

THE CONFEDERATED TRIBES LANGUAGE LESSON

Effective solutions for reversing the loss of American Indian and Alaska Native languages must be found and implemented soon. Both indecision and ineffective action will not reverse the current rapid loss of surviving indigenous languages.

This rationale and needs statement documents the importance of indigenous languages as an irreplaceable cultural knowledge and as a cornerstone of indigenous community and family values. It gives an overview of past government policies to eradicate indigenous languages and then describes the reversal of those policies with the new policy of Indian self-determination over the last quarter century. Tribal language policies are cited as evidence of the desire of American Indians and Alaska Natives to preserve and renew their languages.

The rationale and needs working group was in agreement with the Roundtable's keynoter Joshua Fishman that efforts to save languages must ultimately deal with the intergenerational transmission of mother-tongues. This is, to a large extent, a family and community issue. Exclusive focus on education and schools can compound, rather than solve, the problem of language shift. Groups who are succeeding in saving their language have found ways to revitalize and stabilize their speech community. In these cases, schools play a role, but the community is the primary focus of action.

Stabilizing an endangered language touches all aspects of a community from child-rearing practices and intergenerational communication to economic and political development. Helping indigenous Americans develop the effective right to save their languages would likely produce important benefits, not only for the various tribes on the brink of destruction but for all societies. An investment in Indian languages that would be large enough, come fast enough, and be well-enough planned to make a difference would likely prove to be an extremely effective investment in terms of addressing pressing national and international problems.

Language as Irreplaceable Cultural Knowledge

Many of the keys to the psychological, social, and physical survival of humankind may well be held by the smaller speech communities of the world. These keys will be lost as languages and cultures die. Our languages are joint creative productions that each generation adds to. Languages contain generations of wisdom, going back into antiquity. Our languages contain a significant part of the world's knowledge and wisdom. When a language is lost, much of the knowledge that language represents is also gone. Our words, our ways of saying things are different ways of being, thinking, seeing, and acting. In the words of anthropologist Russell Bernard,

Linguistic diversity . . . is at least the correlate of (though not the cause of) diversity of adaptational ideas — ideas about transferring property (or even the idea of property itself), curing illness, acquiring food, raising children, distributing power, or settling disputes. By this reasoning, any reduction of language diversity diminishes the adaptational strength of our species because it lowers the pool of knowledge from which we can draw. We know that the reduction of biodiversity today threatens all of us. I think we are conducting an experiment to see what will happen to humanity if we eliminate "cultural species" in the world. This is a reckless experiment. If we don't like the way it turns out, there's no going back. (1992, p. 82)

Where American Indians are concerned, for example, tremendous contributions have been made to the mainstream society in many areas including agriculture, governance, art, and philosophy (Weatherford, 1988 & 1991). If the natural world survives the next few centuries, much will be owed to the insights and perspectives of American Indians and other indigenous groups. Unfortunately, the Indian communities that have survived until now may be extinct by then.

A vicious cycle persists that is very difficult to break. Lack of community infrastructure and many social problems contribute to language shift; language shift fosters dysfunctional behavior, and so it goes. So much damage has been inflicted on the local cultures that some people seem rather fatalistic about language loss, not to mention solving the many social problems associated with the accompanying cultural unraveling.

Family Values and Native Language Survival

American Indian and Alaska Native languages are threatened as fewer and fewer children are learning them in the home. Many non-Indians and some Indians see no tragedy in the loss of these languages, but as this country becomes more and more dominated by concern about crime and the breakdown of traditional families, many American Indians and Alaska Natives see the perpetuation of native languages as vital to their cultural integrity.

The reason for this is, that in addition to speech, each language carries with it an unspoken network of cultural values. Although these values generally operate on a subliminal level, they are, nonetheless, a major force in the shaping of

each person's self-awareness, identity, and interpersonal relationships (Scollon & Scollon, 1981). These values are psychological imperatives that help generate and maintain an individual's level of comfort and self-assurance, and, consequently, success in life. In the normal course of events these values are absorbed along with one's mother tongue in the first years of life. For that reason, cultural values and mother tongue are so closely intertwined in public consciousness that they are often, but mistakenly, seen as inseparable. For the majority of young Natives today, culture and language have, in fact, been separated. As a result, most of these young people are trying "to walk in two worlds" with only one language. This is a far more complex and stressful undertaking than the "two worlds" metaphor would suggest (Henze & Vanett, 1993).

Across two cultures the preferred etiquette for behaving or communicating in a particular situation may be starkly different. Using the same language across the two cultures often poses a challenge to both sense and sensitivity (Platt, 1989). Giving young Natives the opportunity to keep or learn their tribal language offers them a strong antidote to the culture clash many of them are experiencing but cannot verbalize. If along with the language, they learn to recognize the hidden network of cultural values that permeates the language, they will add to the knowledge and skills required to "walk in two worlds." They will learn to recognize and cope with cross-cultural values that are often at odds with each other, and they will begin to adopt more comfortably the cultural value that is appropriate for a particular cultural situation (Tennant, 1993).

The revival and preservation of minority languages is not a hopeless cause. Successful efforts towards indigenous language renewal and maintenance are to be found around the world. Examples are to be found in the revival of Hebrew in Israel, French in Quebec, and Catalan in Spain (Fishman, 1991). Even in the United States with its emphasis on conformity, small groups such as the Hutterites and Hasidic Jews have been able to maintain their languages and cultures.

Native Language Can Help English Proficiency

In seeking to preserve their cultural heritage, tribes are not rejecting the importance of English language instruction for their children. The results of the latest U.S. Department of Education study of bilingual education programs show that native-language use in schools does not hold children back (Ramirez, 1992). Such research tends to use English-language standardized test scores as a measure of success. If such research also focused on objectives such as strengthening American Indian families, there can be little doubt that bilingual programs utilizing and developing native-language fluency produce superior results. This is supported by the findings in the aforementioned study that parents were most satisfied with having their students learn both English and their home language and wanted their children to stay in bilingual programs longer.

Internationally, researchers have found that bilingualism is an asset rather than a handicap (Baker, 1988; Cummins, 1989). It is not necessary to forget a home language to learn a second "school" language and be academically successful in that second language. It takes time, around six years on average, to become fully — that is academically — competent in a second language, but through proper instruction — such as has been carried out at Rock Point Community School in the Navajo Nation — students can learn English and the academic subjects — math, science, and so forth — and still learn to read and write their tribal language (Collier, 1989; Cummins, 1989; Reyhner, 1990).

Former National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE) Treasurer Dr. Richard Littlebear sees "our native languages nurturing our spirits and hearts and the English language as sustenance for our bodies" (1990, p. 8). American Indians and Alaska Natives are seeking to follow a bilingual "English Plus" philosophy that will preserve their heritages and will allow their children access to jobs in the non-Indian world.

Results of Past Government Policies

From the very beginning of the invasion of the Americas that began in 1492, Europeans overwhelmingly failed to recognize the strengths of American Indian cultures, globally evaluating them as "savage," when in fact they were different. Europeans commented on but did not fully appreciate American Indian and Alaska Native cultural strengths such as their kindness towards and love of children, the important role women played in many tribes, and their respect for and appreciation of the natural world. Efforts to Europeanize and Christianize Indians alternated with efforts at genocide or removal.

After the American Civil War, President Ulysses S. Grant appointed Peace Commissioners in an attempt to bring an end to the Indian wars on the frontier. The commission concluded that language differences led to misunderstandings and that:

Now, by educating the children of these tribes in the English language these differences would have disappeared, and civilization would have followed at once. . . .

Through sameness of language is produced sameness of sentiment, and thought; customs and habits are molded and assimilated in the same way, and thus in process of time the differences producing trouble would have

been gradually obliterated. . . . In the difference of language to-day lies two-thirds of our trouble. . . . Schools should be established, which children should be required to attend; their barbarous dialect should be blotted out and the English language substituted. (*Report of the Indian Peace Commissioners*, 1868, pp. 16-17)

Government supported education became the means to accomplish the eradication of Indian languages. Indian children were taken away from their families and put in government funded boarding schools. Once there, they were kept away from their families for years at a time and punished in a variety of ways if they used their mother-tongue. Harsh punishments such as whipping were used that would never have been considered by the supposedly "savage" Indians. Under Secretary of the Interior Schurz, the Indian Bureau issued regulations in 1880 that "all instruction must be in English" in both mission and government schools under threat of loss of government funding (Prucha, 1973, p. 199). In 1885, the Indian school superintendent for the BIA optimistically predicted,

if there were a sufficient number of reservation boarding-school-buildings to accommodate all the Indian children of school age, and these building could be filled and kept filled with Indian pupils, the Indian problem would be solved within the school age of the Indian child now six years old. (Oberly, 1885, cxiii)

It was felt by J.D.C. Atkins, Commissioner of Indian Affairs from 1885 to 1888, that "to teach Indian school children their native tongue is practically to exclude English, and to prevent them from acquiring it" (1887, p. xxiii). The ethnocentric attitude prevalent in the late Nineteenth Century is evident in Atkins' 1887 report,

Every nation is jealous of its own language, and no nation ought to be more so than ours, which approaches nearer than any other nationality to the perfect protection of its people. True Americans all feel that the Constitution, laws, and institutions of the United States, in their adaptation to the wants and requirements of man, are superior to those of any other country; and they should understand that by the spread of the English language will these laws and institutions be more firmly established and widely disseminated. Nothing so surely and perfectly stamps upon an individual a national characteristic as language. . . . [As the Indians] are in an English-speaking country, they must be taught the language which they must use in transacting business with the people of this country. No unity or community of feeling can be established among different peoples unless they are brought to speak the same language, and thus become imbued with like ideas of duty. . . .

The instruction of the Indians in the vernacular is not only of no use to them, but is detrimental to the cause of their education and civilization, and no school will be permitted on the reservation in which the English language is not exclusively taught. (Atkins, 1887, pp. xxi-xxiii)

This government sponsored suppression of Indian languages and cultures continues to this day, though without the harsher forms of punishment, in government supported boarding schools that concentrate on an English-language curriculum. An unintended side effect of the government boarding school has been generations of Indian youth that failed to learn loving child rearing skills because of their removal from their homes.

Coincident with the loss of language has been the breakdown of extended families. In traditional American Indian and Alaska Native cultures, the extended family was a central way of life. Parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles were all in the household living as a family. Beyond the debilitating effects of the white man's education and the boarding school experience has been the destructive effects of other government programs such as the construction of single family housing units that isolate extended family members from each other and help prevent grandparents and other relatives passing down their language and culture to the children. Generally, the results of government sponsored suppression of indigenous languages and cultures in the United States has been catastrophic for American Indian and Alaska Native peoples. Prior to the turn of the century this suppression was coupled with genocidal activities such as forced removal, now called "ethnic cleansing," which helped sharply reduce the American Indian population in the United States from an estimated ten million in 1492 to just over two hundred

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