

## The Language of the Navajo: Will it Exist in 30 Years?

Lauren LANDSBERRY

*The way the Navajo community has been treated through the colonialism of the European settlers, amounts to virtual cultural genocide. Here we examine the Navajo's major institutions, typical domains for the use of the Navajo language, and their access to language maintenance resources, as we consider the likelihood of the language surviving the next 30 years. Colonialism and its contempt for indigenous languages brought with it assimilationist policies, including punishment for speaking the native Navajo language, and a policy of "English only" education. The resulting loss of language produced a corresponding loss of identity for many Navajo, and resulted in immense suffering amongst the Navajo people. Despite international recognition by powerful groups, and a movement to encourage the preservation of the language, federal policies and laws have failed to support these policies, and this raises serious questions about the survival of the Navajo language.*

Colonialism has brought immeasurable suffering and hardships to the indigenous peoples of the world. The Navajo, the largest group of American Indians are no exception and the siege upon their culture by the white man can only be described as that of "cultural genocide" (Balter & Grossman, 2009, p. 20). Well into the twentieth century and it could be argued that even today, assimilationist policies have had and are having detrimental ramifications on the Navajo language and culture. Several decades ago Navajo was still thriving, however, these days it is in a steady state of decline and all the domains where Navajo was once regularly spoken have been engulfed by English.

There are numerous factors that have contributed to the language loss of the Navajo, such as, the ageing population and a declining number of monolingual speakers, a preference for English-language use among bilingual Navajos, western schooling, an ideological acceptance of English and changes in attitude, introduced religion, politics, a break down in isolation, economic changes and lifestyle and a complacency of the people themselves (Benally & Viri, 2005; Spolsky, 2002).

Educational programs have been established and are attempting to revive the language, but their efforts have repeatedly been counteracted by federal and state education laws and it may also prove to be too little too late (Aguilera & LeCompte, 2007; Balter & Grossman, 2009). Can this language loss be reversed and can the Navajo language be revitalized? Or is this current language loss irreparable and leading rapidly toward extinction? Will Navajo survive in this community for the next thirty years?

In order to answer these questions, it is important to examine the history of the Navajo people and their language, investigate the dynamics that promote and hinder language maintenance and revitalisation within their community and to understand the socio-

historical circumstances which have shaped its current vulnerable state (McCarty, 2003).

The Navajo people are believed to be descendants of the Southern Athabaskans who migrated from Canada and Alaska between 200 and 1300 A.D. Traditionally hunters and gatherers, they learnt to grow crops and developed a network of trade after contact with the Anasazi and Pueblo peoples of the south. They also began herding sheep, goats and horses with the arrival of the Spanish in the seventeenth century. By the time the white man arrived in the 1860s the Navajo had developed a complex culture of trade, animal-rearing and agriculture (Utah American Indian Digital Archive, 2008).

This was all destroyed when hostilities came to a head and the Union army attacked and defeated the Navajo in 1863. Survivors were forced to walk the 'Long Walk', almost 500 kilometres to a reservation in neighbouring New Mexico, where they were held prisoner and interned. Many did not survive the journey and those that did survive endured four long years plagued with a lack of food and water, illness and death. In 1868, the United States (U.S.) government recognised that their plan to Americanise the Navajo had failed and they signed a treaty with the Navajo allowing them to return home to what was then to be designated as the Navajo reservation (Sharp, 2014; Shonerd, 1990).

The Navajo Nation was established in 1923 and is the largest semi-autonomous Native American governed territory in the U.S. It replaced the Navajo reservation which after 150 years of expansion now occupies an area of about 71,000 kilometres over the three states of Arizona, New Mexico and Utah (Benally & Viri, 2005; Spolsky, 2002). The nation has many of its own institutions such as a tribal council, government agencies, laws and law enforcement, an education and culture department, radio stations, a library, a community college and technical college and even a Navajo Medicine man association that teaches traditional Navajo ceremonies (Navajo Nation Government, 2011). At the 2010 census, there were 332,129 people who identified as being Navajo, with 169,009 living within the Navajo Nation (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

The 'Navajo language' also called by its indigenous name 'Diné Bizaard', belongs to the Athabaskan language family which is one of the most widespread native language families in North America, spoken from beyond the Arctic Circle in the North to the Southern plains of the U.S. (Benally & Viri, 2005). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there were approximately 178,014 Navajo speakers scattered throughout the U.S. in 2000 with the majority residing within the Navajo Nation or in towns and cities on the outskirts. By the 2010 census this number had fallen to approximately 169,000. Unfortunately, exact figures for the Navajo specifically are not available, however, the census also reports that an enormous 88% of Native Americans now speak only English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

The United Nation's Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Atlas of World Languages in Danger (2013) figures are even more detrimental, reporting that the number of Navajo speakers is now 120,000. UNESCO classifies the language as 'vulnerable' and a survey carried out showed that only 28% of speakers were children under the age of five. This clearly shows that intergenerational transmission of the language is decreasing and fewer children are learning Navajo as their primary language (UNESCO, 2013).

Despite the disparity of these figures and regardless of the source you refer to, one thing is clear, the Navajo language is now in a state of serious decline. Language survival depends on numerous factors such as, domains of use, education, community attitudes, the government's ideological and monetary support and policies. However, arguably the most imperative factor for language survival is the transmission to the children and youth. As small children are the custodians of language to the next generation this lack of intergenerational transmission is perhaps the one of most concern (Aguilera & LeCompte, 2007; Benally & Viri, 2005; Lee, 2007).

Since the onset of European contact the colonialists have sought to assimilate and civilise Native Americans into white society, decimating their cultures, religious practices and eradicating their barbaric tongues (Benally & Viri, 2005) with an "ideology of contempt" (Grenoble & Whaley, 1997, p. 9). For over a century schools offered an English-only education and prohibited the use of their native mother tongue (McCarty, 2003). It can be said that the goal of these schools was to "remake Indian children into brown White citizens" (Benally & Viri, 2005, p. 89). Many Navajo children and youth were forcibly removed from their homes, families and tribes and sent to boarding schools. Some Navajo thought that educating Indian youth in the ways of the European Americans was necessary and sent them willingly. For poor and destitute families and orphaned children, boarding schools became a way of survival (Benally & Viri, 2005; Reyhner, 2010).

It was here where they were brought up by Whites in the hope to cleanse and purge the 'indian-ness' out of them. Stripped of their cultures and forbidden to speak in their native tongue or practice their own customs, they were demeaned, told they were evil and made to feel inferior and ashamed of their language and heritage. Those found speaking in their native Navajo were often beaten and severely punished. (Benally & Viri, 2005; Spolsky, 2002). These schools resulted in an irreplaceable and devastating loss of language, culture and identity and were regrettably perhaps one of the white man's most effective and successful tools in the assimilation process (Benally & Viri, 2005).

This destruction of language and identity was recorded by Dr. Platero (1975), a Navajo linguist and the first director of the Navajo Division of Education who reported the following in regards to Kee, a young Navajo man:

"Kee was sent to boarding school as a child where—as was the practice—he was punished for speaking Navajo. Since he was only allowed to return home during Christmas and Summer, he lost contact with his family. Kee withdrew from both the White and Navajo worlds as he grew older because he could not comfortably communicate in either language. He became one of the many thousands of Navajos who were non-lingual—a man without a language. By the time he was 16, Kee was an alcoholic, uneducated, and despondant—without identity" (Platero, 1975. as cited in Reyhner, 2010. p. 141).

Research shows that people who can no longer communicate in their own native tongues lose not only their personal identity but their connection to their heritage community. As values and culture are inextricably linked to indigenous languages, this language loss and loss of identity also corresponds with social problems such as unemployment, alcoholism,

breakdown of the family, depression, school dropouts and underachievement, crime and a mentality of victimization (Reyhner, 2010).

Many Navajo, like Kee, have spoken of their sense of alienation and despair and how they have reclaimed their identity and heritage after their grandmothers taught them to speak their ancestral languages. "The use of the native tongue is like therapy, specific native words express love and caring. Knowing the language presents one with a strong self-identity, a culture with which to identify, and a sense of wellness" (Midgette, 1997. as cited in Reyhner, 2010. p. 142). Experiences such as Kee's clearly assert the importance of language revitalisation and maintenance among the young Navajo to ensure not only the survival of the language but also their psychological well-being (Reyhner, 2010).

Regrettably, many students who were educated in boarding schools chose not to pass their tribal languages on to their children. They themselves had not been taught in Navajo and the schools had taught them to devalue their language as it was 'evil and inferior' (Balter & Grossman, 2009; Benally & Viri, 2005; Spolsky, 2002). Furthermore, they didn't want their children to suffer the same difficulties that they had and so have often refused to speak their native language in public or at home with their families (Aguilera & LeCompte, 2007; Lee, 2007).

Today the majority of the younger generations throughout the Navajo Nation have negative attitudes towards the language and it is often considered as a language for the old, one associated with poverty and lower standards of living, irrelevant to modern life and not necessary in order to be successful in the modern world (Balter & Grossman, 2009; Benally & Viri, 2005). Many youth have been found to hold value to and expressed interest in their language, but they are not sure how to implement it in their lives. They are also reluctant to speak Navajo as they feel ashamed, lack confidence in their ability and have previously had negative experiences such as being teased by their peers and even ridiculed and scolded by relatives or family members when they made mistakes (Lee, 2007). These attitudes of youth are a significant issue since 45% of the population are under the age of nineteen (Lee, 2007).

In the last twenty or so years the importance in the promotion and protection of indigenous languages has been recognized internationally, domestically and locally. In 1990 the U.S. government passed the Native American Languages Act, the only federal legislation that vows to promote and protect Native languages (McCarty, 2003). This was followed by the Navajo Nation passing the Diné Sovereignty Education Act in 2005, an initiative to promote Diné language renewal among children and young people (Lee & Lee, 2012). Unfortunately, neither has had little effect to help save the Navajo language, as federal funds and support are inadequate and the Navajo Nation lacks the necessary resources and is deprived of the autonomy to control the state provided funding for its schools (Lee & Lee, 2012; McCarty, 2003).

Perhaps the most well-known and long-awaited realization of international support for the decolonisation and protection of the rights of indigenous people, the 'Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples' was adopted by the U.N. in 2007. This declaration affirms among other things the incredible importance of language to indigenous people and states that they 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”; and “the right to establish and control their education systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning” (Article 13 & 14. as cited in Reyhner, 2010, p. 138).

Many tribal leaders, educators and concerned citizens have also long recognised the detrimental effects of English-only education and the importance of preserving the Navajo language. “Schooling and language are inextricably related and the role of schools in language shift and maintenance is central” (Spolsky, 2002, p. 139). In the 1980s a number immersion schools were established in the hope to revitalise the Navajo language, however, the only really successful one has been the Fort Defiance School in Window Rock, the capital of the Navajo Nation. It offers a language-immersion education with class instruction completely in Navajo for the early grades while slowly introducing English instruction as they get older with equal instruction in both Diné and English by grade six (Aguilera & LeCompte, 2007).

For almost twenty years the Navajo Language Academy (NLA) has also been committed to the scientific study, promotion and preservation of the language and both the NLA and Diné College have educated many dedicated Navajo language teachers (Diné College, 2014; Navajo Language Academy, 2014). Despite their devotion to revitalisation efforts and their passion to save their language, community trends, attitudes and government policies remain stacked against them.

“In the USA, language diversity is most often seen by those in power as a problem to be solved rather than as a right to be protected or as a resource to be conserved” (Cashman, 2006, p. 42). In recent years, this effort to revitalise and provide an education for the Navajo in their own native language, has been thwarted by state and federal legislation such as the ‘No Child Left Behind’ Act (NCLB) and Proposition 203 to eliminate bilingual education in the state of Arizona (Balter & Grossman, 2006; Cashman, 2006). Although the Navajo Nation has been granted autonomy, its schools are actually operated under the authority of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and local district school boards. They are all under intense pressure to fulfil the requirements of the states and the federal government, to ensure ongoing funding and therefore the survival of their schools (Balter & Grossman, 2009; Lee & Lee, 2012; McCarty, 2003; Spolsky, 2002).

Although the NCLB seeks to ensure high standards in education for all students nationwide, American Indian leaders and educators have questioned its suitability in their communities (Balter & Grossman, 2009). With its immensely demanding test-driven curriculum, it leaves little if any time to devote to the teaching of Navajo and language instruction at many schools is now offered as a “foreign-language elective” (Lee, 2007, p. 13). Even though research shows that bilinguals perform just as well or better in exams and assessments than their monolingual peers, the state and federal governments have continued to pass legislation to ensure an English-only education (Balter & Grossman, 2009; Cashman, 2006).

Despite legislation passed in the past few decades to protect indigenous rights, it is unfathomable that all governments involved have blatantly ignored the Navajos' human rights, to the revitalisation of their language and their autonomy to control their own schools (U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007; Combs & Nicholas, 2012). Whether it be due to indifference, ignorance or racism, governments are still continuing to exert assimilationist policies and anti-bilingual ideology on the Navajo, and once again their weapon of choice is education (Cashman, 2006).

Another central factor to the loss of the Navajo language and culture were the major demographic changes that resulted from the stock reduction plan of the 1930s. The federal government ruled that the Navajo lands were overpopulated with livestock and carried out culls that were to continue through till the 1960s. Livestock herding had become the backbone of both Navajo society and the economy and this enforced reduction led to tremendous suffering and the collapse of their traditional way of life. Desperation forced the people to relocate from their isolated farming lands to urban areas, where the shift from Navajo to English was encouraged (Spolsky, 2002).

It should also be noted that the Navajo language is not a renewable language that can be revived by speakers from an outside location and exists purely within the Navajo community. As each speaker stops speaking or refuses to speak Navajo the language is weakened which will lead to its eventual disappearance (Benally & Viri, 2005). One of the greatest enemies of language maintenance is the complacency of the Navajo people themselves. As many bilingual Navajos have grown up surrounded by the language they take it for granted, assuming it will always be there. They are oblivious to the decline in Navajo and don't recognise that their failure to teach their children the language is the greatest cause of its decline (Benally & Viri, 2005). The language is relying entirely on the Navajo people themselves for its survival and if it can't be saved it will be a loss for the entirety of humankind. As Nettle and Romaine (2000) have observed "Every language is a living museum, a monument to every culture it has been a vehicle to. It is a loss for every one of us if a fraction of that diversity disappears when there is something that can have been done to prevent it" (as cited in McCarty, 2003, p. 148).

Other types of language change have not been enforced and have been less conspicuous than the boarding schools or English-only education within schools, however, they have been and remain just as dangerous towards language maintenance and shift. These are the quiet changes that the Navajo Nation faces daily within their "social, economic, and political systems that force change, setting in motion dramatic shifts away from one language toward another" (Benally & Viri, 2005, p. 92). Forty years ago the Navajo Tribal Council was almost entirely in Navajo and there was an official Navajo-English interpreter. By the 1980s all members preferred code switching and today English is the main language of communication within the government. As leaders of the Navajo Nation, the Navajo Tribal Council should be committed to using and promoting the Diné language, however, there is a general idea that government and politics are easier to discuss and explain in English and it has become the preferred language (Benally & Viri, 2005).

English is even the favoured language of communication within stores and businesses across the Navajo Nation. Entertainment, media and fashion generally come from

mainstream America with English as their medium of communication. Youth aspiring to be cool and modern use English as their language of choice. Navajos are no longer being forced to speak English in their everyday lives, rather they are choosing to speak it (Benally & Viri, 2005).

For many years, radio provided a counterforce toward the shift to English with many small local stations broadcasting in Navajo. However, since the younger generation often do not easily understand Navajo there has been a shift with the majority of broadcasts in English. TV is also entirely in English except for an hour or so of local programmes and media and literature, anything from mainstream American society is of course in English and only adds to youth's desire to associate more with American culture than their own (Spolsky, 2002).

Religion has often played a role in language maintenance and also in the spread of language. For example, the existence of ancient texts in Hebrew and Sanskrit have served an undeniable part in preserving these languages. While traditional Navajo religion practices its rituals, prayers and ceremonies in Navajo and plays an important role in preserving the language, its believers tend to distrust institutions and have often objected to native language teaching in school. Young Navajo often don't follow the traditional religion due to the Navajo-use it demands and many also follow other religions such as Christianity (Spolsky, 2002).

The spread of Christianity has usually worked against language maintenance and repeatedly Christian churches have opposed the teaching of Navajo in schools due to the language's connection to traditional beliefs. Some Navajo Christians have supported bilingual education, whilst opposing bicultural education as they fear the language will bring instruction of its religious practices and beliefs. However, this is a difficult ask as it is almost impossible to teach one without the other as language and culture are inextricably linked (Spolsky, 2002).

Therefore, there is a large section of the community; traditional Navajo, Christian Navajo, many boarding school educated Navajo and youth who are against bilingual and bicultural education as they distrust the government controlled schools and see the language as old, backward and pagan (Spolsky, 2002). In order for the Navajo language to survive, these attitudes need to change to one of support and this needs to happen now. However, as we all know, changing people's attitudes or even that of our own is often a colossal and impossible task and is unlikely to happen any time soon.

Saving the Navajo language is an urgent race against time. Research and census data show that in the past few decades there has already been a significant decrease in Navajo speakers and a large decline in intergenerational transmission of the language with non-speaking Navajo children doubling every ten years (Aguilera & LeCompte, 2007; Benally & Viri, 2005; Lee, 2007; U.S. Census, 2012). Revitalisation of the language through language classes and immersion programs within the school system are vital, but have become difficult to implement because of anti-bilingual federal and state policies. Furthermore, there has been overwhelming pressure to teach English in order for the students to pass national tests, robbing the schools of precious time to teach Navajo. People's attitudes, particularly of the Navajo community itself have also worked against language revitalisation education efforts

(Aguilera & LeCompte, 2007; Spolsky, 2002).

The Navajo endeavouring to save and revitalise their language face numerous hurdles that they cannot conquer alone (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2009). International and federal declarations and legislation to protect indigenous rights need to provide effective means of support rather than just rhetoric (Reyner, 2010). Federal and state governments must stop ignoring and recognise the human right of the Navajo people to have autonomy and complete control over their education system and institutions (Lee, 2007). While schools once worked to destroy the language they now have the opportunity to play a vital role in reviving it. There are still many talented teachers and an abundance of Navajo language resources available (Lee, 2007; McCarty, 2003). However, if current trends continue and more practical federal and state support along with strong community backing is not provided, the revitalisation of the Diné language will prove impossible (McCarty, 2003; Spolsky, 2002). “Given the gravity of the current state of language loss, anything less than full immersion is likely to be too little, too late” (McCarty, 2003, p. 159). Moreover, given the current situation this is most unlikely to happen.

Over the next thirty years, with the passing of each bilingual old soul and the birth of an English monolingual new one, the Navajo language will continue to dwindle until it is silenced forever. In thirty years, I believe the language will exist in some form, the people may know greetings or tribal introductions but there will be very few who will be able to converse fluently in the language. It is only a matter of time, regrettably sooner than later, that the Navajo language along with its culture, knowledge and wisdom will be silenced and gone forever. I can only hope and pray that I will be proved wrong.

### References

- Aguilera, D. & LeCompte, M. D. (2007). Resiliency in Native Languages: The Tale of Three Indigenous Communities' Experiences with Language Immersion. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 46(3), 11–36.
- Balter, A. & Grossman, F. D. (2009). The Effects of the No Child Left Behind Act on Language and Culture Education in Navajo Public Schools. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 48(3), 19–46.
- Benally, A. & Viri, D. (2005). Diné Bizaard (Navajo Language) at a Crossroads: Extinction or Renewal? *Bilingual Research Journal*, Spring 2005; 29(1), 85–108.
- Cashman, H. R. (2006). Who Wins in Research on Bilingualism in an Anti-bilingual State? *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 27(1), 42–60.
- Combs, M. C. & Nicholas, S. E. (2012). The effect of Arizona language policies on Arizona Indigenous Students. *Language Policy*, 11, 101–118. doi:10.1007/s10993-011-9230-7
- Diné College, (2014). *Center for Diné Teacher Education*. Available at <http://www.dinecollege.edu/cdte/index.php>
- Grenoble, L. A. & Whaley, L. J. (Eds). (1997). *Endangered Languages—Language Loss and Community Response*. New York. Cambridge University Press.
- Lee, L. L. & Lee, T. S. (2012) Navajo Cultural Autonomy. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*. 213, 119–126. doi:10.1515/ijsl-2012-0011
- Lee, T. S. (2007). ‘If They Want Navajo to Be Learned, Then They Should Require It in All Schools’: Navajo Teenagers’ Experiences, Choices and Demands Regarding Navajo Language. *Wicazo Sa Review*, Spring 2007, 7–33.
- McCarty, T. L. (2003). Revitalising Indigenous Languages in Homogenising Times. *Comparative Education Volume*, 39(2), 147–163.
- Navajo Language Academy (2014). Available at <http://navajolanguageacademy.org/nla.htm>
- Navajo Nation Government (2011). Available at [www.navajo-nsn.gov/govt.htm](http://www.navajo-nsn.gov/govt.htm)
- Nettle, D. & Romaine, S. (2000). *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World’s Languages*. New York. Oxford University Press.

- Reyhner, J. (2010). Indigenous Language Immersion Schools for Strong Indigenous Identities. *Heritage Language Journal*, 7(2), 138–149.
- Sharp, J. W. (2014) Desert USA. *The Long Walk Trail—The Navajos*. Retrieved from <http://www.desertusa.com/desert-trails/long-walk-trail-navajos.html>
- Shonerd, H. G. (1990). Domesticating the Barbarous Tongue: Language Policy for the Navajo in Historical Perspective. *Language Problems and Language Planning*, 14(3), 193–208.
- Spolsky, B. (2002). Prospects for the Survival of Navajo. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 33(2), 139–162.
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*. (2013). Retrieved from <http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/en/atlasmap/language-id-784.html>
- U.S. Bureau of the Census (2012). Population by Selected Ancestry Group and Region 2009. Retrieved from [www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0052.pdf](http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0052.pdf)
- U.S. Bureau of the Census (2012). The American Indian and Native Alaskan Population 2012. Retrieved from [www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-10.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-10.pdf)
- Utah American Indian Digital Archive (2008) *History: The Navajo*. Available at <http://www.utahindians.org/archives/navajo/history.html>