

Native Language Revitalization: Keeping the Languages Alive and Thriving

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Native American languages should be constantly revitalized by tribes because languages are a vital component of tribal culture and are an essential aspect of Native identity. Many Native languages have already disappeared or are in danger of disappearing and it is up to the tribes to preserve and revitalize their languages before they are gone forever. Keeping languages alive will benefit tribal members in several ways, but they must first overcome several barriers on the path to saving their languages. Many tribes have taken on efforts to revitalize their languages to varying degrees of success.

Throughout the world, there are approximately 7,000 languages in use today. Of those languages, an estimated 50-90% will be extinct by the end of this century (Baines, 2012; Lateu, 2014; Thomason, 2007). Before the arrival of the European colonists, North America was home to around 300 distinct languages (Perlin, 2014). Approximately 155 indigenous languages are spoken in North America today, with 135 of those languages only spoken by elders (Paskus, 2013). Currently, at least 50 of the languages still spoken have fewer than ten speakers each (Perlin, 2014). In Oklahoma, there were once 37 indigenous languages spoken. Of those languages, 22 have become extinct (Baines, 2012). The Chickasaw Language has approximately 70 fluent speakers, down from an estimated 1,000 fluent speakers in 1994 (Chew, 2015).

In order to understand why so many Native languages are in danger of becoming lost, one must take a look back at the history of North American tribes and European settlement of North America. With the arrival of Europeans, came a gradual decline in Native languages and the increase in the number of people speaking English. Some people argue that languages are “living entities and as such are born, flourish, mutate, wither, and die in a natural cycle” (Lateu, 2014, p. 13). However, the language loss that is occurring in the world today is not simply a part of the natural order of things. Rather, language loss started due to European colonization, was perpetuated by boarding schools, and continues today due to globalization and indifference.

The reasons that indigenous languages are disappearing are multiple and varied. The arrival of Europeans to the North American continent started the process of language decline as early as the 1600s. In addition to bringing new diseases that proved devastating to Native populations, Europeans also brought with them elitist cultural attitudes that prompted them to actively try to eradicate Native languages (Hinton, 2013). The process

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of one culture achieving dominance over another culture is almost always accompanied by language loss for the conquered people (Perlin, 2014). Furthermore, the Europeans also engaged in trade with the Indian tribes, so it became important for tribal members to speak English in order to engage in commerce (Ozbolt, 2014).

The ubiquitous federal boarding schools of the 19th and 20th centuries also contributed to the loss of American Indian languages. The effects of the boarding school experience on the languages today are still present in the form of peoples' attitudes toward the need for language preservation. The European colonists viewed the way of life for Indian people as being uncivilized and decided that it was their duty to teach Indian children the ways of dominant society in order to "civilize" them. In order to carry out their goal of assimilation, the federal government established boarding schools that took children as young as 5 years old away from their families for long periods of time (Lawson, 2013; Meza, 2015). Once at the boarding schools, children were not allowed to speak their Native languages and in fact were punished for doing so (Cobb, 2000). By removing children from their homes, they effectively replaced their Native cultures and languages with those of the dominant society (Thomason, 2007).

In addition to teaching students to speak English and effectively eradicating the use of Native languages, boarding schools also succeeded in changing Indian people's attitudes toward their own languages. Given the fact that students were beaten or had their mouths washed out with soap for speaking their languages at boarding schools, it comes as no surprise that Native language became viewed as something to be left behind by most students (Cobb, 2000; Thomason, 2007). This widely accepted policy was instrumental in the loss of Native languages because even when they left boarding schools, most students never spoke their Native language again (Meza, 2015; Ozbolt, 2014).

Further compounding the result of the boarding school experience, most Native Americans of the boarding school era did not pass their languages on to their children (Thomason, 2007). Many students adopted the way of thinking that was prevalent at the time: that English was more valuable and important than the Native language (Chew, 2015). The students faced pressure at school to assimilate into the dominant culture and in turn encouraged their own children to learn and speak English instead of their heritage language. When parents did not pass on their Native languages to their children, it was most often a decision based on wanting the best for their children's futures which included being able to fully participate in the larger English-speaking society (Chew, 2015).

In modern society, increasing globalization is has a tremendous impact on indigenous language loss around the world. Part of globalization has involved people moving from rural areas, areas where Native languages are spoken and flourish, into towns and cities where in order to ensure survival, they must learn the dominant language (Lateu, 2014). Languages that are commonly used in business throughout the world such as English and Mandarin Chinese have trickled into remote locations, thus competing with smaller, local languages (Rymer, 2012). Parents start to believe that in order to have

better job prospects, children must be solely fluent in the dominant language (Fernando, Valliarvi & Goldstein, 2010). In fact, according to Perlin, “the languages that are most likely to disappear over the next century are unknown outside their communities” (2014, p 71). When a language is confined to use in a remote location, it truly becomes endangered (Baines, 2012).

The question that comes up when engaging in a discussion of Native languages deals with why they should be preserved in the first place. A primary reason for preserving Native languages is that tribal languages are one way to keep distinction, identity, sovereignty, and culture as a people (Ozbolt, 2014). For Indian people, community is at the heart of their existence and is vital in preserving culture. Language and culture are intertwined and perpetuate the unique features of each Native tribe (Waterman & Lindley, 2013). When people are fluent in both culture and language, there is a positive impact on the tribe’s sovereignty (Meza, 2015).

Adding to the importance of language preservation and the need to keep languages alive is the fact that many concepts and ideas associated with the traditional lifestyles of a particular culture can only be expressed in the tribal language. Languages hold the keys to what concepts are important and unique to a culture and what ideas make up the world view associated with various cultures (Thomason, 2007). In order to determine what concepts are important to a particular group, one must look to their native language. In so doing, one can find expressions and phrases that are linked to “botanical, biological, and geographic information and insight into human cognition” (Fernando, Valijarvi & Goldstein, 2010, p. 49). Some knowledge that is language-specific includes knowledge related to “medicinal plants, food cultivation, irrigation techniques, navigation systems, and seasonal calendars”; the ideas will not successfully translate into another language (Rymer, 2012, p. 63).

Finally, language revitalization and preservation are important for preserving connections to the past and one’s ancestors. The historical trauma and genocide that were perpetuated against indigenous peoples led to widespread language loss. Revitalizing the languages is a step toward healing the historical trauma and ensuring survival as a people (Chew, 2015). Learning one’s heritage language is an important factor in reclaiming ties to the past and to one’s cultural roots (Meza, 2015).

An example of the cultural healing that can come as a result of Native language instruction is the fact that “in communities where at least half of the tribal members speak their ancestral language, the suicide rate is significantly lower than in communities with less language vitality” (Ozbolt, 2014, p. 208). Another example is found in the city of Spanish Fork, Utah. In 1998, only 37% of the Native American students in the school system graduated from high school. At that time, there was no cultural education offered as part of the school curriculum. Once the school district implemented an Indian education program which included language and culture instruction, the graduation rate rose to 92% within four years (Meza, 2015).

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With all of the benefits associated with preserving Native languages, there are also several barriers that stand in the way of language preservation. The first deals with the lack of perceived need to keep languages alive. Many people do not see the value in perpetuating languages. In fact, they see extinction of Native languages as a part of a natural life cycle (Lateu, 2014). The idea that one should abandon Native languages in favor of English also acts as a barrier to language revitalization (Baines, 2012).

Another hurdle for many tribes to overcome is the fact that the populations of fluent speakers are dwindling. The fluent speakers in most tribes are elderly and many were educated during the boarding school era. Most of the elder fluent speakers have not earned college degrees, so even though they are experts in their own languages, they are typically not allowed to teach in either the public school or college setting. Also, many elderly people feel apprehension and insecurity about teaching the language to someone else (Hinton, 2013). This could be yet another product of the indoctrination endured at boarding schools when the language was forced out of use.

As with learning any new skill, learning a language is challenging. It takes time, effort and dedication to learn a new language (Chew, 2015). In order for one to keep their new vocabulary, one must use it often. Finding opportunities to use a Native language can be difficult. If a person were to have a desire to learn Italian, for example, they could simply travel to Italy in order to be immersed in the language and culture for a period of time. However, immersion settings for Native languages are rare and often must be constructed in a somewhat artificial manner. Unfortunately, one cannot turn on the television or radio to find Native language programming or walk down the street and hear their Native tongue being spoken.

Despite the widespread loss of indigenous languages and the barriers preventing their revitalization, many tribal members are making great strides toward keeping their languages alive. Some of the efforts include creating Master/Apprentice programs, establishing language nests and immersion schools, and developing home-based immersion settings. The efforts have been met with varying degrees of success, but the common thread is that tribes need to start their efforts somewhere.

The Master/Apprentice program was developed in California in 1992 as part of an effort to preserve Native American languages (Fernando, Valijarvi & Goldstein, 2010). In the Master/Apprentice program, a fluent speaker is paired with a learner. The partners then meet together and participate in immersion sessions. The two participate in daily activities such as cooking, yard work, and running errands while conversing only in the language. This program is especially effective when there are fluent speakers who are motivated to keep the language alive by teaching it to other people (Hinton, 2013). The Chickasaw Nation has sponsored a Master/Apprentice program since 2007 (Ozbolt, 2015).

Language nests and immersion schools are programs that are aimed at creating new native speakers. In a language nest, newborns and toddlers are exposed solely to the indigenous language as part of their day care experience (Paskus, 2013). Then as the

children get older, there is more classroom-type instruction, keeping completely in the native language. Another aspect of the language nest involves elders working with the children and helping to teach the language. In immersion schools all of the instruction for the entire school day is conducted in the Native language. The Maori of New Zealand and the Native Hawaiians have had great success with their language nests and immersion schools. Through immersion schools, each culture has been able to produce a new generation of fluent speakers (Fernando, Valijarvi & Goldstein, 2010).

In her 2013 book, *Bringing Our Languages Home*, Leanne Hinton stressed the importance of the indigenous language being used in the home. She emphasized the point that language learning is not a part-time endeavor. The same process that largely eradicated the use of Native languages during the boarding school era (removing students from home where Native language was spoken) could be used in reverse to achieve fluency. Successful language learning involves at least one parent to have some language skills and to be willing to speak to their child in the language as much as possible (Hinton, 2013). In the public school settings, languages have usually been taught for around an hour at a time, and then the student returns to using their first language. This method of instruction has not been very successful in producing new fluent speakers. With the immersion schools combined with using the indigenous language at home, students have a much greater likelihood of becoming truly fluent (Paskus, 2013).

An extreme example of successful language revitalization is the case of Jessie Little Doe Baird and the Wopanaak Language. As a member of the Wampanoag Tribe, Ms. Little Doe Baird was aware that there had not been a native speaker of her language since the mid-1800s, although there were many written Wopanaak documents in existence (Shatwell, 2012). In 1993, she had several dreams in which her ancestors were speaking to her in Wopanaak, the native language of the Wampanoag tribe, and saw that as a message that it was up to her to bring the language back (Hinton, 2013; Shatwell, 2012). Working with a professor of linguistics, Mrs. Little Doe Baird was able to use the existing Wopanaak documents to piece the language back together. Over the years, she has become as fluent in the language as a non-native speaker can be. She made a commitment to teach her young daughter the language by only using Wopanaak in their home and in so doing, developed the first native speaker of Wopanaak in the world since the 1800s (Hinton, 2013).

Although Native languages are dying off at high rates, there is still hope for tribes wishing to preserve their languages. The Chickasaw Nation offers community classes and a Master/Apprentice program (Ozbolt, 2014). Each program has had varying degrees of success, but each program is an important first step for keeping the language going and for raising awareness among Chickasaw citizens of the need for language revitalization. Given the success that the Maori and Hawaiians have had in revitalizing their languages and creating new fluent speakers, the logical next step for The Chickasaw Nation, or any other nation with hopes of preserving their language, would be to implement language nests and immersion schools. As fluent speakers are becoming increasingly rare, there needs to be a sense of urgency when it comes to preserving Native languages.

Even though the statistics regarding loss of languages throughout the world present a bleak picture, many tribes are engaged in multi-faceted efforts aimed at keeping their languages alive and thriving. American Indian tribes have endured decades of historical trauma and cultural genocide at the hands of the dominant culture, yet still remain resilient. One component that will ensure the strength of the tribes well into the future is language revitalization. Through teaching and learning tribal languages, tribal members are able to remain connected to their culture and to preserve connections to their communities and ancestors. Many tribes have engaged in efforts for the specific purpose of creating new fluent speakers. As long as there is a passion and commitment for language in the hearts of the people, indigenous languages will continue to live and thrive.

Abstract

This paper discusses the fact that Native American Languages have been in a state of decline for many years. The reasons for the decline are varied, but include the effects of European colonization and boarding schools. Additionally, the prevailing attitudes of many speakers who did not deem it important to pass their heritage language on to their children has had a detrimental impact on the number of Native people who are fluent in their languages. Keeping languages alive is important because certain cultural concepts and ideas can only be expressed by using the tribal language. Furthermore, tribal languages are one way for tribes to hold onto their identity and culture as a unique people. Learning a heritage language can be an important step toward healing historical trauma and preserving connections to both community and ancestors. When discussing language revitalization, tribes must be aware of several barriers, including apathy among tribal members and the aging population of fluent speakers with embarking on the journey of language revitalization. Many tribes currently have programs in place aimed at keeping their languages viable. Some examples of successful language programs include Master/Apprentice programs, language nests, and immersion schools. Home-based language immersion has also had a high rate of success, but is often not a choice due to the parents not speaking the language. Whichever method or methods a tribe chooses to use, as long as there is commitment among both the fluent speakers and learners, language revitalization is entirely possible. *Keywords:* Master/Apprentice program, language nest, immersion school

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