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ABSTRACT

This paper notes the tendency among non-literate peoples such as the American Indians to lose their native language as the demands of modern technology increasingly push them towards literacy in a language which is not their own, and argues that literacy in the vernacular language may present such acculturation and language loss from going hand in hand. Relating this to the Navajo Indians, the author shows that, despite the relative ineffectiveness of English teaching programs, Navajo is steadily declining. Thus, although the resent Navajo Reading Study indicates that it is still the main language of Navajo-populated areas, Navajo continues to decline as more roads are built, as more children complete school, and as the Reservation is increasingly exposed to the outside world. The author feels that the achievement of literacy in Navajo might prevent this shift to English. He believes that present programs directed at Navajo literacy may have a better chance than past ones because of the growing realization that teaching reading is easier in a child's strongest language as well as because of the community school movement, which includes the teaching of reading in Navajo as part of its program for community control of Navajo schools. (FWB)

Literacy in the Vernacular: the Navajo Reading Study

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Modern technological society demands literacy: non-literate peoples who wish for modernization must either work to develop literacy in the vernacular, or face the probability of ultimate language loss and consequent loss of identity. For an unwritten vernacular language is most vulnerable to destruction when the educational system, economic life, and the mass culture are all conducted in another language.

As Kloss has pointed out, the only factor that seems to guarantee the maintenance of a minority language is religious and societal isolation, which occurs when a religious group shuts itself away from the rest of society, rejecting not just the language and the values but also many of the inventions of the outside world. Such is the case with the Old Order Amish and some other German speaking groups in the United States. A second class of factors influence but do not decide language maintenance. Among them, a key factor has been the existence of a language island. In recent years, with increasing social and population mobility, and the increasing effect of mass communication, only very large islands have chances of survival. Thus, the Spanish-speaking language island of northern New Mexico, the French-speaking one in southern Louisiana, and the German-speaking areas of Pennsylvania and North and South Dakota, were for a long

time sufficiently large to maintain language without the support of other factors, but they are no longer able to do this.

One factor explaining the language loss in these areas is literacy: for, even though in each case there was a literary language available (and one with high status, required for foreign travel or Ph.D. study), it failed to be maintained in the schools, the cultural life, the politics and the commerce of the areas once there was regular contact with the dominant language, and was soon replaced by English, at least in those domains. (In other domains, too, probably: Tucson six-year-olds, speaking Spanish, give English color names when asked for their favorite colors more than Spanish ones.)

With North American Indian languages, the process of loss has been even clearer. Failing to develop as literate languages they have also failed to hold their own in other ways. Acculturation and language loss have gone hand in hand. The case of Navajo fits the paradigm exactly. Virtually all written activities are conducted in English. Tribal Council meetings and Tribal courts use Navajo but their records are kept in English. A number of radio stations broadcast a few hours a day in Navajo but the Tribal newspaper uses only English. (A letter written to them in Navajo congratulating

them on running an advertisement with a few words of Navajo in it was never published.)

And the central arm of language destruction is the school. Over 90% of the children beginning at Bureau of Indian Affairs schools speak little or no English when they come to school; but very few of these children are exposed to even token teaching in Navajo, a mere handful are taught to read in their own language. In the public schools, the situation is even more striking. Public school children are more assimilated but still over 50% come to school unable to speak English. And to our knowledge no public school has a school-wide bilingual reading program. The only exceptions to this policy are the community controlled school at Rough Rock, and one BIA school in both of which programs have been begun to teach children to read in Navajo.

There have been a number of attempts at developing Navajo literacy. The earliest were the efforts of Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries; by 1910, each had developed a separate writing system and had begun publishing materials. The lay literacy program of the late 1930's conducted by the Bureau of Indian Affairs under the direction of Willard W. Beatty was a part of the new policy that replaced the earlier forced assimilation. For some time, it had been apparent that the children were not succeeding with a

curriculum entirely in English, and it was also apparent that the vast majority of the adult population could not speak English. A practical alphabet was developed using for the most part the same symbols as the English alphabet. (The unfortunate exception was the slashed l and the nasal hook, neither of which occur on normal typewriters.) A first primer was prepared in Navajo and other readers in Navajo followed. In 1940, the teaching of reading and writing of Navajo became part of the curriculum in some schools at least. Admittedly, the main purpose of these bilingual readers was to teach English, But, for the first time Navajo was permitted after the child's entry into school, was even encouraged in the classroom. Children were often allowed to take their books home and read to their parents who got a new vision of schooling when they understood the reading of the Navajo text.

At the same time an adult literacy campaign began. The demand for teachers far exceeded the supply; nevertheless there were soon people in many communities who could read their own language, and it was proposed that forms and regulations be written in Navajo. The government began to translate articles for conservation, livestock management, and health. In 1946, a Navajo language newspaper was started that continued publication until 1957. Through the

newspaper, concepts such as "sheep unit" were explained, and news of Tribal Council affairs, Tribal laws, and the outside world was published in Navajo. The second World War took much of the steam out of the literacy campaign, and the return of Navajo servicemen who had learned to speak and read English took away much of the pressure for Navajo literacy. Missionary activity in adult literacy still continues; primers, charts, and teaching aids have been developed and educational as well as religious materials developed by the Wycliffe Translators are available in both Navajo and English.

After World War II, the Bureau of Indian Affairs conducted a five year intensive education program for a special group, Navajo teen-agers. Representing 40% of the school age population on the Reservation, this group had for the most part never been to school and spoke little or no English. In ten off-Reservation boarding schools, a program was developed to teach them "to speak, read, write, and think in English" with the basic purpose of making it possible for them "to obtain and hold a permanent job away from the Reservation". At first, interpreters were used in teaching, but it was clear that Navajo had its place only to help in the teaching of English. Since there was little available material designed for the teen-age reader with limited English, a bilingual series, the Navajo New World Readers, was developed. Basic

emphasis was on preparation for leaving the Reservation, something which called for learning English; Navajo was a bridge to this.

Inadequate as most school programs aimed to teach English have so far been, there has been steady loss of Navajo. We have tried to measure the extent and rate of loss in a study we made of the language spoken by six-year-old children coming to school in the fall of 1969. Recognizing the importance of school itself as a factor affecting language loss, we chose to look at the six-year-old before he had been contaminated by the school situation. Whatever other measures of language maintenance may be used, one of the most reliable is surely the parents' choice of language to speak to their children. For instance, while one may find parents with strong ethnic or national or religious ties choosing to have their children learn an ethnic language in school or church, the fact that they themselves choose to speak English to their children at home is the best guide of their basic attitude. Similarly, when one finds a pueblo expressing interest in having its language taught in head start programs and elementary school one is tempted to see this as evidence of a strong desire to maintain the language; but in fact it reflects the situation that English is now the first language

of the pueblo's children. Official tribal policy in such a pueblo may be language maintenance but the real home policy is to switch to English. At the same time, one might find another pueblo refusing to have its language used in school, reflecting the existence of home language use. Home language decisions are more crucial than publicly expressed opinions.

In our study, we used a simple questionnaire completed by teachers in schools on or near the Reservation. The teachers were asked to judge each Navajo six-year-old in their classes on a five point scale, as follows:

N: When the child first came to school, he or she appeared to know only Navajo, and no English.

N-e: When the child first came to school, he or she appeared to know mainly Navajo; he or she knew a little English, but not enough to do first grade work.

n-E: When the child came to school, he or she knew mainly English, and also knew a bit of Navajo.

E: When the child came to school, he or she appeared to know only English, and no Navajo.

The data gathered from these questionnaires were then correlated with two measures of acculturation, the type of school and the distance from the nearest off-Reservation town.

*N-E: When the child came to school, he or she was apparently equally proficient in English or Navajo.

The results of our survey permitted the following generalizations:

1. Overall, 73% of Navajo six-year-olds in the study (virtually complete for BIA schools, and including several of the largest public schools) come to school not speaking enough English to do first grade work.

This first generalization results from treating columns N and N-e of the questionnaire as the criteria for determining a child's lack of ability to do first grade work in English. When our entire sample (including BIA and public schools) was tabulated, the results indicated that 88% of the 1510 children in the Bureau sample were judged incapable of beginning first grade work in English, and 57% of the 1383 children in the public schools were similarly rated by their teachers. Thus, we found clear evidence that the large majority of Navajos are still speaking their language at home.

2. The farther a school is from an off-Reservation town the more likely its pupils are to speak Navajo.

This second generalization follows the establishment of an index to indicate the relative ease of access of the various schools involved to off-Reservation towns. We determined our accessibility figures using Map No. 2345,

"Indian Country," published by the Automobile Club of Southern California. Distances on improved roads were taken at face value, but those on gravel, graded dirt, and ungraded dirt were multiplied by two, three and four respectively on the assumption that the poorer the road, the less convenient and the less certain the access--especially in bad weather. When we compared the accessibility figure for each school with an index of the amount of Navajo spoken by six-year-olds in the school, we obtained an overall correlation coefficient of .517. Considering there are many other potent factors accounting for language retention, this is quite a respectable correlation. This factor of accessibility also seems to account for the difference in amount of English spoken in each of the five agencies.

3. The farther children live away from school, the more likely they are to speak Navajo at home.

Generalization 3 also deals with a kind of accessibility but it is best explained by the way a child is assigned to a public school or a BIA school. They key factor is accessibility to the school: those children who live more than one and a half miles from a public school bus route are assigned to Bureau schools. The data bore out the hypothesis that public school children speak relatively more English and less Navajo than their Bureau school counterparts.

Navajo, we found then, is still the main language of the area, but as more roads are built, as more children complete school, as the Reservation is more exposed to the outside world, there is steady increase in English. And the absence of Navajo literacy is a potent factor in this shift.

Let us consider some of the factors that may explain the relative slowness of the development of genuine bilingual programs or of Navajo literacy. When reading and writing is an alien thing and associated with alien elements of the culture, it is not surprising to find reluctance to associate them with one's most precious possession, language. But that this need not be so is evidenced by two strong vernacular literacy movements of the 19ty century: Cherokee and Maori. In both cases, reports suggest that once the peoples were given the opportunity of learning to read and write in their own language they did so with great rapidity. In both cases there was an extremely high standard of adult native literacy. In New Zealand, for instance, over a thousand items were printed in Maori between 1815 and 1900; in 1872, Bishop Colenso wrote a text book for teaching Maoris to read English remarking in the preface (which was written in Maori) that seeing they could already read their own language so well, they should have little trouble in learning to read a second one.

But school policy soon destroyed this promising development. Maori was banned from schools soon after 1870 and not tolerated again until 1930. Only in the last few years have there been any signs of encouraging its use again.

The literacy movement for Navajo at no stage developed the impetus of these other two movements; the pre-war campaign was too closely associated with the stock reduction program, the post-war program too closely associated with relocation to develop any genuine popular support. Literacy in Navajo remained an alien concept.

The newest attempt has more promise, for two distinct factors are converging in its support. The first is the growing realization that teaching reading is easier in a child's strongest language. Thus, it is possible to persuade educators that children should be taught to read in the vernacular. Evidence from such studies as Nancy Modiano's has convinced many educators that it is worth trying. With this sort of encouragement, the Bureau of Indian Affairs has been prepared to offer some degree of minimal support to two or three pilot programs. But even here, the limited amount of research data, as Venezky points out, leaves the issue in reasonable doubt. Faced with a situation where so many children still speak Navajo, there are two main strategies: native language literacy, or effective standard language

teaching. Some reading experts tend to feel the solution is standard language teaching: while many of us with language teaching background find native language literacy more promising. Presumably, this suggests neither of the techniques has yet been shown to be effective.

The second factor is related to the community school movement: there is increasing pressure for the Navajo communities to control their own schools. The examples of Rough Rock Demonstration School and now of the Ramah Community High School are applying pressure to the BIA and state school systems to pay much more attention to the wishes of the community. And the newly developed Dine BeOlta Association is starting to become a force in education on the Reservation. So far, these Navajo groups have stressed the importance of the Navajo language. Their programs are new and undeveloped, but there is a firm commitment to the use of Navajo throughout the school, to the teaching of reading in Navajo, and language maintenance.

For the first time, then, there are signs of pressure from the Navajos themselves for literacy in the vernacular: the next few years will tell whether the combination of educational need and growing nationalism will be enough to produce results.

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