

Language Loss

By: Wilfred Jumbo (Navajo)

America has been known as a land full of opportunities and success throughout history, but there is a piece of land also known as “The Great Navajo Nation.” There, a young Navajo boy grew up in a small community called Two Grey Hills. He lived a very simple childhood playing with numerous action figures and Hot Wheels and cared for the livestock his father had. He attended Navajo ceremonies and other cultural events with his family. As years went on, he soon realized that he lived in two different worlds and had to balance, in order to succeed in life.

The depiction above about the young Navajo boy is of me, Wilfred Jumbo. In my life, the two worlds were made clear between the “Navajo World” and the “Anglo world”. Balancing the two worlds, made it difficult to speak my own Navajo language in a “White World” where it was not understood. I have seen through the years that the Navajo language is being lost which is an important issue in native communities.

The first loss of language was back in the nineteenth century when Native Americans had to be Christian, speak and dress like a European in order to be humans. The Christians did not take time to understand the culture, history, and needs of the various indigenous people. (Weaver 30). Native Americans were to forget their previous “savage” ways of thinking and to stop speaking their native tongue. This process of losing one’s identity and speaking, acting, and dressing like someone else is called assimilation.

Like many other indigenous people, the Navajos are in a language shift. This language shift is when fewer and fewer heritage language speakers are lost every generation. When children forget their Navajo language, what will be their shield as they move into the future? The Navajo language is what makes Navajos unique and gives them a form of identity. Knowing the language is going to Fort Sumner and coming back it what it is worth (McCarty 179). This means the Navajos had fought hard to survive in order to keep their culture alive. The survivors of the Long Walk returned as Dine and their identity held strong. Songs, prayers, greetings, blessings, stories, science, philosophy, and geography are constructed through the language (McCarty 180). Without language, a Navajo might survive physically but not culturally. When Natives lose language, they lose part of themselves (Davidson 11).

As generations come and go, some changes are natural because evolution is a part of life, but natives must resist the sudden intrusive changes that are imposed upon them. As indigenous people, natives have to articulate what we mean by change; define what we perceive as essential to our life. Natives have to refuse to accept others blindly, perceptions of progress (Davidson 42). Just as their people were in the past as warriors, so natives must be warriors on these new battlefields, fighting all fierce changes to the way of life.

A way the Navajos prevented the loss of language and identity is in a community called Rock Point. On the Navajo reservation, a school opened named Rock Point Community School. In 1960, a man named Wayne Holm, a non-Navajo, began working

at Rock Point to help improve the BIA school's English as a second language (ESL) program because the students were struggling to learn the English language.

Rock Point started a Navajo/English bilingual education program in 1967 because of low-test scores. This remained limited until 1971, when the school received funds under the Bilingual Education Act passed by Congress in 1968, which President Lyndon Johnson signed (Reyhner 26). In the bilingual education, students were taught subjects such as reading, mathematics, and science in their own Navajo language, while also taught to read, write, and speak in English.

With natives preserving identity, writers are using the Native American Literatures books as a helpful tool. The only problem is how you define Native American Literature. James Ruppert shares his definition of a Native American Literature this way: "The successful contemporary Native writer can create a text that merges delegitimizing influences while continuing oral tradition and culture (Leap 24)." Native American writers are those of Native American blood and background who affirm their heritage in their individual ways as do writers in all cultures. As an example Luci Tapahonso has written poetry in English but now prefers to express herself in the native language that carries her culture and thought world.

Non-native Americans cannot refresh Native American languages. However culturally sensitive linguists and others can help them survive. Successful language revitalization efforts are dependant on family and community support. When children are very young they need to speak and hear their mother tongue. Ideally, first language is learned in the home (Davidson 47). As we now know, English is very powerful

widespread, but unless indigenous people work locally and international so their languages will not vanish. An old trick that has worked for many natives to keep from getting lost is, every now and then; look back over your shoulder to see where you are coming from. Perhaps it is time for natives to look back over the way they had come from.

Many young Native Americans are succeeding in post-secondary institutions across the world, while maintaining and sharing their Native American identities, while other young Native Americans are trying to balance their existence between two worlds. Finding a balance between two societies is strenuous and demanding, but there is a need for synergy to create stability, which will provide maintenance to their Native heritage, as well as, succeeding in the national and global worlds. There are many young Native Americans incorporating both values of their lives in a comprehensive approach, where traditional and cultural values are carried out without forgetting the contemporary aspects of the majority society.

I am Navajo but also sought to be the all-American high school student. My Navajo heritage and identity is balanced with my non-Native customs, because I make an effort of putting to use both worlds in my daily lifestyle. I do attend a school where education is based off Navajo philosophy but I realized that every student came from different backgrounds because most individuals grew up without any knowledge of their culture and language. Navajo Prep is still located on Navajo Nation but the majority of the time is predominated by non-Navajo values, but communication over the phone with my parents and close relatives in the Navajo language refreshes my Navajo linguistic

capabilities. In addition, I listen to my Native music and try to teach and inform my peers about their Navajo heritage and identity.

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