

Godfrey, David & Daniel W. Hieber. 2009. The Navajo language. Term paper, 'Linguistic Anthropology', Prof. Amy L. Paugh, Fall 2009, James Madison University.

The Navajo Language

David Godfrey

Daniel W. Hieber

Navajo, or *Diné Bizaad* as it is called by its speakers, is a richly complex language spoken by approximately 149,000 speakers in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah (Wikipedia contributors 2009). The Navajo people remain one of the largest and most culturally distinct Native American groups in North America, but they represent the paradigm of almost all native groups in the United States, in that despite their size and cultural unity, both their language and way of life are in danger of extinction. Modern efforts to revitalize their culture now face a fundamental question of identity – what does it mean to be Navajo?

American Dominance & Institutions

Navajo culture faced its first serious threat in July of 1863 from the American commander Christopher “Kit” Carson, who led 1,000 men against the Navajos. By March of 1864, huge numbers of Navajos were being forcibly marched to Fort Sumner, where many would die before negotiating a return to their homeland. Drought and unworkable farmland claimed many more after the Long Walk home (Locke 1976, 353-390). This was the end of a way of life for the Navajos.

The Treaty of 1868 with the United States laid out several terms which the Navajo originally saw as invasive but later insisted on, namely that the U.S. government establish both schools and social services on the reservation (House 2002, 3). Ironically, Navajos struggling to rebuild their identity today once again view these services as an intrusion, and it is true that these establishments have contributed greatly to the loss of Navajo culture.

The infamous Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) schools, established as part of the treaty, often adhered to Richard Henry Pratt's model at the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania (House 2002, 59). The objective was simply to "wean" the native populations from their own cultural norms, leading to a complete abandonment of Navajo lifestyle (Underhill 1956, 224). Speaking Navajo was of course heavily punished (McClain 1981, 51), yet the language was always spoken covertly as a form of counter-hegemony, similar to the way African American English (AAE) is used as a counterlanguage today (House 2002, 13; Morgan 2009).

This Western schooling system upset the social order among the Navajos. Students returned from school with no practical skills, and were viewed as strangers bringing new ideas (Underhill 1956, 225). Additionally, in the Navajo society of the time, it was the elders not the younger people who were looked to for guidance regarding the future. In the 1920's, the U.S. government realized few Navajos were attending school, and soon forcibly rounded up children for boarding school. At the same time, the Navajos were for the first time being organized as a tribe. In 1923, Henry Chee Dodge – an entirely Westernized Navajo – was elected as a puppet chairman and representative of the Navajo people, mostly to manage their oil rights (Underhill 1956, 228). The imposition of these American institutions set in motion a deterioration of Navajo culture, which they still struggle to overcome today.

World War II & Onwards

WWII saw Navajos and their language reclaim some of their prestige through the vital role their codetalkers played in the eastern theater. The unbreakable code baffled the Japanese, who had no anthropologists experienced with Navajo culture, and would have been hard-pressed to translate the extremely complex language – let alone the codetalkers' heavy use of metaphor –

even if they had (McClain 1981, 51, 56).¹ Navajo participation in the conflict affected both native and American perceptions of the tribe. To begin with, the language itself was inundated with words for modern technologies and military equipment, as well as for distant places and cultural items. This was a huge linguistic advantage for a language which in the past had been described as “primitive” and unable to cope with modernity. Just as important, the Navajos themselves earned a great deal of prestige from their participation; their military peers were greatly impressed by their soldiering, having been conditioned by a tough life on the reservation (Underhill 1956, 241), and the American people came to laud them for their role in Iwo Jima, if belatedly (McClain 1981). The Navajos involvement in WWII on the whole greatly broadened their worldview, and was a decisive step in preserving both their culture and language (Underhill 1956, 242, 246).

The 1960’s saw another step forward, as the Navajos, taking part in a broader civil rights movement, demanded and received greater self-determination (House 2002, 11-12). Schools *for* Navajos became schools *by* Navajos, and they began to purge the tribal government and even their social services of outside (i.e. white) influence. Of course, the government still had its own ideas concerning the best ways to teach Indians, and the Navajos are still trying to restructure these American-based institutions in a way that adheres to Navajo culture today.

Issues of Identity

Like most minority languages, Navajo is prey to the linguistic inferiority principle; because they are a socially ostracized group, their language has in the past been deemed inferior as well

¹ The Germans, on the other hand, have long had a fascination with Native American culture, and were aware of the Navajo language. As such, Comanche codetalkers were utilized for the western theater instead, restricting Navajo to the east. (Meadows, William C. *The Comanche Code Talkers of World War II*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002)

(Wolfram 1998). As mentioned earlier, the language was seen as primitive, although this mostly changed with WWII. Contributing to these stereotypes was the fact that no outsiders had any real grasp of Navajo until recently, and such ignorance simply perpetuated the myth further (McClain 1981, 83). Today, Navajo is one of the most documented indigenous languages in the world; furthermore, its structure is of extreme theoretical interest to linguists. This fact has direct consequences for language survival, resulting in greater documentation, exposure, and prestige, especially in academia. Few Americans today have never heard of the Navajo, and the language is no longer tied to the survival of just one ethnic group.

Tensions between whites and Navajos have far from vanished. Navajos still see a sharp distinction between Navajo and *Bilagáana* (white) culture. English and social corruption is associated with whites, so that social failures among the Navajo (drunkenness, laziness, etc.) are seen as the result of white influence (House 2002, xxi-xxv). This sharp dichotomy is unfortunately not in the best interest of the youth, who need to be able to navigate both Navajo and Bilagáana culture successfully. Denying them access to one only serves to hinder their success, and does not appreciate their need to address both aspects of their identity. This is very similar to tensions among black Americans (Duranti 2009, 81). Navajos are mimetic only to the extent that they want access to things which will give them independence and economic power, and these things (like formal schooling) are or have been in the past only available via their white oppressors. Their overriding perspective, however, is alteric, in their desire to be as different from the whites as possible (House 2002, 35).

This alteric stance unfortunately stems from a rising sense of cultural disunity and loss. Unsurprisingly, the Navajo language has become a symbol of counterhegemony in reaction to this – we have already seen how it served as a counterlanguage in early boarding schools. Navajo

culture too has remained surprisingly intact through military conquest, WWII, and economic impoverishment, and there is now a strong movement to revitalize Navajo culture. Yet this revitalization competes with already-existing Western institutions or ideologies. Navajo culture has lost much of its medium for cultural transmission: parents now depend on (Western) schools for the language education of their children, on (Western) hospitals for their medicinal needs, and on (Western) churches for their spiritual well-being. In the past, parents, elders, and the community were the disseminators of cultural information, but today Western institutions have usurped these roles entirely. This outsourcing of cultural conduits poses a serious threat to the continuation of the Navajo way of life, even while improving their standard of living.

Another unfortunate result of the white versus Navajo dichotomy is the perpetuation of a victim identity among Navajos (House 2002, 40). This poses nearly as great a threat as cultural erosion. House (2002, 40) isolates the issue well: “Another problem with a focus on a victim identity is that it places Navajos in a passive role, as individuals or as a group unable to take responsibility or to exercise agency to change their own direction and history.” When one is unable to take agency in revitalizing their culture, there seems little hope of success.

Today, the Navajo language balances precariously between successful revitalization and cultural erosion. Many aspects of Navajo culture remain intact, and there is a growing effort to revitalize. The tribe is Navajo-izing their schools as much as possible. For instance, the Diné College is a shining example of successful cultural integration in the school system, offering Navajo language classes, cultural activities and festival, and a greater sense of community for Navajos. Yet these successes must face declining Navajo language fluency rates, and white intrusion on the scale of the 2000 English-Only Act from the Arizona legislature. In Navajo preschools today, only 17% of children come speaking Navajo as their only language, while 53%

speaking English, and 30% are bilingual (Platero 1992). So it remains to be seen whether Navajo language and culture will fall by the wayside like so many other indigenous languages, or whether they will be a successful example of counterhegemony and revitalization.

Bibliography

- House, Deborah. 2002. *Language Shift among the Navajos: Identity Politics and Cultural Continuity*. Tuscon: University of Arizona Press.
- Locke, Raymond Friday. 1976. *The Book of the Navajo*. Los Angeles: Mankind Publishing.
- McClain, Sally. 1981. *Navajo Weapon: The Navajo Code Talkers*. Tuscon: Rio Nuevo Publishers.
- Morgan, Marcyliena. 2009. The African-American speech community: Reality and sociolinguists. In *Linguistic Anthropology: A Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Alessandro Duranti, 74-92. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Platero, Paul R. 1992. Language loss among Navajo children. Paper presented at the Athabaskan Linguistics Conference, Flagstaff, AZ, July 4.
- Underhill, Ruth M. 1956. *The Navajos*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Wikipedia contributors. 2009. Navajo Nation. In *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Navajo_Nation&oldid=316149196 (accessed September 25, 2009).
- Wolfram, Walt. 1998. Black children are verbally deprived. In *Language Myths*, ed. Laurie Bauer and Peter Trudgill, 103-112. London: Penguin Books.