

Commentaries

Tribal Languages and the Challenges of Revitalization

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Although school- and university-based language programs can help strengthen threatened Indigenous languages, language revitalization at its heart involves reestablishing traditional functions of language use in the context of everyday speaker interactions. The inherent dynamics of Native oral language traditions suggest the limitations of institutions in supporting critical language learning activities that are the key to successful language renewal efforts. [American Indian/Indigenous language revitalization, teaching American Indian languages, Pueblo Indian languages]

Mindy J. Morgan's article, "Redefining the Ojibwe Classroom: Indigenous Language Programs within Large Research Universities," reiterates the continuing challenge facing many American Indian tribes and their present-day efforts to maintain and revitalize their Native languages. For most tribes and language communities involved in such efforts, the challenge has been first and foremost to reestablish tribal languages as spoken languages within families and communities. This goal has not been easy to accomplish and many tribal language initiatives continue to struggle with this challenge, oftentimes against tremendous pressures and influences from the mainstream English-speaking society. The ways in which language revitalization has taken root in different Native language communities has often differed according to the availability of language resources. This is clearly evidenced in Morgan's description, where a Native language is now being taught at Michigan State University, a very different setting than the traditional context for language learning and transmission. The challenge of producing language speakers in this context is compounded by insufficient numbers of speakers and the constraints that an academic learning environment places on the teaching and learning of tribal languages.

In the American Southwest, where viable tribal language communities still exist among a number of Pueblo Indian and other tribal groups, the number of fluent speakers, although less dire than the Ojibwe experience, is nonetheless a critical factor in terms of maintaining and teaching tribal languages within these communities. In New Mexico, where several Pueblo tribes have recently initiated community-based language immersion initiatives, much effort has gone into deliberate planning about the types of language learning environments that need to be created so that young and adult language learners are engaged in contextualized language learning. This has often meant that language learning "events" extend beyond the instructional times that the learners spend in language immersion classes. Through collaborative effort and language planning, community members organize several events during the year, bringing fluent speakers together with language learners. In the case of two Pueblo Indian communities, this has included community dinners where language learners participated in preparing and serving a meal for elders and other members of the community, a community carnival in which different game and food booths were manned by fluent speakers who

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reinforced language use among students wanting to try their hand at a bean bag toss game or to order food, as well as group activities in which students helped elders and traditional religious leaders with community work and other chores. In these contexts, language learners can apply the language they learn in their immersion classes.

The intent of these efforts is to bridge the learning of language taking place during summer immersion camps and other immersion classes with practical, everyday use in the community and home settings. In this manner, language learners can take immediate "ownership" of the language at whatever stage in the language learning process they have progressed. Furthermore, situated within these rich oral language environments, language learners are not only hearing fluent language being spoken but also encouraged to use the language. (For more on these initiatives, see Pecos and Blum-Martínez 2001; Sims 2001.)

A key question for many tribal communities, therefore, is how to maintain traditional Native language functions such that the language is accorded its rightful place as a common language of use among its people. Many factors associated with successful second language learning, including contextualized language learning environments and critical social interactions among fluent speakers and language learners, are important considerations (Wong Fillmore 1991). Intergenerational language transmission has been identified as a key element in the successful maintenance of language (Fishman 1991, 2001; see also Henze and Davis 1999). These elements, coupled with the understanding that the core foundation of tribal languages has been rooted in oral tradition, with their functions being to represent and recreate tribal sociocultural, socioreligious, and sociopolitical life, clearly place the teaching of Indigenous languages at odds with how formal educational institutions—including institutions of higher education—ordinarily approach subject matter teaching, especially language teaching.

Morgan's description reflects the difficulties associated with attempts to create real-life language immersion contexts in settings that have not been traditional places for Native language learning. The difficulties that Morgan points out in terms of access to university-based Ojibwe classes and the need for extending instruction into other contexts outside the classroom setting suggest the limitations of institutional paradigms. The goals of university language classes are typically to fulfill basic language requirements and focus on instilling a passive knowledge of the grammar and structures of written languages.

The program at Michigan State may be an exception, but in the broader context, K-12 schools and universities are rarely able or willing to put forth the resources necessary to initiate and sustain long-term language learning. Nor do such institutions consider the length of time and types of supportive language learning environments required to effectively produce speakers of a Native language. The goal of reestablishing Native languages as spoken languages outside the instructional setting challenges the best language revitalization efforts. The challenge is far greater when language teaching is situated apart from tribal communities. Established within academic disciplinary structures and Western philosophical traditions, university-based Indigenous language programs will continue to face great difficulties in effecting any substantive change in terms of language revitalization. Although university-based Native language programs may indeed bring newly established validation to these languages, as Morgan states, it must not be forgotten that the primary function of these tribal languages has always been their use as the foundation of essentially oral tribal societies. That is where the validation of these languages resides.

Tribal language communities are only beginning to understand the kinds of resources and commitment it will take to reverse the growing phenomenon of language shift. At the same time, there is growing recognition that Native languages are central to self-determination and sovereignty; tribal languages are the unique and primary medium used to give voice to these fundamental aspects of American Indian life. Tribal languages serve not merely symbolic functions. Their value as

oral traditions must be given its rightful place and use in any language teaching situation.

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