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### Native American Youth Discourses on Language Shift and Retention: Ideological Cross-currents and Their Implications for Language Planning

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# Native American Youth Discourses on Language Shift and Retention: Ideological Cross-currents and Their Implications for Language Planning

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This paper examines preliminary findings from an ongoing federally funded study of Native language shift and retention in the US Southwest, focusing on in-depth ethnographic interviews with Navajo youth. We begin with an overview of Native American linguistic ecologies, noting the dynamic, variegated and complex nature of language proficiencies and practices across a continuum of sociocultural settings. We then examine two pairs of youth discourses that illuminate social–psychological and macro-structural influences on language practices. These discourses juxtapose language identity with language endangerment, and language pride with language shame. As such, they expose the ways in which language allegiance is tied to the distribution of power and privilege in the larger society. Youth discourses, we argue, represent a powerful call to action for communities and schools serving Native American students. We conclude with the implications for future research and for language education planning in Indigenous and other endangered-language communities.

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**Keywords:** Native American language education, indigenous languages, language revitalisation, language planning, language ideologies, Native American youth

When you first came to be as a child, the things that you were taught were very strong . . . [But] the next generation, they don't seem to want it. That is why our language, our prayers, the words we used to speak – our words are not wanted anymore. (Navajo grandmother, interview, January 1996)

Elders say we're lost youth. *No*. [We just want] adults to take the time . . . to try to encourage us . . . There's always hope. ('Jonathan', 16-year-old Navajo high school student, interview, May 2004)

## Introduction

These reflections on language by a Navajo elder and youth poignantly illustrate the challenges faced by Native American families and communities in their efforts to maintain their heritage languages and cultures. In Navajo, the first language of both speakers cited above, the terms for 'language' and 'word' are identical: *saad*. In the first excerpt, a Navajo elder laments the loss of 'our language, our words we used to speak' among the young. In the second excerpt, a Navajo youth resists that loss, insisting 'there's always hope'.

Understanding Native youth and adult perspectives on heritage-language shift and retention is central to an ongoing federally funded study being carried out in the US Southwest. The Native Language Shift and Retention Study responds to a 1998 executive order by then-President William J. Clinton, calling for research to 'evaluate the role of native language and culture in the development of educational strategies' for Native American students (Executive Order 13096, 1998, Section 2, [f][3]). As part of the executive order, a working group composed of federal and non-governmental organisations sponsored a series of regional forums and a national conference at which recommendations for high-priority research topics were proposed. 'Probably no subject generates more interest and discussion than the idea of structuring [American Indian and Alaska Native] education around the concepts and language that lie at the core of tribal or village culture', researchers closely involved with this process observed (Strang *et al.*, 2003: 4). Calling on researchers to 'work actively with the tribes and villages' to conduct research that is both nationally generalisable and locally responsive, the national Research Agenda growing out of these forums seeks to address 'what is and is not successful as part of a larger school reform and improvement effort' (Strang *et al.*, 2003: 2).

Well informed and well implemented language education planning, policies and programmes lie at the heart of such education reforms. Most federal and state language education policies, however, are premised on the assumption that language minority children enter school speaking a primary language other than English.<sup>1</sup> Putting aside for the moment the compensatory and assimilationist aims of these policies, we must question the validity of the premise itself for Native American learners. Increasingly, Native American children enter school with English as their primary language. At the same time, tribal/community languages continue to be an important part of Indigenous linguistic ecologies, which typically include one or more tribal languages, schooled or 'pedagogised' English, and Nativised varieties of English.<sup>2</sup> Effective language education policies and programmes must be responsive to these unique sociolinguistic conditions and the language practices they reflect and produce.

The Native Language Shift and Retention Study is tasked with examining these conditions and practices 'on the ground'. We are particularly concerned with eliciting local understandings of and experiences with language shift across a range of tribal-community contexts. What language attitudes and ideologies prevail in these language shift settings? How do Native youth identify with their heritage language and culture? What are their language

proficiencies? What is the relationship among children's language proficiencies, language attitudes/ideologies and school achievement? Four overarching research questions guide this study:

- (1) What role does the Native/heritage language play in the personal, familial, community and school lives of American Indian youth?
- (2) How do language loss and revitalisation factor into how well youth perform in school, as measured by district-administered local and national assessments?
- (3) How might the findings from this study inform tribal language planning and education initiatives?
- (4) What are the lessons for state and national education policies and minority language rights?

This is an action-oriented study with a strong social justice component. Our assumption is that language is not only a resource to its speakers and humankind (Ruiz, 1984), but that heritage language acquisition and development are fundamental human rights (Magga & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2003; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000, in press). Linguistic rights are part of a larger democratic project in support of tribal sovereignty and self-determination. Hence, supporting tribes and Native communities in promoting their heritage languages is a further goal of this research.

We begin with a brief overview of Native American linguistic ecologies, noting the ramifications for language proficiencies. This is followed by a description of the research methodology and contexts. We then examine a select corpus of data from one school-community site, focusing on in-depth ethnographic interviews with Navajo youth. These data are selected for analysis because they embody both social-psychological and macro-structural influences on language practices. We characterise these as discourses, 'stretches of language that "hang together"' in ways that are meaningful to their users (Gee, 1996: 104), and which are inherently ideological; that is, they situate language attitudes and practices socially and historically, indexing the position of the speaker vis-à-vis the social group and the larger society. As such, these discourses expose the relations between language and identity, and the ways in which language allegiance is tied to the distribution of power and privilege in the larger society (Gee, 1996: 104). We conclude with a discussion of the implications of this work for future research and Native American language planning efforts.<sup>3</sup>

## The Status of Native American Languages and Language Proficiencies

The linguistic ecologies in which Native American students are growing up are highly complex, variegated and not amenable to easy description or assessment. Of 175 Indigenous languages still spoken in the USA, only 20 are being naturally acquired as a first language by children (Krauss, 1998). The historical causes of this language shift have been well studied, and we will not repeat that work here.<sup>4</sup> Suffice it to say that Native American languages, as

Skutnabb-Kangas (2000: 222) characterises the process for minoritised languages in general, have not fallen into disuse due to 'natural' causes; 'they have been "helped" on their way.' Colonial schooling designed to 'remake Indian children into brown White citizens' (Benally & Viri, 2005: 89) has been a primary instrument for Native language eradication (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006).

In global terms, the contemporary situation of Native American languages can be envisioned as a continuum, ranging from a few communities in which intergenerational language transmission persists, to those in which the heritage language is spoken by the parental generation and older, to those with only a handful of elderly Native-language speakers. In all cases, language shift is under way. This continuum corresponds to Fishman's (1991) eight-point Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS). Krauss (1998) offers this classification for Native North American languages:

- Class A: languages in which there are speakers of all generations;
- Class B: languages spoken by the parent generation and up;
- Class C: languages spoken by the grandparent generation and up; and
- Class D: languages spoken only by a few elderly persons.

The dynamics of language use and change 'on the ground', however, are not as neat and tidy as a classificatory scheme might suggest. Multiple classifications may apply across a single speech community. For example, Krauss (1998) classifies Navajo and Tohono O'odham – languages with relatively large numbers of speakers in comparison with other Native American languages – as Class A, yet in some communities within the reservations in which they are spoken, these languages are more accurately categorised as Class B or Class C. Language vitality is influenced by numerous complicating factors: rural versus urban lifestyles, locally available language education programmes and materials, the number of Native-speaking teachers, and local and regional opportunity structures vis-à-vis the heritage language and culture, to name only a few.

Within and across diverse local contexts, children's language proficiencies, their attitudes toward the heritage language and culture, and the relationship of language proficiencies and attitudes to school performance are not well documented or understood. Adley-SantaMaria (1999: 17) notes that the '(mis)education of Native American youth is one cause of the crisis of language shift'. Bielenberg (2002) and Nicholas (2005) examine the familial, communal and school-based dynamics impacting Hopi youth's language choices. Lee's (1999) study of Navajo adolescents suggests that as they aged, these youth became more aware of the endangered status of their language; this may have led them to speak more Navajo with family members as young adults (see also Lee & McLaughlin, 2001). Romero's (2003) study of child socialisation and language shift in Cochiti Pueblo documents young people's interest in learning Keres (the tribal language), although most young parents were not fluent in Keres and were therefore raising their children in English.

What we do know is that even as more Native American children come to school speaking English as a primary language, they continue to be stigmatised as 'limited English proficient' (LEP) and, as a group, to fare poorly in school. More than 10% of all Native pupils enrolled in US public schools are identified as LEP. In federal schools overseen by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), nearly 60% of all Native pupils are so identified (Tippeconnic & Faircloth, 2002: 1). The goal of the Native Language Shift and Retention Study is to interrogate these linguistic and educational processes – what Hill (2002: 219) calls 'the human specifics of endangered-language communities'.

## Research Contexts and Methodology

Because of the important role of schools in Indigenous communities, schools have been points of entry and access to each of four tribal school-community sites. All of the sites are in Arizona, a state in which 25% of the land base is Indian reservation land, and in which more than 5% of the total population is Native (US Census Bureau, 2005). Arizona also is home to several of the most populous tribes in the USA (US Department of Commerce, 1990). The state is representative of a wide range of Native American communities, schools and language situations.

Table 1 outlines the characteristics of participating project sites. Reflecting the larger linguistic ecology presented in the previous section, the sites can be envisioned across a continuum. At one end of the continuum is a small, reservation-interior Navajo community with speakers of all ages, including some elderly monolingual Navajo speakers. Navajo is a member of the huge Athabaskan language family, which counts speakers from the sub-Arctic to the southern Plains. The Navajo Nation has the second largest tribal population (more than 250,000) and the largest reservation in the USA (25,000 square miles, stretching over parts of three Southwestern states). According to the 2000 US Census, Navajo is spoken in every state in the union, with 178,014 speakers (Benally & Viri, 2005: 88). Despite these facts, the Navajo language is at a crossroads, with fewer children learning it as a primary language each generation (Benally & Viri, 2005). Our Navajo site includes a federally funded community school serving approximately 600 students in pre-kindergarten through Grade 12.

In central Arizona, we are working with two communities and their community schools. Two languages are represented there: Akimel O'odham, a Uto-Aztecan language, is also called Pima and is by far the largest speech community on the reservation; Pii Paash is a Yuman language, also called Maricopa. Both languages are considered 'moribund', having few or no child speakers. Pii Paash is seriously endangered, with only a few elderly speakers. The fourth project site is a Native American charter school<sup>5</sup> serving primarily Tohono O'odham students (Tohono O'odham and Akimel O'odham are mutually intelligible languages). Tohono O'odham is spoken by members of the 20,000-member Tohono O'odham Nation in Southern Arizona; there are still child speakers, although Tohono O'odham, too, is increasingly endangered.

Table 1 Characteristics of participating sites

<i>Tribal group</i>	<i>Tribal population</i>	<i>Heritage/ community language(s)</i>	<i>Language vitality (Krauss, 1998)</i>	<i>Setting</i>	<i>School type</i>	<i>No. schools</i>	<i>No. students</i>
Navajo	250,000	Navajo	Class A	1 reservation- interior community	Pre-K-12, federally funded community school	3	600
Akimel O'odham/ Pii Paash	15,000	Akimel O'odham (Pima); Pii Paash (Maricopa)	Akimel O'odham: Class B-C; Pii Paash: Class D	2 reservation communities, both near large metropolitan area	Pre-K-8, federally funded community school	2	500
Tohono O'odham	20,000	Tohono O'odham	Class A-B	Reservation and urban	9-12 public charter school	1	150
Summary	4 tribal groups	4 Native languages	Class A-D	Reservation and urban	Pre-K-12, federally funded and public/ charter schools	6	1250



At each site, we have negotiated research protocols according to school, tribal, university and federal norms. This has been a labour-intensive process, but one that has resulted in a strong degree of local participation in and ownership over the work. 'If a researcher wants to know the ethics of doing research in a . . . Native community', Lomawaima (2000: 15) writes, 'they must first ask, then listen'. Thus, a key component of the project is the involvement of Native co-researchers at each site – teachers and paraprofessionals we call Community Research Collaborators or CRCs. The CRCs have been instrumental to all phases of the research, facilitating entrée and access through tribal councils and school boards, helping to design and validate research protocols, assisting in the conduct of in-depth interviews and the administration of project questionnaires and participating in university-based training on language education planning, heritage language immersion and ethnographic research methods. As suggested by the national Research Agenda, CRCs are the critical change agents positioned to apply research findings to local language education efforts once the study ends.

The overarching methodology for this project is ethnographic; prolonged participant observation and in-depth interviews designed to elicit Native or 'emic' perspectives are primary research procedures. Data collection also includes teacher, parent and student questionnaires, and locally maintained school achievement data.

To date we have administered more than 500 questionnaires, conducted hundreds of hours of observations of language use and teaching inside and outside of schools, collected achievement data from three school sites, and conducted 221 in-depth interviews, including 160 with adults and 61 with youth in Grades 4 through 12. In structuring interviews, we have adapted Seidman's (1998) format, condensing his three-interview sequence into single 60–90-min interviews that include:

- (1) a focused life history, concentrating on language learning inside and outside of school;
- (2) details and observations of language use at home, in the school and in the community; and
- (3) normative assessments of the role of families, community members, tribal government and the school in local language planning efforts.

To identify research participants, we have been guided by the recommendations of local CRCs, seeking a balance of Native and non-Native speakers, males and females, and individuals of different ages and professional backgrounds. All interviews have been audiotaped and many have been conducted with CRCs. For interviews conducted in the Native language, we have relied on Native-speaking CRCs and the skills of bilingual, biliterate Native speakers to translate and transcribe the data.

In the sections that follow, we examine two discourse pairings that emerged from thematic analyses of interviews with Navajo youth, their teachers and parents. One pairing juxtaposes language identity and endangerment; the second juxtaposes contradictory discourses of language pride and shame. All data are from our Navajo site, which we call Beautiful



Mountain (all names are pseudonyms). Beautiful Mountain is a reservation-interior community of about 1500, with 600 students served in three school facilities (see Table 1). Wage labour at the school, in nearby mines, construction and the railroad; and tribally or federally funded health and social services constitute primary sources of income. Family incomes remain well below national poverty levels, however, and the traditional subsistence activities of ranching, small-scale farming, and sheep and goat herding continue to have economic value.

### **Discourses of Language Identity and Endangerment: 'The Language Needs More Takers'**

Some researchers have posited that the decline in Native American languages is attributable to a general pattern of 'denial' about the endangered state of these languages (Krauss, 1998), or to 'collective ignorance and apathy' (Benally & Viri, 2005: 98). In our work across project sites, however, we have found not denial or apathy, but rather widespread concern about the fragile state of the heritage language. Moreover, discourses of endangerment intertwine with discourses of Indigenous identity. A young father of four and teacher assistant at Beautiful Mountain School asserted, 'We're Navajo. That's our language. We need to keep on talking [Navajo].' A Navajo school administrator reflected, 'The language, that's what makes you a Navajo.' Projecting into the future, another Navajo educator said:

Your child some day . . . she is going to look back and say, 'Gosh, I am Navajo and I don't know anything. I can't speak my language. I don't know who is related to me. I don't know my community.'

A parent and school staff member said (in Navajo):

My parents handed down the values of the Navajo culture and tradition to us and that's what brought us forth to this day . . . so I value the language and culture. I wish for us not to lose the language for our children's sake . . . We are made up with our language . . . Who will we be when we have lost our language?

The themes of 'language as key to identity' and as 'carrier of culture and worldview' are not new in discussions of language shift. As Hinton (2002: 152) notes, these are among the most prevalent reasons given for why language revitalisation is important (see also Fishman, 1991, 2001; Hornberger, 1996; May, 1999). What has not been well studied is whether or how these themes resonate with Native youth. We have found young people to be remarkably articulate and even passionate in addressing these issues. A young man of 20, for example, stated that knowing Navajo language and culture is the foundation 'to go on for better things in life':

It gives you strength . . . to know where you're coming from and to know your self-identity and your culture . . . you will always come through obstacles with your foundation being there to back you up.

Asked to speculate on the future of Navajo, he added, 'We [Navajo people, Diné] have survived a lot of hard things trying to carry on the Navajo language ... I think it will go on.'

To explore youth discourses on language endangerment and identity in greater depth, we introduce readers first to Samuel, a 17-year-old high school senior when he was interviewed in 2004. Samuel learned to speak Navajo and Apache (a closely related Athabaskan language) at an early age, but considered Navajo his primary language and himself the 'strongest' speaker of Navajo among his five siblings. He also claimed to know 'a little French' and 'some Hopi' (a Uto-Aztecan language spoken by Hopis whose reservation lies within the borders of the Navajo Nation). By his own and his teachers' accounts, Samuel was doing well in school. He aspired to become a medical doctor and to return to the Navajo reservation to treat diabetes, a condition that afflicted his grandmother and which has reached epidemic proportions in Native American communities. Asked whether 'knowing and keeping Navajo' was important to him, Samuel replied, 'Very important'.

**Interviewer:** Why?

**Samuel:** Because I get the best of both worlds ... I want to become a doctor. And to do that, I have to know how to communicate with patients in Navajo and ... in English. And not just because I want to go into medicine, it's important [to know Navajo] because the language is dying out – not slowly, as it used to be, but it's going very vigorously now.

Asked whether he would feel 'less Navajo' if he could not speak the language, Samuel averred that 'no matter if you speak it or not, you're Navajo ... But traditionally, if you're not speaking Navajo, you [aren't] a Navajo.'

Like other young people and many adults in our study, Samuel commented on the fact that Navajo-speaking parents were not transmitting the language to their children.

There's a lot of [children] that aren't even being taught. Their parents can speak Navajo, but they don't do it inside the home. They would do it [outside the home], but they wouldn't even teach their children Navajo ... And that, in a way, kind of makes me angry, because ... Navajo is supposed to be spoken at all times in the house, ... and these parents, ... they're Navajo, and they should be speaking Navajo ...

We will return to Samuel's narrative in the following section, but we turn now to an interview with Jonathan, a 16-year-old ninth grader at Beautiful Mountain School when he was interviewed in 2004. A pensive young man, Jonathan initially reported that he was 'learning' Navajo in school. However, during an interview that lasted more than two hours, he revealed that his first language was, in fact, Navajo. For years, he said, he had been 'caught up in the confusion of learning English, having to form those words in my head'. His first elementary teacher, who was Navajo, had belittled him for his accented

and ungrammatical English. This made Jonathan's early goal in school 'just survival, how to cope in this colonial world we live in'. Despite these negative school experiences, Jonathan viewed Navajo as integral to his identity and ability 'to bring about some change in the world, in my own [Navajo] nation . . . because we need a strong [Native] community'. Asked if Navajo was important to him, Jonathan said:

Yes, it helps me, having that as my first language . . . The Navajo, it helps separate the side . . . of where all these [traditional Navajo] teachings come in. That helps me not get too far in, not to lose the identity of who I am, of where I come from . . . It's mainly a search for who you are . . . It's your outlook, you know.

Jonathan linked knowledge of Navajo to Navajoness and stewardship of the land:

We're so much a part of the land, you know . . . It's hard to see [destruction of the land/loss of language]. It really hurts me . . . It's a spiritual anguish.

Asked what would happen 'if there is no Navajo language anymore', Jonathan responded: 'It's like taking away the spirit; it's like taking away a real big part of who you are'.

**Interviewer:** Do you think Navajo will be spoken . . . 40 years from now . . . ?

**Jonathan:** I don't really see people talking to their children in Navajo . . . I have some hope, that's all I can say, because without hope . . . I wouldn't have a reason . . . [I] hope that someday we can go about living with the sacredness a little longer.

In Jonathan's, Samuel's and other young people's discourses, sentimental and even sacred attachments to the Navajo language are recurring themes. These sentiments also appear in our interviews with adults at Beautiful Mountain and other project sites: 'I want them [children] to know you're . . . Indians', an Akimel O'odham teacher stressed. 'That's your culture. That's who you are.' A CRC maintained, 'Our language . . . is the number-one source of our soul, our pride, our being, our strength, and our identity.' A Navajo educator described the ability to speak Navajo as a 'gift', equating it with 'getting back down to roots, . . . being able to say, "Yes, . . . I'm proud to say I'm Navajo."' 'The language', this educator said, 'it needs more takers, somebody to hold it up high.'

### **Contradictory Discourses of Language Pride and Shame: 'You Forsake Who You Are to Accommodate the Mainstream Life'**

The previous section reveals the ethnolinguistic pride many young people and adults attach to knowing and speaking the heritage language. 'I'm proud

that I can read and write Navajo', one young woman in our study stated. 'That's how we were created.' Many youth at Beautiful Mountain also viewed their bilingualism as having an instrumental value – as helping them succeed in school and later life. This theme is apparent in Samuel's interview; to become a medical doctor, he said, 'I have to know how to communicate with patients in Navajo and how to do it in English.' Asked if knowing Navajo helped him in school, Samuel reflected:

Yeah, . . . just comparing the differences [between Navajo and English], and the culture itself . . . when I go to the English class, I can really tell the difference, and how Navajo is so descriptive, and English isn't.

A female senior reported that Navajo helped her in school 'because you can compare the two different languages'. Another student said that knowing Navajo helped her because 'when you try to pronounce something in English, you just say it [first] in Navajo. And [then] I write it down [in English]'.<sup>6</sup> This same girl, who aspired to become a paediatrician, said that knowing Navajo would be helpful in her career 'cause kids [patients] might speak Navajo. And their mom [might speak Navajo as well]'.<sup>6</sup>

But not all youth at Beautiful Mountain shared these positive attachments to Navajo language and culture. Jamie was 18 when he was interviewed in 2004. Having grown up in a reservation border town, his primary language was English. Jamie insisted that Navajo language and culture were 'just the past'. Distancing himself from his Navajoness, he stated that knowing Navajo is important 'because it's their [Navajos'] culture'. Asked if he believed there had been a decline in the use of Navajo among young people, Jamie replied: 'Yes, 'cuz kids don't really care anymore'. At the same time, Jamie was trying to learn Navajo in school.

These discourses reveal contradictory ideological currents that run throughout our interviews with Navajo youth and adults. A teacher aide reported that a few of her students had insisted, 'I'm not going to learn [Navajo]. Navajo's nothing. I hate it.' During one phase of our fieldwork, school personnel were assessing students' Navajo language proficiencies. Describing her interactions with students in one secondary classroom, the Navajo teacher charged with administering the assessment reported:

When we were talking [to students] in Navajo they were . . . making fun of us . . . and it really frustrated me, and I told them, this is very sad, the way your attitude is towards your language and your culture, . . . the way you are putting your language down. . . I told them to really think about it because . . . every single one of them, they are Navajo. 'You are Navajo' [I said to them], 'take a look at yourself. If you are laughing about your language or your culture, you are laughing about your parents, you are laughing about your grandparents . . . you are Navajo and you should be proud of who you are and your identity.'

After administering the assessment, the teacher found, to her surprise, that students 'knew the language but were just ashamed of it'.

These discourses were further illuminated in interview segments in which individuals were asked to estimate the proportion of Beautiful Mountain students who were proficient Navajo speakers. With a few exceptions, adults uniformly placed the number at 30–50%. The teacher whose interview excerpt appears above, for instance, was initially convinced that none of the students she was testing could comprehend the most basic Navajo terms. Another bilingual educator maintained that ‘No one speaks Navajo. They only speak English now.’ Adolescents, on the other hand, expressed a very different view:

**Interviewer:** In school, what percentage of the kids are fluent speakers of Navajo?

**Student 1:** 80%.

**Student 2:** Probably 75%.

**Student 3:** 75%.

**Student 4:** 80%.

**Student 5:** Everybody knows Navajo out here.

Each of these responses was recorded in a separate, individual interview. The responses were typical of Beautiful Mountain youth. As these data reveal, there was wide divergence in how youth and adults responded to questions about language proficiencies among the young, with youth consistently providing much higher estimates. Recognising that self-assessments of language proficiency are problematic, the divergent responses of youth and adults nonetheless signify local *perceptions* of language vitality that have important implications for language choices. A bilingual adult who believes the child to whom she or he is speaking has little knowledge of or interest in using Navajo is likely to address the child in English. For their part, youth may possess greater Native language proficiency than they show, ‘hiding’ it out of shame or embarrassment. The net effect is to curtail opportunities for rich, natural adult–child interaction in the heritage language. As Samuel explained:

Well, ... a lot of [youth] tend to hide [their Native language ability] ... they put a façade on, and they ... try to make teachers believe that they speak primarily [English] and weren’t exposed to Navajo.

Asked how he thought students at his school felt about speaking Navajo, Samuel stated:

They probably think it’s important, but ... they’re judged by it by other people that speak English more clear than they do and they just kind of feel dirty about the whole thing, and that’s why they put on the fake ... and try to make it sound like they speak more English than they do Navajo ...

For some of his peers, Samuel claimed, speaking Navajo stigmatises one as ‘uneducated, and they haven’t experienced anything in the world’.

This was confirmed in interviews with adults. ‘Many of the kids around here do speak Navajo’, a Navajo school administrator stated:

A lot of them fake not wanting to speak Navajo. I knew. They're ashamed. I caught a few students who claim they only speak English [but] there are hundreds who are fluent Navajo speakers.

A bilingual teacher assistant reported that her students 'pretend that their parents are all educated', implying that parents speak only English at home. 'And some of the parents don't even speak English!' the teacher assistant exclaimed. In parent-teacher conferences, she had been surprised to hear parents report that their child – who claimed not to know Navajo – had been raised in a Navajo-language environment. A mother whose primary language was Navajo reported that her 22-year-old son refused to speak Navajo:

He'll say, 'Why do I have to speak Navajo? ... It's a new world. We're more into technology, we're into the *bilagáana* [White, English-speaking] world. I don't have to speak my language ... We want to go forward, not backward.'

Interestingly, this mother's 17-year-old daughter told her, 'I want to go forward. I want to keep my language too.'

How can we understand these contradictory discourses? Jonathan provided a remarkably sophisticated postcolonial analysis, which he referred to as the 'Long Walk Syndrome'. In 1864, 7000 Navajo people – their sheep herds and farms destroyed in a federal 'scorched earth' campaign – were marched at bayonet point by the US cavalry 300 miles across wintry plains to a concentration camp at Fort Sumner, New Mexico (called *Hwéeldi* in Navajo). Hundreds of people perished along the way, many at the hands of soldiers; thousands more died as a result of their incarceration. Four years later, acknowledging Fort Sumner as a 'failed experiment', the federal government released the 2000 survivors, dispossessing them of all but a fraction of their original homelands. Recalling these events, Jonathan said:

Like I said, this Long Walk syndrome ... we're afraid to be punished, we're afraid that someone will whip us in the back ... you forsake who you are, you give up having to learn Navajo ... [You] give all that up, in order to accommodate the mainstream life ... That's been colonised in the mind.

'Many of these kids know how to speak Navajo', Jonathan asserted, 'but many times they might be ashamed, or got that kind of self-hate' –

It's been pumped into them. It's not something natural. It's being told Navajo is stupid ... to speak Indian is the way of the devil, that kind of thing...and many times, the older people will encourage English so [their children] can make it in the White man's world...Like I said, for me, it [early school experiences] kind of confused me. Where was *I* in the world?

The psychosocial and linguistic consequences of genocide, colonisation and language repression have been documented for speech communities around the world. Writing of 'language shame' among Garifuna children in Belize, Bonner (2001: 86) notes that the cause is not language *per se*, but rather the



marginalisation of Garifuna and 'the association of Garifuna ethnic identity with poverty and low social status'. Reese and Goldenberg (2006: 25) describe similar processes for Spanish speakers in southern California. In a collection of life histories reflecting the multiple 'face[t]s' of heritage language loss, Kouritzin (1999) demonstrates the further complicity of racism and linguisticism. 'I grew up feeling ashamed to be Chinese, and of course, to speak Cantonese', a young woman of Canadian-born Cantonese parents recalled, remembering the taunts by her classmates of 'Chinky, Chinky Chinamen' (Kouritzin, 1999: 43). 'You shame people away from their language', a Cree artist and writer told Kouritzin (1999: 66–67):

... you deal with it by speaking English, and that way you don't have to face the hurt of the loss... you hide behind the language of the dominant society for a while... thinking you're cool because you speak English, you're cool because you don't speak [the Native language] anymore. It's better because now you're white, right?

## Conclusions and Implications for Language Revitalisation and Maintenance

Youth and adult discourses from Beautiful Mountain implicate a complex array of ideological forces that underpin heritage-language shift and retention among the young. On the one hand, many youth express pride in their heritage language, fusing it solidly to their senses of self. For these young people, the language is a tool for negotiating multiple languages and cultural worlds, and a foundation to 'to go on for better things in life'. Further, as Samuel's discourse reveals, youth recognise that 'the language is... [declining] very vigorously now'. On the other hand, some youth have internalised the message – conveyed and legitimated by racialised societal discourses and marginalising practices – that speaking Navajo is an emblem of shame that must be renounced. For these youth, (marginalised) Navajo is linked with 'backwardness' and (privileged) English is associated with modernity and opportunity; youth feel they must make an either–or choice between language affiliations.

The sociolinguistic dynamics at Beautiful Mountain are in many ways unique among our project sites. Beautiful Mountain is a fairly conservative, reservation-interior community, and we suspect that the situation there also differs in some important respects from that of reservation bordertown communities. These differences notwithstanding, the ideological cross-currents reflected in youth discourses at Beautiful Mountain have been noted for other endangered-language communities, and language planning challenges faced there are widely shared.

These challenges are compounded by the global spread of English and the growing standards movement in US schools. According to youth and adults in our study, these pressures are forcing schools to abandon heritage-language instruction. 'The school can spend *some* time teaching Navajo', a Beautiful Mountain teacher stated, 'but we can't be bogged down, ... we have so many requirements to meet.' Another teacher remarked, 'We don't have time to teach



Navajo. We've been told to teach to the standards.' Youth are keenly aware of these pressures. 'English', Jonathan asserted, 'that's always taking over . . . It's just hard to have . . . a Native thing going. Because we're run by the state, and we're told to do these tests and everything.'

Despite the challenges, it seems clear from this preliminary analysis that many Native youth are deeply concerned about the future of their heritage language. It also seems evident that in the Navajo case, youth may possess greater heritage-language proficiency than they demonstrate or than adults credit. Youth interests in retaining their heritage language and their (often intentionally hidden) heritage-language proficiencies constitute critical resources for Indigenous language revitalisation and maintenance efforts.

All participants in our study stated that those efforts must begin with parents and families in the home. 'Tell the parents to let the kids speak Navajo when they're born', the 13-year-old girl who aspired to become a paediatrician told us. A bilingual teacher provided this insightful commentary:

The most important thing is that it is up to us. As parents we have an opinion about it and the responsibility belongs to us, we, the mothers and fathers. And our leaders have ownership to part of it too. How might they be thinking about all of this for us? . . . We are called Indigenous and we are looked at as such . . . I want it to remain that way in the future . . . You decide not to let them [outsiders] take away your language to let it die.

We concur with these sentiments, but recognise that parents and families need support if their efforts are to have the desired effects. Writing about her native Hopi language, Sheilah Nicholas (2005: 36) describes this challenge as reinvigorating 'the community ethic of "putting our hearts together for a common purpose"'. This involves recognition 'that the major upheaval of the Hopi way of life has left them with little alternative but to . . . reimagine a way of life that accommodates changes from within the community' (Nicholas, 2005: 36). Hualapai educator Lucille Watahomigie (1995: 191) speaks of the need for 'reverse brainwashing': educating community members 'on the importance and priority of the values and knowledge embodied in our culture'. Romero's (2003) and Sims's (2001) research on Keres, the heritage language of the New Mexico Pueblos of Cochiti and Acoma, illustrates the ways in which community language surveys can open new possibilities for dialogue and change:

On the one hand, findings [from the surveys] pointed to the possibility of the loss of the Keres language within the next several decades or sooner. . . On the other hand, the findings revealed that there remained a considerable number of fluent speakers . . . and, if revitalization efforts were initiated promptly and carefully, language shift could be stemmed and even reversed. (Romero & McCarty, 2006: 11)

Much more 'on the ground' research is needed on these processes and their impacts. Further research also is needed on the relationship of language revitalisation to American Indian student achievement, a focus of the present study. There are many promising precedents that already have shown positive

correlations between heritage-language learning and student achievement, among them Native-language immersion programmes in Hawai'i (Warner, 2001; Wilson & Kamanā, 2001) and at Fort Defiance on the Navajo Nation (Arviso & Holm, 2001; Holm & Holm, 1995; see also Burnaby & Reyhner, 2002; Huss *et al.*, 2003; May, 1999; May & Aikman, 2003; McCarty & Zepeda, 1998).

We conclude by returning to Jonathan's fiercely hopeful words, quoted in the epigraph that begins this paper. Most youth in our study indicated that they value the heritage language, view it as integral to their senses of self, want and expect adults to teach it to them, and employ it as a strategic tool to facilitate their English language learning in school. Native youth discourses problematise a monolingual English status quo, calling upon adults to respond by creating opportunities to learn in and through the heritage language. As expressions of youth concerns about the future of their people, their language and their culture, youth discourses constitute potent testimony capable of informing local, tribal, state and national language education planning and policy.

Language policies and practices are human-built and thus malleable to change. Youth have much to teach us about the strategies we might employ in creating policies and practices that support heritage-language retention. Our role, then, is to listen and to act.

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### **Notes**

1. This excludes the 1990/1992 Native American Languages Act (NALA), which supports the teaching of Native American languages as second languages. Funding for NALA, however, is miniscule in comparison to that available under other federal legislation that has historically supported some form of bilingual education for students whose first language is not English (i.e. the Bilingual Education Act

- [BEA] of 1968). With the passage of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, the BEA was recast as the English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement and Academic Achievement Act. Although this legislation includes a provision for instructional programmes for Native American children studying Indigenous languages, such programmes are clearly not intended to promote, revitalise or maintain those languages. The legislation specifies that the outcomes of these programmes 'shall be increased English proficiency' (Sec. 3216).
2. The metaphor of linguistic ecology comes from Haugen (1972), who traces it to Voegelin and Voegelin (1964). Our concern is with a specific aspect of this metaphor: language endangerment. As Hornberger (2003: 321) notes, the focus on language endangerment is not only about studying and describing language loss, but about counteracting it (see also Mühlhäusler, 1996).
  3. In Gee's (1996) framework, (lower-case) discourses constitute and are constituted by (upper-case) Discourses – 'ways of being in the world, ... a sort of "identity kit"' or way of using language that identifies one as a member of a social group (Gee, 1996: 143). In the present analysis, we examine the ways in which Native youth discourses on heritage languages reflect and constitute Discourses. This is not a 'discourse analysis' in the more technical and linguistic sense employed by Gee and others (i.e. analysis of prosody, cohesion, contextualisation, organisation). Rather, we are concerned with youth discourses as manifestations of ideologies about language that in turn have an impact on language practices and choices.
  4. For more on this, see Benally and Viri (2005), Lomawaima and McCarty (2006: ch. 7), McCarty (2002a, 2002b: ch. 13) and Watahomigie and McCarty (1996).
  5. Charter schools are state-funded schools linked through formal agreements to authorising entities such as public school systems, but chartered by a distinctive mission. In the case of this charter school site, the mission is to serve as an academically rigorous, bicultural, community-based high school for Native youth.
  6. What these youth are describing is metalinguistic awareness, an ability developed in the context of bi/multilingualism that has been shown to enhance cognitive flexibility.

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