Objective evidence indicates that despite public fears and the claims of those who would make English the official language of the United States, it is not English, but minority tongues that are threatened in this country today. In the last 5 years, educators have noticed a sharp decline in native language skills among Native American children. Despite the end of punitive English-only policies and the advent of bilingual education, the shift to English is accelerating in many Indian communities. Seven hypotheses related to this shift are presented, drawing on historical research into U.S. language policy and anecdotal observations in Native American communities. First, language shift is very difficult to impose from without. Second, language shift is determined primarily by internal changes from within language communities themselves. Language choices are influenced, consciously and unconsciously, by social changes that disrupt community. These dislocations include demographic factors, economic forces, mass media, and identifiers of social status. Third, language shift reflects changes in social and cultural values, including the encroachment of individualism, pragmatism, and materialism. Examples of factors in language shift are offered for Navajo, Hualapai, Pasqua Yaqui, and Mississippi Choctaw. Fourth, efforts to reverse language shift must also involve a change in values. Fifth, language shift cannot be reversed by outsiders but depends upon community action. Sixth, successful strategies for reversing language shift demand an understanding of the current stage of language loss. Finally, at this stage, the key task is to develop indigenous leadership. (SV)
After reporting on bilingual education and the English-only movement for the past ten years, I am still amazed by the enormous gap between popular attitudes about language and scientific realities about language, as documented by researchers and educators. Especially ironic is the claim that the dominance of English is threatened in the United States today by the encroachment of other tongues. Many Anglo-Americans worry that minority language speakers are refusing to assimilate, owing to the influence of ethnic separatists and to government programs such as bilingual education, bilingual voting, and bilingual social services, which appear to enable people to live here without learning English. Since the early 1980s, such fears have nourished a movement to declare English the official language at both state and federal levels. Without such legislation, its advocates warn, U.S. national unity will be eroded as language diversity continues to increase and the hegemony of English continues to decline. This perception is widespread, as reflected by public opinion polls and by statements from the new Republican leadership in Congress, which now insists that English needs “legal protection” — that is, legislation to make it the sole medium of government functions.

Objective evidence, however, indicates quite the reverse. It is not English, but minority languages that are threatened in this country. Back in the early 1980s, the demographer Calvin Veltman (1983) completed the most extensive analysis of linguistic assimilation ever conducted in the United States. He concluded that, without the replenishing effects of immigration, all languages other than English would gradually die out in this country, with the possible exception of Navajo. And, I regret to report, Veltman would probably drop that qualifier today, following two decades of rapid erosion for Navajo and other Native American languages.

How do we know when a language is threatened? One obvious sign is that the number of its speakers is declining, as exemplified by most Native American and “old immigrant” (i.e., European) languages in the U.S.A. Other symptoms include:
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- fluency in the language increases with age, as younger generations prefer to speak another (usually the dominant societal) tongue;
- usage declines in "domains" where the language was once secure — e.g., in churches, cultural observances, schools, and most important, the home;
- growing numbers of parents fail to teach the language to their children.¹

When I first started writing about bilingual education in the mid-1980s, language loss was not perceived as a major problem among tribes such as the Navajo, Hualapai, Crow, and Tohono O'odham, which still have large numbers of native speakers, at least among adult. But in the last five years or so, educators are noticing a sharp decline in native language skills among the children of these tribes.

It seems that even when good things happen in educational programs, there is not much impact on the rate of language loss. Despite the end of punitive English-only policies in Indian schools and the advent of bilingual education, especially since the mid-1970s, the shift to English is accelerating in many Indian communities. Why is this happening now?

At the outset it should be noted that, so far, no one has developed a comprehensive theory of language shift — what causes it under widely varying conditions, what prevents it from happening, what can help to reverse it — although I believe that Joshua Fishman has gone farther than anyone else in doing so. Linguists in general have neglected this area; finally a number of them are beginning to wake up to the fact that Native American languages are fast disappearing. According to Michael Krauss (1992), 45 of the 175 still spoken in the U.S.A. are likely to be extinct by the year 2000.

In presenting my working hypotheses about this crisis, I will draw on both historic research into U.S. language policy and my own anecdotal observations in Native American communities, which illustrate most of the many and varied factors involved in language shift. These will be drawn from my visits to reservations in the past year to talk with people about prospects for language revitalization.

1. Language shift is very difficult to impose from without. We know that languages can die. Can they be "murdered"? I'm sad to say, looking at the Americas since the arrival of Columbus, that the answer is yes. Nevertheless, this crime is more difficult to commit than many believe. The one sure-fire way to murder a language is to murder its speakers. Genocide of language communities occurred with Tainos in the Caribbean, the first peoples to be encountered by Columbus. It has also been the fate of a number of others since that time — most famously the case of Ishi, the last speaker of Yana, whose tribe was systematically hunted down and killed by California settlers in the late 19th century. Ishi himself survived until 1916, living out his last years in an anthropology museum in San Francisco.

More often, however, languages die in a more complex and gradual way, through the assimilation of their speakers into other cultures. We know lots of the factors involved — the one-repressive language policies of the Bureau of Indian Affairs are often cited, along with other attempts at cultural genocide, the advent of English-language media, and so on — but these mechanisms have not been studied extensively. We do know that, in the past, this process has taken quite a long time, often several generations, as a community goes through transitional stages of bilingualism. As I noted, however, the pace of language shift
appears to be accelerating dramatically in late 20th century America, which is a major cause for concern.

My first hypothesis is that the external forces that are often blamed, especially direct attempts to suppress a language, cannot alone be responsible, for the simple reason that people resist. Language is the ultimate consensual institution. Displacing a community's vernacular is equivalent to displacing its deepest systems of belief. Even when individuals consent to assimilation, it is enormously difficult to give up one's native language. This is especially true as we grow older, because language is tied so closely to our sense of self: personality, ways of thinking, group identity, religious beliefs, and cultural rituals, formal and informal. Such human qualities are resistant to change at the point of a gun; witness the survival of indigenous tongues through centuries of colonialism.

Let us look at the historical record of United States Indian education policies and analyze their role in language shift. Following the advice of the Indian Peace Commission of 1868, the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) embarked on a conscious attempt at cultural genocide. There are numerous statements on record from Commissioners of Indian Affairs who speak explicitly about the need to "blot out barbarous dialects" and substitute English in their place, so as to "civilize the Indians" and contain them on reservations (Atkins, 1887). Coercive assimilation was seen as a less expensive and more humane alternative to military action. Boarding schools were set up for this purpose beginning in 1879.

The BIA's policy was not simply an outgrowth of racism, although clearly racism played a significant role. It grew out of a school of thought known as social evolutionism: simply put, the idea that human cultures evolve through predetermined stages, from "savagery" to "barbarism" to "civilization." According to this theory, it was both natural and desirable for "lower" cultures to die out and be replaced by "higher" cultures - and for "lower" languages to be replaced by "higher" languages. This was the orthodox view among late 19th century anthropologists and linguists, as exemplified by John Wesley Powell, who explored the Colorado River, learned to speak several Native American languages, and founded the Bureau of American Ethnology. Powell believed that humanity was evolving toward a single world language. As an amateur linguist, he wanted to study Native American languages before they died out, although he viewed them as primitive and had no other regrets about their impending extinction (Powell, 1881).

At the same time, the BIA saw nothing wrong with helping this "natural" process along. It rationalized the policy of repressing indigenous languages by arguing that Native Americans' interests were best served by becoming "civilized," even through forcible means. By
Navajos would acquiesce in the reduction of their herds. This did not prove to be the case; neither reading nor stock reduction caught on. Some people believe that the BIA's initiative actually soured Navajos on the idea of learning to read and write their language by associating Navajo literacy with an unpopular and dictatorial government program. Meanwhile, despite Collier's policy changes at the top, many BIA schools continued to maintain English-only rules and to punish students for violating them well into the 1950s, apparently without much interference from Washington.

What was the overall impact of English-only policies on language choices? To my knowledge, no one has systematically studied this question, although there is no shortage of anecdotal evidence. Many people cite the BIA boarding schools, with their coercive approach, as the number one factor in Indian language loss. But as Wayne Holm (personal communication, 1994) has pointed out, from his vantage point at the Navajo Division of Education, many tribal members who hold this view — people who attended BIA schools themselves — remain fluent speakers of Navajo, although often their children do not. Most, if not all, of the boarding school "survivors" I have interviewed recall proudly their defiance of English-only rules, even at the risk of harsh punishments.

Some people believe that the boarding school experience has had a delayed effect, inducing shame among many Indians about their culture or at least convincing them that their languages are a source of educational difficulties. So, on becoming parents themselves, they have raised their children only or mostly in English, believing this would help them in school. In my observation, such practices are not uncommon among Indian parents even today. But the question remains: did negative attitudes toward the native language come primarily from repressive BIA policies or from other messages that Indians receive from the dominant culture?

Holm notes that language loss among Navajos began to accelerate in the 1970s and 1980s, among children whose parents started school in the 1950s and 1960s, by which time public schools greatly outnumbered BIA schools on the reservation. While using English as the sole medium of instruction, public schools generally did not practice repressive language policies. Moreover, they promoted an ideology quite distinct from that of BIA schools — one more in line with modernity, economic development, and social integration. These latter forces affect traditional cultures in more insidious, and perhaps more devastating, fashion than direct coercion. Hence my second hypothesis:

1. Language shift is determined primarily by internal changes within language communities themselves. No doubt these changes frequently take place in reaction to external pressures — or

"dislocations," to use Fishman's useful term. Such factors weaken the bonds that hold communities together. Yet ultimately speakers themselves are responsible, through their attitudes and choices, for what happens to their native language. Families choose to speak it in the home and teach it to their children, or they don't. Elders choose to speak the language on certain important occasions or to insist on its use in certain important domains, or they don't. Tribal leaders choose to promote the tribal language and accommodate its speakers in government functions, social services, and community schools, or they don't.

This is not to say that such decisions are made in a vacuum, or that they are entirely deliberate. Language choices are influenced, consciously and unconsciously, by social changes that disrupt the community in numerous ways. These include the range of dislocations Fishman (1991) has cited, such as:

- **Demographic factors.** In- and out-migration disperses a community — for example, when people have to leave a reservation to attend school or look for jobs. Mobility often leads to intermarriage with other language communities, which in turn means English will likely become the common language of the household. In addition, we should not overlook the forcible dispersion of certain tribes through genocidal campaigns — for example, in California, a state that also refused to establish reservations for most tribes, which might have provided space for language communities to regroup. It is no coincidence that indigenous tongues in California are among the most endangered in the U.S.A.

- **Economic forces.** Opportunities for employment and commerce tend to be open only to those fully proficient in the dominant language. This is increasingly true when a wage economy starts to replace an agricultural economy and when isolated markets become integrated into a consumer society. It used to be that trading post operators had to be proficient in languages such as Navajo to deal with rural Indians; today it is the Indians who must accommodate to the English-dominated marketplace.

- **Mass media.** Television and video cassette recorders have had a noticeable cultural impact among Native Americans. In more remote areas this has happened only in the last decade. With increased electrification and satellite dishes popping up everywhere, Indian children are suddenly watching MTV, listening to heavy metal, and playing video games — none of which makes any use of their native language. Perhaps more important, electronic media have displaced traditional pastimes, such as the winter stories through which elders passed down tribal history and culture, with passive forms of entertainment.
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Social identifiers. We speak like those we admire or aspire to emulate. Native Americans who desire to succeed in professional careers or who feel an attraction to popular (i.e., Western) culture or non-native religions often come to identify with the language of those pursuits — English — and to ascribe low status to native languages. Such tendencies are especially strong among the young, who increasingly identify with non-Indian role models.

These are the kinds of dislocations that occur when barriers fall between the tribal society and the dominant society, when indigenous language communities no longer live in isolation. This has happened earlier on some reservations than on others, but the basic process is pretty much the same. Dan McLaughlin of Navajo Community College put it very well when he said, “You pave roads, you create access to a wage economy, people's values change, and you get language shift” (Crawford, 1995). This brings me to my third hypothesis.

3. If language choices reflect social and cultural values, language shift reflects a change in these values. Language loss is affected not merely by attitudes about language per se (e.g., whether or not to try to keep the ancestral tongue alive). If such values were all that were involved, saving endangered languages would be a lot simpler. More important in this process are larger systems of belief.

Individualism — putting self-interest ahead of community interest. Ambitious individuals tend to ask: How is honoring the old ways going to help me “get ahead”? Other people can do what they want, but my family is going to stress English, the language of success in the dominant society.

Pragmatism — worrying about “what works,” not about defending principles that may seem old-fashioned or outdated. Pragmatists reason that, as indigenous languages decline in power and number of speakers, they are no longer “useful.” With English taking their place in more and more domains, they no longer seem worth maintaining.

Materialism — allowing spiritual, moral, and ethical values to be overshadowed by consumerism. The attitude is that indigenous languages won't put bread on the table, so why worry about preserving them? Teaching them to children is a waste of time, and time is money.

The encroachment of these Western ways of thinking, the dominant thought patterns in U.S. capitalist society, has a great deal to do with language shift in native communities.1 Once these viewpoints were

1At the same time, I want to distance myself from the view, fashionable in some quarters today, that all Western ways are by definition oppressive and reprehensible. American democratic ideals, such as respect for human rights and minority self-determination, while not consistently observed in practice, nevertheless provide openings to rally the public’s support for language preservation.

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kept out by social, economic, and geographical distances. Although the U.S. government tried repeatedly to implant them — for example, the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887 mandated private land ownership to teach Indians "selfishness, which is at the bottom of civilization" (Debo, 1940) — such ideologies failed to take root in isolated communities; indigenous values and belief systems were too strong.

No more. Technological advances, another byproduct of Western values, have made it increasingly difficult for tribes to insulate themselves from the wider society. Traditional cultures have never been more threatened. In visiting various reservations last year, I found many of these dislocations in community and shifts in basic values to be in evidence. But another interesting thing I discovered is that each native community has its own story, quite distinct from those of other tribes. I would like to share briefly my observations from four of these reservations.

Navajo. As I noted, there has been a rapid erosion in the native language among young Navajos over the past twenty years. This is true even in two communities that remain relatively remote, Rough Rock and Rock Point, Arizona, which also happen to have highly regarded bilingual education programs. As recently as the mid-1970s, more than 95 percent of children starting in these programs spoke Navajo, and most spoke little or no English. Today, according to teachers and school administrators, only about half of the newly arrived kindergartners are orally fluent in the native language (although at Rough Rock this estimate is disputed).1 In border towns and other large communities, of course, children's fluency in Navajo is considerably lower. A reservation-wide study of Navajo Head Start programs reported that teachers judged 54 percent of preschoolers to be monolingual in English, 18 percent monolingual in Navajo, and 28 percent bilingual (Platero, 1992).

There now seem to be few stable domains for Navajo, daily contexts where it can function without being challenged by English. Because many younger people cannot speak the native language, or cannot speak it well, there is social pressure to use English much of the time. This is true in tribal government and even at Navajo Community College, where Benjamin Barney tells me that English largely predominates — except in his teacher-training program.

Some of this language shift has conscious roots. Opposition to bilingual education has been fanned by some fundamentalist Christian groups, who fear its potential to encourage Navajo religion. In addition,

1It should be noted that these assessments are based on teachers' observations rather than on an objective test. Some administrators believe that the percentage of Navajo speakers is considerably larger at the Rough Rock Community School.
basically the entire northwestern quadrant of Arizona. While they spoke some parents have been convinced that learning the native language is a distraction from learning English and other school subjects. But I believe these are minority sentiments. The vast majority of tribal members, if asked, would favor keeping Navajo alive. The problem is that people seldom get around to doing anything about it, for example, by teaching the language to their kids. Why is this so?

For one thing, there is little sense of urgency about language loss because there are still so many Navajo speakers left. The 1990 census counted more than 100,000 on the reservation, although no doubt that figure overestimates the number who are fully proficient. At the same time, a growing number of Navajos, generally middle-aged or older, are becoming concerned about language shift among the young. Yet many of these people, including most of the language activists I have met, concede that their own children have grown up without learning Navajo. Now, even if they would like to do so, these young adults cannot seem to find the time in their busy lives, so a disparity exists between good intentions and practical efforts to preserve the language.

Meanwhile, there are significant differences in attitudes between generations. Among Navajo youth the native language tends to have very low status — lower than on any other reservation I visited. It is frequently associated with rural backwardness, with people who are not making it in today's society. There is even a slang epithet for such Navajo speakers: "Johns." I happened to visit the elementary school at Chinle on the same day as some Navajo code talkers. These Marine veterans, who played a crucial role in winning World War II in the Pacific, are a great source of pride to adult members of the tribe. One of the code talkers, Carl Gorman, asked students in a 6th grade class how many could speak at least a little Navajo. At first, not a single hand went up. After some coaxing, about half of the children put up their hands. Clearly, speaking the language was not something they were very proud of. I regard that as an ominous sign for the long-term health of Navajo.

Hualapai. This is another case where the native language has been rapidly disappearing among younger generations. At Peach Springs, Arizona, only 50 to 60 percent of entering kindergartners speak Hualapai fluently today, as compared with 95 percent in the mid-1970s. Many young adults — the parental generation — are themselves no longer fluent in the language. Nevertheless, it is still heard throughout the community. The majority of families still have elderly members who speak Hualapai as their dominant tongue; so children are often exposed to it in the home. But that, too, is changing, as new HUD housing has tended to break up extended families.

A special factor that seems to promote the shift to English is the problem of dialect differences in Hualapai. Until about a century ago, the Pai comprised fourteen bands spread over an enormous territory,
could not detect much remorse among local whites; whereas hostility toward outsiders was palpable.) Choctaws were the first of the eastern tribes to experience forced "removal" from their homeland in the 1830s. Those who evaded the move and stayed behind in Mississippi enjoyed few if any civil rights. Kept out of public schools and discriminated against in many other ways, they developed a strong ethic of self-reliance and self-isolation. Assimilation was never an option for them until quite recently; nor is it an aspiration today. The Choctaws needed to learn English to deal with local whites to some extent, but they have developed their own parallel institutions; hence the tendency to retain Choctaw.

All this may be changing quite soon. In the last fifteen years the Yaquis have begun assimilating into the Angl culture, as have many of the Hispanics in Tucson and Phoenix. Over the last two or three generations there has been a massive language shift. According to a recent census conducted by a Felipe Molina, a Yaqui writer and lexicographer, only about 6 percent of the 8,500 tribal members remain fluent in the native language. Virtually none of these are children. In Marana, Arizona, a relatively isolated community I visited last year, the youngest Yoeme speaker was eighteen years old.

There is still some cause for optimism, however: Yoeme remains quite viable in Sonora, where children are still learning the language in isolated Yaqui villages. One of the Tucson schools has organized cultural exchange programs for Pasqua Yaquis and their relatives in Mexico. There are also hopes for joint economic development projects between the two groups. thanks to the North American Free Trade Agreement, something that could make Yoeme a valuable economic as well as cultural resource.

Mississippi Band of Choctaw. This relatively small branch of the Choctaws, with about 5,500 tribal members (versus nearly 43,000 in southeastern Oklahoma) is far from isolated geographically. Yet it has an extremely high rate of retention of the native language: at least 90 percent among children entering school. Meanwhile, fluency in English is also widespread. The Mississippi Choctaus represent a rare example of diglossia, or stable bilingualism, in which a single speech community uses two languages for distinct purposes.

Tribal government, tribal business enterprises, and the tribally controlled school system operate mainly if not exclusively in English. Although there was a federally funded bilingual program back in the 1970s, it proved unpopular with the community and was soon terminated. For its part, Choctaw is used extensively in social, ceremonial, and family life. This is the only reservation I visited where I encountered groups of teenagers hanging out with each other speaking their native language, without teachers or other adults cajoling them to do so.

How did this situation develop? Most informed observers believe that the key factor has been social isolation. The reservation is located near Philadelphia, Mississippi, a town that became world famous for white racism when three civil rights workers were murdered there in 1964. (Visiting the town close to the 30th anniversary of the crime, I encountered groups of teenagers hanging out with each other speaking their native language, without teachers or other adults cajoling them to do so.)

How do fundamental changes in values occur? Either individuals' lives change in radical ways, or they experience a religious conversion, or they are influenced by a social movement that speaks directly to
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long-suppressed needs and aspirations. In this case I believe a social movement will be necessary, one that addresses questions that matter to Native Americans, no doubt in the context of struggles for self-determination — cultural, economic, and perhaps political as well.

5. Language shift cannot be reversed by outsiders, however well-meaning. As Michael Krauss (1992) has written, based on long experience directing the Alaska Native Language Center, "You cannot from the outside inculcate into people the will to revive or maintain their languages. This has to come from them, from themselves." If language preservation efforts are to succeed, they must be led by indigenous institutions, organizations, and activists.

Schools, by contrast, are usually regarded as an outside institution in Indian communities, unless they are under effective local control. As experience has shown, establishing such control is easier said than done, even when tribes or communities contract to run their own schools. The frequent need to hire outside expertise can mean sacrificing power over things that are important to tribal members. Generally speaking, outside administrators bring with them their own agendas. The only way to avoid this trap is to train native talent to perform these jobs.

Even where there is effective local control, schools can only do so much. Again, it is hard to translate good intentions into action — not unlike the situation in many homes. Everyone agrees the native language needs to be preserved, but English still tends to predominate, even in bilingual education programs, unless domains are consciously defended for the former. When I visited Rough Rock, I heard lots of concern about this problem among teachers, who wanted to create "a totally Navajo environment" at least part of the time. Otherwise, they felt an overpowering tendency to lapse into English.

Another obvious problem is dependence on federal funding, unfortunately a universal phenomenon in Indian education and one that fosters program instability. For example, Title VII bilingual education grants were designed not as a permanent entitlement, but as seed money to get programs started, promote experimentation, and build local "capacity" to make them self-supporting. On reservations, however, alternative resources are usually lacking. So when the grant ends after three to five years, so does the program in many cases.

Moreover, in the U.S.A. bilingual education has developed largely as a transitional approach for assimilating immigrant children. The vast majority of such programs make no attempt to preserve the native language after the student learns English. Until recently the best Indian bilingual programs have had to bend the law to combine native language maintenance with learning English.

Finally, even where there has been a concerted effort to maintain and develop bilingual skills, such as at Peach Springs and Rock Point,
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most by providing resources, training, and encouragement to indigenous language activists.

It is heartening to see the growing enthusiasm for language preservation work throughout Native American communities. I have encountered it on reservations, in schools, and at some excellent and well-attended conferences in the last few months — for example, the Native American Languages Issues Institute, organized last fall by Gloria Emerson. Projects are popping up all over the country. Yet so far there is no central forum for discussion or organization for moving things forward.

Without such a vehicle, today's momentum could soon be lost. Now is not the time for summit meetings or mass organizing or expensive technology projects. Now is the time to develop our brain trust; to facilitate communication among activists (e.g., through conferences, publications, and the Internet); to compile resource guides and how-to-manuals that share practical experiences (failures as well as successes); to train Indian linguists and educators; to build alliances with sympathetic outsiders; and of course, to encourage talented and committed people to get involved.

In closing, I would note that a high proportion of today's Indian language activists tend to be tied to educational institutions of one kind or other. Educators have served as a kind of early warning system about language loss. And it goes without saying that they are both well situated and usually well qualified to help address this crisis. Certainly, there are important contributions to be made in the schools, but not only in the schools. Broader community-wide efforts are essential in restoring and expanding safe domains for indigenous languages. It is here in particular that we should be seeking out and encouraging new activists. I hope this Symposium will lead us at least a few steps down that road.

References


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