

Introduction

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In November 1994 and May 1995, with funding and sponsorship from the United States Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs (OBEMLA), Northern Arizona University's Center for Excellence in Education hosted two symposia on stabilizing indigenous languages attended by participants from 21 states, two U.S. territories, and Canada. The Flagstaff Roundtables on Stabilizing Indigenous Languages sought through the bringing together of tribal educators and experts on linguistics, language renewal, and language teaching to lay out a blueprint of policy changes, educational reforms, and community initiatives to stabilize and revitalize American Indian and Alaska Native languages. These symposia included a survey of the historical, current, and projected status of indigenous languages in the United States as well as extensive dialogues on the roles of families, communities, and schools in promoting their use and maintenance. In addition to listening to a variety of experts, the participants turned their attention to documenting how language maintenance and transmission can become a reality, with emphasis on "success stories." The broad areas of family, community, and school naturally fell into subtopics such as preschool, adult education, arts and the media, and so forth.

Each symposium highlighted talks by well-known scholars. In November:

Dr. Dang T. Pham, Deputy Director, OBEMLA
"OBEMLA's Commitment to Endangered Indigenous Languages"

Dr. Joshua A. Fishman, Distinguished Professor Emeritus
Ferkau Graduate School, Yeshiva University
"Reversing Language Shift: Challenges, Strategies, and Successes"

In May:

Dr. Richard Littlebear
Director of the Multifunctional Resource Center in Anchorage
"A Review of the Findings of the First Symposium"

Dr. Michael Krauss, University of Alaska
"Status of Native North American Languages:
Why Should We Care?"

James Crawford, Author, Consultant
"Sociological and Historical Perspectives on Language Shift"

Damon Clarke

“What My Language Means To Me”

and finally:

Dr. Joshua A. Fishman, Distinguished Professor Emeritus

Ferkauf Graduate School, Yeshiva University, NYC

“What Works and What Doesn’t”

In addition to interacting with these experts, the participants met in small groups led by moderators who encouraged everyone to speak. The outcome of the sessions has been a somewhat surprising convergence of ideas in terms of what impedes language maintenance and what promotes it. Among the most frequently discussed barriers were:

- the lack of opportunity to practice native languages at home;
- the parents’ lack of proficiency in the native language;
- the teachers’ criticism of those who speak the home language in school;
- the tendency to correct novice learners whenever they make a mistake;
- the likelihood of put-downs by non-speakers of the home language;
- the perception that English is a better vehicle for economic success;
- and
- the teaching of isolated vocabulary items instead of communicative skills.

In addition, some widespread misconceptions about language teaching and learning were identified as serious barriers to the success of native language maintenance and transmission. These misconceptions included:

- you have to give up your own language in order to master another one;
- you need special training to teach your own language to your children;
- schools can take over the job of teaching a language if families do not teach it; and
- writing a language is what keeps it alive.

Among the conclusions on which there seemed to be strong agreement by symposium participants were:

- school programs alone are not sufficient for language maintenance (but better than nothing);
- schools must change significantly and communities must have a major say in what the schools do; and

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- schools are best at implementing a developmental language curriculum for children who have acquired the language at home.

Consistent with the above, the most frequently agreed-upon recommendations were:

- keep the home as the central source of native language learning;
- provide instruction in the home language at an early age;
- offer classes in native languages at all levels, including college;
- welcome anyone interested to attend these classes; and
- combine the focus on language with a focus on culture.

These are not startling innovations; what we need is a critical mass of committed people, and this critical mass can only be created through continuous capillary infiltration of information and encouragement. This volume is intended to be a part of such an effort. It will be disseminated not only to those who attended one or both of the sessions, but to a much wider audience consisting of Native and non-Native individuals and institutions. The message this volume carries begins with an alert about the severity of impending language loss. Many people are not aware of the danger, and researchers may not agree about exact figures. We are told that 80% of existing American Indian languages are moribund — perhaps 50% of the languages existing in today's world are endangered, only 600 are reasonably safe because of the large number of speakers (at least 100,000). About 90% of the world's languages may be extinct in the next century, to be supplanted by those, such as English, Spanish, or Chinese, that have been more widely taught and used. The danger of language extinction and of the loss of linguistic diversity parallels and exceeds the severity of the decline of plant and animal diversity on our earth.

Languages are more likely to disappear as a result of the destruction of the cultural habitat of their speakers than because of direct attack upon their use (as, for example, when they are forbidden by political powers, especially in schools and public offices). But it is important to remember that there are political forces pushing national and state constitutional amendments to make English the official language of this country that could harm efforts to save indigenous languages. Because states are being asked to ratify a constitutional amendment to make English our official language, it is important that indigenous language advocates make their concerns known at all levels of government: local, tribal, state, federal, and international. In addition, state governments need to be lobbied to ensure that traditional native speakers be included as “eminent” educators along with certified teachers.

It is feasible, though far from easy, to prevent and even reverse linguistic extinction. It is possible to halt the repression of local culture and promote the production of materials, written texts, and radio and television broadcasts in minority languages. One can preserve taped and written samples; one can encourage the use of a traditional language for songs, special social events, ceremonies, and rituals.

Should this be done? Who should decide? Those who choose to switch to the mainstream language for the sake of their own and their children's economic and social well-being have the right to do so. No outsiders should presume to criticize them.

Unfortunately, people often stop using and transmitting their language not as a conscious, deliberate, well-examined choice. They may not be aware of what they are doing, or of the impact of their behavior. When circumstances prevent them from using their own language in their own home, they tend to believe that other families will keep it alive, or that the schools can assume this responsibility.

What explanations and reasons can we give to people so that they have an enlightened choice? How can we reward the efforts of those who set a good example? How can we encourage others to join them? In attempting to address these questions we have become convinced that the problems are world-wide (like all ecological issues) and that, although action needs to be taken at the local and individual level, it may be more useful to think globally. Thus one might profit from the experience of others, preventing the repetition of processes that have proven futile and avoiding wasting time "reinventing the wheel."

Although the Symposia were organized as a United States based initiative focused on the Southwest, we received calls and evidence of interest from far-away places. This led to the decision to accept papers having to do with language issues in areas outside our northern and southern boundaries even though the authors were unable to present them in person. Therefore, Mexico and Canada are represented in this volume by articles by Pauline Gordon, Norbert Francis and Rafael Nieto Andrade, and Carla Paciotto.

The material in the text has been organized by topic rather than according to the chronological order in which various discussions were held. There is of course a certain amount of overlap between sections, since it is hardly feasible, for example, to separate community issues from schooling. We have arranged information according to the focus and the point of view from which it seemed to flow. When individual presenters or participants have sent us articles or other original materials we have published it as fully as space allows, but in several cases we have had to rely on transcriptions of tapes. This is true of some individual presentations (such as Dr. Fishman's and Dr. Krauss's) and of all the group discussions.

Following an inspiring preface by Dr. Littlebear, the book is arranged into four parts, a conclusion, and appendices. The first part on needs and rational presents various perspectives about the urgency of maintaining one's home language. In his article, Dr. Reyhner places this information in the context of political and historical reality; his article is based not only on the input of the November Roundtable but also on his own extensive knowledge of Indian education. The bleak reality of numbers world-wide is made clear by Dr. Krauss, who reminds us of the speed with which indigenous languages have ceased to be spoken. Barbara Burnaby gives an overview of the situation focusing on Canada.

The second part deals with language policy. A summary of the November Roundtable's input is followed by the report on Dr. Pham's encouraging message in which he conveys the assurance that the United States Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs (OBEMLA) stands firmly behind the concept of minority language rights. Focusing on the United States, James Crawford addresses both the causes and cures of the problem in his "Seven Hypotheses" article. The section concludes with two policy documents: the text of the Native American Languages Act of 1990 and the 1991 goals of the U.S. Secretary of Education's Indian Nations at Risk Task Force.

The next section addresses the role of families and communities. After a summary of the November group's discussion, the fundamental role of the home in keeping the language alive then is eloquently discussed by Joshua Fishman. His presentation included examples from other language groups and other cultures, but the message is unequivocal: schools cannot accomplish intergenerational transmission unless the task is begun and continued in the home. Damon Clarke then discusses what his Hualapai language means to him. These papers are followed by reports on two group presentations: one a language activists panel summarized by Jon Reyhner and including a written statement by Rosemary Ackley Christensen and the other of the media, writers, arts session summarized by Laura Wallace along with a written statement by Ofelia Zepeda.

The fourth section deals with education, which includes the following sub-topics:

- Early childhood education
- School-based programs for indigenous language acquisition
- School-based programs for indigenous language development
- Colleges and Universities, including a report on a panel of students from Northern Arizona University and Navajo Community College
- Adult education

These discussions and reports emphasize examples of successful language maintenance within formal academic frameworks. We feel encouraged by the reports of their effectiveness and by the existence of social and political support systems that have made them possible. The education section concludes with additional submissions of written materials on programs that were described in various sessions at the May symposium plus materials on indigenous language initiatives in Mexico.

We conclude these proceedings with a summary of Dr. Fishman's recapitulation of the multiple aspects and successful initiatives of our mission.

The Appendices include information on contributors, a list of selected resources on endangered languages, and a model for promoting Native American language preservation and teaching developed by the Alaska Bilingual Multifunctional Resource Center 16.

Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.

Indigenous children have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State. All indigenous peoples also have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.

— United Nations Draft Declaration of the
Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 1993