

Cultural Affects of Language: Cultural reconstruction among the Navajo

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American Indian reservations are unique places in that they simultaneously harbor colonial images of assimilation, while embodying pride as a homeland for the people that were once imprisoned thereon. Among the Navajo of the southwestern United States, this dichotomy is represented by linguistic and cultural adjustments that move through time and space in parallel to both historical assimilation agendas, and the natural shifting of cultural patterns for behavior. This paper briefly illustrates some of the processes that encapsulate this bridge between language and behavior by reviewing a history of traditional Navajo values and how such values interact with a rapidly changing linguistic and cultural environment. Ultimately, this paper presents an argument for what may be termed language revitalization, which is based on the thoughts and sentiment of bilingual Navajo speakers on and around the reservation, who hold language to be a vital component of their Navajo identity

As a nation struggles to restore its identity after decades of tireless attempts at assimilation, a new *tradition* is being created. The Navajo people, known as the “Dine,” currently comprise 45 percent of all American Indian language speakers (Lockard 1999, 68) and their language is the most commonly spoken one north of Mexico, spoken by over one hundred thousand people (Silver and Miller 1997, 8). The percent of Navajo speakers today is much higher than others in part due to its vast population of 165,000 individuals, but also because of the rapid extinction of other native languages around the United States. The Navajo population primarily resides within or in the immediate vicinity of the reservation borders in Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah. This draw to remain near home is not typically shared by the average transient Anglo-American, and can be generally rationalized by one key point; that the attempts at forced assimilation by evangelists and many federal or national groups have driven the Dine to hold strongly to any bit of traditional culture they have left. Staying within the four sacred mountains of their traditional homeland provides them with an additional support of identity.

Historically, there have been individuals that have assisted in alleviating the threat of extinction towards the Navajos. One of these individuals was Franz Boas who was originally interested in what would be later known as linguistic anthropology. He took particular interest in Native American languages and ultimately resided in the socio-cultural subfield of anthropology. His view on the preservation of American Indian cultures was a refreshingly new perspective shared by only a few at the time, but now admired by millions. The presently renowned Edward Sapir who was a student of Boas, was intrigued by various ideas and theories regarding native American linguistics. Both Boas and Sapir would ultimately have a direct affect on the Dine of the Southwest.

During John Collier’s tenure as the commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in the 1930’s, he employed the help of Yale University’s Edward Sapir, to write a Navajo language *worker’s handbook* to help introduce the written language to government employees (Lockard 1999, 69). This was one of the few attempts to accommodate the prevailing use of the Navajo language. While in New Haven, Connecticut, Sapir met up with an Insurance Company employee in Hartford named Benjamin Whorf, who was an introspective apprentice that had much potential. Sapir employed Whorf to assist him in his research efforts regarding a new idea involving language and thought (Erickson and Murphy 2003, 115). These two researchers formulated what is known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

Two principles governed the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, stating that language determines culture, and culture determines language. The first principle called “Linguistic Determinism” stipulates that the way one thinks is determined by the language one speaks. The second principle called “Linguistic Relativism” illustrates that differences among various languages are due to the world-view or culture of its speakers (Salzmann 2004, 46-47). Typically one of the two different principles is adopted as truth by various groups of people, and a relative few groups accept both principles as being correct. In the case of the Navajo people, both seem to be correct to some degree. The time in history where this is most apparent is around the middle of the 20th century up until about 15 years before the present time.

Assimilation efforts consisted of tremendous pressures and forces from many different angles, as it seemed absolutely necessary to “civilize” the Indian as quickly as possible in order to mold them into proper human beings. As evangelist or government officials learned that communication was a strong mechanism of preserving culture, institutions began to augment their practices. The BIA, which was established in the late 19th century helped perpetuate these assimilation efforts by providing an environment that would separate native children from their native language and traditions (Silver and Miller 1997, 11). The simplest and seemingly most efficacious manner to dissolve a native language was to begin with the children. Pushing education and religion on the Navajo people was a huge endeavor and was taken up by many different organizations, the most popular being the Catholic Boarding Schools. Navajo families could easily see the importance of being educated, but even more easily see the need for financial assistance, which is what these schools offered. The children could reside at the school, alleviating the expense that was previously required for the parent to ensure proper care.

The number of families that lived below the federal poverty level just over a decade ago in 1997 was 57.4 percent. The annual average per capita income of families was just \$4,106 (Lockard 1999, 68). As one can postulate, the statistics for 1997 are much better than that of 50 years prior. The draw to sending children to boarding schools or other outside foster programs was very alluring. As a result thousands of children went off the reservation, several hundred miles away from home to be cared for by someone other than their parents. These new caregivers were people of different cultures, creating an instant barrier supplemented by the atmosphere produced by Anglo-American society, whose philosophy was to remove the savage and primitive language in order to mold them into human beings.

The boarding schools that dotted the reservation, which are now run by the BIA, were very strict in ensuring the Navajo language was not spoken. Disciplinary actions were taken when children were caught using the language. Young children were actually punished for using their own first language. This created a 35 – 40 year span of a few generations who grew up with the notion that speaking their native language would bring repercussion and discipline.

Today, the effects of these boarding schools and foster programs are very easily seen. The majority of Navajo ‘head of household’ individuals, usually a woman aged 35 –55, will not speak Navajo to their children, except a handful of words, and will always speak English first. If you travel outside that age bracket towards slightly older generations, who are in their seventies, Navajo is noticeably their primary language and is mostly spoken to the children who subsequently refuse to speak it. Research illustrates that the Dine are not the only people with this generation of non-speakers. Of 155 American Indian languages today, 87 percent are spoken by adults who will no longer teach them to their children (Lockard 1999, 68). While residing on the reservation and observing interactions between older women and their daughters, it was easily noticeable that the older woman was using primarily the Navajo language while the daughter responded or passed the communication on in primarily English. Many say that they do not speak Navajo anymore, but can understand it fluently. One participant suggested that she did not know any Navajo, yet when her mother or grandparents spoke fluidly to her, she did not misunderstand anything, and appeared to be able to keep up in cognition and response, in English.

The noticeable gap in the usage of the Navajo language has caused a novel cultural shift, based on the principle that requires language to affect the culture that you subscribe to. The English language carries with it a different set of potential cultures than that of the Navajo language, hence so do Navajo adults who will only speak English carry with them a different cultural perspective. There are many cultural shifts that have come upon the Dine that could be linked to this language change. The people have adopted Christian evangelical organizations, and some of these organizations are now being referred to as ‘traditional way.’ In response to a question regarding the institution of “traditional” peyote use, one older woman from a small reservation town in Arizona stated, “I hear these boys talk about traditional way, and that they are traditional, but I just tell them that’s not traditional; Navajos don’t use peyote in their tradition, that’s from the eastern Indians.” The Native American Church (NAC) is at times referred to as being traditional. Its members adopt Christian dogma and the use of Peyote, which was recently borrowed from the Plains Indians tribes such as the Lakota. During the 1960’s and 70’s, when Native Americans were increasingly seen in the media due to the political stances of the American Indian Movement (AIM), many people of different tribes united and become one people to collectively combat damaging federal policy. This too is a plausible reason for the adoption of new “traditions,” particularly the NAC. Cultures within the Dine are becoming more diverse, as these English speaking family leaders continue to adapt all over the reservation.

The goal for the Navajo people is in sight as the population continues to grow and seek the diglossia that will ultimately allow it to function as an autonomous and fully operative and traditional society again. Although the traditional culture that was once observed by the grandmothers and great-grandmothers of the Navajo people is the hope of many Navajo, it will never be seen again. However, the cultures that will soon arrive due to the current efforts in teaching children the Navajo language and traditional ways through the education system will bring a much needed unity back to the people. The Navajo Tribal Education Policy of 1984 initiated this sense of unity. It states:

The Navajo Language is an essential element of life, culture, and identity of the Navajo people. The Navajo Nation recognizes the importance of preserving and perpetuating that language for the survival of the [Navajo] Nation. Instruction in the Navajo language shall be made available for all grade levels in all schools serving the Navajo Nation. (Lockard 1999, 77)

Navajo worldview, like any other culture is dynamic and ever changing. Most importantly the future of Navajo culture and tradition is amenable to control today more than ever since contact with Europeans. As the Navajo people have and continue to move forward with cultural reconstruction, they remain in healthy pursuit of the most valuable component an individual can attain, their place in life, their history, their culture.

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