

Language Reclamation: The Next Generation

***Summary:** After generations of forced assimilation policies explicitly targeting the disuse of Native languages, many indigenous languages are dead or on the verge of becoming so. To address language loss, Native communities have established many educational and extracurricular programs, as well as new technologies, aimed at teaching participants Native languages and retaining their usage.*

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing Native communities today is that of retaining their original languages as living languages. Many Native nations consider their languages to be gifts bestowed on the people by the source of life. These languages shape the distinctive ways in which Native communities envision land, community, and relationship. To be sure, different communities experience the challenge of language preservation to different degrees. Some, like the Diné (Navajo) of Arizona, enjoy relatively high rates of fluency. Among other peoples, like the Cahuilla of California's Morengo community, only a handful of elders spoke the language in the mid-1990s but efforts have been made in recent years to pass down this knowledge to younger generations through cultural practices such as bird-singing.

That these many languages survive at all is evidence of Native peoples' fortitude in preserving their traditions, since several generations underwent the experience of English-only boarding schools and other policies aimed at assimilation to English-speaking culture. Such overt attempts to stamp out Native languages and traditions are no longer the rule. In 1992 Congress passed legislation, the Native American Languages Act, to support Native language retention. But the outcome of years of a policy of assimilation, combined with the assimilative force of the wider English-speaking culture, is still deeply felt. Retaining the language spoken by hundreds of generations of ancestors is no easy matter.

Native communities have established a wide variety of programs to incorporate Native languages into children's education as well as extracurricular programming to address the threat of language loss. In his 2012 "State of Native Education" address, Quinton Roman Nose, President of the National Indian Education Association, highlighted the organization's support of the Indian CLASS Act which would encourage "culturally based curriculum and assessments and support schools and programs that use Native language as the primary instrument of instruction." Others have taken action on a more local level. Some

concerned elders and educators in northern Minnesota's Ojibwe communities have begun a community-based, culturally-situated approach to language retention, a program they call "Harmony in the Village."

The Ojibwe hold seasonal language-immersion camps at the White Earth Rediscovery Center on the White Earth Indian Reservation. These camps bring traditional elders, young people, and their families together to speak only Ojibwe and to learn the terms that pertain to traditional seasonal activities: maple sugaring and fish spearing in a spring camp, gardening and berry picking in a summer camp, gathering wild rice and netting fish in a fall camp, and hunting and storytelling in a winter camp.

At the elders' direction cultural context is as central to curriculum content as is grammar and vocabulary. Unlike many classroom-based language programs, Harmony in the Village reintegrates language learning with community. It emphasizes a healthy respect for self and others and a healthy relationship with the land. Participants learn the language orally, in a context in which words are not objects on the page, but occasions of interpersonal exchange, rooted in specific contexts and in human relationships.

Neither clocks nor bells structure the activities of immersion camps; instead, the experience of human social time is integrated with seasonal and natural cycles of time. The Harmony in the Village program puts community values above educational efficiency in its program structure. Rather than extricating pupils from their families, entire families come together to participate in the camps. In keeping with Ojibwe educational theory, the community elders are the primary teachers of language and culture. Although linguistically-trained professional educators participate and consult, the program itself takes direction from the elders, whose presence inspires confidence in the program and whose lessons are integrated into larger visions and strategies for community life.

Efforts to promote language retention have also included the translation of materials from the dominant popular culture into native languages. In 2013, the major motion picture *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977) was translated into the Diné Bizaad language. According to Time magazine, the effort was spearheaded by the Navajo Nation Museum in Window Rock, Arizona. How might one say that quintessential *Star Wars* phrase, "may the force be with you?" Laura Tohe, a professor at Arizona State University and fluent Navajo speaker, thinks "may you walk with great power" or "may you have the power within you" might suffice, according to a Yahoo interview. Scholastic News reports that such efforts to engage young people

in the learning of native languages has also included *Bambi* in Arapaho and children's book series *The Berenstain Bears* in Lakota and Dakota.

In 2005, several local businesses in Bemidji, Minnesota began incorporating the Ojibwe language into their signage, labeling everything from restrooms to groceries and even fabric and thread selections at the local fabric shop. The initiative was first proposed by Michael Meuers, a government employee for the Red Lake Band of Chippewa and included 119 businesses in 2011 and Bemidji State University, which now labels parking lot signs and posters in Ojibwe. Additionally, the University offers an Ojibwe language instruction program and certificate.

Language reclamation efforts have flourished in the past two decades. Since 2001 the Myaamia Project (as of February 2013, the Myammia Center), an initiative of the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma and Miami University in Oxford, Ohio has worked to revitalize Myaamia language and culture and expose undergraduate and graduate students to these efforts. In addition to electronic language resources available for iPhone and iPad, collaborative research efforts between the tribe and the University have led to the publication of a cookbook, a detailed mapping of the historical landscapes of the Miami, and a database of ethnobotanical resources.