Language revitalization: Navajo

Marion Bittinger, Danny Hieber
Rosetta Stone Endangered Language Program

Bittinger, Marion K. & Daniel W. Hieber. 2010. Invited guest lecture, Anthropology 305: ‘Language & Culture’ Professor Amy L. Paugh, Nov. 11, 2009, Department of Anthropology, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA.
My grandma taught me how to talk Navajo but I'm still learning. She showed me how to cook cake, pizza, eggs w/ bacon, and blue mush. She works at Chinle Elementary school. She works for the principal. My grandma lives at many farms. Her name is Carolyn Irvin. My grandma taught me how to weave.
“My grandma taught me how to talk Navajo, but I’m still learning. She showed me how to cook cake, pizza, eggs w/ bakend and blue mush. ... My grandma taught me how to weave. “
Language Endangerment: A Global Problem
How many languages are in the world?

About 6,900

• By 2100, half these languages will be extinct

• Half of the world’s languages have fewer than 5,000 speakers

• Over 500 languages have fewer than 100 speakers each

• One language dies about every two weeks
LANGUAGES OF THE WORLD

EACH DOT REPRESENTS THE PRIMARY LOCATION OF A LIVING LANGUAGE LISTED IN THE ETHNOLOGUE.

km

0 2000 4000 6000
The Rosetta Stone
Endangered Language Program
The Rosetta Stone
Endangered Language Program

• 1999: First project launched
• 2004: The Endangered Language Program is founded
• 2006: Mohawk Level 1 released
• 2007: Iñupiaq (Coastal) Level 1 and Inuttitut Level 1 released
• 2007: First company grant projects launched
• 2009: Mohawk Level 2 released
What is Rosetta Stone®?

Mohawk Council of Kahnawake (Kanien’kéha)
Labrador Inuit Association (Inuttitut)
NANA Regional Corporation (Iñupiaq)
North Slope Borough (Iñupiaq)
Navajo Language Renaissance (Diné Bizaad)
Mohawk Council of Kahnawake (Kanien’kéha)
Chitimacha Tribe of Lousiana (Sitimaxa)
North Slope Borough (Iñupiaq)
The Endangered Language Program
Mission

The Endangered Language Program works with Native language communities to create custom Rosetta Stone software for use in their language revitalization programs. Through a variety of development models designed to make Rosetta Stone software available to a wide range of indigenous groups, we promote global linguistic diversity and embody Rosetta Stone’s belief that language learning makes the world a better place.
All language knowledge is provided by the sponsoring community.

All language work takes place within the sponsoring community.

All intellectual property, sales, and distribution rights belong to the sponsoring group.
The Navajo language
Navajo is...

• The most widely spoken of all North American native languages (est. 150,000+ fluent speakers)

• Spoken and taught in 3 or more states

• Growing in number of speakers?
BUT...

1970
90% of Navajo BIA boarding school children spoke Navajo

1990
18% of Navajo preschoolers knew Navajo

2006
5% of Navajo school-aged children were fluent in Navajo
Why is Navajo Endangered?

**Historical: Colonialism**
- Disease
- Missions
- War

**Social:**
- Language prestige
- English dominance in mainstream culture and media

**Educational:**
- Boarding school system
- Lack of educational support (teacher training, curricula)
- No Child Left Behind
- English-Only Act of 2000
Navajo Language Renaissance

• 501 (c)(3) non-profit corporation

• Composed of Navajo linguists and language educators from Arizona, New Mexico and Utah

• Has full support of the Navajo Nation Board of Education

• The recipient of a 2007 Rosetta Stone Endangered Language Program grant for software development
Navajo Language Renaissance
+
The Rosetta Stone Endangered Language Program
=

The Goal:

• Use of Navajo Rosetta Stone in 100% of Navajo Nation schools
• Navajo Rosetta Stone available in all Navajo Nation Chapter Houses
• Use of Navajo Rosetta Stone by Navajo living outside of the Nation
The Process

- Team Training
- Translation/Editing/Review
- Customization
- Photography
- Audio Recording
- Final Review
- Production
- Shipping
- Distribution
- Teacher Training/Promotion
Yá'át'éeh.

Yá'át'éeh.

'Aoo', yá'át'éeh.

'Aoo', yá'át'éeh.
Yá’át’ée éh.

Continue with activity
Łééchąąʼį́į́zhin.

Mósí į́įžhin.
Navajo is...

• An Athabaskan language of the Na-Dené family

• An agglutinating, polysynthetic language. A verb can have up to 11 prefixes!

• A “verb-heavy” language (many verbs, few nouns)

• Tonal – Vowels can be either high or low tone
### Navajo Verbs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>disjunct prefixes</th>
<th>conjunct prefixes</th>
<th>stem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1a</td>
<td>1b</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>postposition object</th>
<th>&quot;null postposition&quot;</th>
<th>adverbial-thematic</th>
<th>iterative</th>
<th>plural</th>
<th>direct object</th>
<th>deictic</th>
<th>adverbial-thematic</th>
<th>mode-aspect</th>
<th>subject</th>
<th>classifier</th>
<th>stem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Di’nisbąqs "I'm in the act of driving some vehicle (into something) & getting stuck"

’a- + di- + ni- + sh- + ł + -bąqs

# Classificatory Verbs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classifier+Stem</th>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-'ą́'</td>
<td>SRO</td>
<td>Solid Roundish Object</td>
<td>bottle, ball, boot, box, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-yĺ́</td>
<td>LPB</td>
<td>Load, Pack, Burden</td>
<td>backpack, bundle, sack, saddle, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ł-jool</td>
<td>NCM</td>
<td>Non-Compact Matter</td>
<td>bunch of hair or grass, cloud, fog, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-lá́</td>
<td>SFO</td>
<td>Slender Flexible Object</td>
<td>rope, mittens, socks, pile of fried onions, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-tı́'</td>
<td>SSO</td>
<td>Slender Stiff Object</td>
<td>arrow, bracelet, skillet, saw, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ł-tsooz</td>
<td>FFO</td>
<td>Flat Flexible Object</td>
<td>blanket, coat, sack of groceries, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-tléé́</td>
<td>MM</td>
<td>Mushy Matter</td>
<td>ice cream, mud, slumped-over drunken person, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-nil</td>
<td>PLO1</td>
<td>Plural Objects 1</td>
<td>eggs, balls, animals, coins, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-jaá</td>
<td>PLO2</td>
<td>Plural Objects 2</td>
<td>marbles, seeds, sugar, bugs, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ką́</td>
<td>OC</td>
<td>Open Container</td>
<td>glass of milk, spoonful of food, handful of flour, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ł-t́ią́</td>
<td>ANO</td>
<td>Animate Object</td>
<td>microbe, person, corpse, doll, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"Oó'áál
Navajo Version of Telling Time

hoov'iid
dawn

ha'ii'q
sunrise

alsh
morning

del 'adle'q
mid-morning

k'ad'ê 'alne'e'aah
near noon

'alni'ni'q
noon

alni'ni'q doeó bik'jj'î
shortly after noon

yaa 'e'doo'q
mid-afternoon

ni'hootsoii
dusk

'e'e'aah
sunset

T'ëé'
Night

Jî
Day

Figure 17-1
Bikáá’ + dah + ‘asdáhí

on up there the thing you sit up on
Working with Language Experts

• Asking the right questions
  – Which classificatory stative verb would this object use?

• Non-conscious understanding of language
  – When do you use –s in English?
    • Theseses, oxes, sheeps, we eats
  – Why *cats* with an /s/ but *dogs* with a /z/?
  – Why am, is, are?
Language Change & Rosetta Stone

• Descriptive v. Prescriptive
• Will RS crytsalize / standardize the language?
  – Green/Blue = tatł’id dootł’izh, ch’ilgo dootł’izh, yágo dootł’izh, tatł’id, or…?
  – Chair – separate words > one crystallized form?
• Product uses newer or new words
  – Addresses needs of modern youth
Hurdles to Revitalization

• Travel – remote geography
• Legal – state, federal, and tribal law
• Census – collecting accurate data
• Acceptable Compensation – experts work mostly *pro bono*
• Intratribe politics – non-confrontational culture
Hurdles to Revitalization

• Speech varieties – superposed speech communities
  – Christian v. Navajo religion

• Elderly speakers – not good with technology

• Religion
  – Avoid use of sacred religious terminology
  – Christian impact on language varieties
  – Drinking v. Drinking
What’s wrong with this picture?

The men are drinking.

The girl is running.

The man is drinking.

The girls are running.
Hastiin ’ayá.

’Asdzání ’adlá.

Hastiin ’ayęeqzhii yiyá.

’Asdzání gohwééh yidlá.
Intercultural Communication

• Mistrust of whites – long-term partnerships

• Use L2 as much as possible – affirms and respects their sociolinguistic identity

• Non-confrontation – who makes decisions?
Special thanks to:
Our many Navajo friends and colleagues
Hágoónee’.

Ch’iyáán 'ít 'í

Hágoónee’.
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