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ABSTRACT

As indigenous communities begin to develop language revitalization programs, they inevitably must face the decision of whether to incorporate written forms of their historically oral languages into their efforts. This paper argues that as indigenous people go about the decision-making process, they must be aware of the implications of relying on a value laden medium, literacy, that has been closely associated with assimilation. Depending on one's perspective, literacy may be seen as a neutral technology, a vehicle for social and political action, or an "alien" medium. Four communities that have recently addressed the issue of indigenous literacy are examined. These cases include the historical use of indigenous literacy in Hawai'i, the recent inclusion of indigenous literacy in Navajo schools, a tribe that recently developed indigenous literacy, and a southwestern community that has chosen not to pursue indigenous literacy. The cases focus on the history of written indigenous language in each community, community discussions about whether or not to incorporate a written form in language revitalization efforts, and the current functions of literacy within the community. The cases suggest that cultural change can be tied, as least indirectly, to indigenous literacy, especially when the schools and churches are the main domain for use. (Author/SV)

Indigenous Language Codification: Cultural Effects

Brian Bielenberg

As many indigenous communities in North America and elsewhere begin to develop language revitalization programs, they inevitably must face the decision of whether or not to incorporate written forms of their historically oral languages into their efforts. In the past, many have argued that a written form of the indigenous language is a necessary component of a successful language revitalization effort. But is this really the case? In this paper I will argue that as indigenous people go about the decision making process, they must first of all be aware of the possible implications that result from how value laden the concept of literacy is. This argument is supported by examining four "communities" that have recently addressed the issue of written indigenous literacy. Particular attention is paid to 1) the history of written indigenous literacy within each community, 2) discussions that occurred around the issue of whether or not to incorporate a written form, and 3) examination of the current functions of indigenous literacy within the community. A final discussion looks at what, if any, changes have occurred in the culture of these communities that can be either directly or indirectly related to the communities' decisions regarding use of a written form of their language. Although there is no way to show a direct cause and effect relation, this paper indicates that cultural change can at least indirectly be tied to written indigenous literacy, especially when the schools and churches exist as the main domain for use.

It is well documented that many indigenous peoples in the Americas and worldwide have begun movements to revitalize and reinvigorate their languages. The reasons for these movements vary, but the fact that in 1996 over 85% of the indigenous languages in North America were reported moribund (Krauss, 1996) certainly plays a role.[1] These movements are tied to a desire to maintain cultural identity and integrity at the local level, and diversity within the world on a broader level. At the same time, they satisfy needs for self-determination and renewed cultural pride. As part of these efforts, many communities, particularly those in North America, face the decision of whether or not to incorporate written forms of their historically oral languages into their revitalization efforts. As indigenous peoples consider codifying their languages, they must be aware of the possible implications that result from relying on a highly value laden medium, literacy, that has been closely associated with assimilation. The decision of whether or not to codify is usually argued from two competing views, those of: 1) 'the nationalists,' who view literacy as crucial to survival of the traditional culture and an indication of their language's equal value with English, and 2) 'the traditionalists,' who reject a written form of the indigenous language as an alien

intrusion. As Spolsky and Irvine note, "the paradox would appear that both groups have the same goal, but they approach it with opposing policies" (1982, pp. 77-78). Both groups are seeking to reclaim their language and renew cultural pride, but their beliefs about the best ways to do this differ.

This paper briefly examines four "communities" that have addressed the issue of indigenous literacy[2] within the past 25 years. I base these examinations on my personal experiences as well as published works of others.[3] In each case I investigate the history of indigenous literacy within the community, identify the views that led to a community's decision concerning whether or not to incorporate the written form of their language in revitalization efforts, and look at the current functions of indigenous literacy within those communities that have chosen to make use of written forms of their languages. In conclusion, I will discuss what changes have occurred in the culture of the community that can be either directly or indirectly related to the community's decision regarding use of indigenous literacy.

Autonomous or ideological model?

Before looking at individual communities, I believe that it is important to situate this paper within the framework of the dialogue surrounding the 'autonomous' versus 'ideological' models of literacy (Street, 1984). Generally speaking, an 'autonomous' model is one which considers literacy to be a neutral technology, a technology that can easily be detached from social context. Followers of this model argue that literacy can be isolated as an independent variable, thereby allowing the predicted cognitive effects of literacy to be examined. The 'autonomous' model attempts to distinguish literacy from schooling, and sets up a dichotomy between written and oral modes of communication. The 'ideological' model, on the other hand, concentrates on the social practices of reading and writing. It recognizes that these practices are culturally embedded, that literacy is a socially constructed practice and thus has different meanings for different groups. This model envisions an overlap of the oral and literate modes.

I argue that literacy decisions in the context of language revitalization must be looked at from the perspective of an 'ideological' model of literacy as opposed to an 'autonomous' model. In examining the discussions surrounding the issue of inclusion of written forms of indigenous languages in revitalization efforts, it soon becomes obvious that no one is arguing for inclusion in order to receive supposed cognitive benefits. The closest any discussion comes to this is when educators make claims for the "transferability" of indigenous literacy skills to English literacy. Unfortunately, for most communities in North America these claims are irrelevant in that many of their children already have English as their primary language. Rather than cognitive benefits, the discussions of literacy involve words and phrases such as 'self-determination,' 'self-esteem,' 'empowerment,' 'self-understanding,' 'gives credibility to the language,' and 'crucial to survival of language and culture.' Watahomigie and McCarty (1996) write "Committing the language to writing is itself a statement about the value the language holds for its speakers.... We need to understand indigenous literacy as social and

political action" (p. 107). Thus, indigenous literacy involves much more than the skills of reading and writing and any cognitive development they may bring about. Literacy in the context of language revitalization involves strong social motives. Those who argue against inclusion of a codified version of their language point out things such as "literacy has been associated with missionaries, anthropologists and disseminators of unpopular BIA policies" (Irvine, et al., 1979). These associations lead the traditionalists to conclude that literacy is "alien."[4] It is quite apparent that ideology and power issues play a dominant role in the decision regarding inclusion of indigenous literacy. As has been written, "the need is to understand literacy as a set of concepts and practices that operate within a cultural context" (McLaughlin, 1992, p. 20). In indigenous communities, the concepts involve the perceived value of literacy in promoting self-awareness and cultural pride and in establishing the indigenous language as "non-primitive.".

Sample cases

Historical Use of Indigenous Literacy: I will begin by examining a "community" in which inclusion of indigenous literacy as part of language revitalization efforts has been readily accepted, the indigenous peoples of the state of Hawai'i. Prior to the events that led to annexation, Hawaiian was the primary language of the islands as well as the main language of the schools (Ka`awa & Hawkins, 1997). The Hawai'i public school system included the first high school west of the Rocky Mountains, and its curriculum and administration were entirely in the Hawaiian language (Kamana & Wilson, 1996). Protestant missionaries had developed a writing system in the early nineteenth century, and by the mid 1800s Hawaiian language newspapers were quite common and the literacy rate (Hawaiian literacy) was among the highest in the world (Hinton, 1997). Unfortunately, English-only legislation closed down the Hawaiian language schools in 1896. In 1983, the 'Aha Punana Leo was formed with the goal of reestablishing Hawaiian medium education. Family run preschools were developed in 1984, and by 1987 the State Board of Education was persuaded to open two kindergarten-first grade Hawaiian medium classes to serve the children from Punana Leo (Kamana & Wilson, 1996). The decision to establish Hawaiian medium schools inevitably led to a need for materials. The fact that Hawaiian literacy had once been so prevalent apparently led to the unquestioned decision to include a written form of Hawaiian in revitalization efforts.

The use of the written form of Hawaiian outside of schools today is rather limited, but it is possible to find Hawaiian signs and newspapers in public. Ka`awa and Hawkins (1997) report that it is possible to write checks in Hawaiian. There are several Hawaiian language web pages, and one can purchase a Hawaiian language version of Clarisworks®. Hinton's (1997) paper details observations of the uses of indigenous literacy within Hawaiian language immersion schools. In the classrooms she observed there were numbers, the alphabet, and captioned pictures, all in Hawaiian. A bilingual dictionary including new Hawaiian words (thousands have been developed, especially scientific terms) is published every

few years and is always in a prominent place within classrooms. The University of Hawai'i at Hilo publishes a Hawaiian language newspaper that is distributed and read mainly within the immersion schools. Books and curriculum materials are developed centrally and sent to all the schools. English books, such as *The Little Engine That Could,* are Hawaiianized by pasting Hawaiian language labels over the English text. A number of pieces of literature, both English and traditional Hawaiian, are being translated and/or published for use both inside and outside of school. Technology is playing a large role in establishing domains for written Hawaiian (Ka`awa & Hawkins, 1997). And, of course, the Bible has been written in Hawaiian.

While parents, teachers, and children are "deeply enthusiastic about their work and deeply dedicated to the survival of the Hawaiian language and culture" (Hinton, 1997, p. 17), the process has not been without conflict. Because of the use of Hawaiian within the schools and the need to write textbooks, thousands of new words have been added to the Hawaiian lexicon. A lexicon committee exists that has as its job the coining of new words to be disseminated to the public (Kamana & Wilson, 1996). Many of the *Kapuna*—the Hawaiian word for elders—are uncomfortable with the way the language is now spoken with its different vocabulary and intonation. While literacy cannot be blamed for all of the new vocabulary, it certainly has played a large role in making Hawaiian sound "like a foreign language" to the *Kapuna.*

Recent Inclusion of Indigenous Literacy: Mesa Valley is a pseudonym given to a Navajo community in northeastern Arizona by Daniel McLaughlin, the researcher on whose work much of the following description is based (McLaughlin, 1992). This community chose to incorporate an already established indigenous literacy as part of a bilingual education program in the early 1970s after much debate.

The first known Navajo word list was created in 1849 (Young, 1993). Since then church groups, anthropologists, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, schools, and Navajos have been developing written Navajo. Much of the promotion of written Navajo has come from the schools and churches. Because of this, many traditional Navajos continue to view literacy as alien, as these are alien institutions. On the other hand, a number of educators and tribal leaders have argued that literacy is a necessary component of self-determination and language revitalization.

McLaughlin's study looks at a community that began a bilingual-biliterate program in the early 70s. In establishing the program, community and education leaders needed to address the question of what roles English and Navajo should play in the Navajo development from a traditionally oral to an increasingly literate culture. Many felt that "the development of vernacular literacy instruction [was] part of a larger process of gaining local control of the school" (McLaughlin, 1992, p. 9). They felt that Navajo texts could lead institutions (school, church, BIA) to become more indigenous, less "alien." Others argued that to "get ahead" people needed to speak, read, and write English. They argued that introducing Navajo literacy would take away from valuable English learning time and con-

fuse the kids, that Navajo was never meant to be a written language, that literacy was an alien idea (see Watahomigie, 1996, with a similar discussion concerning Hualapai).

After much discussion, the community did eventually decide to incorporate indigenous literacy. Over 25 years later, its uses are predominately in the school, church, and BIA texts. While it may have made these institutions more indigenous, indigenous literacy certainly has not found its way into everyday life outside of these institutions. McLaughlin noted very few instances of letter writing, list making, or creative writing in Navajo outside of school. He claims that the use of Navajo and Navajo literacy in the schools and churches has encouraged the community to take a much more active role in controlling these two institutions. Navajo literacy has also gained economic importance in that promotion of biliteracy creates economic opportunities, especially for Navajos, within schools, the principal employer in the community.

Recent Development of Indigenous Literacy: This description of literacy is based on my own experiences of living and teaching in an indigenous community as well as on the writings of, and personal conversations with, a linguist who helped to develop the indigenous script.

This tribe has had an official writing system for nearly 25 years. It was developed by a group of non-native linguists in collaboration with tribal members. The initiative for development of an orthography arose from tribal members' desires to introduce the vernacular into the school system, as well as to develop a written language that would benefit the adult community. The fact that a neighboring tribe was developing their own orthography and bilingual program also served as an incentive. Overall, it was believed that indigenous literacy would help to preserve the language and cultural traditions. It was argued that the vernacular needed to be the language of instruction within the schools in order to insure that young children understood what was being taught, with the belief that these skills could later be transferred to English medium education. It was also argued that indigenous literacy would help to bring balance to the lives of adults who conducted oral transactions in the native language, but all written transactions in English. Social and political criteria played a very important role in the final development of the writing system, with the views of the indigenous staff often guiding the decision making process.

Currently, reading and writing of the indigenous script are taught in the local school, through teacher-aide training programs, and in the Protestant church. Some people are also self-taught, but the numbers are quite small. In spite of the prevalence of teaching and the fact that the vernacular is the language of the home as well as informal and formal community settings, there are probably only 10-15 tribal members who read and write it fluently. Most, if not all, use English for writing letters and making lists. There is very little indigenous literature other than school and church materials. Tribal council minutes and the community newsletter are written in English. The two main areas where indigenous literacy is used are within the school and the church.

The amount of indigenous literacy within the school varies from year to year depending on staff, which goes through rapid turnover, particularly in the upper grades and administration. In the past, children have developed native language materials, which are publicly displayed in the local museum and cafe. While I was teaching, the children developed bilingual poetry books. Traditional songs and stories have also been written and are sung and read in the schools. The church has probably shown the strongest interest and increasingly uses the indigenous literacy. It is used for Bible translation, hymnals, gospel readings and even the writing of some new hymns. Other common uses of indigenous literacy are for symbolic purposes, such as letterheads and T-shirts.

Some tribal members view the indigenous writing system as proof that the language is "as good as English" and that their language is not a "primitive" language. However, many of the students I worked with saw indigenous literacy more as a nuisance than a source of pride. Several felt that the only reason their language had ever been codified was so that the Anglos could better control them. The main impetus for continued use of the script appears to come from outsiders, usually educators and people affiliated with the church, and from the native bilingual staff at the school.

Choosing Not To Include Indigenous Literacy: Some indigenous peoples of the American Southwest have made conscious decisions not to include written forms of their language in language renewal efforts. Many of their languages were in the past codified by the church and anthropologists, and some have even been used as part of language programs in the schools. However, after careful examination of the issue, some tribal councils have decided that the language has to be taught and learned in the context of the everyday activities of the community itself. Some of the reasons for this decision are outlined below.

First, in many communities the continuance of traditional religious practices depends on limiting information access to outsiders; a critical key to this access in many peoples' minds is having the language written down. The belief in some communities is that if language is written, it allows potentially anyone to learn how to read, to write down, and possibly to exploit knowledge of traditional religious practices, something that has occurred in the past. Early ethnographers often collected sensitive religious information and wrote and exposed much of it in ethnology reports, which were only later discovered by indigenous people. Secondly, people have begun to recognize the potential impacts of indigenous literacy on a language community. They question why indigenous literacy development should or should not occur. Watahomigie and McCarty also address this issue in their 1996 article entitled "Literacy for What? Hualapai Literacy and Language Maintenance." Thirdly, there are pedagogical issues with regard to writing. The oral and written are considered by some to be two differing modes, which are meant for different purposes. The language must be learned in the context in which it will be used, which for these language communities is the oral. The writing of the language or the development of a writing system are things that may only come at a later date, they are not to be the beginning point for language revitalization.

It is on the basis of the above that some peoples have chosen to avoid the use of any written form of the their language in their language renewal efforts. To date, these revitalization efforts have proven quite successful in the areas of both language and traditional culture renewal.

Discussion

In these samples, both indigenous people who are for indigenous literacy and those who are against it have the same goals in mind, they all want to revitalize a language and culture, a revitalization that they see as necessary to the very continuation of a group of people. Both types of programs have been successful (e.g., Watahomigie & McCarty, 1996; Benjamin, et al., 1996, 1998), and I am sure that other ways could aid language revitalization as well. However, these four samples indicate that inclusion of indigenous literacy does have repercussions on the culture they are attempting to maintain. And even though these studies indicate that indigenous literacy is really only likely to be accepted when the domains and functions for written communication exist prior to the introduction of a new writing system, the cultural repercussions will occur independent of whether there is widespread use of the codified language.

In Hawai'i, historical precedence led to easy acceptance of indigenous literacy and therefore Hawaiian language newspapers and texts are readily accepted. However, codification and the writing of a K-12 curriculum have brought with them the conscious decision to adopt and invent new words, creating a language so greatly modified that some *Kapuna* feel that it is a "foreign" language. In the two communities that have recently adopted use of written forms of their languages, it is only through the domains of the church and school that indigenous literacy has been incorporated, powerful institutions that have historically promoted literacy. Outside of these institutions, indigenous literacy has had little, if any, success. In some Native American communities in the Southwest, they have decided against indigenous literacy because the domain for language revitalization in the community is incompatible with literacy; it would serve no function.

In indigenizing the schools and churches, indigenous literacy has pulled people toward these "alien institutions." Whether good or bad, the culture of the people is changed as the school and church replace informal storytelling and traditional learning and religious practices. Culture is affected by bringing the outside institutions of the church and school into much closer contact with the day-to-day living of the people. While many would argue that this is beneficial in that it provides opportunity for local control and the indigenization of the school and church, it does so at a cost. As school and church come to play a more central role in the lives of indigenous people, the power of these institutions can not help but alter their lives, beliefs, and values, i.e., the very culture people are striving to maintain. Indigenous literacy, by virtue of its use in schools and churches, affects the ways in which traditional knowledge is recorded and transmitted. Not only is transmission affected, but "by virtue of the writing process itself, a great deal of knowledge which is commonly held does not get

included" (Benjamin, et al., 1996, p. 124). Rather than children interacting with elders in the fields and home, learning through "apprenticeship" type relations that reinforce learning over time, the elders are brought to the school to transmit their knowledge in one-hour time blocks. The children who used to listen to the words of the elders now go to books to seek deeper knowledge beyond what is transmitted in the limited interactions allowed for by the structure of schools.

A discussion of the above led a leader of a language revitalization program (personal communication) to elaborate on the cultural changes that indigenous literacy may bring about in a traditional society. He mentioned changes that occur when previously oral stories told by elders at specific times of year are written down. First, an authorship (ownership) of these previously common held stories is incurred. Secondly, when these stories become available in the vernacular the children no longer interact with each other through the stories; rather, it has been seen that children go to the text and engage in the stories on an individual basis. This has also been an issue in other Native American communities.

There is often as well a belief that different groups and clans are entrusted with certain knowledge that only they are to know. In this way, an interdependence is maintained. There is a fear that if indigenous literacy is taught there will be a movement to write down much of this information, thereby making it available to all on an individual basis, again against traditional practices. Once more though, the issue is not whether these changes are beneficial or detrimental. Instead, what is important is that people making decisions regarding the codification of heritage languages be aware of the way culture may be affected.

Another language revitalization program leader related a disturbing, albeit anecdotal, tale of how he had seen indigenous literacy change a people. He related his observations of a people that had once been known for honesty and trustworthiness. When the language was oral the people trusted one another and the word was sacred. As literacy became more prevalent, the people seemed to detach themselves from what was written, they became more likely to go against what they had written, creating an atmosphere of distrust and dishonesty. I have also noticed this effect in African and Mediterranean cultures. The greater the dependency on the written, the less personal trust there appears to be in fellow human beings. Those who write seem to be able to detach themselves from what is written, as if they are no longer responsible for what has been "said." Meanwhile, people begin to distrust the spoken word, fearing that it has less value and can easily be altered. Both directions lead to a loss of trust.

Although there is no way to show any direct cause and effect relation between indigenous literacy and cultural change, nor should we necessarily look for one, this paper does indicate that cultural change can be indirectly tied to indigenous literacy, especially with respect to schools and churches becoming more a part of the culture. As indigenous literacy brings cultural knowledge and traditions into schools, the ways in which information is presented and transmitted is drastically changed, greatly affecting how people interact with one another. This cannot help but influence a culture. Certainly, I am not arguing that

indigenous literacy should be avoided in order to preserve traditional cultures as museum pieces. But indigenous peoples should be aware of the power of literacy in affecting the direction of cultural change, especially when the institutions promoting literacy are the churches and schools.

Notes

[1]In 1996 Krauss reported 175 indigenous languages still spoken in the United States. This compares with 187 indigenous languages spoken in 1992, with approximately 80% moribund. These figures indicate an alarming loss of 12 languages over a three-year period.

[2]In this paper I will use the term indigenous literacy to refer to the "technologies" of reading and writing the indigenous language. However, as will be discussed later, literacy is actually much more than this, involving the attitudes, concepts, and practices surrounding the use of the technologies.

[3]In respect to the requests of members of some of the groups discussed, I have intentionally avoided directly naming them and their tribes. I have also avoided including references to published works that would identify the people and tribes being discussed. All of the information being presented has been documented and thoroughly researched, even when direct references are not presented. The concepts presented are valuable even without directly naming the people and groups involved.

[4]It should be noted that literacy in English is not looked down upon. In fact, no one argues against having English literacy; rather it is often stated that English literacy is a necessity for economic improvement.

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