Native American Responses to Language Obsolescence

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Native Americans use Native American languages for their most highly valued activities, they use them as symbols of ideologies, or systems of belief, and they are responding locally to their decline. Efforts to support Native American languages would do well to recognize these areas and build upon the local responses.

Native American languages are of importance to Native American people first and foremost because Native American people use them as an integral part of their community life. In some contemporary Native American communities the Native language is still widely used for virtually all purposes and indeed has been extended into such new settings such as radio broadcast. Even in communities where the Native language is no longer the primary vehicle for communication, however, the Native language is typically still used conscientiously for important purposes. In many Native American communities Native languages are used regularly as a part of the intimate workings of family life. Even in communities in which English, Spanish, or French now prevail, it is typical for the senior-most family members to use their Native language freely if not exclusively within the family sphere for such purposes as identifying cultural objects, greeting, asking questions, and giving directives. In this context, the Native language, if there happens to be only one, is more than a medium for conveying information. It is a symbol of family integrity and cohesion.

In many Native American communities, even in communities in which English is prevalent, elders prefer to use Native American languages when presenting personal, family, and tribal histories, tales, and myths. In addition to conveying information about the past, scholars have shown that such narrative sessions typically convey the culturally distinct values children draw upon when finding their own way in the world (Basso 1979, Hymes 1981, Jacobs 1959, Urban 1991). Even when English is used extensively in such narrative, Native American

languages are still employed for key parts of narratives (Moore 1993). Thus in this context Native American languages, in addition to conveying information are symbolic of the values associated with the cultural heritage.

In many communities, including the Blackfeet, the Navajo, and many others, Native people continue to use the Native language as an integral part of religious or ceremonial life. For those adhering to traditional religious practices the Native language is the language of liturgy and prayer. In addition to serving as the vehicle of communication in the narrow sense, in this context the language is symbolic of spirituality.

And even in communities where Native languages have been largely displaced by English or Spanish the Native languages are typically ubiquitous in the forms of personal names, place names, names for traditional ceremonials and ceremonial items, foods, plants, animals, and so on. In short, one should not underestimate the value Native Americans place on Native languages. Even where those languages are moribund from a linguistic point of view, that is to say, even when they are no longer the primary vehicle for conveying information per se, they generally maintain a profound presence in the community.

Native American languages are present in Native American communities in another sense that goes well beyond their actual use and this secondary presence is a another important indicator of their significance to Native American people. Native Americans have ideas, beliefs, rationalizations, or what academics call "ideologies" regarding their languages (Boas 1911, Kroskrity 2000, Schieffelin, Woolard, & Kroskrity 1998, Silverstein 1979, Whorf 1956). Typically these ideas reinforce patterns of language use. For example, an individual might believe that the use of their Native language is integral to the well being of their family. In view of this belief they might encourage the use of the language within the family.

Generally these beliefs center on the possibility that using Native American languages accomplishes more than communication per se. Examples include the following: the use of the Native language a) promotes cognitive development, b) activates a traditional worldview, c) sustains appropriate relations between human and other persons, d) promotes morality, and e)

promotes progress. Due to the realities of Native American history ideologies surrounding Native languages are not always positive. One also encounters such ideas as using the Native language a) promotes cultural parochialism, b) promotes immorality, c) discourages education, and d) retards economic progress. Though they have observed such ideologies for many years, and have become increasingly interested in them as centrally important subjects of research, academics do not understand them well. The key point here is that the well substantiated presence of such language beliefs or linguistic ideologies, whether positive or negative, further attests to the significance Native Americans grant to Native American languages by using them.

A third key point to be made about the importance Native Americans place on their Native languages is that while it has gone largely without notice in the academic literature, Native American individuals, families, and other sorts of groups, have in many cases taken it upon themselves to respond to the decline in the use of their Native languages. In the First Nations community I have studied in Canada, for example (The Xeni Gwet'in First Nations, formerly, The Nemiah Valley Indian Band), one family became concerned in roughly the 1970s when they observed that the Band was no longer conducting their politics or business in the Native language, which happens to be Chilcotin, a language related to Navajo and Apache. Family members began to address the matter publicly whenever an opportunity presented itself. As a result of their efforts the Band eventually returned to using the native language in public discussions, including political speeches and debates. Another family in an adjacent community has appointed themselves tribal historians. They attend events like weddings and funerals not only in the capacity of family members and participants but also as observers. Everywhere they go they bring state of the art recording equipment and have compiled an enormous library of audio and video records in hopes of preserving their language and culture.

These are not isolated cases. While as academics we have not systematically studied this phenomenon it seems to take two main forms (Silverstein 2002). Either the emphasis is on establishing the use of the language within central institutional spheres or it is on documenting, preserving, and displaying the cultural and historical significance of the language.

Anthropologists have observed a worldwide phenomenon of relatively marginal peoples beginning to preserve and protect aspects of their cultural heritage as they enter the realms of national and international politics and economics (Sahlins 2000). Some see this as the diffusion of the modern Western European emphasis on the *volk* and their native language and culture. Others believe that heritage in this sense an is integral component of the corporate identity of complex modern societies whether they be German, Scottish, Hispanic or Iroquois. While most are not yet prepared to explain the phenomenon, few deny its significance.

The heritage movement is widely apparent in contemporary Native American communities in the form of new societies, new museums, and new schools, new list-serves, all devoted to supporting traditional practices and documenting them while this is still possible. A prominent characteristic of heritage in this sense is that it is not readily classified as being conservative or progressive, traditional or modern. For example, interest in heritage is often greatest among the most educated and most economically successful community members. In many cases it is people that have been away to school who become most enthusiastic about reanimating their heritage. This suggests that heritage in this sense is an aspect of modernization. On the other hand, traditional community members are often also meaningfully involved. Moreover, participation often crosscuts the lines of what one might expect in terms of the received clines of conservative to progressive. Risking an absurdly academic characterization, it appears to generally represent something like a progressive neo-traditionalism.

In any case, almost everywhere that heritage movements are underway in Native American communities, the Native language (or, in some cases, languages) serves as an integral if not the central component of the heritage program. Sometimes this means that the central concern is with documenting the testimony of elders using state of the art technology like digital video recorders, other times it means developing a language curriculum, and yet other times it means displaying important terms like names for historically significant personages and sites.

Some of these movements represent no more than the actions of a family or two. In other cases the movement may eventually coalesce as a formal institution. It is important to remember that the movements I am describing here, whether consisting of individuals or families or institutes all originate locally. They are to be distinguished from programs established outside of Native American communities which at some point are tailored to serve Native American interests. While these latter programs can be very helpful, it is the former movements that are representative of the strength of feeling Native American people have for their languages and of the response of Native Americans to language obsolescence.

Native American efforts to come to terms with their linguistic heritage, to preserve the use of the language and to document its role in their cultures and histories is a new subject for academics. *Anthropological Linguistics*, an academic journal, initiated an ongoing series on Native American linguists beginning in roughly 1994. For the most part the featured individuals worked with linguists or anthropologists as a part of academic efforts to document Native languages and cultures. In some cases the Native American scholars moved well beyond their initial involvement and initiated projects of their own. These portraits are fascinating and vitally important but the kinds of language movements I am discussing here go well beyond these cases. Some have encouraged research in this area (Silverstein 1998) but no systematic ethnographies have been completed to date. While I am only familiar with two or three situations, and the one I am most familiar with happens to be located in Canada, they suggest that in all Native American communities there are people are very consciously addressing their linguistic heritage in one way or another. For some this might mean using the language with renewed purpose. For others it might mean avoiding the language due to painful associations. For yet others it might mean documenting the remaining speakers and beginning to learn the language for the first time. For yet others it may mean teaching the language to interested youth or even to linguists or anthropologists. The Peigan Institute represents the culmination of onesuch movement. Blackfeet individuals started the Institute to reactivate the language in their own lives. Later they began to address the obsolescence of the language in the community more generally. It

represents a case of a movement generating an institution of broad purpose and of considerable longevity. Thus such movements are to be taken very seriously. They represent not so much echoes of the past as they do a leading edge of language-centered culture in the United States. They represent not only how Native Americans feel about their Native languages; they represent the Native American goal of participating more effectively within contemporary American society. And they promise to play a larger and larger role in this country in the future.

To summarize, Native American languages are important to Native Americans in three ways: 1) as vehicles for conducting their most valued activities, 2) as objects of ideologies, and 3) as components of heritage movements. Native Americans are responding to language obsolescence and their efforts warrant the attention of scholars. The better organized among them should be centrally involved in any effort to support Native American languages or Native American education.

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