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ARTICLES

Indigenous Youth as Language Policy Makers

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This article offers a grounded view of language shift as experienced by Native American youth across a range of early- to late-shift settings. Drawing on data from a long-term ethnographic study, we demonstrate that the linguistic ecologies in which youth language choices play out are more complex than a unidirectional notion of shift might suggest. We focus on 3 areas of research: youth language prac-

socialize their children in the Indigenous language, due to their own negative experiences with linguistic assimilation, and youth who are negotiating the place of their heritage language in their lives and identities in a situation of unequal power relations.

In this article we provide an analysis of language shift “on the ground,” as experienced by Native American youth across a range of early- to late-life settings. Following Schiffman (1996) and others, we take a broad view of language policy, implicit and explicit, overt and covert, de facto and de jure (McCarty, 2004). Our goal is to interrogate the “real policy” in these settings (Shohamy, 2006) by attending closely to Native youth’s discursive practices. In complex settings of language shift, it is often children who set the language policy of the home (Parsons-Yazzie, 1996/1997). “Children make decisions, conscious or not,” Samy (2006) points out, “as to the language(s) they want to use at home, with their peers and in public domain, depending on a variety of considerations” (p. 48). Responding to social pressures that marginalize their languages and identities, youth often act “as tiny social barometers [who are] tely sensitive to the disfavored status of their elders’ language and . . . choose to speak the dominant tongue” (Harrison, 2007, p. 8). These decision-making processes, we argue, are de facto manifestations of implicit language policies. Informed by shared meanings about language constructed within peer culture, the culture of schooling, and broader frames of reference, this informal policy making profoundly influences language choices. While these processes can (and do) structure language shift, they also foreground the agentive potential of youth in family-, community-, and school-based language planning.

Drawing on data from a large-scale study of language shift among Indigenous communities in the U.S. Southwest, we examine the interplay of micro and macro forces that influence youth language ideologies and practices. We focus on 3 key areas of our research: (a) contemporary language practices in Native American communities; (b) youth communicative repertoires; and (c) youth language attitudes and ideologies.

We preface our discussion with some demographic background. In 2006, 4.5 million people in the United States (1.5% of the population) identified as American Indian and Alaska

school performance. The participating sites were selected to represent a cross-section of Indigenous languages, language vitality, demographic characteristics, and school types, included:

1. A Navajo prekindergarten–grade 12 school, Beautiful Mountain (all names are pseudonyms), at which perhaps a third of entering students speak fluent Navajo but where rapid language shift is under way;
2. Two Akimel O’odham (Pima) communities near a large metropolitan area, Ak Wijid and U:s K:ek, within which nearly all Indigenous-language speakers are beyond child-bearing age, and where a second, linguistically related language, Pee Posh (also called Maricopa) is spoken by a handful of elders (0);
3. An urban public charter school, Bahjidaigh, serving primarily Tohono O’odham teenagers whose heritage language (mutually intelligible with Akimel O’odham) is still spoken in the reservation communities from which students are bused daily, but by increasingly fewer young people; and
4. Three schools in a large urban public school district, Black Foothills, attended by children from a trilingual Indigenous-language/Spanish/English community with 100–150 Indigenous-language speakers, most beyond child-bearing age².

Altogether, the 7 participating schools enrolled 2,039 Native American students.

Each community served by these schools has experienced major upheaval as a result of colonization, and in all cases, *only* English-only schooling has been a leading cause of language shift. As the data show, these experiences left a residue of ambivalent language attitudes, encouraging parents to socialize their children in an alien tongue—English.

Community-Based Action Research

The study was guided by principles of participatory action research in which inquiry is situated in local concerns and community stakeholders are active agents in the work. At each site, we worked with teams of Indigenous educators identified as community research collaborators (CRCs). The CRCs facilitated entrée and access to research protocols, assisted with data collection, and participated in coursework on language planning and ethnographic and sociolinguistic research methods. As we discuss later, CRCs are also the local change agents who are applying the study’s findings to local language planning.

Research Questions, Data Gathering, and Analysis

For the purposes of this article, we focus on 3 key research questions:

1. When, where, and for what purposes do youth in these settings use the Indigenous language and English?
2. What is the nature of the youth’s communicative repertoires?

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²At some tribal members’ request and to protect the tribe’s privacy, we do not name the Indigenous nation or language associated with the pseudonymous Black Foothills Unified School District.

3. What attitudes and ideologies do youth hold toward the Indigenous language and English?

We employed an ethnographic, case study approach making 80 site visits over 5 years to collect data, plan with the CRCs, and report back to councils and other stakeholders. Data collection included demographic records, audiotaped interviews with 168 adults and 62 youth ages 8 through 21, questionnaires (600) to determine language practices and ideologies, observations of language use and teaching, documents (lesson plans, school mission statements, etc.), and student achievement data. The qualitative data produced more

FIGURE 1 Educators' assessments of the percentage of youth who hear the Indigenous language (IL) spoken at home.

Source: Native Language Shift and Retention Project Teacher Questionnaires. ACS = Ak Wijid Community School; BHS = Bahidaj High School; BFUSD = Black Hills Unified School District; BMCS = Beautiful Mountain Community School; UKCS = U:s K:ek Community School.

to 81%). Navajo youth also commonly hear Navajo at the local store, the chapter house (the local branch of government), ceremonies, and on regional radio broadcasts. For BFUSD students, church and community religious activities remain strongholds for Indigenous-language use.

hallways. In contrast, no AWCS students reported hearing Akimel O'odham or Pee Posh outside the classrooms designated for Indigenous-language teaching.

These questionnaire data are amplified by interviews. At Ak Wijid, where all adult participants agreed that few students speak Akimel O'odham, a bilingual educator nonetheless observed that 2 students who were experiencing difficulty at testing time had family members who "speak O'odham all the time." The teacher correctly surmised that these students "must speak O'odham" but were "just not speaking in [the school]" (interview, November 3, 2005). A 12-year-old revealed that he had learned Pee Posh and O'odham from his grandmother as a young child and that both languages are spoken at home (interview, June 2, 2004). A 13-year-old described a peer whose "mom talks [Akimel O'odham] to her and she can understand" (interview, June 1, 2004).

In BFUSD, youth's sociolinguistic environments include the Indigenous language, English, and Spanish. One youth reported that at home his parents and grandparents speak "sometimes [the Indigenous language], sometimes Spanish, and then English" (interview, April 2, 2004). Youth also described parents using different languages in different domains: "My dad speaks English when he is working . . . and my mom speaks both . . . English and [the Indigenous language]. But if they were to go outside [the reservation], they would speak English" (interview, May 11, 2004). Similarly, youth reported that different languages are used with family members of different generations, as reflected in one youth's account that his father "talks [the Indigenous language] . . . to the elders" but uses Spanish or English with younger generations. A trilingual BFUSD educator summed up these language practices this way: The elders speak Spanish, the Indigenous language, "and maybe a little English"; the "next generation speaks English, Spanish, and [the Indigenous language]" and is literally three; while the generation that is coming up . . . is English only. . . . So we have a trilingual family but each generation is slightly different than the one before (interview, March 30, 2004).

At Beautiful Mountain, educators noted that their Navajo dominant students come from more rural areas—"the ones that live kind of way out . . . without electricity and running water"—reinforcing the pejorative stereotypes identified by Lee (2007) that associate speaking Navajo with "backwardness," poverty, and lack of Western education (interview, April 28, 2003). And, while Beautiful Mountain adults did not agree on the numbers of students who are fluent in Navajo, many Navajo youth insisted that "everyone speaks Navajo out here" (interview, May 5, 2004). These responses are borne out in their questionnaire data, as shown in Figures 3 and 4.

Dynamic, Heteroglossic Linguistic Ecologies

From early- to late-shift settings, these data show that Native American youth are growing up in highly complex, heteroglossic sociolinguistic environments (García, 2009). In their homes and communities, children are likely to hear varieties of one or more Indigenous languages spoken by older family members, alongside multiple varieties of English and, in some cases, Spanish. There is a continuum of Indigenous-language fluency, from complete fluency to no fluency at all (see Table 1).

Although English is the language of choice in both school and community for most youth, and the language youth say they are “most comfortable speaking, their English repertoires are complicated, with different varieties being used for different purposes. The school is a primary domain for academic English—a variety that may have little currency in the home and community. As the next section indicates, this is of consequence in school labeling practices and students’ performance on English standardized tests.

YOUTH COMMUNICATIVE REPERTOIRES: “THEY’RE ALL DIVIDED”

Our data on youth’s Indigenous-language abilities derive from self-reports on questionnaires and in interviews, a methodology validated in other Indigenous settings where formal language assessments are unavailable (Holm & Holm, 1995; Romero, 2001; Spolsky, 1975). On these measures, adults characterized youth’s Native language abilities as limited, with approximately 40% to 100% of educators ($n = 102$) reporting that fewer than 20% of their students were fluent speakers of an Indigenous language. Interview data shed further light on these data. Akimel O’odham educators agreed that although “there’s probably a few [students] that know [Akimel O’odham] . . . but to be able to speak fluently . . . I doubt if we have any” (interview, May 14, 2003). In more than 25 years in the community, one teacher reported knowing “only one student that was completely fluent in O’odham” (interview, February 27, 2004).

Educators of Navajo students expressed divergent views of their students’ Navajo abilities, with some insisting that none of their students were fluent speakers and others judging the number to be 70% to 90%. One Beautiful Mountain educator summed up Navajo students’ language proficiencies this way:

I’d say one-third have a hard time understanding English. Then, one-third . . . will understand [Navajo] and speak some, and one-third [are] fluent [in Navajo]. So they’re all divided (interview, April 24, 2003).

At the same time, educators agreed that their students had receptive abilities in the Indigenous language, acquired through in- and out-of-school activities.

Educators’ views of their students’ Indigenous-language abilities were poignantly illustrated in the metaphors they chose to describe the Indigenous language: “There is this afterglow of a language,” one administrator said (interview, May 11, 2004). “There are only remnants of an active [Indigenous] language,” another educator maintained (field notes, October 28, 2005). The Indigenous language is “fading away” yet another educator remarked (interview, May 11, 2004).

With some exceptions, students’ self-reported Native language abilities mirrored adults’ assessments. At Ak Wijid, only 3 students (8% of those sampled) listed Akimel O’odham alongside English as a language spoken fluently. At Bahidaj High, 24 students (21% of 114)

75% to 80%. Across all sites, a small percentage of students reported being able to read and write the Indigenous language, with the highest percentages at BHS and BMCS where regular Native language classes were in place.

Data on students' English abilities derive from criterion-referenced and standardized tests, questionnaires, and interviews. On questionnaires, educators of O'odham students identified all their students as fluent in English. The exceptions were students whose primary language is Spanish or Navajo. At the same time, a significant number of students were identified as LEP on the basis of their test performance. In combination with their assessments of students' Native language abilities, these designations led some educators to characterize youth as "semi-lingual," "language-delayed," or lacking proficiency in either the Native language or English—characterizations we take up in the following sections.

Hybrid Communicative Repertoires

As the study unfolded, we were increasingly impressed with the hybridity of youth's language practices. These multiple and intersecting discursive qualities are captured by the notions of communicative repertoire, pluriliteracies, and translanguaging. The construct of communicative repertoire, Martin-Jones and Jones (2000) says, is "a varying degrees of expertise in different languages and literacies and 'the complex ways in which people draw on the language and literacy resources available to them as they take on different identities in different domains of their lives'" (p. 2). Notions of pluriliteracies (García, Bartlett, & Kleifgen, 2007) and translanguaging (García, 2009) get at the fact that "languages are not compartmentalized in a diglossic situation,

The Indigenous youth in our study expressed both positive and negative attitudes and ideologies toward English and the Indigenous language. On the one hand, English was viewed as universal and necessary; on the other hand, it was viewed as a language of colonization. Participants regularly referenced sentimental attachments to their heritage

Youth placed a utilitarian value on the Indigenous language and bilingualism/multilingualism—a value not typically associated with minoritized languages or their speakers. “I get the best of both worlds,” a high school student stated, adding that he wanted to become a medical doctor, “and to do that I have to know how to communicate with patients in Navajo and . . . English” (interview, May 5, 2004). Knowing Navajo “gives you a chance to communicate with elders,” another youth said, “and it gives you a chance to listen to what they have to say and learn stuff from them in Navajo” (interview, May 6, 2004).

In these discourses, youth voiced concern about the future of their heritage languages and the role of families, communities, and schools in language maintenance and revitalization. Maintaining Navajo is important, a young man said, “because the language is dying out. . . . Navajo is supposed to be spoken at all times in the house . . . and [parents] should not be treating their Navajo like this” (interview, May 5, 2004). “Right now, we’re losing it,” a Tohono O’odham youth said, “so it’s very important for me to learn about it and to speak it” (interview, April 19, 2004).

At the same time, youth and adults acknowledged language practices that ran counter to these desires. Maintaining the Indigenous language is extremely important,” a teacher said, “[but] in my household, it’s all English” (interview, April 29, 2004). “I always hear people say, ‘Oh you need to treasure the language,’” another teacher stated, “but when it comes . . . to their own homes . . . they speak English” (interview, April 29, 2004).

Further, not all youth shared sentiments of heritage-language pride. Jamie,” for instance, whose primary language is English, insisted that the Indigenous language and culture are “just the past” (interview, May 5, 2004). Yet Jamie was trying to learn his heritage language in school. These contradictory ideological currents run throughout our data. One educator reported that some students had told her, “I’m not going to learn [the Native language]. . . . I hate it” (interview, December 12, 2003). Another teacher described the Indigenous language as “dead” to many of her students, stating their rationale as: “‘We live in an English-speaking society. Why should we learn this? What are the benefits?’” (interview, May 14, 2005).

Asked to reflect on these negative attitudes and ideologies, participants repeatedly referenced the legacy of colonial schooling. “Parents said they did not speak to their children in Navajo because of shame and guilt,” an educator stated in an interview, March 27, 2003). “It’s being told that [the Indigenous language] is stupid,” a 16-year-old declared, adding, “you . . . forsake who you are, you give up having to learn [the Indigenous language] as a cultural

do, they think that students will start laughing about them” (interview, May 27, 2003). These findings are supported by studies in this *discourse* and other recent Indigenous youth language research (cf. Lee, 2007; Meek, 2007; Nilas, 2008; Tulloch, 2004; Wyman, 2004).

IMPLICIT LANGUAGE POLICIES

In this section we consider the mechanisms (Shohamy, 2006) through which youth in these settings construct language policy in everyday practice. We are informed by the work of Shohamy (2006) and others who argue that language policy “can exist at all levels of decision making about languages . . . as small as individuals and families [who make] decisions about the languages to be used by individuals, at home, public spaces, as well as larger entities, such as schools” (p. 48; see also Spolsky, 2004). In this sense language policy can be conceptualized as implicit and informal, and therefore “more difficult to detect” (Shohamy, 2006, p. 50). For the cases profiled here, these implicit policy making mechanisms can be detected within a social complex characterized by (a) dynamic, heteroglossic linguistic ecologies, (b) hybrid communicative repertoires, and (c) conflicting language ecologies. How youth and adults negotiate this sociolinguistic terrain can abet language shift, but may also open new “ideological and implementational spaces” (Hornberger, 2006) for heritage language education. We turn now to consider these different possibilities.

Data from this large-scale study show that language shift is much more complicated than the mere replacement of one language by another. Even in communities with few Native speakers, children are likely to be “overhearers” and “understanders” of one or more Indigenous language(s) and varieties there. These varieties mark speakers’ age, and social status – knowledge tacitly acquired by children in their everyday social interactions, and which, when asked, they thoughtfully articulate. Some youth have high levels of spoken proficiency and, through bilingual education programs, are developing literacy in their heritage language. Meanwhile, they are adding to their communicative repertoire multiple varieties of English and, in some cases, Spanish. These practices Martin-Jones and Jones (2000) point out, are “observable in specific events but also operate on a socio-cognitive level” (p. 5).

Yet, for most youth in our study, English is the language of choice. This is complicated, as different varieties are used for different purposes. The school is the primary domain for academic English—a variety that children may have little exposure to outside of school. As a consequence, youth may be stigmatized as “semi-lingual” or “language delayed”—school labeling practices that devalue their communicative repertoires and create a vicious cycle of less support for their heritage language development.

This situation is complicated by ambivalent and conflicting language attitudes and ideologies. Asked whether they believe it is important to learn to speak their heritage language, youth in our study overwhelmingly (87% $n = 336$) responded that it is “very important.” Many spoke repeatedly of the symbolic link between the Indigenous language and a unique Indigenous identity

2004). On a daily basis, virtually every social message these youth receive—from the language privileged in their print environment, the media, and via technology to overt and covert schooling practices that parse “academic” (empowering) knowledge from “traditional” (disempowering) knowledge—conveys the supremacy of English. Youth take up these messages in diverse ways—resisting, accommodating, and sometimes feeling compelled to “forsake who they are.”

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