

# The Survival and Revival of Native American Languages

*The disappearance of Indigenous languages, although a deeply disturbing and ever accelerating trend, has received little national or international attention. Under enormous stress from a variety of sources, the Native people of this continent appear unable to halt the rapid erosion that is washing away a central strand of human identity. Not only are languages disappearing, but with them unique world-views and philosophies. The negative consequences of this loss of cultural, spiritual, and intellectual diversity will become more apparent as the spiritual and intellectual barrenness of the modern world more fully reveals itself.*

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## The Problem

The study of Native languages, anthropological linguistics, was developed under the assumption that Indigenous languages were doomed. Its main task has been to record languages for posterity. This is important, but it is not enough. Today there is glowing resolve to put a brake on this process: the Indigenous cultures and their traditions are too important. For their survival, the languages must also continue. As a stuffed and mounted specimen can give little sense of the live animal it once was, so dry texts and even tapes are no substitute for living languages. These are not museum pieces, they are themselves living libraries, windows on worlds that cannot be replaced.

The loss of language diversity is a global trend. It has been estimated that, at current rates, the 5,500 currently living languages will be reduced in a century or two to just a few hundred.<sup>1</sup> American Indian languages have been especially hard hit. Indeed, of the world's languages that are considered nearly extinct, over one quarter are Indigenous languages in the United States.

At the time of Columbus, at least 300 Indigenous languages were being spoken in what is now the United

States.<sup>2</sup> Today there are only 148 and, of those, one third have fewer than 100 fluent speakers and are considered near extinction. More ominous, 32 native languages have 10 or fewer speakers and are in critical danger of becoming extinct within the next few years.<sup>3</sup>

The percentage of Native-language speakers in the various communities varies enormously. While over 350,000 Native people, or one in six, speak their language, almost three-fourths of these come from fewer than a dozen Native nations or groups of nations, and more than a third of the Indigenous-language speakers in this country are Navajo.

While Indigenous languages are threatened in other countries in the Americas, nowhere is the problem as critical as in the United States. More languages are on the verge of extinction in this country than in the rest of the Americas combined, and California alone has more threatened languages than any other country. Moreover, even those languages that are not immediately threatened with extinction are in danger. For example, although Yakima has 3,000 speakers, most or all of these are middle-aged or older.

Without a comprehensive program to educate young Yakimas, the language will soon suffer a massive loss of speakers as they begin to pass away.

It is estimated that 80% of all Canadian and United States Indian languages are in a similar process of dying out.<sup>4</sup> Few national governments are doing anything effective to reverse these patterns. For example, the United States has a strong commitment to bilingual education, yet the manner in which it is taught is almost useless in preventing languages from disappearing.

There are many Indian communities that have successfully resisted the global trend. Some, such as the Hualapai and the Utes, have long had vigorous and effective language programs. Recent

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income from gaming and other new enterprises has made possible strong language revival programs among the Oneidas and Menominee of Wisconsin. In Canada, there is growing awareness of the seriousness of the issue and there have been strong commitments to language revitalization from national Native organizations such as the Assembly of First Nations.



Photo: Lisa Hamman

A Navajo woman elder. The Navajo are one of the few Indigenous cultures in the United States that have retained their language to this day. More than one third of the Native language speakers in the US are Navajo.

All of this indicates two things: that there is a critical need to begin working with Native communities in the United States on intensive language teaching or revival; and that there are successful models of how to proceed. Many Indian communities require immediate action, in the form of specially designed programs, if their languages are to survive.

The inability of the modern mind to understand the wealth that surrounds it is every day making the world a poorer place. A report issued by the Worldwatch Institute in 1992 warned that the consequences of culture loss among tribal peoples would include the disappearance of millions of plant and animal species which currently live under their protection.<sup>5</sup> One can only ponder the question: when the world is reduced to a single language, will there be anything of value left to say?

### The Needs

All preliminary findings indicate that Native communities in the United States, Canada, and other parts of this hemisphere find the language retention issue to be one of their biggest concerns. The inability to pass on the language to the youth is making it more and more difficult to pass on traditions and culture, or even to foster the traditional leadership necessary to guide Indian communities into the future.

The general consensus among those who work with Native people on their issues is that the vast majority of Native communities would gladly organize or participate in language recovery projects if they had the option. When economic opportunities present themselves, Indian reservations usually begin a language revitalization program. Many communities, such as the Seneca and Onondaga, have fought

hard for bilingual education in public schools, only to find that it is inadequate to stem the loss of speakers.

Due to the lack of resources available to most Native communities, many of whom are struggling with a host of other problems, language programs are usually not an option. Most Indigenous people in this hemisphere have much lower standards of living than the surrounding populations and are often extremely poor. Many Native communities suffer political oppression, continual erosion of their land base, and the denial of their legal and cultural rights.<sup>6</sup>

Efforts to develop and provide an economic base to these Indian communities can have detrimental effects on languages and cultures.<sup>7</sup> New economic development activities such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) can be expected to have a

negative effect on Indian languages in Mexico, where almost 30% of the population is Indigenous.<sup>8</sup>

Language revitalization is a comparatively new effort, with few successes and many failures. Programs are required that can take into account the specific political, cultural, and economic circumstances of Native communities.<sup>9</sup> Even those Native people with economic resources often lack the many different skills needed to put forward a comprehensive program. Moreover, cultural change is now so rapid and pervasive, that new ways to hold the interest of young people and educate them need to be developed.

The lack of communication among Native communities has hindered the few successful models from being applied in other areas. In areas where language loss has reached a critical level, governments and institutions put the emphasis on recording languages rather than on rescuing them. Much more research needs to be done on this issue to better survey and evaluate the current state of language retention among North American Indians as well as to seek out successful solutions. 🐾

*Adapted from Daybreak, Winter 1994*

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6. The quality of life among indigenous people in this hemisphere varies widely, though on the whole it is not very good. Indian reservations in the United States, with the exception of those that have successful gaming operations, are still among the poorest regions in the country. Indians in the US suffer disproportionately from teen-age suicide (more than four times the national average), substance abuse, and other social ills. Canadian First Nation reserves have many of the same problems, as well as often being enmeshed in political and legal disputes with the Canadian government over land title and development policy. Amnesty International (1992) provides a glimpse of the difficulties faced by indigenous people in this hemisphere, and particularly in Latin America. The latter generally live in extreme poverty, have few of the rights and services accorded Indians in the U.S. and Canada and are often the victims of political violence and oppression.
7. There are few studies that correlate development, reservation economies, or other factors with Indian language retention. A simple comparison of median incomes and poverty levels among Indian communities that have suffered severe language loss with those that have not gives a small indication that those reservations that are poorest may retain their languages better. More work is needed on this question.
8. With over 230 Indian languages, Mexico is the richest source of Native languages in the hemisphere. According to Taliman (1993) and DePalma (1993), NAFTA can be expected to rapidly accelerate the displacement of Indians from their lands and into the overcrowded Mexican cities. Unlike the United States, where only 2.4% of its population is now engaged in agriculture, in Mexico, 26% of the labor force is composed of farm workers, and the vast majority of these farmers are Indians. Since corn is the leading Mexican crop, the introduction of cheaper American corn is likely to lead to a loss of jobs, lands, and cultures for millions of Indians.
9. Reyhner (1993) examines the history of Indian language education in the U.S. — and its notable lack of success — in light of the new Native American Languages Act of 1990. Up until recently, Indian languages were either banned or discouraged in schools. The last few decades have seen a change of attitude, but little has been accomplished. In 1991, a report prepared by a United States Department of Education Task Force noted the continuing failure to stop Indian language and critical loss (Associated Press, 1991). The schools managed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs are notorious for the poor quality of teachers and equipment, and the derelict condition of the schools themselves.