

The Importance of Culturally-Relevant Materials

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1. Background on endangered languages

- Of the 6,000 languages still spoken, between 20% and 50% are no longer spoken by children. These will be extinct during this century. These, then, are not endangered, but are essentially dead.
- How many are endangered? 300 are “safe”; that is, they will be spoken by children in a century. So in the 21st century, we may see the extinction of 95% of our languages. The surviving 5% will belong to at most 20 language families; over half of the “safe” languages belong to Indo-European and Niger-Congo.
- The endangered ones, then, are 45% to 75% of the 6000. (Krauss)
- Realize that because we have no fossil record for languages, we can’t calculate the rate at which they died out in the past.
- “Modern cultures, abetted by new technologies, are encroaching on once-isolated peoples with drastic effects on their way of life and on the environments they inhabit. Destruction of lands and livelihoods; the spread of consumerism, individualism, and other Western values; pressures for assimilation into dominant cultures; and conscious policies of repression directed at indigenous groups—these are among the factors threatening the world’s biodiversity as well as its cultural and linguistic diversity.” (Crawford, 3)

2. How does a language die?

- Languages can die through disease or genocide—but this is very rare. (The Arawak people of the Caribbean disappeared within a generation of their first contact with Columbus.)
- Most often language death is the result of internal and external pressures that induce a group of people to adopt a language spoken by others. On the one hand, the process always reflects forces beyond its speakers’ control: repression, discrimination, or exploitation at the hand of others, and in many situations all three. On the other hand, except in the case of physical genocide, languages never succumb to outside pressures alone. There must be some complicity on the part of the speakers themselves, changes in attitudes and values that discourage the children from continuing to acquire the language and instead encourage loyalty to the other, dominant language.
- So, language “choices” are made in the end by the speakers themselves, but this explains little about the social forces underlying such “choices.”

3. The Example of the death of Native American languages

- Native American languages were targeted by the U.S. government in a campaign of linguistic genocide. In 1868, a federal commission on making peace with the Plains Indians concluded: “In the difference of language today lies two-thirds of our trouble... Schools should be established, which children should be required to attend; their barbarous dialects should be blotted out and the English language substituted.”
- By the 1880s this language policy was institutionalized in the boarding school system established by the BIA. Under strict English-only rules, students were punished and humiliated for speaking their native language as part of a general campaign to wipe out every vestige of their Indianness. A BIA teacher in the early 1900s explained that the schools “went on the assumption that any Indian custom was, per se, objectionable, whereas the customs of whites were the ways of civilization.”
- In the short term, the coercive assimilation policy met with limited success in eradicating Indian languages. This kind of treatment naturally breeds resistance, however, and determination to defend the culture under attack. Also, the isolation and exclusion of most Indians from the dominant society make assimilation seem like a bad deal—even when students excelled in BIA schools and embraced the

dominant, white culture, they were often shunned by white society. They were also shunned by their own when they returned to the reservations.

- Over time, the policies took a toll on the pride and identity of many Indians, alienating them from their cultural roots and from their tribes and giving them little in return. Being punished for speaking their language often devalued it in their minds, and some accepted the dominant society's judgments. This has left a legacy of opposition to bilingual education among Indians who vividly remember the pain they suffered in school and who hope to shield their children and grandchildren from the same experience.
- So while the boarding schools and the other policies did damage to the status of Indian languages, other factors may have had a stronger influence. There are new pressures and enticements for Native Americans to enter the wider society and/or abandon their former way of life. Linguistic assimilation seems to be working more efficiently in this laissez-faire way than it did coercively. Pragmatic parents see advantages to raising their children with English, the language of social and economic mobility.
- In theory, having both languages is a possible solution to preventing loss of native languages, but the odds for maintaining them are very low.

4. Language revitalization: The case of Hebrew

- Hebrew had been “dead” for nearly 2,000 years when it was brought back to life in Israel about 60 years ago; it now has several million speakers.
- Hebrew is a member of the Semitic family of languages, related to Arabic and to a lesser extent Amharic. The language and alphabet go back over 3000 years. The language became extinct as a spoken language after about the second century B.C.E., when Aramaic (a closely related Semitic language) became the dominant language of the Middle East. However, the Jews continued to learn Hebrew as a literary and religious language, even when the Jewish population was scattered by the Romans in the year 70 C.E. So for two thousand years the Hebrew language was not used as a spoken language.
- In the late nineteenth century, a Lithuanian-Jewish medical student named Eliezer Perelman (later Ben-Yehuda) became interested in the revival of the Hebrew language and devoted the rest of his life to the cause. He coined nearly 4000 new Hebrew words based on original Hebrew roots in order to make Hebrew a modern, practical language for everyday usage. The language was adopted by the early Zionist settlers in Palestine around the turn of the 20th century, and became the official language of Israel in 1948 when the state was established.
- Today Hebrew is spoken by about five million Israelis, both in Israel and abroad, and is the language of prayer for Jews throughout the world. A native speaker of Modern Hebrew is able to read the Bible (Old Testament) in its original Hebrew much as an English speaker can read Shakespeare.
- So, Hebrew is an inspiration to many people today trying to revive languages. But the situation was unique. In order for language revitalization to work, you need not only good intentions, but enormous practical efforts.

5. Challenges of language revival/revitalization

- Many Native American tribes need expert help to complete a writing system, grammar books, and dictionaries. Many of these languages were not written down until very recently.
- Teacher-training: This is complicated by the fact that Indian language speakers often lack academic credentials while outsiders lack essential cultural and linguistic knowledge.
- Scarce resources: Language renewal projects must compete with other, usually more pressing priorities like health care, housing, schooling, and economic development.
- Governmental support: Congress passed the Native American Languages Acts of 1990 and 1992, laws that articulate a government policy of protecting indigenous languages and authorize a grant program for that purpose. While some federal help was already available through the National Science Foundation and the U.S. Department of Education, for the first time, the 1992 Act made tribes eligible

for funding to carry out language conservation and renewal. Yet Congress has been slow to appropriate any resources to carry out the new laws. Finally, under an agreement between Sen. Daniel Inouye and the Clinton Administration, \$1 million in grants were awarded in the fall of 1994—a meager amount but still a beginning.

- Implementation of the 1990 Act has also been disappointing. Among other things it called upon all agencies of the federal government including the Departments of Interior, Education, and Health and Human Services to review their activities in consultation with tribes, traditional leaders, and educators to make sure they comply with the policy of conserving Native American languages. By the fall of 1991, the President was supposed to report back to Congress on what was being done and to recommend further changes in law and policy. But the Bush Administration simply ignored these requirements. There is no indication that any review or consultation has taken place. After some prodding by the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs, the White House referred the matter to the BIA, whose only response has been to compile a list of bilingual education programs in its schools. So, while the federal government now has a strong policy statement on file, its real-world impact has thus far been limited.

6. Why should we (as a society) care?

Why concern ourselves with the problem of endangered Native American languages, to the extent of investing the considerable time, effort, and resources that would be needed to save even a handful of them? For many non-Indians, who tend to view linguistic diversity as a liability rather than an asset, the value of these languages is not self-evident since general knowledge about Native American issues is limited, as is knowledge about language.

- 1) The loss of linguistic data that can be loss of the material for the field of linguistics, where that information can be “a window on the human mind”.
- 2) The loss of linguistic diversity means a loss of intellectual diversity. (Yes, though that impact remains too elusive to rally much public concern about language loss.)
- 3) Language loss is “part of the more general loss being suffered by the world, the loss of diversity of all things”. (Ladefoged).
- 4) We should care about preventing the extinction of languages because of the human costs to those most directly affected. The destruction of a language is the destruction of a rooted identity for both groups and individuals. Along with the accompanying loss of culture, language loss can destroy a sense of self-worth, limiting human potential and complicating efforts to solve other problems, such as poverty, family breakdown, school failure, and substance abuse. Language death does not happen in privileged communities. It happens to the dispossessed and disempowered, people who most need their cultural resources to survive. (Hale)

7. Lushootseed language preservation and revitalization: A success story?

- Now there are, maybe, six speakers left, all in their 80s and 90s.
- One woman, Vi Hilbert, has worked tirelessly for almost 40 years recording, documenting, and transcribing Lushootseed (dx^wləʃucid). She became literate in the language, taught it at UW, and has tried to record and document the speech of as many of the remaining speakers as possible.
- There is renewed interest in the language at local reservations (Tulalip Elementary School on the Tulalip Reservation, Chief Leschi School on the Puyallup Reservation, and Muckleshoot Tribal School on the Muckleshoot Reservation all have incorporated Lushootseed into their curricula.)
- <http://www.msvl.wednet.edu/elementary/tulalip/frame1.html>

8. Selected materials

- “Teaching Kids about Language Change, Language Endangerment, and Language Death,” Kristin Denham (background reading)
- Assimilation through Education: Indian Boarding Schools in the Pacific Northwest: An essay by Carolyn Marr (background reading)
- “Incorporating Literary Style Prior to Literacy in the Elementary Tribal School,” Kristin Denham et al. (teaching ideas, incorporating native stories and native literary style into curriculum)
- <http://www.msvl.wednet.edu/elementary/tulalip/frame1.html> (incorporates native language and culture into various aspects of the curriculum). Site down as of 5/22. I hope it returns because it’s a wonderful site with a wealth of information.
- Seattle Art Museum resources and curriculum
- Lady Louse and Willowood Schoolhouse lessons (classroom ideas, incorporating native texts)

9. Selected references

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