and/or delay the child's speech and language acquisition.

Research has shown that bilingual children are not delayed in their speech and language development. Furthermore, there is evidence that suggests that being bilingual can actually enhance cognitive flexibility.

The New Kituwah Academy (ᏊᏃ ᏌᏍᏓ ᏊᏃ ᏌᏍᏓ ᏊᏃ ᏌᏍᏓ) in Cherokee, NC, is a private, bilingual immersion school that serves Cherokee students from kindergarten through sixth grade. More about the school can be found on the Kituwah Preservation and Education Program [website](#). The school also has a [YouTube channel](#).



Beloved Man or **Beloved Woman** is a title bestowed on a Cherokee person to honor their special contributions to their people- a unique and special designation afforded to few in recorded history. LLP documentaries [First Language](#) and [Voices of North Carolina](#) feature four of these individuals (clockwise from top left); [Amanda Swimmer](#), [Jerry Wolfe](#), [Shirley Oswalt](#), and [Myrtle Driver Johnson](#). You can read more about the tradition on [this page](#) of the Visit Cherokee website.



Interested in learning more about the Cherokee language and Cherokee culture? Check out the following links!

- Cherokee language learning material found on the New Kituwah Academy website [here](#).
- Cherokee language database [here](#).
- This [website](#), courtesy of the Cherokee Nation.
- The [VisitCherokeeNC](#) YouTube channel and the [OsiyoTV](#) YouTube channel.
- Our State Magazine, in conjunction with UNC-TV, also has a [short video](#) on the Cherokee language.
- Voice of America (VOA) News has posted several YouTube videos featuring the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and their fight to revitalize their language. Watch them [here](#) and [here](#).
- To learn more about visiting Cherokee, NC, click [here](#)!

And if you're learning the language, you may want to download a Cherokee keyboard to your computer and/or smart device. You can find instructions on [this page](#) of Cherokee.org



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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PRE-VIEWING

1. Imagine that, one day, as a student in the United States, you show up for a normal school day and find out that you are no longer allowed to speak English at school. Your classes are no longer being taught in English; your textbooks are no longer written in English; announcements are no longer made in English; you are even punished for speaking English in the hallways and at lunch time! How do you think that you would react?
2. Do you think that language and culture are tied together? Why or why not? What about language and identity? Why or why not?
3. How do you learn a language? How did you learn the language(s) you know today?
4. How do you identify ethnically, racially, or culturally? Is the way that you identify related to your proficiency in the languages of your ethnic, racial, or cultural group(s)?

ACTIVE VIEWING

1. What strategies of language revitalization are depicted in the film?
2. What are some of the reasons that have led to the Cherokee language being critically endangered?
3. Who was Sequoyah? What was his major contribution to the Cherokee language?
4. What is the difference between a syllabary and an alphabet? How many syllabary symbols are needed to represent your name?

POST-VIEWING

1. One speaker in the film said the following: "I'm not so sure that language was the only reason that the children were encouraged to speak English and not Cherokee. I think it probably had a lot to do with Americanizing the Cherokee children." Do you agree or disagree? Explain your rationale.
2. Several speakers in the film discuss how, for some words, there is no direct Cherokee to English translation. Can you think of some examples of words from other languages you know that are difficult to translate into English?
3. Why is language revitalization important? Specifically, why is it important to the Cherokee?
4. What are your thoughts on the Cherokee's revitalization efforts? Do you think that their efforts will be enough to save the Cherokee language from extinction?

Additional Resources

Learn more about the film (and how to purchase the DVD) on the Language & Life Project [website](#). Stream the documentary for free on the Language & Life Project's [YouTube channel](#).

Learn more about the Language & Life Project and their other films on the [LLP website](#).

The Language & Life Project at NC State, in conjunction with the NC Civic Education Consortium, developed lessons about language diversity in North Carolina including one specifically on the Cherokee revitalization efforts, which is linked here: <https://linguistics.chass.ncsu.edu/thinkanddo/cec.php>

Learn more about the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians on their website: <https://ebci.com>

There are many different books that cover topics related to bilingualism. Here are three to get you started!

Grosjean, François. *Bilingual: Life and Reality*. Harvard University Press, 2010.

In this book, Grosjean--an international authority on the topic of bilingualism--addresses myths related to bilingualism and explores different facets of life as they pertain to the use of two or more languages.

Myers-Scotton, Carol. *Multiple Voices: An Introduction to Bilingualism*. Blackwell Publishing, 2006.

This textbook is recommended for undergraduate or beginning graduate students.

In it, Myers-Scotton provides a comprehensive overview of bilingualism, discussing bilingualism as it relates to such topics as psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, language policies, and more.

Shin, Sarah. *Bilingualism in Schools and Society: Language, Identity, and Policy*. Routledge, 2013.

This book introduces readers to various social and educational aspects of bilingualism, touching upon a myriad of sociolinguistic and political issues related to bilingualism.