



# Focus On

## American Indians/Alaska Natives

### Endangered Indian Languages

#### Introduction

It's not exactly news that language is an integral part of culture and the foundation for group and individual identity.<sup>i</sup> While allowing groups and individuals to communicate, language—written or oral—maintains the cultural base (all the knowledge that a group has accumulated) and serves as a vehicle to pass that cultural base from one generation to the next.

Although languages share many common aspects, they are typically unique, emanating from a group's particular interactions with its environment. While reflecting their external realities, language also helps to form a group's world view. Consequently, the loss of a language can mean the disappearance of a major part of any group's culture or identity.<sup>ii</sup>

For American Indians, the loss of languages has been intimately tied to the loss of major parts of their culture. Conversely, current efforts being made by American Indians/Alaska Natives to maintain or recapture their languages approach a nativistic revitalization movement.

#### Why languages die

Many theories abound as to why languages disappear. According to Joshua Fishman, author of *Reversing Language Shift*,<sup>iii</sup> languages die off because of:

- Dislocation—the removal of a group from their homeland;
- The subordination to an economic system in which a group's language is not much valued or used;
- The weakening of traditional values and habits; and,
- Contact with modern social systems that place a high value on individual freedom over the group.<sup>iv</sup>

In the case of American Indians/Alaska Natives, all of the above reasons have contributed to the demise of many of their languages. Wars, genocide, and infectious diseases can be added to the list.

#### Indian Languages: Past and Present

Of course, no one can say with any certainty how many Indians were in America when Columbus arrived. Estimates range from a low of 8.4 million to a high of 112 million, with the actual number probably lying in between. Nonetheless, those Native Americans spoke an estimated 1,000 Native languages.<sup>v</sup> But within ten years, the number of Indians, and the languages they spoke, declined dramatically.

Although attempts by Europeans to subjugate, and even enslave, Indians played a pivotal role, the primary culprit was disease. Because most Indian tribes did not engage in animal husbandry

(and it should be remembered that Indians had never seen horses, which had become extinct in America around 7,000 B.C., until the Spaniards reintroduced them), Indians lacked antibodies in their immune systems to stave off the diseases contracted from Europeans. Chicken Pox and Measles, though common and rarely fatal among Europeans, were lethal for Indians.

The result: pandemics decimated the Indian population in American by as much as ninety-percent. Within ten years of Columbus' arrival, thousands of tribes were destroyed and millions of Indians were wiped out. In the process, hundreds of Indian languages were lost. And those languages that were not lost due to tribal extinction became forgotten over the next few centuries with the advance of Europeans into America and the founding of the United States.

Indeed, contributing further to the decline of Native languages was the formal repression by various U.S. Government agencies,<sup>vi</sup> which sought to remove the "Indianness" from Indians, using education as a tool. For example, from 1776 to 1926, the main goal of Indian education was to foster assimilation. Toward that end, the U.S. Government passed legislation in the late 19th Century that stressed English-Only in schools and the repression of Native American languages.<sup>vii</sup>

#### The Status of Indian Languages Today

Perhaps more than at any other time in history, dozens of Indian languages are in danger of being forgotten and dying, unless more is done to make them a tool for everyday communication. Of the roughly 300 documented Indian languages, only 175 are still spoken today, and 70-percent of those are spoken only by a handful of Indians in their 70s, which increases the likelihood they will die.

Variations in the decline of Indian languages exist by region as well. For example, out of the approximately 20 languages still in use in Alaska, only two are being picked up by younger generations: Central Yup'ik, and St. Lawrence Island Yup'ik. In California, all of the 50 or so Indian languages are moribund.<sup>viii</sup> In Oklahoma, only 2 of the 23 Indian languages are actually being learned by children. The situation is so dire that one scholar estimates that by the year 2050, 155 of the existing 175 Indian languages will be lost.<sup>ix</sup>

Clearly, the preservation of Indian languages depends on Indian children learning them and passing them on to their children. But among the 39 federally recognized tribes in Oklahoma, only the Cherokees, Kickapoos, Choctaws, and Creeks are known to have children growing up speaking a Native language.



Of course, another modern challenge facing Indians trying to preserve their languages involves finding new words in those languages to apply to modern technology, such as computers or rockets. But there's a problem. Some tribal members have been reluctant to coin or incorporate new words into their languages. But some tribal members have taken a different approach in dealing with this language quandary and are borrowing words from other Indian languages, adapting words to fit their own language, or even coining new words or phrases when none exists. For example, one tribe's word for radio translates as "electric talk."

Perhaps the most important reason to fight for the preservation of Indian languages is to keep a unique world view alive. And yet another reason is that language is tied to the education of Indian children. Research has shown that infusing school curriculum with Indian culture, including language, boosts the educational achievement levels of Indian children.<sup>x</sup>

### What's being done?

Although it is no easy task to revive or maintain dead or in-active Indian languages, it is not impossible. Native educators across the country are launching successful language revitalization programs that match very young children with fluent speakers.

One school in Fort Defiance, Arizona, The Navajo Language School between the Meadows (or Psétshehootsooi Diné Bi'ólta, in Navajo) conducts all of its classes in the Navajo language, using a language immersion approach. The school, which has been in existence for twenty years, has 240 students enrolled.

Students entering kindergarten or the first grade, for example, have all of their classes conducted completely in Navajo. By the second, they receive ninety-percent of their instruction in Navajo and ten percent English; by the third grade it's eighty percent in Navajo and twenty percent in English. The proportion of English instruction to Navajo increases by ten percent in each subsequent grade until instruction is balanced at fifty percent Navajo and fifty percent English by the sixth grade.

A part of the Window Rock Unified School District, the Navajo Language School between the Meadows is a state school and adheres to the curriculum standards of Arizona. However, while meeting those standards, the school also provides students with culturally relevant activities. Fall is Navajo harvesting season, for example, so the curriculum focuses on activities that take place in the fall.

Currently, the Navajo Language School between the Meadows offers classes in grades K-8 school. But each year, an additional grade is being added. In four years, the school will have grades that range from K-12.

Students at The Navajo Language School between the Meadows appear to be more comfortable in dealing with education in larger mainstream schools when they leave. Because they are comfortable with their own culture and know who they are, they're capable of higher achievement levels. And their knowledge of

the Navajo language seems to be a major contributing factor.

### Resources

Octaviana V. Trujillo and Denise A. Alston. 2005. *A Report on the Status of American Indians and Alaska Natives in Education: Historical Legacy to Cultural Empowerment*. Washington, DC: National Education Association.

American Indian Education: [www.jan.ucc.nau.edu](http://www.jan.ucc.nau.edu).

American Indian Nations: [www.americanindian.ucr.edu](http://www.americanindian.ucr.edu).

Foundation for Endangered Languages: [www.ogmios.org](http://www.ogmios.org).

Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas: [www.ssila.org](http://www.ssila.org).

Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition: [www.carla.umn.edu](http://www.carla.umn.edu).

Resources for Endangered Languages:

<sup>i</sup> J. Fishman. 1991. *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

<sup>ii</sup> See Fishman. 1991. Op. Cit.

<sup>iii</sup> J. Fishman. 1991. Op. Cit.

<sup>iv</sup> Fishman distinguishes between Civil Rights and Cultural Rights. The former focus on individual freedom, the latter on ethnocultural rights. His argument is that we need both.

<sup>v</sup> See "Indigenous Languages." [www.Indians.org](http://www.Indians.org).

<sup>vi</sup> See The Swinomish Tribal Mental Health Project. 1991. *A Gathering of Wisdoms, Tribal Mental Health: A Cultural Perspective*. LaConner, WA: Swinomish Tribal Community. See Page 31. For a short synopsis of Government suppression of Native American languages see J. Reyhner. 1993. American Indian Language Policy and School Success. *Journal of Educational Issues of Language Minority Students*, 12: 35-59. For an historical analysis of the role Missionaries played Native American language repression see P. Yazzie. 2003. "Missionaries and American Indian languages." In J. Reyhner, O. Trujillo, R. L. Carrasco, and L. Lockard (eds.), *Nurturing Native Languages*. Pp. 165-178. Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona University.

<sup>vii</sup> J. Crafword. 1995. Endangered Native American languages: what is to be done, and why? *The Bilingual Research Journal*, 19: 17-38.

<sup>viii</sup> L. Hinton. 1994. *Flutes of Fire: Essays on California Indian Languages*. Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books.

<sup>ix</sup> M. Krauss. 1992. The world's languages in crisis. *Languages*, 68: 6-10.

<sup>x</sup> For discussions about the importance of Native American Culture and language for Native American student achievement see the literature cited in this FOCUS, and R. R. Verdugo. 2006. *The Invisible Minority: The Education of the American Indian Population*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Montreal, Canada.