

“Keep the Languages Alive” with Elders, Teachers, Advocates, and Linguists: AILDI’s Balancing Act in Efforts to Maintain and Revitalize Endangered Languages

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Language endangerment in the global setting

Over a decade ago, in his keynote address to the Mid-America Linguistics Conference (November 2, 1996), Ken Hale reminded the audience that languages were vanishing at an alarming rate in all corners of the world. Many linguists have expressed their concerns for endangered languages and Michael Krauss, among them, stated that at least 50% of the languages still spoken in the world would become extinct in the next century (Krauss, 1992; Harmon, 1995). In North America, Wallace Chafe listed 51 Native American languages as having 10 or fewer speakers in 1962. Three decades later, Ofelia Zepeda and Jane Hill (1991, p. 136) stated that those 51 languages were probably extinct. (For more recent assessments, see Hinton, 1994; 2007; Linn, Berardo, & Yamamoto, 1998; Yamamoto, 2009; Yamamoto, Brenziner & Villalón, 2008).

According to UNESCO’s *Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger of Disappearing* (2009), prior to 1950, there were 192 languages in the United States, and 53 have become extinct since then, leaving 139 languages with one or more speakers. Eleven languages are classified as “unsafe,” twenty-five languages are “definitely endangered,” and thirty-two are “severely endangered.” Languages are “unsafe,” because their use may be restricted to certain domains such as in the home, even though most children still speak them; they are “definitely endangered,” because children no longer learn them as their mother tongue; and they are “severely endangered,” because they are spoken primarily by older generations. Furthermore, seventy-one languages are classified as “critically endangered,” because the youngest speakers are the elderly. Indeed, we are facing the reality that all Indigenous languages in the United States are endangered.

Responses to the endangered situation of Indigenous languages

Energized, ironically, by the English-only movement in the late 1980’s, Indigenous peoples began to organize themselves to address the issues of cultural and linguistic decline: one of the most poignant voices was expressed by the Hawaiian Immersion Program group, “if you want to kill a people, take their language away.” Cultural diversity and language diversity are the expression of the most basic human rights. Awareness of language loss as a manifestation of human rights violation has led to shifting trends in people’s attitude toward languages.

In many communities, people had known that there were only a handful of people who still remembered their community languages but had not thought it significant. These people began to speak out on the urgent situation of their ancestral languages. They began to reexamine the language situation. Even in communities where there were a relatively large number of speakers, they discovered that the language was no longer transmitted to children in their own homes.

Communities began to reaffirm that their language is a part of them and its revitalization must become one of the priorities of their community. In many communities, blaming a third party (such as the federal government, BIA, missionaries, linguists and academics) for not allowing Native Americans to speak their languages ceased to be a popular practice. They began to look inwardly and to formulate strategies for reversing the language shift from the ancestral to the dominant English language.

Resulting from such changes in the people’s thinking, motivated community members began to appreciate the significant contribution of academic professionals in having documented their languages and making materials available to them. In turn, academic professionals were made aware that documented language data were appreciated as valuable by the communities. Nevertheless, many of the documented materials were extremely difficult for nonprofessionals to use for language revitalization purposes. Many organizations, both

academic and non-academic, began to emerge or create new foci of “doing something about endangered languages,” which the language communities are able to use. Funding for endangered language documentation and revitalization projects became available from governmental and non-governmental agencies.

In 1988 at the Native American Language Issues Institute (NALI) Conference in Tempe, Arizona, participants of AILDI played an important role in the preparation of a resolution on endangerment of Indigenous languages. At the conclusion of the NALI Conference, the resolution was approved and sent to the Select Committee on Indian Affairs. The resolution became Senate Bill 1781 in the hand of Senator Inouye and his Select Committee on Indian Affairs. The House and the Senate passed the bill and President Bush signed it into Public Law 101-477 entitled “Native American Languages Act.” In 1992, a follow-up bill was made into Public Law 102-524 “Native American Languages Act of 1992,” which authorized funding for community-based language programs. Although actual money was not allocated until 1994, the efforts to make the laws into reality by mobilizing community leaders, educators, linguists, and anthropologists had very positive effects on individuals, groups, and communities, and energetic innovative programs began to be initiated toward revitalization of languages and cultures.

Issues in promoting language revitalization

There are several issues we need to consider in carrying out language documentation and revitalization activities. One is the issue of participants. In order for them to be effective in documentation and revitalization efforts, it is essential for them to receive training, often, at a higher educational institution or special training institute away from home communities. In Native communities, there are people who have strong interests and motivation for pursuing a career in language study and/or in language education. What then keeps them from attending higher education institutions to receive the kind of training needed for language work? Reasons are fairly simple and yet very difficult to resolve. We need to be prepared to address the needs of three groups who all desire to receive training in language documentation and/or in language education:

- 1) those who have the full range of knowledge of their Native languages are often elders. Being elderly, they have important obligations at home and in their communities and they cannot afford to leave their families and communities for an extended period of time. In addition, they may have health problems that keep them from being relocated;
- 2) those who are relatively young and highly motivated to do language work with full range of knowledge of their Native languages also have obligations--very strong ones indeed -- for their families and communities. They are wage earners and cannot afford to leave their families and communities;
- 3) those who are young and highly motivated to do language work, but may have partial or very little knowledge of their Native languages.

Another issue is the more basic question regarding the language work itself that includes: 1) the purpose of the work, 2) the relationship between the workers and the community, i.e., under what condition(s) we do our language work, and 3) the use of the result of the work.

The following points address the crucial issues of ethics and responsibilities of those who engage in the language documentation and revitalization activities:

- 1) Is our goal documentation of the language for the community that is attempting to reverse the language shift? Are we doing this as a request of the community, by a larger government, or because of our sense of urgency/mission? What training can we offer for the members and/or resource persons of the community to be linguistic researchers and language educators to keep the language work going?
- 2) Whether we are a member of the community or not, with whom do we do our work? In some communities, the mere presence of an outside researcher may cause disturbance in the life of the community people, especially in the life of the language resource persons with whom we work (e.g., in an African community, a language resource person was ousted because he was identified as working with an outside researcher). From whom should we obtain permission to be in the community? How should we identify resource persons? How do we compensate them for sharing

their linguistic knowledge with us?

- 3) In addition to the issues related to the language work as outlined in (1) and (2) above, there is another important issue. That is, to what extent is the worker allowed to use the language materials for public presentations and for publications (theses, dissertations, articles, monographs, etc.).

Some answers to the issues

Three strategies have been implemented in addition to the traditional way of assisting the prospective language workers with scholarships and fellowships. One is the Berkeley model: technology assisted “distance learning” in which faculty members periodically visit the degree-seeking students who remain in their own communities. It is the teaching and academic staff who travel to the communities. In this model, technological capability (e.g. online interactive system) poses one issue, recruiting motivated participants is another, and finding qualified and enthusiastic faculty poses yet another issue. It is important that the educational institution must commit itself to such an outreach degree program and provide both human and financial resources.

The second strategy is for academic linguists to formulate cooperative language projects with the local community. Here research and training are done as a team--mutual training and cooperative research. Such projects are exemplified by a series of teacher training seminars by the members of the Oklahoma Native Language Association, the documentation and teaching projects of Loyal Shawnee in Oklahoma (Marcellino Berardo), the documentation and dictionary projects of Yuchi in Oklahoma (Mary Linn), and the now completed Creek Dictionary Project (Jack Martin and Margaret Mauldin).

The third is a short-term intensive institute to which, time-wise, even elders and working people can afford to attend. The institute sites may be in the communities or at a university setting. Our American Indian Language Development Institute (AILDI) at the University of Arizona represents such a strategy. Carefully planned and continuous offerings of training in linguistics and education have attracted a large number of Native American teachers--both young and elderly, paraprofessionals, parents, and community leaders--to the institute.

The American Indian Languages Development Institute (AILDI)

The American Indian Language Development Institute was established with these aforementioned issues in mind. It was initially established with the National Endowment for the Humanities funding to the American Indian Studies Program at San Diego State University, and the initial grant proposal was prepared by a team: Lucille Watahomigie, Director of the Hualapai Indian Bilingual/Bicultural Education Program and, Leanne Hinton, linguist, ethnomusicologist, artist, and teacher at Berkeley. The Institute soon obtained its semi-permanent staff--Teresa McCarty, Lucille Watahomigie, Ofelia Zepeda, and Akira Yamamoto, and the latter three continue to be active with AILDI. The Institute's courses are designed to train not only the Native language speaking teachers but also those who desire to learn their Native languages and to become language teachers. Although small in number, it has also trained those who desire to work in Native communities and/or schools of their choice. At one time, we had over 120 participants from all over the country and abroad, but the number of participants has continued to dwindle down to a few dozen participants. The rising tuition fee and increasing housing expenses away from home are just two of the many factors for the decreasing participation by members of the communities.

Through 30 American Indian Languages Development Institutes, from 1978 through 2009, we have prepared some 2,000 Native teachers, parents, and English -speaking teachers to become researchers and practitioners in language and culture teaching and, in linguistically and culturally relevant education in their own communities, to become curriculum specialists, to become materials developers, and to become effective classroom teachers. Many of the participants were able to attend an average of two institutes. Those who are involved in ALDI activities feel it to be of crucial importance to work with capable and dedicated teachers, energetic prospective teachers, language advocates, and community resource persons, and to provide them with skills and knowledge so that they will, in turn, be able to train other teachers and local people to assure continuity.

Statistics show us that there are a significantly large number of school children whose primary languages are Native languages. Even when children's primary language is English, their family members may reside on reservations where their identity is primarily with their tribes. When children come from those families who have moved to urban centers away from their reservations, children often face an identity crisis. The continuously expressed comment by teachers--both Native American and non-Native American--is that students

drop out of school because they are not interested in what the schools have to offer (Reyhner, 1992, p. xii). Rather than examining the reasons why these students may not be interested in schools, the teachers, administrators, and even parents tend to regard the Native American children's school failure as the natural consequence of the Native American and other minority groups' "inherent inferiority" and that "the process of blaming the minority group for its own failure effectively screens from critical scrutiny the way in which the educational system causes school failure among minority students" (Cummins, 1992, p. 3). At the Institute, we emphasize that such patterns can be changed by utilizing an "experiential-interactive" model of teaching rather than the traditional "transmission" model. More specifically, we want to train teachers who can rebuild confidence in the Native American child, confidence as a Native American and as a member of American society. Our basic thinking is captured by Cummins (1992, p. 5) who states that by incorporating minority students' language and culture, schools promote "additive" language and culture education in which parents are involved as "partners," and teachers, staff, and other professionals are "advocates" for minority students in their teaching, assessments and in planning. This view is further strengthened by an increased amount of evidence showing that, "the positive self-image that children gain from knowing the value of their local history, language, and life-style is extremely important to their future success as individuals, whether or not they choose to continue to remain and identify with their respective communities as adults" (Watahomigie & Yamamoto 1992, p. 13).

During the thirty years of AILDI, we have seen many "advocates" and "teachers" renewing their language revitalization work and dedicating their lives to training the prospective language teachers in their own communities. Among them, to name just a few, are the elders who came to AILDI for further training and went back to their respective communities to continue their work. Doris Pratt (Dakota, Manitoba, Canada) came to AILDI for several summers. She obtained a Master's degree in Education from the University of Arizona. Returning to her community in Manitoba, she continues to produce creative written language materials with audio recordings, teach the language in community classes, deliver talks at other communities, and share her experiences at conferences. Virginia Beavert (Sahaptin, Washington) came to AILDI for several summers, and obtained a Master's degree in Education from the University of Arizona. She received an honorary doctoral degree from the University of Washington in 2009 for the distinguished research on and teaching of Sahaptin. She dedicates her life documenting her language, producing written materials such as texts and dictionary, and training the younger Sahaptin language users. Parsingula Tenorio (Tamayame, New Mexico) continues to work with her apprentice Deidre Otero and teach her language in her community. Cristina Morreo (Cahuilla, California) teaches her language, produces language materials, and trains the younger teachers.

There are many more exceptional teachers who have dedicated their lives to revitalization. The late Esther Scott (Yavapai, Prescott, Arizona) taught Yavbe classes upon returning to her community, worked diligently documenting her language and published a textbook "Yavbé Gwááwja Ibárja Ha?" (Let's speak Yavbe). The late Danny Lopez (Tohono O'odham, Arizona) taught the language by practicing the traditional dances and gardening. He taught the young at his home and within the community, and at Tohono O'odham Community College. And there are more to follow in their footsteps, either working in their own communities or teaching at various academic settings.

The American Indian Languages Development Institute has continued to provide Native and non-Native teachers and staff, administrators, parents, and academic professionals with systematic training. The training includes, but is not limited to, linguistics, language pedagogy (including immersion method and techniques), curriculum and materials development, language acquisition, Native literature, creative writing, and educational technology. Those at the American Indian Language Development Institute strongly believe in and strive for working with Native language communities--this embodies their commitment to the linguistic and cultural human rights of the people in those communities.

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