Cultural Survival vs. Forced Assimilation: The Renewed War on Diversity

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Ethnologue, published by SIL International, estimates that of the more than two million people who identify themselves as American Indians in the United States, only 361,978 still speak one of the remaining 154 indigenous languages, and many of those are only spoken by the very old. This is about half the number of languages spoken in 1492 in what would become the United States. At one extreme, seven of the remaining 154 languages are spoken by only one person (Coos, Eyak, Kalapuya, Coast Miwok, Plains Miwok, Northeastern Pomo, and Serrano), and at the other extreme, 148,530 of an estimated 250,000 Navajos still speak their Diné language. American Indian languages, which cannot be helped by immigration like other minority languages in the United States, are becoming extinct, one after another.

One of the key factors in the survival of American Indian languages has been the isolation of many Indian reservations, which tend to be located on lands that none of the white conquerors wanted when reservations were established in the nineteenth century. Today, however, roads, satellite dishes, and progress in general are rapidly reaching the most isolated Indian communities. As one elder interviewed by Northern Arizona University Professor Evangeline Parsons Yazzie stated in Navajo: "Television is robbing our children of language." As Navajo children learn English and the mainstream culture through the media and through school, they increasingly become separated from their grandparents, some of whom speak no English. As one of Yazzie's informants said, "Older people who speak only Navajo are alone." Yazzie concluded that, "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."

Many American Indians see language as the key to their identity, and they question whether one can be Navajo, Apache, or Crow without speaking the tribal language. Navajo language survives most strongly among older Navajos, in Navajo chapter houses (the tribe's unit of local government), and in some Christian churches that use a Navajo-language bible and hymnal. Younger Indians are less likely to speak their tribal language because the schools they attend, the music they listen to, and the television they watch are in English. Tribal languages are considered "old fashioned," "out of date," and "not cool" to children raised on television. When these children grow up and have children, they raise them to speak only English because it is the only language they have learned to speak fluently. If this situation is not changed, most of the remaining Indian languages will be extinct in another generation or two.

The loss of isolation is not the only current threat to American Indian languages. The old idea that all Americans should just speak English is being promoted by groups like U.S. English (once led by Linda Chavez) and English First. These groups advocate an amendment to the U.S. Constitution to make English the official language of the United States and to limit legally the use of other languages. Already, half the

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states have some kind of Official English law. Louisiana's 1811 law is the earliest of these, and Utah's 2000 law is the most recent. This concern over the importance of English is comparatively recent: 21 of the 26 states with Official English laws passed them since 1981.

A second approach to attacking minority languages is the movement to oppose bilingual education. Sixty-three percent of Arizona voters, for example, elected to end bilingual education when they voted for Proposition 203 on their November 2000 ballots. In its place, voters substituted one year of untested English immersion marketed under the slogan, "English for the Children." This, despite opposition to Proposition 203 by the state's major newspapers, university presidents, and experts in language education, and despite the fact that test scores reported by the Arizona Department of Education showed students in bilingual programs doing better academically than those who were not enrolled in such programs.

Proposition 203 was spearheaded and financed by Ron Unz, a computer millionaire with political ambitions who in 1998 backed a similar successful initiative, Proposition 227, in California. Unz portrays himself as "a strong believer in American assimilationism." Contributing an article entitled, "California and the End of White America" to the November, 1999 issue of *Commentary*, he wrote of the "social decay and violence" in the new multiethnic California, and of how the passage of Proposition 227 would save America from ethnic divisiveness. Although immigrants, especially from Mexico, were Unz's targets, American Indians were not exempted from Proposition 227's provisions.

Arizona's Indian tribes saw Proposition 203 as a direct attack on their attempts to keep their languages alive and strongly opposed it. In a September, 2000 press release, Navajo Nation President Kelsey Begaye declared that the "preservation of Navajo culture, tradition, and language" is the most important guiding principle of the Navajo Nation. He went on to state:

> The Navajo Way of Life is based on the Navajo language. By tradition, the history of our people and the stories of our people are handed down from one generation to the next through oral communication. Naturally, the true essence and meanings for many Navajo stories, traditions and customs cannot be fully transmitted, understood or communicated as told through non-Navajo languages.

Only four of Arizona's 15 counties voted down Proposition 203; three of those four were the ones comprising portions of the Navajo Nation.

After the passage of Proposition 203, Jack Jackson, a Navajo Arizona State Senator, requested an Attorney General's opinion as to whether Proposition 203 applied to Navajos. On February 15, 2001, Janet Napolitano gave her opinion that it did not apply to any of Arizona's Indians living on or off reservations. She based her opinion on "principles of tribal sovereignty," wording taken from the Native American Languages Act of 1990, which provides that "the right of Native Americans to express themselves through the use of Native American languages shall not be restricted in any public proceeding, including publicly-supported education programs." The opinion also noted the use of the term "immigrant" in the proposition's wording.

MINORITY CULTURAL SUPPRESSION

The ethnocentrism that breeds assimilationism is a worldwide phenomenon, and legal efforts to suppress minority languages and cultures are not new, especially as regards American Indian languages.

Repeatedly in the 1880s, the U.S. government required all instruction for Indians to be in English. Traditional Indian ceremonies, such as the Sun Dance of the Plains Indians, were banned. Students entering government boarding and day schools were reclothed, regroomed, and renamed. Locked rooms were used as "jails," and corporal punishment was employed to enforce school rules that usually included a ban on tribal languages. In his autobiography, *Indian Agent*, long-time teacher, school administrator, and Indian agent Albert Kneale reported that Indian students in Indian schools "were taught to despise every custom of their forefathers, including religion, language, songs, dress, ideas, methods of living." The alternatives for Indians were annihilation or assimilation (then called "civilization").

Schooling was enforced using tribal police, who were under the control of Indian agents, and even the U.S. Cavalry. Adults who resisted sending their children to schools that devalued their tribal cultures were punished; in 1894, 19 Hopi Indian men were sent to the military prison on Alcatraz Island for such an infraction. While the harsh assimilationist methods worked with some Indians, they also bred resistance in others. Hopi artist Fred Kabotie recalled in his autobiography, "I've found the more outside education I receive, the more I appreciate the true Hopi way. When the missionaries would come into the village and try to convert us, I used to wonder why anyone would want to be a Christian if it meant becoming like those people."

Ironically, after years of suppression in schools, Navajo and other tribal languages were pressed into service by the U.S. military during WWII to rapidly encode and decode military transmissions. Specially trained Navajo "Code Talkers" were particularly useful in the South Pacific, where they used a Navajo-language-based code that the Japanese were never able to decipher. Initially kept "a military secret," the original 29 Navajo Code Talkers received Congressional Gold Medals of Honor for their service last year; a "GI Joe" Navajo-speaking Code Talker doll is currently being marketed.

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

The Civil Rights Movement created a climate for more culturally appropriate schooling. In 1968, the U.S. Congress passed the Bilingual Education Act (Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act) under unanimous consent provisions. Though it was targeted at Hispanics, American Indian tribes quickly saw that they could profit from the provisions of the Act. In 1975, Congress passed the Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act, which provided for more Indian control of Indian education.

The results of past repressive government policies specifically aimed at American Indian languages were recognized by Congress in 1990 with the passage of the Native American Languages Act (P.L. 101-407). Congress found that "the status of the cultures and languages of Native Americans is unique and the United States has the responsibility to act together with Native Americans to ensure the survival of these unique cultures and languages." Congress made it the policy of the United States to "preserve, protect, and promote the rights and freedom of Native Americans to use, practice, and develop Native American languages."

Although the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 led to some teaching of non-English languages in schools, Blackfeet language activist Darrell Kipp rightly points out that:

> Bilingual programs are designed to teach English, not your tribal language. We aren't against English, but we want to add our language and give it equal status. . . . Bilingual education typically teaches the language fifteen minutes a day.

Fifteen minutes—or even 30 minutes—a day is just not enough time to develop language fluency. Increasingly, Kipp and other indigenous language activists are advocating immersion teaching methodologies that give more classroom time to tribal languages. U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley, in a speech on March 15, 2000, strongly supported dual-language immersion schools, which allocate about half the school day, rather than 15 minutes, to language learning. Of course, with that much time spent in language learning, academic content is integrated into the lessons so students do not fall behind in mathematics, science, social studies, and other school subjects. While working at Rock Point Community school in Arizona, I found that Navajo students who were immersed in Navajo for half a day in the primary grades not only learned to read and write their Navajo language; they also learned English better than in surrounding schools where only English was taught. It is hard enough to learn to read, write, and understand subjects like math in a language you can speak. It can become an overwhelmingly negative experience to learn these first in a language you are only beginning to understand.

Increased efforts to teach indigenous languages are being made outside of school as well. For example, during the summer of 2000, The Hopi Village of Mishongnovi ran a program that involved local artists from the village working

with children 5 to 19 years old. Along with traditional crafts, the program worked to immerse the children in the Hopi language.

Of special importance in the revitalization of American Indian languages and cultures has been the tribal college movement; the number of tribal colleges has grown from one in 1969 to over 30 today. Lionel Bordeaux, long time president of Sinte Gleska College, called cultural preservation "the foundation of the tribal colleges."

LANGUAGE FREEDOM

Proponents of English as the official language see its dominance threatened and consider it the "glue" that holds our country together and a panacea to the problems of poverty faced by many ethnic minorities in the United States. A letter to the editor in the December 27, 1999 issue of *USA Today* claimed, "The one thing that binds the USA as a nation and makes possible the blending of so many varied cultural and ethnic mixes is that we have a common language." A similar letter appeared in the November 21, 2000 issue of the *Arizona Republic*. Its author insisted, "We must all be able to communicate in one language, the only glue uniting this great country."

I maintain that the "glue" holding this country together is not the English language, but rather the ideas embodied in the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and other key documents of the democratic experience. The definitions of "freedom," "liberty," and "free speech" in those documents need to be broadened to include group as well as individual rights to heritage, languages, and cultures. Government suppression of minority languages and cultures violates the liberty of American Indian, Latino, and other language minority citizens. Forced conformity is still being imposed on ethnic minorities in the United States through assimilationist, English-only schooling to the detriment of full and equal citizenship.

Research indicates that immigrants are learning English faster now than they ever have before; the dominance of English in the United States is in no way threatened. On the contrary, it is immigrant languages that are threatened. In the words of attorney Lani Guinier (1994) and others, minorities through the initiative process are being subjected to democracy's "tyranny of the majority." American Indians, comprising less than one percent of the nation's population, are defenseless in the face of the majority unless they present a united front, link arms with other minorities, and actively recruit the support of mainstream Americans. Journalist David Broder, in his new book, *Democracy Derailed: Initiative Campaigns and the Power of Money,* details how the initiative process in California and other states can submerge minority viewpoints and offer slogan-driven panaceas to deep-rooted societal problems.

WHAT IS BEING LOST

As American Indian languages die, the accumulated wisdom of their cultures dies. At a bilingual education conference in Anchorage, Alaska, in 1996, I picked up a card describing traditional Iñupiaq Eskimo values. One side of the card read:

> Every Iñupiaq is responsible to all other Iñupiaq for the survival of our cultural spirit, and the values and traditions through which it survives. Through our extended family, we retain, teach, and live our Iñupiaq way.

The other side read, "With guidance and support from Elders, we must teach our children Iñupiaq values." Listed were the values of "knowledge of language, sharing, respect for others, cooperation, respect for elders, love for children, hard work, knowledge of family tree, avoidance of conflict, respect for nature, spirituality, humor, family roles, hunter success, domestic skills, humility, [and] responsibility to tribe." With the loss of these traditional values and the languages through which they were taught, functioning American Indian communities and families are being destroyed, leaving in their wake dysfunctional families and myriad other social problems.

American Indian elders want their grandchildren to respect their elders, work hard, study in school, not drink, and, of course, remember that they are Indian. Today, even on rural Indian reservations, there is youth gang activity. Dr. Richard

Littlebear, president of Dull Knife Community College and Northern Cheyenne language activist, writes,

> Our youth are apparently looking to urban gangs for those things that will give them a sense of identity, importance, and belongingness. It would be so nice if they would but look to our own tribal characteristics because we already have all the things that our youth are apparently looking for and finding in socially destructive gangs. . . . [One] characteristic that really makes a gang distinctive is the language they speak. If we could transfer the young people's loyalty back to our own tribes and families, we could restore the frayed social fabric of our reservations. We need to make our children see our languages and cultures as viable and just as valuable as anything they see on television, movies, or videos.

My quarter century of involvement with American Indian education and bilingual education as a junior high school teacher, school administrator, and university professor supports Dr. Littlebear's contention that language and culture revival movements are generally healthy for America. Riots and ethnic violence are a product of the loss of traditional values and of poverty, not of multilingualism and multiculturalism. Linguistic and cultural assimilation will cure none of these ills.

The legally enforced aspects of assimilation epitomized in Propositions 203 and 227 are divisive and destructive. Not only do they divide "white" America from minority America; they also create divisions within minorities between those who think that being a "good American" is associated with surface features such as speaking English. Being an American means adhering to the principles of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the United Nations Charter, and other representations of democracy, freedom, and tolerance. These can be lived in any language.

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CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the key factors that have allowed some American Indian languages to survive the onslaught of majority English?
2. What were some approaches taken by the American government and culture to attempt to assimilate American Indian groups and eliminate their languages?
3. What recent political and social movements have further threatened the survival of American Indian languages? Do you agree or disagree with these movements, and why?
4. What recent cultural and legal steps have been implemented to foster the survival of indigenous languages in the United States?