

# A Strategy for Language Maintenance Programs

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Shiprock, NM; March 12, 2009

## Introduction

There is a sense in which language lies at the very heart of culture. This is a point to which I return below with emphasis. In much of this paper, however, it will be useful to make a distinction between the two. Again, there is a sense in which all aspects of culture, apart from language, blend into one undifferentiated "way of life." And yet it will be useful in what follows to distinguish between other aspects of culture and what an outsider might call "religion."

If someone objects that, in a Navajo context, it is impossible to maintain any distinction between the rest of culture and religion, I counter that just under half the tribe routinely does so. Christian Navajos eat, look, and in many other respects live like Traditional Navajos, but do not worship the same way. This difference is what I'm trying to isolate when I speak of "religion" in the present paper.

The strategy for language maintenance proposed in this paper has two parts, which can be applied wherever a culture is in transition and its host language threatened. The numbers will change depending on circumstances, but the same principles apply. On the one hand I argue for a very broad approach which excludes no one. On the other hand I argue for a very narrow approach which starts with perhaps only one other individual.

To present this strategy I will need to cite some historical facts, but my focus will be on creating an environment in which the Navajo language can have a sustainable future. Having expended considerable effort acquiring some of the language myself, this is something on which I place high value. I badly want the Navajo Nation's language maintenance efforts to succeed.

## Part I

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### Past and Present

#### The past

If we were to go back in time 150 years or so, even though they might travel separately in small bands, all Navajos would be unified by at least two factors - religion and language, where by "religion" I mean those ways in which Christian Navajos differ from Traditional Navajos. There are other unifying factors that might be brought into the discussion, such as the blood ties inherent in the kinship system and the economic aspects of material culture, but here we focus on religion and language.

*Religion.* Lyon (1989) describes the career of Gladys Reichard, a well known student of Navajo religion active during the previous century. Early in her career,

[Reichard] began to realize that religion lay at the center of Navajo life, the core from which all else emanated.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, for Reichard, religion was the great unifying factor which lay "at the center of Navajo life." There is a story that illustrates this point. It's about Black Horse and the early resistance against government efforts to educate Navajo children in the late 1800s.

"Now men, is there anyone here who can do it (a chant)? Long ago, people of old had a story of some kind of chant called "Talk One Into the Grave." Who of you knows it?" said Black Horse, asking that it be performed.

These people from the other side of the mountain were saying this. That is what I heard. I wasn't at the meeting myself. And I don't know just how this chant goes.

"I do," said the one I referred to as Little Boy.

"Two of you are needed for it," said Black Horse.

So then my grandfather, the man I spoke of as Big Mexican Clansman, volunteered to join him to carry on the ceremony. South from the trading post there is a ruin which we call in Navajo "Shattered House." Someone burned it long ago. It is said that they were anasazi. It is black there like ashes. It was there that they carried on the ceremony. I don't know how it was done. That is what took place that night [*kódzaago yiská*].<sup>2</sup>

In this account, Black Horse asks for volunteers to perform a ceremony that would last all night and in the small crowd of men standing around him someone is able to come forward and do it, and a second man is able to assist. All of this on the spur of the moment, without warning or preparation. This is one of the most impressive stories I've ever come across in the literature. Such ceremonies were deeply ingrained in Navajo society and people knew how, not only to appreciate what was being said, but to officiate when called upon. So 150 years ago, and as late as the 1930s when Richard began her research, religion was a pervasively unifying factor for all Navajos.

*Language.* In regard to language, Lockard (1995) relates the following anecdote about an unfortunate U.S. military officer:

In 1852, at Fort Defiance, Arizona, Captain J. H. Eaton was ordered to write Navajo translations for 424 English words. Robert Young reflected on his work, "For obvious reasons, there was no Navajo in 1852 who could speak or understand the English language, and there was no speaker of English who knew Navajo."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> William H. Lyon, "Gladys Reichard at the Frontiers of Navajo Culture," *American Indian Quarterly*, 13:2 (Spring, 1989), p. 138.

<sup>2</sup> Left-Handed Mexican Clansman, "The Trouble at Round Rock," *Navajo Historical Series 2: The Trouble At Round Rock* (Lawrence, KS: Bureau of Indian Affairs, Division of Education, 1952), pp. 25-26. For the corresponding Navajo text see, *Atk'idáqá' Adahoodzaai Baa Hane': Dinék'ehjí Naaltsoos Wólta'í #15* (Albuquerque: Navajo Reading Study, 1973), p. 39. Below I refer to *TRR* and *DNW* respectively.

<sup>3</sup> Louise Lockard, "New Paper Words: Historical Images of Navajo Language Literacy," *American Indian Quarterly*, 19:1 (Winter, 1995), p. 18.

Thus, in 1850 all Navajos still spoke Navajo (traditional language) and they all still participated fully in the ceremonial life of the tribe (traditional religion).

The present

Today, instead of being a great unifier of Navajo life, religion is its single greatest divider. For the most part, Navajos now fall within one of two broad categories: either Traditionalism or Christianity.

According to Pavlik (1997) there are two types of traditionalists: (a) Orthodox Traditionalists (=Old Way, 5% of the population) and (b) New Traditionalists (=Peyote, 50% of the population).<sup>4</sup> These groups differ from each other, but share many more assumptions between them than either does with Christianity. Christianity can of course also be subdivided. Groups prominent on the reservation include Catholics, Mormons (LDS), Native Pentecostals, and other Protestants.

Assigning numbers to the various Christian denominations on the reservation is not my purpose here, and due to the current state of research it would be difficult. The point to notice is that Traditionalism claims about half the population and Christianity the other half. Religion today splits the tribe just about down the middle. See fig. 1.

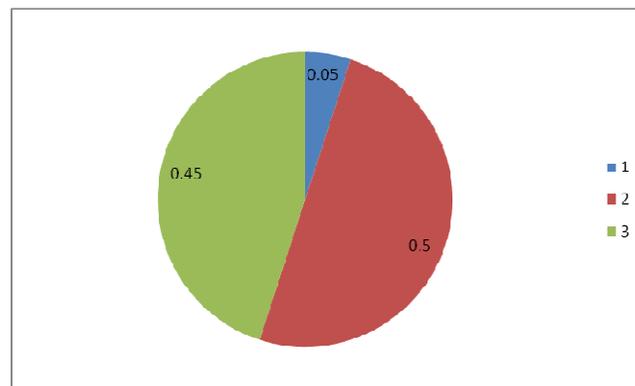


Fig. 1. Pie chart showing the approximate size of three major religious affiliations on the reservation today, where 1 = Old Way, 2 = Peyote (Native American Church, or NAC), and 3 = Christianity.

I now bring these facts together in a different form, with a different graphic. If 55% of the population are Traditional in their religious outlook and 45% are Christian, or other (but not Traditional), we could state these facts in the following way, which maps changes onto time. See fig. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Steve Pavlik, "Navajo Christianity: Historical Origins and Modern Trends," *Wicazo Sa Review*, 12:2 (Autumn, 1997), pp. 51-52.

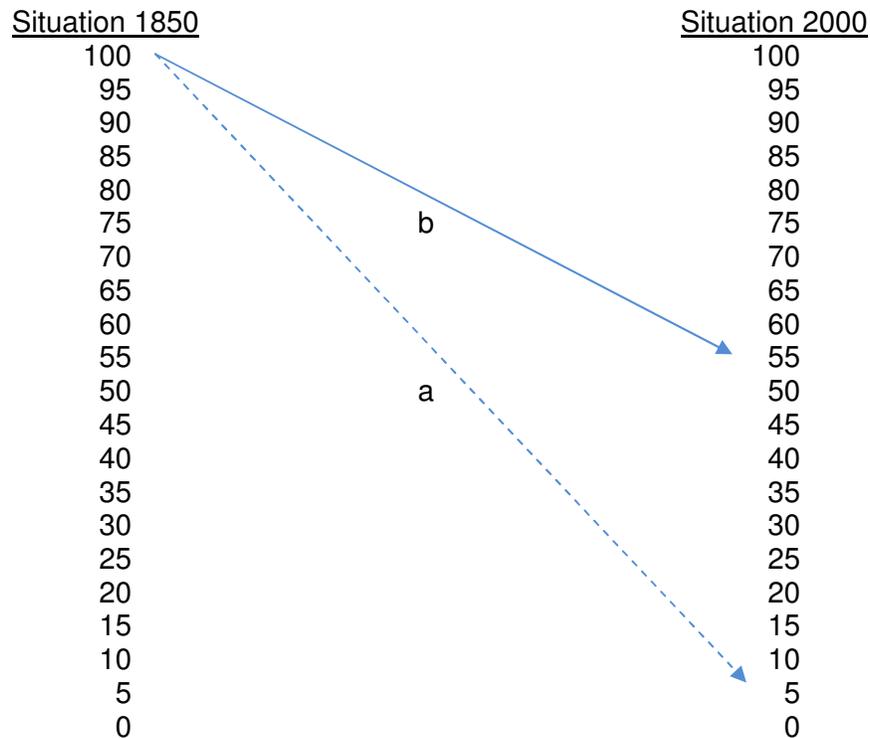


Fig. 2. The decline, between 1850 and 2000, of Old Way religion (a) and of traditionalism in general (combining Old Way and Peyote) (b).

In fig. 2 Old Way (a) goes from 100% participation in 1850 to 5% participation by 2000. This fact by itself, however, doesn't give an accurate idea of people's religious attitudes on the reservation. When Old Way is combined with Peyote, we see that over half the population still hold traditional views. These views, as held by members of the Native American Church, are no longer the same as what they once were under Old Way. The substance of the tradition has changed. But the outlook in both cases is Traditional. Line (b), then, is a composite measure, which combines Old Way and Peyote based on what the two hold in common.

What does all of this have to language? Nothing yet, but now we add a third line. Line (c) represents the rate at which traditional language use has declined over the same period as that shown in fig. 2. In 1850 the Navajo language was being maintained at 100% and when the 2000 census was taken it was being maintained at about 65%. This number (65%) includes both those who prefer Navajo over English and those who feel equally comfortable in either language.<sup>5</sup> See fig. 3 (below).

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/c2kbr01-15.pdf>. I here take 269,202 as the total population before considering intermarriage and 173,800 as the total number of speakers of Navajo. The proportion of speakers to population under these assumptions is 64.56% (=65%).

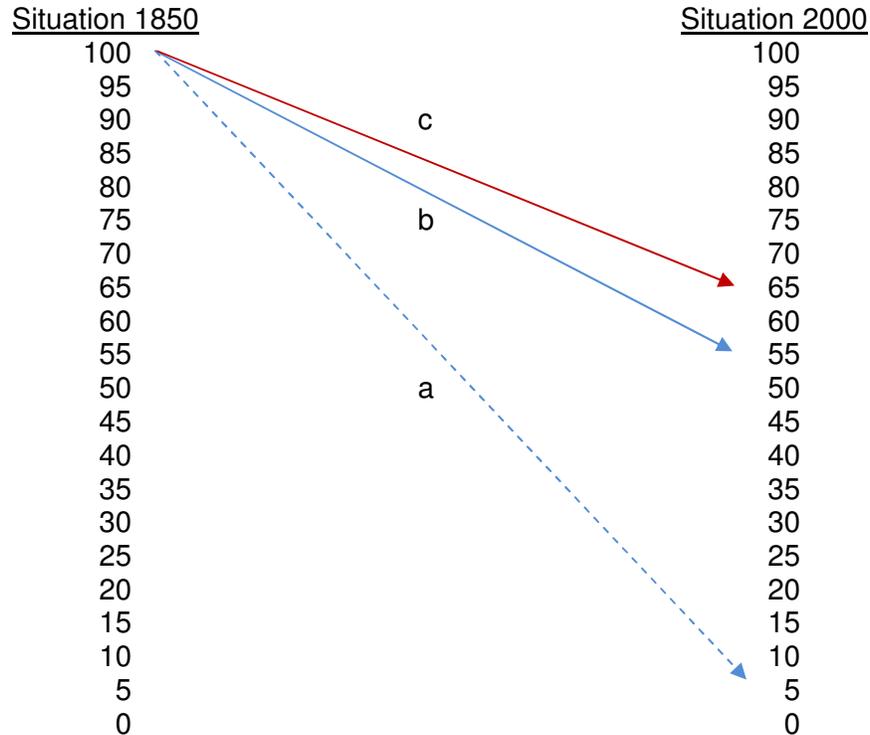


Fig. 3. The decline, between 1850 and 2000, of Old Way ceremonialism (a), of traditionalism in general (combining Old Way and Peyote) (b), and of the Navajo language (c).

Notice four things in fig. 3. First, all of the lines are declining. Second, lines (b) and (c) are declining in similar ways. The two lines run close to each other. Third, although similar, lines (b) and (c) are not the same. In one sense the two are proceeding together (they are similar), but in another sense they are proceeding independently (they are not the same). And fourth, the nature of the difference is that line (c) is declining more slowly than (b), and dramatically more slowly than (a). Point 1 requires no further emphasis. Below we focus on points 2-4.

## Analysis of the Numbers

Point 2: Lines (b) and (c) are similar

Unfortunately, the numbers I use in figs. 1-3 (above) are soft. They badly need to be either confirmed or disproved through systematic research. I now offer a hypothesis and a corollary to the hypothesis as a starting point for any future research project done along the lines suggested here.

Hypothesis. There is a correlation between religious affiliation and language use on the Navajo Indian reservation.

Corollary: Traditional Navajos use Navajo more than non-Traditional Navajos.

In order to confirm or disprove the above hypothesis and/or its corollary one would need to gather information on the Navajo People's religious affiliations and on their language use. And this information would need to be gathered in such a way as to allow any relationships that might exist between the two factors to be clearly seen. This has not yet been done.

*Religion.* As regards religious affiliations, Dolaghan and Scates (1978) have taken a step in the right direction,<sup>6</sup> but their numbers are entirely inadequate. For example, they give no numbers for either Mormons or Catholics. These omissions represent enormous inadequacies in the authors' research model. Essentially, they were studying only main stream Protestant groups and their derivatives. But this accounts for only one part of the Christian half of the population, which, as we have seen, is the smaller of the two halves.

In an earlier paper from 1992, Pavlik discusses the role of Mormonism on the reservation. He suggests that perhaps 20% of the population is Mormon. Combining this with the Native American Church, at about 60%, these two religious bodies together might claim as much as 80% of the population.<sup>7</sup> In my view these numbers are a bit high and in a 1997 paper Pavlik revises them downward.<sup>8</sup> It is the 1997 paper that I draw on for figs. 1-3 (above). In any case, omitting both Catholics and Mormons from a study of religious affiliations on the reservation is a major weakness for Dolaghan and Scates, and one that must be remedied in future surveys.

As we move beyond these earlier sources, a publication that might seem to hold out much promise is *Religious Congregations & Membership in the United States 2000*, published by Glenmary Research Center.<sup>9</sup> This 564 page report reads like a census. It has as much detail as anyone could want – almost. One thing it doesn't track is ethnicity. Thus, we can know with exact certainty how many people are affiliated with participating religious groups in the counties that make up the Navajo reservation, but we can't know how many of those counted are Navajos. Another thing the study doesn't track is language. As a result, we can't learn anything that would be useful in the present context from this otherwise exhaustive and authoritative resource.

*Language.* As regards language, the United States census for 2000 provides excellent information, but none that can be related to speakers' religious affiliations. The question is not just how many people speak Navajo, or who believes what, but how the two factors influence each other. It is the relationship that holds the greatest interest, not just one or the other factor in isolation, or both factors in isolation. Thus, the research that would enable us to answer the questions raised here has not been done and still needs doing.

If there is a connection between religious affiliation and language preference on the reservation, I suspect we will find more traditional language among those who are religiously or culturally Traditional in their outlook, and less among those who are not. This hypothesis follows from the fact that lines (b) and (c) of fig. 3 track more or less together. They are similar.

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Dolaghan and David Scates, *The Navajos Are Coming To Jesus* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1978).

<sup>7</sup> Steve Pavlik, "Of Saints and Lamanites: An Analysis of Navajo Mormonism," *Wicazo Sa Review*, 8:1 (Spring, 1992), p. 25. See also p. 27, where Pavlik suggests 60% of the population follow the NAC.

<sup>8</sup> See Pavlik (1997), "Navajo Christianity" (cited in an earlier note).

<sup>9</sup> Nashville, TN.

### Point 3: But not the same

Having acknowledged that there are ways in which culture and language influence each other, I now argue that culture and language can be systematically distinguished. So at this point we break the connection established in the preceding section. There are important anthropological reasons for doing this, and important implications to be drawn from the differences between culture and language that can help us craft a useful strategy for doing language maintenance. Before going on, let us consider the concept of areal diffusion.

Areal diffusion is a concept normally associated with anthropology, rather than linguistics. But Sherzer and Bauman (1972) argue that diffusion can tell us interesting things about language. I cite their work below, more than once, because it says interesting things about culture and about the relationship – or the distinction – between culture and language.

According to Wissler (1926:216), to whom the culture area concept owes much of its subsequent popularity among American anthropologists, "it appears the rule that, wherever in aboriginal America, a well marked ecological area can be delineated, there one will find a culture area and that the centers of distribution for the constituent traits will fall in the heart of the ecological area."<sup>10</sup>

Thus, environment imposes constraints on culture. But it does not impose those same constraints on language.<sup>11</sup> People who move from the Eastern Woodlands to the Plains will develop a Plains culture. But they will not develop a Plains language, because there is no such thing. People living in the Plains, taking this as one example, speak languages from many different language families.<sup>12</sup> As the same authors state in another place, "a culture area is often marked by genetic linguistic diversity."<sup>13</sup>

Given this ecological emphasis in the field of culture area studies, it is not surprising that linguistic features have not figured in the formulation of culture areas; for, since Sapir's classic consideration of "Language and Environment" (1912), it has been accepted as a fundamental linguistic truth that, certain lexical elements aside, language and environment are mutually independent (see also Wissler 1922:373).<sup>14</sup>

### Point 4: Language changes slowly

A classic example of the difference between culture change and language change is provided by the Kiowa and the Plains Apache (or Kiowa Apache). The roots of the Kiowa language lie in the south. Other members of the Aztec-Tanoan language phylum live in the

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<sup>10</sup> Joel Sherzer and Richard Bauman, "Areal Studies and Culture History: Language as a Key to the Historical Study of Culture Contact," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 28:2 (Summer, 1972), p. 132.

<sup>11</sup> The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis might be interpreted as arguing to the contrary, i.e., that where we live does affect our use of language, but most linguists disagree. For discussion see John B. Carroll, ed., *Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1956), e.g., pp. 134-59.

<sup>12</sup> According to Robert H. Lowie, *Indians of the Plains* (American Museum of Natural History, 1954), p. 4, six major language families are represented on the Plains (Algonkian, Athabaskan [his spelling], Caddoan, Kiowan, Siouan, and Uto-Aztecan). Of these, most entered the Plains from other culture areas and many did so within the last few centuries (see pp. 184-93).

<sup>13</sup> *Idem*, p. 133.

<sup>14</sup> Sherzer and Bauman, *idem*, p. 132.

Valley of Mexico.<sup>15</sup> The roots of Plains Apache are in the north. Other members of the Athabaskan language family live in Alaska and Canada. That's where their linguistic relatives live. Thus, while neither group is native to the Plains, once there, they both developed identical Plains cultures. And yet linguistically, there is no relationship between them whatever.

My point here is that language – when included as a component of culture – is bedrock. It is all too true that a language can be lost in a single generation, but it is also true that language is potentially the most durable aspect of culture. It can survive changes that would unavoidably and irreversibly change all other aspects of a people's way of life. If this much is theoretical, the practical counterpart of saying so is that sometimes different goals conflict with each other and we find ourselves in the position of focusing on only one thing. Both culture preservation and language preservation are praiseworthy goals, and this is room for both, but possibly not at the same time. It is always appropriate to combine language preservation with culture preservation, but it might not always be appropriate to combine culture preservation with language preservation.

## The First Part of the Strategy

I have argued that culture and language are related in that Traditional Navajos will tend to use Navajo more than others (point 2), that culture and language can be systematically distinguished (point 3), and that, when the emphasis is on what culture and language have in common, language is a fundamental component – potentially the most fundamental component – of culture (point 4). It is capable of being lost, but it is also capable of changing less and of surviving more than other features of traditional life. With these facts in mind, we come to the first part of my proposed strategy for language maintenance.

If Christians (and students, and town dwellers, and unspecified others) use the language less than Traditional Navajos, they need language maintenance programs more than Traditional Navajos. If culture and language can be systematically distinguished, then this is a place where it would make sense to do that. If Christian Navajos use the language less, and for this need language maintenance programs more, those programs will be most effective if they are kept neutral with respect to religion so as not to offend the religious sensibilities of Christian Navajos.<sup>16</sup>

There is no need for pro-Christian content in our materials, or for pro-Old Way content, and no place for anti-Christian content, or for anti-Old Way content. All such distinctions can only divide and therefore do not bring us closer to our goal, if the goal is to maintain the

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<sup>15</sup> If there is an Aztec-Tanoan language phylum. The Ethnologue (<http://www.ethnologue.org/web.asp>) lists Uto-Aztecan and Kiowa-Tanoan separately and does not seek to relate them.

<sup>16</sup> Actually, my hypothesis and its corollary might just be wrong, or if they are right for now they might become wrong over time. The factor that could bring about such a change is the Navajo Bible, published in 1985 and revised in 2000. (A Navajo New Testament was published in 1956 and revised in 1975.) This is a remarkable achievement and, in my view, a national treasure. I don't mean it is a treasure only for Christian Navajos. It is a treasure for anyone who wants to see the Navajo language preserved and used. By the end of 2010 there will be six complete Bibles in Native North America published in the years following 1800. Of these, four are in dialects of Eskimo. (The one scheduled for completion in 2010 is Central Yupik.) The only other complete Bible in Native North American south of Canada, besides Navajo, is a Dakota translation from 1879. If the Navajo Bible attracts enough readers, this could reverse any imbalance in language use between Traditionalists and Christians.

language. If, on the other hand, the goal is culture maintenance, then that is a separate thing and different methods would be appropriate.

I submit that it is possible for a publication to be proudly and distinctively Navajo without including Old Way symbolism, or Christian symbolism. The point is to make all the People your partners. If the goal is to reach the reservation's entire population, don't do it with materials that are guaranteed to alienate half of them. I don't consider it my task to specify just what will alienate people and what won't. But this is information you will want to have before proceeding. So ask. Talk to representatives of groups with whom you disagree and solicit their input. This can only help and it might produce a level of buy in that could not have been achieved in any other way.

## Practical Suggestions

### Print media

*Hardy and Goldtooth.* Recently Tony Goldtooth and I collaborated on a small booklet for adults.<sup>17</sup> In doing this we were writing for a Christian readership, not preparing for this conference, so what we have is not an example of neutral content, but let me show you what we did and it may be that some of the ideas we used will be useful to you as you develop your own materials. First, we wrote in a bilingual format, with English on the left of each page opening and Navajo on the right. Second, we produced a companion audio book with only the Navajo pages represented. And third, we put up a web site for questions and follow up.<sup>18</sup>

Using audio books and web sites may or may not be considered practical, but as the technology becomes more widely available on the reservation, such things will become increasingly useful. There is no reason why a children's book, written as part of a language maintenance program should not be accompanied by a web site, with interactive content such as games or puzzles that reinforce the content of the book, or by an audio recording. I predict that, going forward, producing supporting materials of this sort will become routine.

*Hall.* An excellent example of the right way to do a children's book for Navajos is *Kii Baghan Haz'áągi (Kee's Home)* by Geraldine Hall.<sup>19</sup> It is attractive, nicely illustrated and published, and its bilingual format is ideal for early language learning or reinforcement. Highly recommended.

*Harvey.* For an older, though still school age readership, Frank Harvey's *Saad T'áá Aaníí Wójihígíí*<sup>20</sup> illustrates another type of approach that could hold great interest for readers. What Harvey does is discuss the origins and a lot other interesting facts about certain words and expression in common use. Harvey obviously enjoys talking about words and the result is an engaging presentation. A nice feature of this book is its footnotes, which give modern equivalents for certain older terms. It's unfortunate that the author did not want his book to be translated. He specifically requests that it not be.

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<sup>17</sup> Frank Hardy and Tony Goldtooth, *Jesus Hoł Yi'ashgo (Walking With Jesus)*, Hagerstown, MD, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> [www.thebooklet.org](http://www.thebooklet.org).

<sup>19</sup> Flagstaff: Northland Press, 1971.

<sup>20</sup> *Tsé Nitsaa Deez'áhí*, 1974.

Something the editors might consider doing differently in *Saad T'áá Aaníí Wójihígíí* derives from one of the book's strengths. It is edited with immaculate care. In fact, the transcription is so careful that it goes beyond certain standard spelling conventions in the interest of phonetic accuracy. In my opinion the goal of making a book easy to read should take precedence over the desire for minute phonetic detail – unless the author is illustrating a regional pronunciation for effect.<sup>21</sup>

The author's request not to translate the book would not have to preclude recording it. If an audio companion volume would increase this book's circulation, it would be something to consider doing. The idea behind Harvey's book, i.e., the idea of explaining the meanings behind interesting Navajo words and expressions, is terrific. We need more resources like this one.

*Various authors.* Another children's book I like is *Hai Náhásdlíí'*, produced by the Navajo Reading Studying at the University of New Mexico.<sup>22</sup> This book illustrates the sorts of things that can be done with stories for children. The stories are short, independent of each other but brought together around a common theme, and they hold interest well. If *Hai Náhásdlíí'* could be reissued with all the same polish as *Kii Baghan Haz'áagi*, it would have more presence and attract more interest. The potential is there.

*Other.* The 2000 census says that there are still 7,616 monolingual speakers of Navajo. Many of these will be older individuals with an endless storehouse of practical wisdom and experience. Biographical sketches of such individuals are a potentially rich source of inspiration for future publications – books or perhaps even a periodical – whose goal is not only to maintain the Navajo language, but to help it expand further into new territory as a vehicle for popular literacy.

*Summary.* I mention these specific books in order to address certain issues that will arise frequently in any Navajo print publication. A bilingual format, audio book companion volumes, accompanying web sites – all of these are the future. An insistence on standardized spellings and professional design will become increasingly important over time. Typing gets the information out, and it might have been adequate at one time, but this alone might not be enough to attract readers in the future. Brief stories about situations everyone can relate with (such as playing in the snow instead watching the sheep), biographical sketches of people with interesting life experiences, descriptions of unusual places on the reservation, explanations of words people use without necessarily thinking about where they came from – all of these are resources to draw on that will make reading the language inviting and enjoyable for Traditional and non-Traditional Navajos alike.

## Film

Worth and Adair (1970) report on a project where video equipment was given to a half dozen different individuals and told "to make films about 'anything you want to.'"<sup>23</sup> Worth and Adair were not interested so much in the content of these films as they were in the way they were produced and what that could tell them about Navajo thought processes. For our purposes, if film were used as a means of language maintenance, the focus would be very

<sup>21</sup> An English speaking poet who wrote extensively in various dialects is James Whitcomb Riley. There's a place for dialectal forms in writing. But there's also a place for standardized spellings.

<sup>22</sup> Various authors, Navajo Reading Study (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1975).

<sup>23</sup> Sol Worth and John Adair, "Navajo Filmmakers," *American Anthropologist*, 72:1 (February 1970), p. 9.

much on the content. The idea of making films should not be foreign to any group as artistic as Navajos are. Watching them is certainly a universally popular pastime. But in regard to training Native film makers, the concept is "that all peoples across time and cultures had all made pictures, and that movies were just another kind of picture."<sup>24</sup> Navajos should have no trouble adapting to film as a means of artistic expression, and of language use.

### Television

Speaking of television might seem like a bold leap for the Navajo Nation in 2009, but at this conference we're talking about the future. Television will certainly come to the reservation over time, and has already come to parts of it, but not in a way that can help achieve the goals of language maintenance. The Navajo Nation should consider the possibility of establishing a television presence of its own on the reservation, which can be used to improve the quality of people's lives here instead of improving the lives of advertisers in Los Angeles or New York. For Navajos this might never be a 24 hour a day service, but if people knew when to expect it, and had the necessary equipment, and if there were something being broadcast that they wanted to see and hear, they would tune in.

## Part II

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### A Vision for the Future

#### Education

There are ways in which the Navajo Nation is ahead of other Native groups. One of these is your educational system. I'm not talking here about such excellent lower level schools as Rough Rock or Round Rock, but your college system – Diné College. With multiple campuses and a baccalaureate degree, Diné College has nothing to apologize for.

A future direction Diné College should consider is that of becoming a center for the academic as well as practical study of the Navajo language. This could eventually include a masters level program in Navajo linguistics, which would need to include a comparative Apachean component.<sup>25</sup> This is something you could do, and do well. It won't happen today, or tomorrow, but it could happen. The potential is there. As such programs develop, they will shape the way in which Navajo is perceived both on and off the reservation. And just here is a major point. The shaping of attitudes toward a language is an important part of maintaining or discarding it. With better attitudes there will be a better quality of language maintenance, and not just more speakers. Let me explain what I mean.

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<sup>24</sup> Idem, p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> One thing my dissertation taught me is that, to study a language thoroughly, one must have an awareness of the historical processes still active within it. And to understand these, it is necessary to be aware of how those same processes operate in sister dialects.

## Language attitudes

Attitudes are intangible, but they are not inconsequential. As a wise person once said, *Nitsáhákees bidziil*.<sup>26</sup> I've lost the source for that quotation, but it's true and here's the place to apply it. The self concept we bring to a language shapes the choices we make in regard to how, or whether, to use it. If people feel stigmatized by using a given language, they won't use it. How can such attitudes change? Through the influence of role models. By role models I mean educated, articulate, successful Navajos who have still choose to use their language in public and with their friends.

No one questions the need for good English language skills in today's world – that's a given –, but the goal should be full bilingualism rather than merely switching to English. In this model children gain additional knowledge without losing what they have to begin with. Where did the idea come from that a person could get ahead by forgetting something, or purposely not learning it? Admittedly, not knowing English will place a person at a disadvantage, but I can't imagine a disadvantage that would follow from knowing more than this. Knowing Navajo will not put anyone behind. At least it didn't put the Code Talkers behind. What if they had grown up in forward-looking homes that saw no value in passing Navajo on to the next generation? Who knows how the war would have turned out if they had made such a decision? Reducing the scope of what we know in order to get ahead is not the way to get ahead.

## The Second Part of the Strategy

If the above vision for the future goes farther than might have been anticipated (fundamental changes of attitude toward the Navajo language and toward speakers of Navajo, masters degrees and comparative Apachean programs at Diné College, a tribally operated TV station), the starting point for getting there is much closer than one might think.

No program will ever be successful in preserving a language that no one uses. On an earlier trip to Shiprock I went to a large grocery store across town for a few items. Everyone I saw there was Navajo, but every word I heard was English. This is the sound of a language dying. There is a way to reverse the situation. Speak the language yourself. Go to the same store and, while there, speak to someone using Navajo. Make this a language you choose to use – not because you don't know the correct English word, but because you're making a conscious choice to speak the language your mother and father taught you.

Use Navajo especially with those who respect you. And who might that be? Answer: the children in your life. If you do this, they will conclude that if people they respect are willing to continue speaking Navajo, perhaps they should too. Nothing can increase their own respect for the language more than the respect they feel for you as you speak the language. Make Navajo a language you choose to use. Since not everyone is likely to do this, there are some things you can do that will achieve similar results.

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<sup>26</sup> "Thoughts are powerful."

## Practical Suggestions

### Language day care centers

In an increasingly wage-based economy there is a near universal market for day care. The age at which children start day care is often an ideal age for language learning. Establish language day care centers, in which parents understand that their children will be taught Navajo while there.<sup>27</sup> But resist the temptation to make this a pro-traditional forum. If you do, it will have the effect of alienating some who might otherwise have participated. Keep content on a level which meets the needs of all constituents and challenges no one's beliefs.

### Cartoons

Consider placing Navajo-language cartoons in the *Navajo Times* that young children will want to read. For that matter, consider publishing them separately as small magazines. We used to call these comics, or funny books. The thing about comics is that they're fun to read – or watch. On any future tribally operated TV station, consider creating animated Navajo-language cartoons. Don't let these descend to the same level as those available on English TV, but make them fun. Keep the language as simple as possible and let the subject matter be drawn from the joys and foibles of Navajo life as children on the reservation know and experience it. And make them neutral with respect to religious motifs and symbolism. Some won't want to accept this limitation, but if the goal is language maintenance, that's what will be required in order to reach your entire target audience, i.e., the entire population of the reservation.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have suggested taking a focused approach to language maintenance. When you create language maintenance materials, don't allow other goals to crowd in, regardless how desirable they might be for other reasons. Don't create programs for people who don't need them. Take a goal oriented approach and do what is required to make your program successful. If there are cultural things you want to preserve, by all means preserve them. But don't call that language maintenance.

There is another side to this. If people see their language as something that can only preserve the past, they may want to move beyond it as they move into the future. So while it might seem praiseworthy to mingle culture awareness with language maintenance, in this particular case doing that could work against you. Thus, the first part of the strategy is:

Make all the People your partners. Create materials that your entire target audience can accept. One part of doing this will involve making your materials neutral with respect to religion.

I have also argued for a better quality of language preservation, and not merely more people willing to continue speaking – if, as they speak it, the language brings up images of poverty or disadvantages in the job market. There must be a new concept of the language and a

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<sup>27</sup> The Menominee are currently using this approach to come back from near language extinction. See <http://www.jsonline.com/news/wisconsin/40907582.html>. For further information on other language renewal efforts see <http://www.kansascity.com/451/story/1047486.html>.

new self-concept on the part of speakers. Speakers of Navajo must come to see themselves as stewards of an articulate and respected vehicle of communication. The only way to project these attitudes to others is to cultivate them in oneself.

We constantly tell people, by our body language and in many other ways, how we want them to think of us. In my view, speakers of any language as rich and complex as Navajo deserve respect. But the other part of this is they must feel within themselves that such respect is appropriate. To make the needed ripple of respect start moving out across the reservation, people need role models – successful people they can respect who still choose to use the language. Attitudes can't be taught; they can only be exemplified. Each Navajo speaker who reads this paper can cultivate desirable language attitudes in him- or herself and then project them onto others by using the Navajo language when speaking to them. So the second part of the strategy is:

Be a role model. Make Navajo a language you personally choose to use. Use it with those who look up to you, and especially with the children in your life.

Together the two parts of this strategy (including everyone, but starting where you are) could go a long way toward ensuring that the Navajo language will indeed have a bright and sustainable future.