I Lost My Talk

SUMMARY

You stole my native language from me. This happened when I was a child at the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School.

You seized my language, and now I talk like you, I think like you, and I make things the way you do—things like the muddled story about my language.

I speak in two different ways, but I understand that your way (English) is stronger.

As such, with tenderness, I reach out my hand and ask you to let me rediscover my native language so that I can tell you who I am.

THEMES

LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

"I Lost My Talk" presents language as an essential part of cultural identity and expression. The poem's speaker is someone who was forced to abandon her native tongue while attending "Shubenacadie school," part of a network of residential schools in Nova Scotia, Canada, designed to stamp out Indigenous culture. In being forced to adopt English in place of her own language, the speaker argues that she lost not only a vital connection to her past and her people, but also to her identity itself.

The speaker wasn't just taught a new language at "Shubenacadie school"; she was forced to *replace* her native tongue. This, the speaker, says, was akin to erasing her heritage. By forcing her to not only "speak" but also to "think" and "create in English, the dominant culture drowned out the speaker's connection to her own "word"—to her people's traditions, beliefs, and values. She was forced to abandon her people's ways of thinking and being and to instead adopt those of her oppressors.

Now, the speaker can't even talk about where she comes from without the "ballad" (or story) getting "scrambled," which suggests that she will never be to fully understand or capture her "word" in English (and, perhaps, that her English will never be easy and fluent). This isolates the speaker, who is can neither fluidly communicate with her own people nor "teach" people outside of her own culture about herself.

The speaker thus asks that she be allowed to "find [her] talk"—that is, relearn her native language and reconnect with her culture—so that she can truly know, and share, who she is. Language is so intimately linked to culture, the poem implies, that it can be used as a tool of cultural oppression *and* of preservation and liberation. Without access to her own language, an important part of her—and her culture—will be forever lost. But by reclaiming her native tongue, the speaker knows she can reclaim her connection to her people and thus reclaim an essential part of herself.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-15

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

I lost my ...
... you took away.

"I Lost My Talk" begins with the speaker stating that she has lost her native language, which she calls her "talk." This language, she says, didn't just disappear: it was stolen from her—by the very people she is addressing.

The repetition of the word "talk" (which in this case is more specifically anadiplosis) immediately emphasizes what is at the heart of this poem: language. The choice to use the word "talk" rather than "language," however, is important.

On the one hand, this makes the poem feel less formal, and it might evoke the way losing a native language hinders the ability to express oneself. The phrase "I lost my talk" has a certain strangeness to it that suggests a lack of ease with English, or that the speaker is trying to say something that doesn't quite translate.

This, in turn, draws attention to the fact that, though the speaker has lost her own native language, English hasn't entirely *replaced* it; instead, she is stuck somewhere in between, unable to freely speak her own language, and uncomfortable with the language of her oppressor.

At the same time, the actual sounds of word "talk" add to the poem's intensity. Note how the /t/ and /k/ consonance and /aw/ assonance work together to create a rather sharp, staccato rhythm:

I lost my talk
The talk you took away.

The lines don't feel free-flowing; instead, they feel abrupt and quite direct.

LINES 3-4

When I was ...

... At Shubenacadie school.

The speaker zooms out, offering some context for her opening statement about losing her language. Lines 3-4 allude to the poet's own time "At Shubenacadie school" when she was a young girl. The grounds the poem in Rita Joe's personal history, and also in Canadian history more broadly.

"Shubenacadie school" was an Indian residential school in Nova Scotia, Canada, that operated from 1930-1967. Joe spent four years there, during which time she was forced to stop speaking her language, cut her hair short, and dress in uniform along with other Indigenous children. She was subjected to physical and mental abuse from the nuns, who frequently told her she was "no good."

While Joe is referencing her personal life experience, the poem also speaks to the experiences of Indigenous children everywhere who have been forced to abandon their ancestral languages and cultural heritage. "Shubenacadie school" belongs to a long history of European expansion and domination of other cultures, a history in which Indigenous peoples have been subject to any number of violent acts and inhumane policies. The speaker isn't just talking about her own loss of her native language; she is speaking to the much broader realities of colonialism and racism behind this loss.

LINES 5-8

You snatched it ...
... create like you

The speaker reiterates the fact that her language didn't just up and disappear: it was actively taken from her. "You snatched it away," she says, using apostrophe to directly confront her oppressor. The verb "snatched" is quick and violent, suggesting that the cruel force of this theft.

The speaker then goes on to describe the consequences of losing her language. Using parallelism to show the relationship between language and thought, the speaker says:

> I speak **like you**
> I think **like you**
> I create **like you**

Again, the parallelism here illustrates the link between the way people talk and the way they think and make things. Even in her imagination, then, she isn't free.

The repetitive nature of these phrases also simply helps the speaker hammer home her point. The insistent repetition of "I" at the beginning of each line (anaphora) and the repetition of "like you" at the end of each line (epistrophe) positions the speaker on one side of the page and "you," her oppressor, on the other.

Consonance plays a strong role in these lines as well. The intense repetition of /k/ sounds fills the lines with a certain clarity and sharpness.

LINE 9

The scrambled ballad, about my word.

The speaker goes on to say that all this speaking, thinking, and creating in English results in a "scrambled ballad." This is a metaphor for the speaker's inability to fully and accurately express herself in English: her "ballad" (or story) comes out jumbled, mixed up. How, the poem implicitly asks, can she tell the story of who she is when she doesn't have access to the language and customs that shaped her?

Consonance helps evoke the speaker's sense of confusion and frustration. Note how /k/ and /l/ sounds carry over from the previous lines, while heavy /b/ sounds create a jumbled mouthful:

> The scrambled ballad, about my word.

These sounds knit "scrambled" and "ballad" together, subtly reflecting the idea that there is no sorting out the speaker's story. Her sorrow and bewilderment can be felt in the jumble of sounds, as well as in the odd syntax; the awkward arrangement of the line itself enacts the "scrambled" nature of her thoughts.

The use of the word "ballad" taps into poetic history: a "ballad" is a very old form that usually tells a story. The use of the word reinforces the idea the speaker's own poetic legacy has been taken from her. The choice of "word" at the end of this line is also interesting. The speaker doesn't say "history," "culture," "language," or even "words" plural. In a way, this points to the power of language, that one "word" can encompass all of these things.

LINES 10-15

Two ways I ...
... you about me.

The third stanza uses parallelism again, this time to show the kind of trap the speaker has been placed in by being forced to abandon her own language. Note how these lines are the same grammatically, which underscores the idea that, no matter which language she speaks in, the message doesn't change:

> Two ways I talk
> Both ways I say,

On the one hand, she has "two ways" of talking: her own native tongue, in which she has lost proficiency during her time at "Shubenacadie school," and English, which doesn't allow her to express herself fully and accurately. On the other hand, "both ways" of speaking amount to the same thing: the oppressor having power over her. English being "more powerful" also speaks to the fact that it is the language of the dominant culture, and thus carries more weight in society.

Also note how the repetition of the plural "ways" in lines 10-11 narrows into a singular "way in line 12, implying that the speaker's options aren't really options; she's been forced into giving up her power.

The speaker then addresses her oppressor again in the poem's final stanza, asking to be allowed to rediscover her language—to reconnect to her culture so that she can share her true, authentic self with those who would otherwise erase her. She makes this request "gently" while "offer[ing her] hand," a gesture that implies a desire for connection and cooperation over domination and violence. She also knows she cannot force her oppressor into treating her like the human being that she is, but she has to try something—perhaps by convincing her oppressor that she has something valuable to "teach" them.

SYMBOLS

TALK

The speaker uses the word "talk" to refer to literal language, but "talk" also becomes symbolic in the poem of power and identity. When the speaker says she "lost [her] talk," she is saying that she lost both her native language and the *power* that language affords: the power to fully express herself, to connect to her history and culture, and to know who she is.

Because she lost her "talk," the speaker can only mimic the language and ideas that are forced upon her; she "speak[s]," "think[s]," and "create[s]" like her oppressor. She can't remember her own language, and when she speaks English, she is only proving her oppressor to be "more powerful" because she's been forced to accept the oppressor's language as her own.

When when the speaker asks that she be allowed to "find [her] talk" so that she can "teach" her oppressor about who she is, she is not just asking to be reconnected to her language: she is seeking to reconnect with her lost sense of self. Being able to share herself and her culture is a source of strength in a world that has tried to erase her people and her heritage.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "I lost my talk / The talk you took away."
- **Lines 5-9:** "You snatched it away: / I speak like you / I think like you / I create like you / The scrambled ballad, about my word."
- **Lines 10-11:** "Two ways I talk / Both ways I say,"
- **Line 14:** "Let me find my talk"

POETIC DEVICES

PARALLELISM

The speaker uses parallelism in the second stanza in order to add emphasis and intensity to the list of all the ways in which she has been forced to become like her oppressors:

> I speak **like you**
> I think **like you**
> I create **like you**

Notice how each statement follows the exact same grammatical structure (and also features anaphora of the word "I" and epistrophe of the phrase "like you"). The uniformity of these lines reflects the fact that the speaker and other children at Shubenacadie school were forced to *conform* to the dominant culture. Not only was the speaker's language stolen, but her sense of identity was as well: all she can do is parrot back what she is told. The repetitive lines here also suggest the way the children are made to fall into line rather than embrace and express their authentic selves.

The speaker turns to parallelism again in lines 10-12, when she says:

> Two **ways I** talk
> Both **ways I** say
> Your way is more powerful.

The parallelism here echoes the speaker's point: regardless of whether she tries to speak in her own tongue, fluency in which the school robbed her of, or in English, which doesn't allow her to articulate her true self, the school has weakened her by forcing her into a shape that isn't her own. The repetition of these lines again points to the way the speaker can only echo what's been given her.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-8:** "I speak like you / I think like you / I create like you"
- **Lines 10-11:** "Two ways I talk / Both ways I say,"

REPETITION

The poem uses a few different kinds of repetition throughout. For instance, the speaker uses the word "away" at the end of line 2 and then again at the end of line 5, and uses the phrase "my talk" in the first line as well as in line 14. This kind of general repetition draws attention to what the poem is about: the fact that the speaker's "talk," or language, has been taken "away" from her. The repetition keeps these key concepts clear in the reader's (or listener's) mind.

The poem also uses anadiplosis in lines 1-2 with the repetition of the word "talk":

> I lost my **talk**
> The **talk** you took away.

Beyond adding emphasis to the importance of "talk," or language, this creates a choppy rhythm; the poem just wouldn't feel the same if it read, "I lost my talk / Which you took away."

As noted in our discussion of the poem's parallelism, lines 6-8 contain epistrophe and anaphora:

> I speak **like you**
> I think **like you**
> I create **like you**

The repetition of the phrase "like you" is particularly powerful, as it emphasizes the speaker's own repetition of her oppressors. The repetition here also places the speaker, "I," and her oppressor, "you," on opposite ends of each line.

Parallelism then creates yet another kind of repetition called diacope in lines 10-12, as the speaker repeats the word "ways." Note how this actually becomes "way" in line 12; the dropping of the "s" here suggests that there is only *one* option, *one* "way," for the speaker to talk, and that is the "way" that's been forced on her by the school.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "my talk"
- **Line 2:** "talk," "away"
- **Line 5:** "away"
- **Line 6:** "I," "like you"
- **Line 7:** "I," "like you"
- **Line 8:** "I," "like you"
- **Line 10:** "ways," "I"
- **Line 11:** "ways," "I"
- **Line 12:** "way"
- **Line 14:** "my talk"

CONSONANCE

"I Lost My Talk" contains lots of consonance, which adds musicality to an otherwise stripped-down and straightforward poem. In the first stanza, for example, /t/ and /k/ sounds make the lines feel intentionally choppy and stark:

> I lost my talk
> The talk you took away.

The sharpness of the poem at this moment underscores the speaker's point: that her own language is inaccessible to her and she cannot fully express herself. Strong consonance makes the speaker sound all the more impassioned and forceful. Had she chosen to say "I lost my language" instead of "I lost my talk," the *meaning* would be the same, but the *effect* wouldn't be.

In the second stanza, more sharp /k/ sounds combine with liquid /l/ sounds to create an almost sticky feeling, as if the speaker can't separate herself from the language she's been forced to speak:

> I speak like you
> I think like you
> I create like you
> The scrambled ballad, about my word

The /k/ sounds in particular echo across words the way the speaker herself feels as if she is echoing her oppressor, not free to express her own thoughts and feelings. In line 9, the addition of forceful /b/ sounds ("The scrambled ballad, about") again makes the poem feel all the more impassioned, evoking the speaker's sense of confusion and grief.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "lost," "talk"
- **Line 2:** "talk," "took," "away"
- **Line 3:** "When," "was," "little," "girl"
- **Line 4:** "Shubenacadie," "school"
- **Line 5:** "snatched"
- **Line 6:** "speak," "like"
- **Line 7:** "think," "like"
- **Line 8:** "create," "like"
- **Line 9:** "scrambled," "ballad," "about," "word"
- **Line 10:** "Two," "talk"
- **Line 12:** "way," "powerful"
- **Line 14:** "talk"
- **Line 15:** "can," "teach," "about"

ASSONANCE

The poem only has a few moments of assonance, but these, like the moments of strong consonance, add music and emphasis to the speaker's language. In the first two lines, for example, assonance, consonance, and repetition combine to create a short, choppy, and striking rhythm:

> I lost my talk
> The talk you took away.

Likewise, the long /ay/ sounds of "way" and "say" in line 11 and the /i/ sounds of "find my" in line 14 add small bursts of force and feeling to the poem.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "lost," "talk"

- **Line 2:** “talk”
- **Line 11:** “ways,” “say”
- **Line 14:** “find my”

ALLUSION

The poem contains an allusion to a school that the poet, Rita Joe, actually attended. "Shubenacadie school" was an Indian residential school in Nova Scotia, Canada, that ran from 1930 to 1967. Run by Christian churches and funded by the Canadian government, the primary purpose of residential schools was to assimilate Indigenous children into the dominant culture as a way of disempowering Indigenous populations. Children at Shubenacadie weren't allowed to speak their own language or practice their culture's customs. They were also often subjected to poor living conditions and abuse.

The allusion is a reminder that the speaker didn't just "lose" her language—it was violently and intentionally taken from her and other Indigenous children. The allusion also reminds readers that the speaker's struggle isn't hers alone: over 1,000 Mi'kmaq children passed through Shubenacadie School in the 37 years it was open. Moreover, Shubenacadie School was just one of over a hundred Indian residential schools that operated in Canada alone. At least 6,000 Indigenous children died in residential schools, and many more lost their language and knowledge of their cultural heritage.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** “When I was a little girl / At Shubenacadie school.”

METAPHOR

The poem uses a metaphor in line 9 to describe what it's like for the speaker to try to express herself in a language that's been forced upon her. She describes the reality of "speak[ing]," "think[ing]," and "creat[ing]" in English, the language that's been given to her by her oppressor, as a "scrambled ballad."

A ballad is a narrative, or story, in verse. If it is "scrambled," that means it is all mixed up, jumbled together in a way that doesn't make any sense. The speaker is essentially saying that she can't access her own story, the story of who she is, who her people are, her history and culture and customs, because they've been distorted through the loss of her language.

The word "ballad" itself taps into a long tradition of English-language poetry as well, and in doing so highlights how the speaker has been torn apart from her own artistic traditions.

Notably, this "scrambled ballad" becomes "about [her] word" rather than about what happened to her. Having been robbed of her language, it seems all she can do is point to this loss; the conundrum is that she can't really talk about what she lost when she doesn't have the language for it. This is why it is necessary for her to "find [her] talk"; only then can she fit the pieces of her story, or "ballad," back together.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** “The scrambled ballad, about my word.”

VOCABULARY

My talk (Lines 1-2, Lines 13-15) - The speaker is referring to her native language, Mi'kmaq.

Shubenacadie school (Lines 3-4) - *Shubenacadie school* was an Indian residential school in Nova Scotia, Canada.

Scrambled (Line 9) - Jumbled, muddled, or confused.

Ballad (Line 9) - A poem or song that narrates a story.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"I Lost My Talk" has 15 lines broken up into four short stanzas of varying lengths (ranging from three to five lines apiece). It doesn't conform to any traditional poetic form, which is fitting for a poem that points out the harmfulness of forced conformity and assimilation.

The poem is also quite small and spare, which emphasizes the idea that the speaker has "lost [her] talk"—that for her, communication is quite difficult because she can't access the words she needs to tell others who she is.

METER

"I Lost My Talk" is written in free verse, meaning it doesn't follow a set meter. This feels like a very intentional choice: the speaker isn't interested in following prescribed rules, but rather is looking for what feels authentic to her and her culture.

That being said, there are isolated moments of meter in the poem that are worth exploring. The meter that shows up most often in the poem is iambic dimeter. This is when a line contains two iambs (a foot with an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable). The first line of the poem, for example, is in iambic dimeter:

I lost | my talk

This provides the line with a sense of rhythm (da-DUM da-DUM), which actually remains the same in the following line (though there are three feet instead of two here, making it *trimeter*):

The talk | you took | away.

Pushed together, these two lines would have amounted to iambic *pentameter*, which is a line made up of five iambs—the most commonly used meter in traditional English poetry. As such, the speaker briefly nods toward the history of the language she's been forced to learn, while also subtly making that tradition her own.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem does not follow a rhyme scheme or use rhyme at all for that matter. This makes the poem feel more conversational and straightforward, more stripped-down, and even more vulnerable. The speaker isn't risking the possibility of what she has to say being obscured by fancy poetic devices; it is really important to her to communicate her loss and have it be understood by a broad audience.

SPEAKER

The speaker is someone whose "talk," or native language, was taken away from her while she attended "Shubenacadie school." The allusion to the poet's real life—Joe herself actually spent several years at this specific Canadian Indian residential school—indicates that the speaker may be understood as some version of the poet herself.

More importantly, though, the speaker is a voice for all Indigenous people who were cut off from their native languages and cultural identities by colonialist policies. Joe and thousands of Mi'kmaq children like her (not to mention Indigenous children all over the world) were punished for speaking their own language or practicing their own cultures. The speaker recognizes that if she doesn't find a way to reconnect with her own language and culture and "teach" others about it, her people's way of life is in danger of being eradicated.

The speaker doesn't want to "think," "speak," and "create" like her oppressor; she wants to find out who *she* is, and express that.

SETTING

The poem doesn't have a physical setting. The speaker isn't observing the world or remembering a specific scene but rather is making a statement about her experience as a Mi'kmaq person who attended a Canadian Indian residential school. "Shubenacadie school" is the only part of the poem which references a physical place in the world. It was located in Nova Scotia, Canada, and operated from 1930 to 1967.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"I Lost My Talk" was published in Rita Joe's first book of poems, *The Poems of Rita Joe*, in 1978. The poem is autobiographical, referring to the poet spent at Shubenacadie Indian Residential School in Nova Scotia, Canada. This school's primary purpose was the forced assimilation of Indigenous people into the dominant Canadian culture.

In addition to grappling with abusive tactics from the school's nuns and a racist curriculum, Joe was forced to abandon her native tongue, the Mi'kmaq language, and adopt English instead. Joe began writing to herself to counter the negative voices of the nuns, and to cope with the reality of marginalization. When she was 16, she finished school and began to relearn her native language.

Beginning with her first book, and most notably in her autobiography, *Song of Rita Joe*, Joe wrote extensively of the impact of residential schools and the loss of her language, culture, and identity. She would eventually be known as a kind of unofficial Poet Laureate of the Mi'kmaq, as through her writing she acted as an ambassador for her people and their interests.

Joe expressed that her greatest wish was that there would be more writing from her people, and indeed her legacy is one of empowerment not only for the Mi'maq, but for Indigenous writers and artists everywhere. Both the Rita Joe National Song Project, hosted by the National Arts Centre of Canada, and the Rita Joe Memorial Literacy Day, celebrated by Allison Bernard Memorial High School in Eskasoni First Nation, Nova Scotia, attest to Joe's profound influence on future generations of Indigenous people.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The first Indian residential school was opened in the United States in 1860, on the Yakima Indian Reservation in Washington. Residential schools soon became standard practice in the United States and Canada, where they would persist for the next century. These schools, run by Christian churches and funded by the government, existed with the express purpose of removing Indigenous children from their native cultures and assimilating them into the dominant culture: that of white people of European descent.

The Shubenacadie school, which Joe attended, was essentially an orphanage for Mi'kmaq (a First Nations people indigenous to parts of what is now northeastern Canada and Maine) children, many of whom were removed from their families by state officials. It operated in Nova Scotia from 1930 to 1967.

By assimilating Indigenous children—that is, teaching them to adopt the language, beliefs, and behaviors of the dominant culture in place of their own—the government hoped to

eradicate Indigenous ways of life without necessarily killing Indigenous people. This concept was famously and explicitly articulated in a speech by the American general Richard H. Pratt, who said residential schools would "kill the Indian" while "sav[ing] the man."

"I Lost My Talk" speaks directly to this history, illustrating the terrible impact of forced assimilation and suggesting a path forward in which Indigenous people are able to reconnect to their cultural heritage.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Watch a competitive performance of "I Lost My Talk" by Gabrielle Nebrida-Pepin for Poetry in Voice. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHToasTYguc)
- Rita Joe Song Project — A project hosted by the National Arts Centre, which invited students and teachers across Canada to create a song based on Rita Joe's "I Lost My Talk." (https://nac-cna.ca/en/ritajoesong)
- Mi'kmaq Identity — One of a series of OpenLearn videos on Mi'kmaq identity and culture. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGIw25_ML3U)
- The Harmful Legacy of Shubenacadie School — An article for CBC news recounting the abusive practices of nuns at Shubenacadie Indian Residential School. (https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/abuse-residential-schools-nuns-survivors-native-children-1.4171588)
- The Importance of Culture, Language, and Identity — An article about the importance of culture, language, and identity from RacismNoWay, an anti-racist educational resource for Australian schools. (https://racismnoway.com.au/about-racism/understanding-racism/the-importance-of-culture-language-and-identity/)

HOW TO CITE

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