

***Diné Bizaad* [Navajo Language] at a Crossroads: Extinction or Renewal?**

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Abstract

Until about 20 years ago, the Navajo language was one of the most resilient American Indian languages in modern U.S. history. Today, at the dawn of the 21st century, that has all changed. Some changes can be attributed to the normal dynamics of cultural transmission that affect language use. Some others, such as the dramatic shift toward English that is occurring—largely due to the agency of public education and mass media—are jeopardizing the survival of the Navajo language. The Navajo language is at a crossroads; it can still be renewed among the growing number of non-speakers so it can be strengthened, or it can continue to decline in its use. On several levels the language appears to remain strong and viable, but on others the telltale signs of impending extinction are becoming apparent. This paper addresses the differences between the normal changes and adaptation of Navajo as a living language and those that are indicative of language loss or other dramatic linguistic shifts that threaten its viability and survival.

Introduction

In a policy statement first presented in 1999 as the *Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous Rights in Education*, organizers of the World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education (WIPCE) declared the use and preservation of Native languages to be a fundamental human right. Constructed on a foundation of the Indigenous right to self-determination, the statement reflects the continuing struggle of most Indigenous peoples, particularly those who have suffered the impact and effects of colonization: namely, access to and benefit from education that acknowledges, respects, and promotes the right

of Indigenous peoples to be Indigenous—a right that embraces Indigenous peoples' language, culture, traditions, and spirituality. A section of the statement links the vitality of Indigenous language and culture to place, or land:

2.3. Indigenous peoples have strong feelings and thoughts about landforms, the very basis of their cultural identity. Land gives life to language and culture.

2.3.1 Indigenous languages in all forms are legitimate and valid means of communication for Indigenous peoples.

2.3.2 Language is a social construct; it is a blueprint for thought, behavior, social and cultural interaction and self-expression.

2.3.3 Language is the medium for transmitting culture from the past to the present and into the future. Acknowledging that many Indigenous languages have been destroyed, the 1999 WIPCE asserts that Indigenous languages are the best way to teach Indigenous knowledge and values.

2.3.4 Languages are the foundations for the liberation of thoughts that provide direction for social, political and economic change and development.

2.3.5 The survival and revival of Indigenous languages is imperative for the protection, transmission, maintenance and preservation of Indigenous knowledge, cultural values, and wisdom. (*Coolangatta Statement*, 1999)

While the *Coolangatta Statement* is powerful and expresses key commonalities of Indigenous experience worldwide, the assertion of the right to language preservation and usage does not lay out a clear path toward resolution. There is often a variable history of contact with a colonizing power with which Indigenous peoples have had to contend, as well as a context of power relations in society that are ultimately reflected in their language(s) of choice and daily use. This is particularly true where the non-Indigenous majority society has gradually infiltrated the life ways of Indigenous peoples, either by assimilative design, by ongoing contact, or a combination thereof.

How then do we sort through the issues and determine which linguistic and cultural realities we must link to the vital decisions to be made about language planning, preservation, and revitalization efforts, and effective educational programs and policy development in support of such efforts?

Presented as a reality-based case of endangered Indigenous languages, this paper explores the status of the Navajo language, suggesting how history has affected and continues to affect it. It also suggests how a popular national

culture is accelerating the changes that are occurring in its usage, briefly touching on the dynamics of the vernacular language now in common use, Navajo English.

Until the mid-1980s, the Navajo language was one of the strongest surviving American Indian languages in modern U.S. history. Almost all of the parent generation spoke Navajo fluently, and the grandparent generation was likely to be monolingual Navajo speaking. Almost all children entered school speaking only Navajo. Today, at the beginning of the 21st century, this is no longer the case. The monolingual Navajo-speaking population has diminished greatly, and small children are entering schools as monolingual English speakers or with a strong preference for English. The generations in between are now bilingual and have varying degrees of proficiency in Navajo, with a significant sector whose language preference is English.

Navajo society underwent tremendous changes in the last half of the 20th century. Many of the changes have been due to the natural processes of a culture adapting to the dominant society as a result of time and the increased social, political, and economic interactions with an outside culture. Other changes have resulted from educational, political, and social policies that were imposed on the Navajo people. The efforts to educate thousands of Navajo youths in the 1940s–1970s resulted not only in a nation of increasingly subtractive bilinguals, but also in youths embracing some of the social viewpoints and objectives taught by the English-only boarding schools. The separation of children, from the very young through adolescents, disrupted the normal operations of family life with its training, teachings, and healthy emotional and social interactions. The results have included a disruption of language and culture continuity as well as the rise of myriad social ills.

As with other American Indian languages and cultures, those of the Navajos have undergone and continue to undergo tremendous changes. Although Navajos had remained relatively isolated from mainstream American society until around the 1940s, in the last half of the 20th century, Navajos ventured increasingly farther into the American mainstream. In addition, the influences of the outside world have also ventured onto the Navajo Reservation and have left their imprint even in the most remote communities. Schools, satellite dishes and television, CDs, and visitors from distant lands have all left their mark in terms of material culture, ideas, language, governance, religion, and other lifestyle manifestations. These have all created permanent changes.

Many of these changes are part of the normal dynamics of a vibrant culture. Others are indicative of language loss or other dramatic linguistic shifts that threaten the culture's and language's viability and survival.

Historical and Factual Information About the Navajo Language

The Navajo language belongs to the Athapaskan language family that is spoken from beyond the Arctic Circle in Alaska and Canada to the southwestern United States. Navajo is identified as one of the Western Apachean languages of the Southern Athapaskan group. Northern Athapaskan speakers are located in Alaska and Canada. A third group consists of the Pacific Athapaskans, who reside mostly in northern California as well as Oregon. Southern Athapaskan speakers are situated mostly in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Navajo is spoken in every state, as well as Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia. It ranks among the most frequently spoken languages other than English in the United States. Approximately 178,014 people indicated that they speak Navajo. In the United States there are more speakers of Navajo than there are speakers of Scandinavian languages, Thai, or Hungarian. In Arizona, it is one of the most frequently spoken languages.

The highest concentration of Navajo speakers is in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah on and off the Navajo Reservation. There are significant numbers of Navajos in urban and metropolitan areas throughout the country who also use the language in their private and social gatherings as well. Those who converse in Navajo include monolingual speakers who are mostly of the great-grandparent generation. Members of the next age group, now the grandparent generation, are mostly bilingual. Almost all have gone through the boarding school experience. Their children make up the current parent generation. Many of these young parents are latent language users; they understand the language but do not speak it. Some do not speak or understand Navajo at all. However, a significant number are fluent and proficient in the Navajo language. The next age group is comprised of mostly very young children growing up as monolingual English speakers. A young child who is fluent in Navajo can occasionally be found. There are few of these children today, however.

Political History of American Indian Languages, Including Navajo

The primary goal from the beginning of European contact has been to assimilate and civilize the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. To achieve those objectives, the various European powers sought to obliterate tribal languages, eradicate tribal religions and cultures, and force Native people to act and look more like the Europeans.

In the late 19th century, boarding schools were devised as a systematic effort to assimilate large numbers of Indian children. They were deliberately situated far from Indian reservations and communities. Educators, politicians,

social reformers, military men, and Indian agents were convinced that the best way to permanently “civilize” Indians was to take the children far away, where they would not be under the influence of their parents and grandparents. Grandparents especially were seen as a threat to preventing the assimilation of Indian children.

Some tribal leaders recognized the necessity for educating Indian youths in the language and ways of European Americans, and so they willingly sent their children and others of their tribe. Some parents and orphaned children were so destitute that boarding schools became a means of physical survival. Some children were “stolen,” or literally kidnapped by Indian agents and their representatives, and sent away to school. For whatever reason, Indian children found themselves far away from home. Parents and even chiefs lost parental rights over their children once they were taken away to boarding schools.

With the inception of boarding schools, children were sometimes gone for years at a time. Parents had no control over when they would see them again. Untold numbers of those children died in boarding schools. In places like the old boarding school cemetery at Haskell Indian Nations University, headstones mark the graves of children as young as 5 years old. Some children ran away and made it back to their homes and families. Others died on their journey home. There were a significant number who stayed and finished their schooling and went on to employment or other educational pursuits. These students were not large in number, but their significance was in their prominent contributions to their respective tribal communities or to national Indian affairs. Many more, however, returned home and attempted to re-adapt to the social network of their tribal communities. For these individuals, boarding school was often remembered as a trying and painful experience.

The systematic efforts to eradicate American Indian languages and religious practices to remake Indian children into brown White citizens included cutting hair, changing clothing, giving European American names, and requiring instruction and participation in Christian beliefs and practices. Indian students had no choice but to comply and submit to the “civilizing” program. Parents too had no choice once they relinquished control of their children and allowed them to be taken away. In many ways, boarding school became one of the most effective tools for abolishing American Indian languages. It separated children from their families, their cultures, and their languages.

Boarding school life was miserable; children had to deal with homesickness and culture shock and endured harsh conditions. The early schools were militaristic in their approach; children marched, stood at attention, and followed a highly structured schedule. Having just come from military confrontations with the U.S. Army, they probably saw such militaristic treatment as natural. In the decades that followed their inception, Indian boarding schools changed little in their attitude and mission.

Navajo linguist Dr. Paul Platero described his experience in the Albuquerque Indian Boarding School in the 1950s:

There was a lot of brainwashing that went on. “You don’t speak Indian or else we’ll beat you up or put you in a room, we’ll put soap in your mouth and so on.” Even though I was a limited speaker of my language, I fought to keep my language, but in the government school we had this government soap they gave us to shave off. We had the privilege of holding it in our mouths and keeping it there. It really stung. After a while your mouth would go numb and then they would make you spit it out and you had to put in a fresh dose of that stuff. (Platero, 1998)

Such experiences were typical and commonplace. Other forms of punishment were much more pernicious. Children endured extreme physical punishment and daily derision. Carl Gormon related his punishment at Rehohoth Mission School. For misbehaving he was locked in the basement for a week with only bread and water to eat. At a Bureau school, girls and boys were hobbled as punishment to prevent them from running away. These practices prevailed in spite of repeated instructions from the commissioner to refrain from such practices (Iverson, 2002, pp. 119–120).

Added to the physical punishment was the continual verbal assault and denigration of the home cultures and languages of the Indian children. Religious and cultural customs and practices were ridiculed daily. Boarding school staff made it a point to specify that Indian cultures were backward, evil, and inferior. Some students became convinced. Some resisted. Others silently internalized the assault and passively accepted it.

In later years, some students who came out of the boarding school experience became the teachers or the caregivers in the dormitories and in reservation schools. They assumed the same military-like approach to discipline and instruction. They also became the primary antagonists of Native languages. Platero describes the results of the denigration of the Navajo language:

Well, that conditioning really paid off for the government. The problem became the people who were products of the boarding school who later became teachers on the Navajo reservation, for example. They carried out that conditioning and they were very harsh on new children coming into the schools. What they were conditioned to do they took out on the children. You had Navajo elders and teachers fighting their own children, relatives and so on. That was a real big price to pay. (Platero, 1998)

These products of the boarding school experience inadvertently initiated a social hierarchy for the children who came under their care. For the Navajos the elevation of English over Navajo and of European American ways over Navajo ways resulted in the imposition of a hierarchical structure that has become well entrenched in Navajo society today. According to one of the

authors' experiences in boarding school, if either of your parents spoke English and had some schooling, you were automatically in the upper half of dormitory social life. If your father had short hair or if your mother fixed her hair in other than a knot you were elevated even further up the social ladder. If neither of your parents spoke English or had schooling, and if they both dressed like real Navajos and they both (especially your father) had long hair, you were at the bottom level of the social structure. Many of these students, who later became parents, chose not to pass their tribal languages on to their children. As parents, they would emphatically insist that they did not want their children to endure the same social and academic hardships they did.

It is not surprising, then, that many Navajos have chosen not to use their language or pursue a Navajo way of life. They have been instilled with the impression that all that comes from their Navajo culture is inferior to the English language and American social culture. There is also the false notion that schooling cannot be done in Navajo; math, science, social studies, and so forth can only be taught in English because there are no Navajo word equivalents.

Language Issues Challenging Speakers of Navajo

Living languages are fluid and dynamic. They change over time. They add vocabulary, accents, and phrases. They create new words to deal with innovations, and with infused or adopted forms of material culture and ideas. A living language is responsive to its environment. Living languages are in constant use and therefore must be adaptable to changing situations and circumstances. As Dr. Ophelia Zepeda said in her 1997 presentation at the Wassaja Speaker Series at Arizona State University, "I don't speak the same O'odham language that my parents spoke when they were growing up."

Platero puts forth an example of how language changes. He recalled Navajo boarding school students returning home with a new form of language to describe their adolescent social life. Parents and grandparents (especially the grandparents) were scandalized by the inappropriate and "lewd" language teenagers were speaking. Yet, gradually, over time, that language became a permanent part of the contemporary Navajo language. Now nobody gives it a second thought when they speak it (Platero, 1997).

When the Spaniards came into contact with Navajos, some of the Spanish language became incorporated into the Navajo language. Such words as *beeso* (peso), *tsindao* (centavos), and *giinsih* (quince) became part of the Navajo language. The items of material culture represented in these words did not exist in Navajo culture, but trade relations with the Spanish and the Pueblos made it necessary to bring these descriptive word borrowings into Navajo speech. *Bus* is becoming a part of the Navajo language, even though another word, *chidiltsxoo'i*, also describes a school bus. And who knows how many

words of Pueblo, Ute, Hopi, or Paiute origin have become part of the Navajo language? The Navajo language, in turn, has made an imprint on other tribal languages and English as well. *Jaclo*, a word used by Indian jewelry traders, refers to a particular kind of earrings, and words such as *hogan* and *Anasazi* are commonly used borrowings from Navajo that are now part of English.

Such changes are normal. Social, economic, or political conditions create the need for language change. Each generation of speakers adds to the language, changing it to describe and accommodate to an ever-changing social environment. Speakers voluntarily adopt these changes, and in time the changes become part of the permanent lexicon of all speakers. The key point here is that the language continues in daily use, remaining the core language of communication and expression. Borrowing words from other languages and other changes are often unnoticed and incremental and do not dramatically shift or alter community language use.

Other kinds of language change are forced or induced. Such coercion as that inflicted by the boarding school is such an example. Children were taken far from their homes and forbidden to speak their tribal languages on threat of punishment. Their languages were denigrated on a systematic basis. The imposition was direct and sustained, and it was a product of focused political and social policy. The Indian communities of the post-Indian War years had no choice but to acquiesce to the demands of American government agents.

Another kind of change is less forceful in terms of physical threats, but just as potent and threatening. This involves more subtle and underlying social, economic, and political systems that force change, setting in motion dramatic shifts away from one language toward another. The Navajo Nation has experienced this and continues to face this threat on a daily basis. In one of the authors' dissertation research on change in the concepts of leadership and governance, she concludes that the English language has been one of the key causes of the disintegration of native Navajo concepts and practices of leadership and governance. Indeed, the contemporary structure of the Navajo Nation government is based wholly on European American ideas of order and governance. Congruent with structural change, in the last 10–15 years English has become more and more the language of Council debates and of governance overall. Where the presence of a Navajo-English interpreter was once an official position of the Navajo Nation Council, today all Council delegates effectively understand and speak Navajo; however, some consciously choose to be monolingual English speakers. Council delegates even use English to report to home communities. A former Navajo Nation Council delegate said that it is difficult and cumbersome to try to explain current aspects of government policy to grassroots constituents. The concepts are so different and the manner of implementation so foreign that they require extra time to dissect and explain them in the Navajo language. He said it is easier to just explain it all in English.

Schools, supermarkets and stores, auto repair shops, hair salons, gas stations, and so forth all now use English as their medium of communication. Cashiers handing change to customers count the money out in English even to obviously monolingual older Navajos. The economic system that exists on the Navajo Reservation could survive with Navajo, but the speakers prefer to use English. Even in the offices of the Navajo Nation government, English is the main language of communication. It is rare to find a meeting that will be conducted totally in Navajo or to find an office where the receptionist and other office workers will speak more Navajo than English.

In these examples of language usage, there are no prohibitive signs or threats if Navajo is used, but economic, social, and political conditions impose ideas, customs, and routines that lure individuals to use English instead of Navajo. As Deborah House described in her (2002) book *Language Shift Among the Navajos*, this results in capitulating to the conqueror(s) and incorporating one's self into the conquering culture.

Boarding schools served, as Dr. Paul Platero claims, to marginalize Navajo and force it into an inferior language status in the eyes of the boarding school generation. The social stigmatization of Navajo has made it a language only for the old, for the people who do not have the amenities of modern life such as electricity and indoor plumbing. It is the language of those who are powerless and possess little. Success for many Navajos of the boarding school generation includes proficiency in English more than in Navajo. Ann Batchelder's 1997 survey revealed the attitudes of parents who thought the Navajo language was not necessary to a successful life (Batchelder, 2000). This is now a general assumption found throughout the Navajo Reservation.

Another kind of imposed change that is harder to define is that brought through the enticements of contemporary life. Entertainment media all utilize English. Fashion and amusements come with English as their medium of communication. No one is forcing the English language in these cases, but the desire of youth to be contemporary and trendy requires them to choose English as their language. In most American Indian societies, including Navajo, there is no equivalent to English for transmitting youthful entertainment. It appears to the young that everything that is progressive, fun, trendy, and youthful is in English. The tribal language and culture are seen as old, obsolete, out of step with modern life, and irrelevant.

All of these factors are contributing to the shift from Navajo to English language use in Navajo communities. The Navajo language is no longer simply experiencing natural language change, but it is now a process of decline in daily usage. Navajo citizens are *choosing* to speak English rather than Navajo. Most bilinguals consciously or unconsciously choose to teach only English to their children. Children are showing a preference for speaking English all over the reservation, even in the most remote areas. Right now on the Navajo Reservation and everywhere Navajos are throughout the country, English is

taking precedence over Navajo. There are key indicators that explain why some would say the Navajo language is teetering toward eventual extinction. All of them point to the decreasing number of fluent speakers and individuals who want or choose to speak Navajo.

First among the indicators is the fact that monolingual Navajo speakers are aging and declining in number. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, there were 6,914 Navajos over the age of 65. Of those, a good portion are bilingual speakers. A lesser number are monolingual Navajo speakers. Just how many is not known, but it is likely that only those over 70 years old would be found to be monolingual speakers of Navajo. So it may be inferred that there are fewer than 3,000 monolingual Navajo speakers left. These monolingual speakers are the ones who possess the richest stores of linguistic expertise. They have lived in a time when the Navajo language was the premier language of communication in all areas of their lives. These monolingual speakers are also the keepers of the sacred stories that explain the cosmos of the Navajo, and through living the stories, they interpreted Navajo culture. They are dwindling in numbers now, and with their passing will go the rich repository of the Navajo language as well.

Second, bilingual Navajos who speak Navajo and English are reported in the census to number 23,413 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Although there are no definite numbers that clearly identify the language abilities of each age group comprising bilinguals, roughly half of these are likely to be true bilinguals, that is, proficient and fluent in both languages. A quarter of them are likely to have latent abilities in Navajo—that is, they understand the language but do not speak it. The other quarter is not likely to speak or understand Navajo at all.

The statistics as to who is bilingual are imprecise. In an address at Arizona State University in 1997, Paul Platero noted, “Those labeled bilingual speakers—is very loose. That number should be halved. I think that half would be bilingual speakers. That is one area that really needs to be looked at. Somebody needs to do that.” Platero’s statement suggests that not only are there levels of bilingualism, but the accuracy of identifying who speaks two languages with equal proficiency and fluency is a difficult and puzzling task.

There are 85,955 Navajo individuals between the age of 24 and 54 years of age. Roughly speaking, those over 40 are more likely to be fully fluent and proficient in the Navajo language. The younger are likely to have less proficiency, with the majority of those 30 years and younger more likely to have no proficiency in Navajo language. And, incidentally they are now the parent generation.

Third, the majority of Navajos 24 years old and younger are not likely to be proficient Navajo speakers. The younger they are, the less likely they are to be able to speak their heritage language. The generation that has grown up listening to Navajo but not speaking it has now become the parent generation.

They are having a more difficult time passing on the language, a language in which they are not proficient. At the same time they are the pivotal generation. What they teach their children will determine if the Navajo language will remain strong and vital or if the language will be rejected and allowed to languish and disappear.

Fourth, there is a reluctance and refusal on the part of a significant number of Navajos to speak Navajo in public and even in their homes. Some find it easier to communicate in English about business matters, political matters, official government business, or matters related to technology. Deborah House (2002) found in her research on language shift in contemporary Navajo society that although many educators and affluent individuals talk about the importance of Navajo language and culture, in practice they tend to use English. Some of it is because the language of official business is English.

Fifth, there is a preference for English-language use among middle-class and upper-middle-class adults. In 1997 Ann Batchelder surveyed 48 participants from 20 communities to evaluate the effectiveness of the Navajo Nation Council's 1984 Navajo Language Policy Statement. Participants filled out a survey addressing four topics: (a) What aspects of Navajo culture should be included in school curricula? (b) Who should be responsible for teaching Navajo language and culture? (c) How much fluency should students be expected to achieve? and (d) How much school time should be devoted to Navajo language and culture studies? In summarizing her findings, she categorized the participants by age, education, where they grew up, the location or types of communities where they lived, and, informally, whether or not they were "traditional." It should be noted that Batchelder does not include the economic standing of the participants, a detail that is as important as the other criteria.

The survey indicated that a wide spectrum of opinions, attitudes, and expectations exists within the Navajo community. In addition, there were a variety of definitions as to what was meant by *culture* in the classroom. One of the most significant findings was the dichotomy between individuals from small rural communities in the inner parts of the reservation and those from large urban areas or from the border towns on and off the reservations. Those from within the farther interior of the reservation favored use of the Navajo language in the classroom. Those who lived closer to non-Navajos had a tendency to view Navajo as a language obsolete for the economic and academic needs of contemporary life. Batchelder characterizes them as "a large group of parents and young adults in this group who emphasized that learning English is more important for students to become successful in life than learning Navajo" (1997, p. 5). These were the parents who lived off the reservation, on the border but near the reservation, and those living in larger reservation communities and along major highways, who tended to have more advanced educational training. Although their economic standing was not identified,

Batchelder does indicate that they tended to have more educational experience. It can therefore be inferred that they are probably employed with a salary in the middle to upper-middle income range.

Sixth, gender seems to be a factor in language preference. Through observation, one of the authors has noted that men and boys tend to speak Navajo more than women and girls. This is an interesting phenomenon, especially since it is usually the women who pass on language and culture. Quite often there is no use of the Navajo language among teenagers, especially girls.

Seventh, one of the most alarming indications of the decline of the Navajo language is the dwindling number of small children learning the language and becoming proficient in communicating with it. In 1992 Dr. Paul Platero surveyed 39 Navajo preschool centers scattered throughout the Navajo Reservation to determine the amount of language learning that was occurring. There was a serious absence of language. The classrooms were quiet, rather than being filled with the noisy chatter of children. Platero read the goals of the preschool programs and noted that the goals focused on improving motor skills. None of the objectives addressed language skills. Platero described the classrooms: "In my study, I found that in a classroom where it should have been very healthy and noisy there was an absence of speech. It was silent. Actual audible speech, production of speech, was very little. There was a huge gap that was being created." Further, Platero observed that all instruction was in English, even though the Navajo teachers were all speakers of Navajo. According to Platero, "The choice of the classroom, and also, maybe the whole agency, was to teach in English—to help kids bridge the gap to English."

Platero further observed that when instruction was given in English it was very simple English. Questions were very simple as well. When hearing this kind of basic language, the researchers assumed this was so that the teacher could help the children, ages 4 and 5 years old, to understand English. Most of the questions, incidentally, were yes-or-no questions.

On further study, Platero discovered that communication was taking place through gestures and body language. Children were directed to do tasks by simple commands that included much pointing and gesturing. Verbal language was being replaced by bodily communication. Children were also communicating through body language. Nodding for "yes" and shaking the head for "no" were accepted as legitimate responses. To sustain or develop any language, it is important to produce speech. In this study not only was there a lack of Navajo, but a serious lack of language of any sort.

It is especially important for children to be stimulated by and produce speech for communicative purposes. They process data, develop a grammar in their minds, and then acquire a language. Where language experience should have been extremely rich in the reservation preschool classes, very little language—either Navajo or English—was being produced (Platero, 1998).

When communicative speech events did occur within the preschool environments, the English language was found to be pervasive throughout the reservation. All communication was in English. In their personal communication, staff spoke English. When asked “How often or when do you conduct your meetings in Navajo?” 21 of 39 centers indicated their meetings were in Navajo, but that was not found to be the case; staff meetings were conducted in English. Parents, bilingual in Navajo and English, chose to speak English to their children on the bus, at home, and at school. When preschool children were exposed to language, it was English. They were absorbing English and not Navajo.

Platero’s findings have profound implications for the survival of the Navajo language. In a presentation at the 1997 Wassaja Speaker Series at Arizona State University, Dr. Ofelia Zepeda spoke about language extinction. One of the keys to language maintenance, she notes, is the quantity of small children learning the language and becoming proficient in it. Small children are the purveyors of language to the next generation, their children. When they do not learn their heritage language, they cannot pass it on when they have children. According to Zepeda, when two or more successive generations do not learn the heritage language, the language is marked spiraling toward extinction. When enough small children of each successive generation are taught the language, they will ensure the language’s survival.

The 1992 study by Platero found 4-year-olds and 5-year-olds being steered toward acquisition of English at the expense of Navajo. Language preference and proficiency in all five agencies on the Navajo Reservation indicated a dwindling use of Navajo and preference for English over Navajo. The study found that 17.69% spoke Navajo; 54.35% spoke English; and 27.96% were bilingual speakers (Platero, 1998).

Also in 1992, Platero extended his study to include 10th-grade and 11th-grade students. Through speaking with teachers and direct observation, he noted that these high school students were very conversant in Navajo. They spoke the language with ease and were fairly proficient communicating in it. In comparing the 1992 preschool children with the 1992 high school students, Platero concluded that it was unlikely that the former group of children would be as fluent and proficient in Navajo when they reached their late teens. Platero said:

I can only imagine this cohort of children in 1992, ten years from this date, that’s 2002. What will they be like and what will preschool children be like in 2002? I believe [they will speak] English only—[and] monolingual English speakers among Navajo children will be higher. That is the trend.

If this has truly been the trend in the last few years, then according to Zepeda’s formula, the Navajo language is dangerously close to extinction. In 1992, 4-year-olds and 5-year-olds were already being guided by their adult

teachers and authority figures to learn English rather than Navajo. As young adults in 2005, and ready to have their own children, if they have not learned Navajo sufficiently well, they have no Navajo language to pass on to their children. Their children, not having learned their ancestral language, will not have it to teach the next generation, and if sufficient numbers of Navajo children do not learn their native language, the Navajo language will be gone.

Eighth, the lack of monetary support for language maintenance from the tribal government has dampened the enthusiasm to promote the teaching of Navajo language and culture in the classrooms. Even though the Navajo Nation government has enacted a Language Policy Statement supporting and endorsing the Navajo language, it has not allocated funding to support it. There is also a lack of trained and qualified teachers to teach Navajo reading, writing, and oral fluency, and a lack of curriculum materials to support such teaching.

Many schools write proposals, and they often get funded, for language programs. However, the national trend in the last 2 decades has been to guide children toward proficiency in English so they can improve their cumulative scores on skills tests. Programs to develop curriculum materials in Navajo have not been a priority for the federal government. This is occurring in spite of the fact that the Native American Languages Protection Act was passed by Congress in 1990 and amended and expanded in 1992 and 1994.

Ninth, although school districts on the Navajo Reservation have been frequent recipients of federal grants, there is no school that has institutionalized instruction of the Navajo language. Instead, there continues to be subtle and overt resistance toward the inclusion of the Navajo language in the academic curriculum by school administrators and teachers, both Navajo and non-Navajo. Federal grant proposals include provisions to which recipients must respond with respect to institutionalizing language programs. No public school has done this. Those schools that have done so are community-controlled schools like Rock Point, but even they depend on continued federal grants to keep their programs viable.

Finally, one of the most serious obstacles and challenges to awakening Navajos to the state of their language is complacency. Paul Platero stated in a recent communication with one of the authors that Navajos are oblivious to the rapidly declining use of Navajo. He went on to say that one day they will wake up and realize that their language has disappeared, and it will be too late. Unfortunately, he may be right.

There is a collective ignorance and apathy by Navajo speakers themselves about the decline of Navajo-language use. The adult population is so accustomed to being able to speak Navajo anywhere and anytime that these adults have taken it for granted that the language will always be viable. They also do not see the relationship between their failure to pass on their language to their children and the decline of their ancestral language.

The Navajo language is not “renewable” from an outside source, as are many world languages. For instance, when a German American ceases to speak German, the German language does not cease to exist. This is not the case with Navajo, where the speakers are concentrated in one area and where the pool of speakers is relatively small. As each Navajo ceases to speak his or her language, the pool is weakened to the extent that the language will eventually disappear altogether, without the hope of “renewability” from an external source.

Right now, most adults over 40 are bilingual and can, at will, speak to most other adults in Navajo. What is not possible is for them to find, at random, just any young person to converse with in Navajo. More and more youths are inept at speaking Navajo. Some parents object to this observation and insist that their children know Navajo, but that knowledge only encompasses being able to understand basic commands, name objects, and perhaps introduce themselves properly in Navajo. What they cannot do is carry on an extended conversation using complex language or utilize the wide spectrum of language to describe many things in many ways.

Research and Programs for Navajo-Language Maintenance or Revitalization

Because of the research findings and concerns of scholars, there have been major efforts to try to revitalize the Navajo language through school programs. Generally, these efforts have been custom designed to meet the hopes of the school, community, and parents.

One of the programs initiated to address Navajo-language degradation was undertaken at the Fort Defiance School in 1986. The principal organizers of the program were Marie Arviso and Wayne Holm, each with extensive experience as educators. The program was a language immersion program designed to increase students’ skills in Navajo. In 1986 the school had conducted a language proficiency test to determine the level of students’ Navajo-language skills. The results were alarming: At least one third of the kindergartners entering school had only passive knowledge of Navajo that is they could understand some words and phrases, but they could not converse in the language or understand when spoken to beyond simple phrases. This was in sharp contrast to a study reported by Spolsky, (1970) and Spolsky and Holm (1977) that 90% of Navajo children attending boarding schools were reported to have no knowledge of English when they come to school (as cited in Spolsky, 2002). Further compounding the language deficiency was the fact that the same one third group of students who were monolingual in English also tested with weak abilities in their primary language. It was concluded that children were able to use a kind of “Navajo English” that was informal and

useful in places like the playground, but they were unable to use English in more complex settings like school, where advanced academic skills based in Standard English were required.

In 1986, the Fort Defiance School designed a Navajo-language program where students would be immersed in the Navajo language. Kindergarten and first-grade students received total or almost total instruction in Navajo. From second through fifth grade, the amount of Navajo-language instruction would become progressively less, but it would continue. Second and third graders would be instructed 50% in Navajo and 50% in English, and fourth and fifth graders would have a minimum of 1 hour's daily instruction in Navajo.

As can be expected, the program was begun with some trepidation. Both parents and teachers were unsure of the program's credibility as a conduit to academic success. It was, as Arviso and Holm concluded, accomplished because of strong parental and administrative support (Arviso & Holm, 2001, pp. 210–211). There was a strong effort by the teachers involved to speak Navajo in the dining room, on the playground, in the hallways, and in one-to-one interactions with students. Students were encouraged to use Navajo with each other. In the beginning, sometimes Navajo immersion students tried to talk Navajo to other children in the school, but they were laughed at (Arviso & Holm, p. 208). As time went on, though, such reactions became less of a problem.

Positive results became evident through observing the behavior of the students and the improvement of their academic skills. Students, Arviso and Holm observed, came to “act more like traditional Navajo children.” In addition to learning the language, Navajo students began to take on the expected social behaviors of a properly trained Navajo child. By describing them as traditional, the authors do not imply that children became docile and passive, but rather that they displayed proper etiquette as befitting the various social situations they came into. Furthermore, rather than being quiet, children became more active and verbal. Arviso and Holm further state that “students were at once more focused and more relaxed” (Arviso & Holm, 2001, p. 209).

In their academic performance, Navajo immersion students outperformed the monolingual English-speaking students and even those students who had come to school as monolingual Navajo speakers. On local writing assessments, third and fourth graders did better than their monolingual English counterparts. They did the same in math, almost scoring 10 percentage points higher. Not only did students improve in their personal social behaviors, but their academic skills improved as well (Arviso & Holm, 2001).

All of the Navajo immersion students improved in their Navajo language skills. They not only learned vocabulary but how to interact socially with the language. They developed such skills as being able to joke with each other—a skill prized by Navajos. They also learned to use the appropriate language for the appropriate social situation.

Arviso and Holm wrote that the language was successful because of the dedicated staff that included teachers, the principal, and the program director. In addition, the dedication, commitment, and willingness of the parents to let their children participate was of prime importance. Some of the parents were already monolingual English speakers themselves. Others were aware of and concerned about the decline of the Navajo language among young people and the “deculturization” of Navajo youths.

At the end of Holm’s tenure at the school, parents remained committed to the program—so committed that they argued vehemently to convince the incoming superintendent to keep the language immersion program in place. The new administrators wanted to concentrate on steering students toward English proficiency only. Parents by then were convinced that Navajo-language instruction was vital to the academic success of their children. Most of all, parents realized that it was possible for their children “to be both Navajo and educated” (Arviso & Holm, p. 211). In 2000–2001, the program was in its 14th year of operation.

The Leupp Public School is another school that has tried to encourage language revitalization. The language situation at Leupp was abysmal. The school was part of the Flagstaff Unified School District and was the only school located on an Indian reservation. Student standardized test scores were the lowest in the school district. Further, Leupp students transferred to a high school in Flagstaff and made up only 7.5% of the student body, but they accounted for 25% of school dropouts. Students were performing poorly and were not successfully making the social adjustment to school in town (Fillerup, p. 2000).

Michael Fillerup, director of the Bilingual and English as a Second Language Programs for the Flagstaff Unified School District, noted that in his 18-year experience working with Navajo students, there was a dramatic decline in the Navajo-language abilities of Navajo students. In the late 1970s almost all Navajo students spoke Navajo with ease. In a 1994 study of Navajo Head Start students, only 45% of the children had any knowledge of Navajo. Another report by the Division of Diné Education in 1996 indicated that lack of knowledge of Navajo (i.e., inability to understand and speak Navajo) was as high as 50% for both reservation and border town schools. In Leupp Public School, in 1996, 82% of students had no proficiency in Navajo. Only 7% were fluent, with 11% having limited proficiency.

The dramatic findings of the surveys mentioned above spurred the school to initiate a Navajo–English bilingual program (Fillerup, p. 23). It was a program that aimed to reclaim what had been taken away. The program sought to provide Navajo children with a Navajo-based education through and with the Navajo language. It included education in and through computer technology, sheltered instruction, serving gifted students, family literacy and parent involvement, a Leupp to Sinagua High School transition program, summer

instruction, and staff development. The program further planned to implement four components to improve literacy: Sustained Silent Reading, a Read Across the REZ (Reservation) Program, Books in the Home, and Expanded Library Hours.

While Navajo-language instruction was enthusiastically supported by parents and community members, there was debate about how much language to include in the schools. Some wanted full Navajo language immersion right from the start, and others worried about the program's interference with English-language achievement and academic performance. In the end, it was agreed that subject matter would be taught in the Navajo language for at least half a day (Fillerup, p. 26).

There were challenges to full and successful implementation of the program. These included a lack of trained and qualified staff to teach the Navajo language and an inadequate available selection of curriculum materials with Navajo language and culture content. Another problem was the lack of community participation. The community was divided over whether a bilingual program was really useful. At the beginning of the program, there was a division between those who fully supported the initiative and those who were afraid a Navajo-language program would interfere with the academic progress of their children. A third group was simply not sure if a Navajo-English bilingual program was workable or wise.

At the end of 3 years from the inception of the program, Navajo-language instruction had been implemented for kindergarten and first grade. In 2000, the program was being expanded to second grade. One student shade house was completed, along with male and female sweathouses, and construction had begun on the Hogan center that would be the school's culture center. Each of these buildings was meant to focus on cultural teachings.

There are no statistics that indicate whether the program was successful or not, but indications are that for language revitalization to fully work, the people whose language is being saved must be involved and committed. Outsiders cannot do all the work, and they cannot save the language for the speakers.

Navajo English

It is ironic that the shift toward the use of English has created a unique community of speakers of Navajo English—not the vaunted Standard English of mainstream America. As the Navajo language continues to decrease in daily usage from one generation to the next, Navajo English has now become the most widely spoken variety of language on the Navajo Reservation. It is spoken by most individuals, represented in virtually all of the gradations of fluency in the Navajo language, by individuals who are monolingual in its use, and bi-dialectically by individuals who also possess a command of

Standard English. As a vernacular form of English, it has been greatly influenced by the form, structure, sounds, and communicative conventions of the Navajo language. Among prescriptivist educators on the reservation, Navajo English is usually regarded as a substandard and inferior form of English. While Navajo English is now often the primary language they bring to school with them, Navajo children are typically regarded as and treated as “limited English proficient.” Few educators on the reservation recognize the communicative legitimacy of this vernacular English, and they impose a variety of methods of remediation to alter or eliminate it, as they did originally with the Navajo language. The irony lies in the treatment of speakers of Navajo English in schools. Although there is a decided shift toward English-language usage, it is a common belief that Navajos “still do not have it right” and are deemed communicatively deficient in the eyes of most educators. This justifies a continuation of mainstream policies and practices that have done such damage to U.S. Native languages in the first place, only now they are directed toward users of Navajo English. In the present day, this is accomplished largely through the agency of standardized tests, which generally produce poor results among Navajo children because they are administered in a language medium (Standard English) to which the children are unaccustomed in their daily use.

Navajo English is a rich and effective form of expression that is shared throughout Navajo country. In reality, even many of today’s Navajo educators and school personnel speak and teach in Navajo English themselves; thus, it enjoys a great degree of functionality and use in the Navajo speech community. However, its presence is considered by most outsiders and reservation educators as a linguistic aberration, so it is not acknowledged in the formal curriculum of schools on the reservation. Navajo English lies on a continuum between the living Navajo language and the Standard English spoken by the majority of Americans. However, the bridging and connecting role it could potentially play with respect to either end of the continuum has not been explored or addressed, especially in school curriculum and the teaching of Navajo children. However, studies (Arviso & Holm, 2001; Rosier & Holm, 1980; McLaughlin, 1989; Watahomigie & McCarty, 1994) suggest a positive and powerful link to early-grade Native language immersion programs, with later improved performance in areas requiring academic or Standard English.

Though the English language had been used to enforce conformity to Euro-American society and to attempt to obliterate the Navajo language, Navajos have, at the same time, made their own adaptations to and contributions to the English language. In the case of Navajo English, they have made it their own by adapting it as a means of their own cultural expression. Like the Navajo language itself, it is distinctly theirs, creating a shared speech community among its many speakers. As in the case of many speakers of Black English and Spanglish, many are fluent in both Navajo English and Standard English and are able to alternate between the two, depending on the social context.

Although the presence of Navajo English—especially in schools—carries a certain stigma in contrast to Standard English, Navajo English enjoys considerable celebration in the expressive arts, particularly in the literary works of such accomplished Navajo writers as Laura Tohe, Nina Francisco, Lucy Tapahanso, and Rex Jim. The literary expression of the forms and diction of American Indian or “Red English” as it exists in forms similar to Navajo English may also be seen in the works of modern American Indian writers such as N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, and James Welch (Bevington, 1995). Native forms of English convey humor, concepts, and spirituality that cannot be approached in the use of Standard English.

Gina Cantoni-Harvey wrote in 1977 that Navajo English and other similar forms of language among Native peoples should be respected and utilized as an education resource. She noted at the time that the common practice in Round Robin reading instruction of “interrupting a child’s oral reading to point out his deviant rendition of a word does not help his understanding of the text” (p. 230). She advised teachers to model Standard English but not constantly correct students’ nonstandard English.

Cantoni-Harvey (1977) emphasized that the respect for the learner’s home dialect, which is so important in the early grades, should not be set aside when the need arises for instruction in Standard English. “Red English” may be encouraged to develop its fullest range of expressive power and flexibility in creative writing, where the freedom from certain grammatical restrictions, the slightly different connotations of lexical items, and some direct translation from the Indian language, along with the rich content of Indian tradition, may result in poetry and prose more exciting than the correct but cliché-ridden output of Standard speakers. Although the rapid and continued decrease in the number of individuals fluent in the Navajo language cannot be denied, and Navajo must be considered in imminent danger of extinction, we must also acknowledge the practical realities of language and communications in today’s Navajo speech community. Education programs, language planning, and policy development must take these realities—as is the case with Navajo English—into account. The anthropologist Anthony Mattina has even advocated colloquial Indian English as the form of English into which to translate traditional oral narratives from their original indigenous languages, especially in cases where Native language loss has been most severe (Bevington, 1995).

Conclusion

There are many programs that have been initiated to remedy the declining use of Navajo. Some have been very successful, as was the program at the Fort Defiance School. Others have been attempted, but for various reasons the programs never progressed. Much of the problem lies in lack of proper

funding and disinterest on the part of administrators and the community. At Fort Defiance, for instance, the principal was a strong supporter of the program. She made frequent visits to the classrooms. Teachers recruited to teach the Navajo-language classes were committed. Parents were committed and willing to make the crucial “leap of faith,” believing that their children’s success in learning was rooted in their competence in the Navajo language. Student achievement improved. Student behavior improved. The program seemed to be working, but a new team of administrators came in and chose to emphasize English-language competence over Navajo-language competence, and the positive balance that had been achieved was lost. The vigorous protests of the parents saved the program for only a little while longer.

At Leupp, the school district’s Bilingual and English as a Second Language Programs director enthusiastically initiated the program, but lack of trained and qualified Navajo-language teachers, lack of curriculum materials, and lack of a committed community obstructed the program’s success. There was also an unwillingness by the parents and community to take that important “leap of faith” to try a program that promoted the Navajo language so students could acquire competence in that language while deferring English during the early grades, shifting to English-language instruction in later grades, so as to eventually become competent in academic English as well.

The issue that many schools, parents, teachers, and administrators worry about the most is whether concentrating on developing the Navajo language will interfere with acquiring competence in English. Yet, as was shown at Fort Defiance, when Navajo-language competence is allowed to develop in children, their skills in English and in their academic pursuits in general are increased significantly. In addition, their social skills and their cultural knowledge increase. Students become better learners. It appears that educators and parents do need to take that leap of faith and believe that the Navajo language can work for their children, and that they can learn just as effectively and as well in Navajo and, ultimately, in both languages.

The Navajo language remains vital and necessary to the Navajo way of life. Although a significant sector vacillates between valuing it and neglecting it, the language remains an essential core for many others. In the last 15–20 years, the issue of Navajo-language decline has been addressed by scholars, both Navajo and non-Navajo. Most non-Navajo scholars have been those who have lived on the Navajo Reservation and worked with Navajo students and communities, and they have generally been supporters of Navajo language and culture curricula. It is sometimes the outsiders who are the most cognizant of the decline of language.

Where the Navajo language is included as a significant part of the daily curriculum, students have reached higher levels of success, and students score higher on achievement tests. This can be attested to in the experience of Rock Point School and in the Fort Defiance School’s bilingual program (Arviso

& Holm, 2001). Somehow, knowing their language and becoming skilled in using it leads students to perform better in school.

Children who learn their language and social and political history have greater self-esteem and a greater sense of self-identity. They also tend to be more outgoing and display positive social skills. At a workshop in the late 1980s, Kenneth Begishe addressed his home community's parent committee. He spoke about going to Rock Point School and being met by a young boy about 5 years old. The boy, without hesitation, extended his hand and greeted him with "Ya'at'eeh" [hello, greetings] He went on to introduce himself, giving his name, his clan affiliations, and where he was from. Then he asked Mr. Begishe about his clan and where he was from. Having finished his greeting, the boy then gave instructions about where the office was. Mr. Begishe compared the boy to Navajo students in other communities. He noted that when these students were addressed, they immediately ducked their heads and withdrew. Mr. Begishe said he was convinced that Rock Point School students were outgoing and showed positive social skills because they were taught through their own history and culture and language. Because they knew who they were, they had confidence in themselves and projected that in everything else they did.

The Navajo language is at a crossroads. It is at a stage where it can be revived to the extent that it can be strengthened in daily use, or it can continue to decline. The current generation of young parents has mostly grown up hearing Navajo. They are able to decipher much of the language spoken to them, but they do not speak it. When they begin studying the language, for example in a college Navajo-language class, they pick up the language very quickly and easily. Some become proficient and fluent within a semester. This generation of youth is also now beginning to understand the value of their ancestral language. They are beginning to appreciate its significance in their lives and in the lives of their children. This is fortunate for the Navajo language because this generation seems to be the pivotal generation. Aside from those members of their age group who are fluent in the language, they are the last generation to hear active language usage.

The *Coolangatta Statement* (1999) emphasizes the use and preservation of indigenous languages as a basic human right. However, there are many social, economic, and political forces that serve to either undermine or support that right. There is also the added complexity and significance of Navajo English in the continuum of language use among Navajos. It has powerful communicative value among its speakers, but it is not recognized for this value, and it is not systematically connected, in the management of school achievement for Navajo children, to either or both ends of the continuum. The basis of the *Coolangatta Statement* is that the issues of language belong to Indigenous peoples themselves and that they should be making their own conscious decisions about how to recover, protect, or preserve their languages

in everyday use. Most importantly, they need to act on these decisions, as the forces mitigating them are powerful and omnipresent: “3.2 Indigenous peoples have the right to be Indigenous. They cannot exist as images and reflections of a non-Indigenous society” (*Coolangatta Statement*).

On several levels, extinction seems to be looming for the Navajo language, but on other levels, the language appears to remain strong and viable. Ultimately, the future of the Navajo language lies with its speakers. The language is theirs. The stories, songs, and prayers that come with the language are for them. They are for their protection and well being, and it is for them, the speakers, to accept and use or to reject and leave behind. Much research has been done by linguists, both Navajo and non-Navajo. They see the decline in language usage, but they also see hope for the language’s survival. The Navajo language can survive if the speakers choose to keep it alive.

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