

The Role of Cultural Factors in the Maintenance of Indigenous Languages

Gina Cantoni

Northern Arizona University

Half of the world's 6,000 languages might become extinct in the next century, and 2,000 of the remaining 3,000 will become threatened in the following century. (Hale, 1992) No one wants this to happen; however, economic and political pressures on minority communities may make it inevitable. The languages are not inherently deficient in any way, but their vitality is affected by internal and external factors such as location, distribution, status, norms, public service, education and the media.

The intergenerational transmission of a language requires a family and community structure that promotes, sustains and encourages not only the use of the language itself but also the values and knowledge associated with it. In other words, cultural content, outlook and way of life, rather than language alone, are what motivates the advocates of language maintenance or restoration, as the case may be. It is this content that they need to spell out and model so that other people may be attracted to it. (Fishman, 1991:24) To illustrate this concept I have decided to share with you some of the documentation presented during two Symposia held at Northern Arizona University (NAU) in Flagstaff in 1994 and 1995 with funding from OBEMLA (Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs), U.S. Department of Education. The proceedings of these conferences were published in 1996 by NAU's Center for Excellence in Education under the title "Stabilizing Indigenous Languages." (Cantoni, 1996)

As the title of the monograph indicates, the participants were asked to focus specifically on language issues at the individual, family, community, school and government levels. Much attention was given to tribal policies, formal and informal instruction, literacy and teacher training. In spite of this focus, the proceedings contain a wealth of material on cultural factors, suggesting that the two components, language and culture, are linked, interrelated, and reciprocally influenced in a way

that we need to understand more clearly if we want to be effective in our advocacy efforts.

The Symposia included participation and input from a wide geographical area, from Canada to Mexico and from California to New York. For the sake of brevity, I shall limit my discussion to the contributions of representatives from the following Southwestern groups: Navajo, Hopi, Tohono O'odham, Hualapai, Yaqui, Acoma and Pima. What they had to say is consistent with what we heard from other participants from Alaska, Hawaii, American Samoa, and with current literature on the subject, such as the work of Zepeda and Hill (1991), Bernard (1992) and Sims (1996) in the United States, Francescato and Francescato (1994) in Italy and many others.

The findings reported here also tend to be in agreement with the information presented by non-Native participants, who included distinguished scholars such as Joshua Fishman, Michael Krauss, James Crawford, John Oller and Jon Reyhner, as well as non-Native students and practitioners. An analysis of the various documents, quotes and paraphrases attributed to the members of the seven tribes mentioned above indicates that the shift from indigenous languages to English is related to historical factors such as the forced removal of tribal populations from their ancestral lands and the ill-treatment of students in Bureau of Indian Affairs and mission schools. These punitive and repressive actions originated from outside the tribal groups and caused great suffering and resentment. More insidious, however, are some more recent and on-going changes that provide positive reinforcements for embracing the majority culture: a cash economy, relocation, intermarriage, urbanization and the mass media. Even some well-meaning federal government initiatives such as housing projects erode the fabric of traditional family structure by removing young children from the presence and influence of the elders who could teach them their language and values.

These changes have not been forcibly imposed; they have been made available and have been voluntarily accepted because they seemed advantageous. Ultimately, however, they have brought with them a long list of dysfunctional behaviors such as substance abuse, depression, suicide, health problems, family violence, lack of respect for oneself and others and loss of traditional knowledge (including the ancestral language).

Reversing these patterns, according to our participants, requires the support and guidance of tribal leaders, many of whom have issued strong policy statements mandating the teaching of tribal languages and cultures. On the other hand, one of the Symposium's most eloquent language advocates, Radford Quamahongneva, pointed out that, in his small village, the maintenance of traditional values rested on the self-sufficiency of the community, which refuses to recognize extraneous authorities such as the tribal council.

In general it was agreed by the Symposium's participants that the reversal of today's dysfunctional trends requires a return to tradition. For two of the groups, the Yaqui and the Tohono O'odham, this process is facilitated by keeping in touch with the tribal families that live in Mexico and are less exposed to the rapid changes that dominate life in the United States. For all groups, traditional stories, legends and myths, such as those about Coyote and Roadrunner, and the morals they illustrate, should be an integral part of education at home and at school. Emmitt White, a Pima, uses the "Man in the Maze," a traditional design found in the baskets made by his people, to teach proper roles, responsibilities and kinship obligations. The Diné Philosophy of Learning, which represents a holistic and ethical approach to knowledge, is a key component of the teacher-training programs approved by the Navajo Office of Education. Discipline and spirituality are an integral part of the Hopi Way of life. Additional cultural information was provided almost incidentally during the description of educational initiatives focused on language maintenance such as the Tuba City Two-Way Bilingual program, the Fort Defiance Navajo Immersion Program and the Salt River Bilingual Program.

The cultural factors related to the maintenance of Navajo were also discussed by a panel of nine college students (six women and three men). They were interviewed by Selena Manychildren of the Navajo radio station KTNN. Four of the panelists attended Navajo Community College, and the other five were enrolled in NAU's Navajo Language program in the Department of Modern Languages. Although not all of them were fully proficient in Navajo, they unanimously agreed that learning the language was valuable. They also tended to agree that teaching it should, if possible, begin at home. They also agreed that literacy and grammar are important, and that those who know the language should be patient with beginners when they make mistakes. They are maintaining the language "for our youth and the next generation." Their outlook is hopeful and positive; they are teaching Navajo to their own children and feel that "we need to have the language when people come back and want to learn it."

Three of the panelists admit having been subjected to negative outside pressures that interrupted their progress in Navajo. Sylvia was punished for speaking the language and used to think that learning it would interfere with her children's academic success. Sharon spoke Navajo until the age of six, but gave it up because of peer pressure and the disparaging attitudes of some teachers. Claudia spoke Navajo until the age of four when she was living with one set of grandparents, but then moved away and became an English-speaking Christian. Theresa brought up the harsh treatment to which Navajos, including her father, were subjected in parochial schools during the 1950s and 60s: "Their hair was shaved. They were locked in closets. Their mouths were washed out with soap." Malcolm said, "I think it was only yesterday that our ancestors were in Fort Sumner. I come from Big

Mountain where people are persecuted for trying to live their way of life.” One of the panelists, in her fourth semester of learning Navajo, is not Navajo but Delaware. She deeply regrets not having had the opportunity to help maintain her own language and is enthusiastic about learning a Native language, even if it is not her own.

The panelists were eloquent about the importance of their culture and about the centrality of language in cultural transmission. Carlos hopes that “Maybe we (can) go back to tradition. Now there is graffiti, baggy pants and caps on backwards. That is not our people.” In Navajo society, according to Claudia, women are taught how to dress and wear their hair so the Holy People will recognize them. Today’s society, according to Velma, is forgetting sacredness because the dominant society has taken over the education of tribal children. For her, “English is a tool for survival, not a way of life.” Byron added, “I like maintaining my native language and the teachings in it, the songs and stories...It gives you respect for yourself and others...” Malcolm said, “I think the Navajo language is important. When you speak it, it creates a different reality...English is not that passionate or beautiful. In our prayers Navajo directs us when we use it.”

Selena raised an interesting point. “Do you believe that if you do not speak your language, you are not part of your culture?” she asked. In spite of their earlier assertions that “The Navajo language is who we are,” the panelists concluded that being Navajo depends on how you conduct yourself and go about your life, even if you do not speak the language. This response seems to indicate a deeper understanding of the multi-faceted concept of identity. According to Carlos, “You are Navajo because your skin is brown. It’s in your blood; you have suffered.” Furthermore, Byron said, “You represent your family ancestors’ clan. The Holy People know you by your clan.”

However, the students still feel that knowing their language gives greater substance to their identity, and in this they agree with Fishman. (Fishman, 1991: 16) Sylvia said, “You can learn to be more Navajo if you speak the language,” or, as Malcolm summed it up, “There are lots of Navajo, but few Diné.” To keep his Diné identity, he has made the choice expressed at the end of his poem, “Big Mountain,”

“Grandfather, bring the path which is
made of corn pollen and
I will no longer walk in two worlds,
but in your path
in this way in beauty it is done.”

According to Fishman (1991:16), “If Yish is a language of greater power and opportunity than Xish, and if Yish speakers of Xish parentage or ancestry continue

to believe that they can still be X-men...then the need for Xish for the purpose of Xishness will seem to many to be greatly decreased, if not eclipsed entirely.” On the other hand, Fishman admits that maintenance of the home language cannot guarantee the survival of a culture. This is especially true, I think, if the teaching of that language becomes part of the school curriculum instead of being the responsibility of the home. This is how I learned Latin. I began to study it in an Italian public school when I was ten, and continued until the end of college. In class we read the classics as well as later documents written by medieval scholars. We were expected to write compositions, but we were never asked to speak. Outside of school we heard Latin in Church, for this was before the Vatican edict allowing the use of modern languages in Catholic services. Priests from different countries spoke in Latin to each other if they had no other common language, and were able to communicate in spite of significant differences in pronunciation. For us there was no cultural component in the Latin curriculum, and no practical use for the language, except as a sort of mental calisthenics. Perhaps the teaching of Latin was also intended to strengthen our pride in being descended from the Romans, who had conquered the world. We became able to decipher inscriptions in churches, monuments and graveyards, and this ability identified us as members of the educated class. In this sense the knowledge of Latin became a badge of identity. The language had prestige, and was greatly valued in spite of its very limited practical use.

What determines the value of a language? It can be valued as an object of study (as Latin was for me) or as a means of communication (as Latin was not). However, a language has values that transcend its use in communication or as a system of symbols: it is the repository of a cultural tradition and confers a sense of identity to its speakers. For example, let us consider the case of the Waimiri-Atroari, a Caribbean group of approximately 500 individuals. Until recently, they were monolingual; their language had a high instrumental value for them, but for almost no one else. They are now learning Portuguese, which gives them access to the rest of Brazil and beyond. As the proportion of bilinguals in the tribe grows, the instrumental value (the message-carrying function) of Waimiri-Atroari shrinks and will soon be usurped by Portuguese. Adult speakers could stop using the ancestral language and teaching it to their children. Instead, the Waimiri-Atroari are teaching their young people to prize their language as a thing of value.

Many of us feel that a language is an intricate collectively produced artifact inherited from previous generations; as such, it is a gift and should be treated with reverence. It is regrettable that some people utilize their language (as well as their land) without realizing that they ought to behave as responsible stewards of these precious and fragile environments. However, the Symposium participants, including the student panelists, demonstrated a strong awareness of the value and beauty of

their indigenous languages. Simon Ortiz talked about the power of his language; Ofelia Zepeda about the beauty of hers. Velma Hale said "My language is me, my ancestors, the roots of my existence." On the other hand, the symbolic link between a language and its traditionally associated ethnoculture is a sword that cuts both ways. (Fishman, 1991:23) Receding languages can be considered symbolic of the process of marginalization and of the disadvantages associated with it after most speakers have shifted to a language of greater currency.

The low prestige in which minority languages are held by a large number of outsiders can result not only in highly controversial legal initiatives such as "English Only," but also in diminishing the self-concept of their speakers. They begin to measure their own worth not according to the norms and expectations of their own group but according to the standards of an alien and poorly understood culture. They also tend to compare their own language to languages (such as English) used by the more prestigious, dominant, powerful society. Even if minorities make an effort to maintain their language instead of abandoning it altogether, they try to prove that it is capable of doing everything that English can do. Usually, the initial step, if the Native language has been used only in oral form, is to develop a writing system. This is certainly feasible, but is it necessary, in an age when technology offers many alternative ways of recording texts? Since every language represents a unique cognitive mapping of reality, it seems inappropriate to try to use a language that represents a non-technological culture in a field of Western knowledge such as physics. Some tribes, such as the Zia, have until very recently resisted attempts to develop a writing system for their language. (Sims, 1996) This may be one of the factors that has contributed to the maintenance of Keres in Zia: keeping it distinct from the roles, functions and domains of English.

The process of standardizing a hitherto unwritten language, which is considered a prerequisite to putting it into print, and the process of creating new terminology for technological domains seem to imply that the language, in its current status, is somewhat deficient and inferior and needs upgrading. Few people ask themselves whether their home language is capable of expressing concepts that have not been developed in English, or contains vocabulary for important items, actions and relationships that outsiders do not know. Instead of trying to turn their language into a pale carbon copy of English, people could ask themselves and each other in what domains their home language seems more appropriate than English, and for what roles and functions it is best suited. In some instances, as in some traditional ceremonials, only the home language can be used, and English would be inadequate.

Diglossia consists of using each of two languages in the domains and functions for which it is most appropriate and effective, thus recognizing the uniqueness and value of the culture from which it originated. As a result of contact

between two groups, the bulk of the population will learn the majority language for its pragmatic value, but the traditional language will be available to those who want it. Each of the languages and cultures will, of course, undergo changes over time, perhaps at an increasingly rapid rate. The acceptance of diglossia might alleviate some of the stresses and conflicts that accompany change and often lead to dysfunctional behaviors and language shift. For example, economic factors such as the advent of a cash economy can wipe out a community's traditional agricultural or pastoral lifestyle, causing extensive emigration in search of jobs. When a substantial number of families relocate in the same area, the original home language may become a symbol of identity across generations and strengthen the bonds that hold the group together. This is happening in Friulan-speaking communities whose ancestors left Northern Italy to find work in Canada, Australia or the United States. The language of the host country coexists with Friulan in a diglossic situation which is often more stable than that of the country of origin, Italy, where Friulan is used along with standard Italian, but by a steadily diminishing number of people.

Diglossia has many advantages; it expands an individual's communicative repertoire to fit a variety of situations, from intimate to public, from religious to secular, from affective to objective, and, in Fishman's (1991) terms, from Xish to Yish. Diglossia can also be a reasonable solution to many of the problems faced by a community in a language contact situation. Unfortunately, linguistic decisions are seldom based on logic and reflection; they have more to do with politics than with language. They represent collective responses to historic events, economic changes, demographic trends and educational practices. The advantages of assimilation into a dominant society and a technology-based lifestyle usually outweigh the perceived value of a traditional lifestyle and the language that represents it, especially if the self-concept of the speakers has already been undermined by the negative attitudes of the establishment.

The cumulative impact of these two factors (lowered regard for one's group and increased availability of an alien lifestyle) has been vividly documented by another symposium participant, Evangeline Parsons-Yazzie, (Parsons-Yazzie, 1995) a native of the remote Hard Rock area who now directs a very successful Navajo language program at Northern Arizona University. She conducted case studies of ten Navajo families' perceptions of the causes underlying the loss of their home language. These families are long-time residents of the Hard Rock area of the Reservation and quite traditional in their lifestyle and beliefs.

Parsons-Yazzie identified ten children enrolled in Rocky Ridge Boarding School whose scores in the Window Rock Oral Language Test (WROLT) indicated that their fluency in Navajo was very limited or nonexistent. Their parents and other relatives provided information about the extent of the children's access and exposure to Navajo speakers and about the family's perception of the importance of

the language.

In each case, the children were surrounded by an extended family that used Navajo routinely; some of the elders did not even know English. All of the respondents considered Navajo very important as a source of identity, strength and sacredness. In addition, several brought up the contributions of the Navajo Code Talkers to the U.S. victory during World War II. All viewed the loss of their language as inevitably leading to social dysfunction, erosion of identity and beliefs, disappearance of sacred ceremonies and abandonment of traditional teachings. As respondent number two said, "Things that were good will not be any more."

How did the parents account for their children's failure to learn the language of their own community? Some of the answers indicate that the children's exposure to Navajo was not as substantial as one might expect, even in an isolated setting. Because of the scarcity of jobs on the Reservation, several parents had to go to work away from the community. The baby-sitters did not necessarily know or use Navajo. School-aged children had little contact with their parents during the week; they had to rush to school, spend the day there and do homework at night. When the family was together, Navajo was used in the home, in the car, at the store, in the chapter house and during ceremonies; however, there is little evidence that the children were actively and deliberately engaged in these conversations; they could wait outside, play with friends, watch TV. One parent, deploring the younger generation's loss of traditional identity and beliefs, said that the role models for today's children are found in the home, the dorm, the classroom and on television. It seems that only in the home do they have a significant opportunity to be exposed to Navajo-speaking role models; peers and older siblings seem to have been non-Navajo speakers, either because they do not know the language or, more importantly, because they are ashamed of it and do not want to be ridiculed and called derogatory nicknames such as "Johnny."

Being a native and long-time resident of the Hard Rock area, Parsons-Yazzie was able to conduct a series of unobtrusive observations in social settings such as trading posts, homes, chapter houses and waiting rooms. Her field notes complement and confirm the case studies' findings. She heard a lot of Navajo spoken all around her but noted that when family groups consisting of adults (parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles) initiated a conversation in Navajo with a child, the child responded in English. Sometimes this would mark the end of the exchange, sometimes the code-switching pattern would continue. Parsons-Yazzie did not witness any attempt on the adults' part to ask or encourage the child to use Navajo. She said, "It appeared...that the child was the one in each case who dictated what language was spoken. The child in most cases was accommodated by the simplifying of the Navajo language, or the switching of the language to English."

This is a startling conclusion in view of the parents' overt assertions of their

allegiance to Navajo and their awareness of the moral and social consequences of its neglect. However, one should not forget that Navajo child-rearing practices have never been as overtly authoritarian as those of the Western world used to be. At home, Navajo children have always enjoyed a great deal of autonomy and decision-making power. When they herded sheep, they were responsible for a significant portion of the family's wealth. They learned to meet their obligations and to do what was expected of them, but these directives were not handed down as commands or explanations, as they are in the classroom and in middle-class families. The Navajo language does not even have the words to express the imposing of one person's will upon another, such as "he made me do it." In traditional Navajo culture every individual makes his own decisions, and with such freedom comes a profound sense of responsibility. Consequently, the elders who could or should tell a child to speak Navajo instead of English would probably be uncomfortable in doing so. The old patterns of cultural transmission have been eliminated, but no one has come up with acceptable substitutes.

It would be most interesting to conduct a study of the five families whose children evidenced a high level of Navajo proficiency on the WROLT test. What behaviors and attitudes made it possible for these parents to transmit their language to their offspring? It would also be very informative to do a follow-up study on these five Navajo-speaking children to find out to what extent their proficiency (and the values associated with it) can resist peer pressure, the impact of technology, negative stereotypes and other factors that tend to undermine allegiance to minority languages and cultures.

The final recommendation from the parents in Parsons-Yazzie's study was that, in order to remain alive, Navajo must be taught at school. They did not concur on the specific grade levels where this instruction would be most appropriate, but they did concur on the importance of teaching reading and writing as well as the oral language. Only a few mentioned that Navajo should also be taught at home.

Parsons-Yazzie's study seems to indicate that the teaching of Navajo is expected to become part of the school curriculum, rather than being a part of the normal child-rearing practices of Native households. The process, as well as the outcomes, will be qualitatively different from that of home-based socialization. Nevertheless, it will be a remarkable accomplishment if a significant number of Navajo high school graduates become able to use Navajo orally and in writing, as is now the case at Rock Point Community School. This requires some radical changes in the role and structure of schools serving Native children, including greater community control and the hiring of teachers and administrators who are not only tribal members but also proficient in Navajo.

Responsibility for native language maintenance has shifted from the home to the school not only among the Navajo, but in other indigenous groups. Among the

Northern Arapaho of the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming, for example, the language was still actively spoken by members of the older generation and well understood by younger ones in the late 1940s, when Salzmänn (1993) was gathering data for a descriptive grammar of the language. Even though public and mission schools discouraged the use of Arapaho, and comic books were replacing traditional storytelling, little thought was given to the possibility of impending language loss. However, when Salzmänn returned to the Reservation in the 1980s, it was clear that what was left of the indigenous cultural heritage, including the language, was rapidly disappearing. Now the bulk of the population is practically monolingual in English, and parents no longer teach their language to the children. It is now up to the schools to carry out the task of perpetuating the tribal heritage. A great many educators are committed to this goal and have become involved in the preparation of instructional materials.

A study of language shift among language-minority children in the United States indicates that the loss of primary languages is a national phenomenon and can be very costly not only to the families and communities that are directly involved but to society as a whole (Wong Fillmore, 1991). It is not easy to explain or understand why these children are dropping their home language as they learn English, since second-language learning does not necessarily result in the loss of the primary language. However, most language-minority children encounter powerful pressures for assimilation even before they enter school. They begin to see themselves as different in language, appearance and behavior and they come to regard these differences as undesirable because they impede their easy participation in the society around them. If they want to be accepted, they have to learn English, because others are not going to learn their language. English is the high-status prestige language in the United States, and although young children do not yet care about prestige and status, they do need belonging and acceptance. As they learn English, they stop using their primary language. When this happens while they are preschoolers, that is, under the age of five, their command of the home language has not become stable or complete enough for maintenance. If the parents have not yet mastered English, what is lost is the vehicle for imparting their values to the next generation, enabling the children to become the kind of men and women their families want them to be.

The tragic results of the intergenerational breakdown in communication have been documented not only in the case of Native American groups, but also in the case of Hispanic, Asian and other minorities. What should or can be done about it is still poorly understood, but there is no doubt that language minority children and their families are paying a very high price for admission into American society.

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