Lessons from Fort Apache
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Linguistic anthropology evolved in the 20th century in an environment that tended to reify language and culture. A recognition of the dynamics of discourse as a socio-cultural process has since emerged as researchers have used new methods and theories to examine the reproduction and transformation of people, institutions, and communities through linguistic practices. This transformation of linguistic anthropology itself heralds a new era for publishing as well. *Wiley-Blackwell Studies in Discourse and Culture* aims to represent and foster this new approach to discourse and culture by producing books that focus on the dynamics that can be obscured by such broad and diffuse terms as “language.” This series is committed to the ethnographic approach to language and discourse: ethnographic works deeply informed by theory, as well as more theoretical works that are deeply grounded in ethnography. The books are aimed at scholars in the sociology and anthropology of language, anthropological linguistics, sociolinguistics, and socioculturally informed psycholinguistics. It is our hope that all books in the series will be widely adopted for a variety of courses.

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Lessons from Fort Apache
Beyond Language Endangerment and Maintenance

M. Eleanor Nevins
The Americanist tradition, having begun as the study of languages of a fading past and far west, will find fruition as the study of the language of citizens.


Dustinn Craig (White Mountain Apache) designed the cover art for this book. He grew up in White River on the Fort Apache reservation. He now lives in Mesa, Arizona, where he and his wife, writer Velma Kee Craig, are co-directors of the film and media design company White Springs Creative, LLC. He provides the following statement to help explain the meaning of the elements incorporated into the jacket cover:

“In this cover, the four crosses represent the four directions, but in my interpretation of them and the various philosophies behind them, they represent balance, harmony and clarity of thought, the foundation for developing language to convey thought, feeling, intellect. The stars represent the vastness of the universe, and also demonstrate the indigenous awareness of the magnitude of ‘creation.’ This awareness of how small we are instills in us humility and gratitude for the language that conveys and communicates our life way and historical experience. The trees are incorporated to emphasize being rooted into the land, being part of the landscape, not separate from it. In the same way we are just part of the vast universe, so how could we as tiny beings ever proclaim that we know what comes next, or the mind or minds of creation?”
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This book would not have been possible without the generosity, care and guidance of Eva Lupe. I owe a great debt of thanks to her and to members of her extended family, especially Vera Lupe, Leo Cruz, Annette Tenejieth, Gary Lupe, Everett Lupe, Arlene Natan, and Valerie Lupe. I also thank Paul Ethelbah and Genevieve Ethelbah, Genevie Chinche, Cline Griggs, Ramon Riley, Dustinn Craig, and many others who helped along the way, some of whom prefer to remain anonymous. Thanks also to Charles R. Kaut, whose more than fifty-year association with Nelson Lupe and with the communities of East Fork and Whiteriver helped make it plausible that admitting two “kids from Virginia” might be worth the risk. I am grateful to lessons learned from Nelson Lupe, Jerry Lupe, Carmen Lupe, and Rebekah Lupe: it is my intention to honor their memories here.

In the body of the monograph all names have been changed in order to protect the privacy of those who worked with me. My goal has been to portray the kinds of innovation at play at Fort Apache and to suggest parallels in other indigenous communities. There are many instances when the words of people who worked with me, and of the Apache interlocutors of prior researchers, are represented in this monograph. The former were parts of dialogues, recorded performances, and exchanges over the course of three years. My status as a researcher was part of the framing of these exchanges for all involved, and included the anticipation that publications on the model of those in circulation from Keith Basso’s work would be the likely result. Most of the quotes from consultants were tape recorded
in open-ended interview or storytelling sessions. Some were from untaped conversations that I have rendered from memory and doublechecked for accuracy and for permission to use with the persons involved. The status of ethnographic relations is ongoing and reciprocal. I take responsibility for having been given these words for use in this work of scholarship by my consultants and I note that their receipt entails further obligations to maintain good faith relations with those consultants and their words. I also make use of speeches and stories given by Lawrence Mithlo to Harry Hoijer in Hoijer’s 1938 text collection, *Chiricahua and Mescalero Apache with Ethnological Notes by Morris Opler* (Chicago: University of Chicago Publications in Anthropology, Linguistic Series). I thank the University of Chicago Press for permission to reprint extended excerpts of those texts and their translations in this work.

The chapters of this book were developed over more than ten years and have benefited from the critical contributions of many people. Of these it is Tom Nevins, my colleague and spouse, whose creative influence, shared experience, and support pervade every chapter, and without whose sacrifice of time and attention this book would never have been written. I also express here my enduring gratitude to Dell Hymes for his encouragement and critical engagement with this project from its very beginnings. The example he set in living and the wake he left in passing continue to channel and embolden my efforts. I owe debts of gratitude to Dick Bauman, Paul Kroskrity, and James Collins for having, at different junctures, provided needed encouragement, criticism, and theoretical tools, and filled gaps in my knowledge of disciplinary history. I warmly thank Jim Wilce for his editorial and practical acumen in moving this book project along and for inviting me to Northern Arizona University to air some of my arguments in front of an audience whose work and experience directly intertwined with my subject matter! Thanks also to the editorial board of the Wiley-Blackwell Discourse and Culture Series for their helpful critical responses to the book proposal and chapter samples. And I am especially grateful to two anonymous reviewers for reading the full manuscript and providing thorough assessments of the whole and its parts. Where I was able to incorporate suggested changes they have improved the manuscript. There were some suggested expansions that would have been well worth addressing, but which time and space constraints compel me to defer to future work.

I have benefited from engagement with a lively cohort of Southern Athabaskanists: Tony Webster, David Samuels, Margaret Field, Willem de Reuse, and Phillip Greenfeld. Many of the ethnographic and textual materials presented here took presentable form as they bounced out of dialogues with and among these colleagues, or were developed in conference sessions organized by them.
Individual chapters of this book benefit from critical readings given to them by Ilana Gershon, Paul Manning, Magnus Course, Matthew Engelke, Eve Danziger, Ellen Contini-Morava, Bonnie Urciuoli, Erin Stiles, and Sarah Cowie. Special thanks are due to Ilana Gershon, whose suggestions for a radical restructure of the second chapter prompted me to write something much better than what I started with, and had a happy spill-over effect on the book as a whole.

Thanks are also due to Debra Harry and Leonie Pihama for answering my questions concerning decolonization in research relations as this is being discussed among indigenous scholars and activists in global forums like the United Nations and in university indigenous studies programs in the Pacific.

I single out for salutation Nick Thieberger, Brook Lillehaugen, and Lise Dobrin, all of whom helped me to better understand how my arguments were likely to be received by documentary linguists and challenged me to refine and improve my presentation. Broadcasting an argument across disciplinary audiences is the most challenging aspect of this book and I benefited immensely from our discussions. The “Phantom Linguist” cartoon in Chapter 5 is taken from Nick Thieberger’s field linguistics course materials and reproduced here with his permission.

Dustinn Craig designed the book cover. He was my co-worker fourteen years ago at Ndee Benadesh, when he was a high school student already making films and cartoons for youth media projects and I was a graduate student working on language materials. He is now an accomplished professional film-maker, educator, and graphic artist. It is a real pleasure to find myself in a new relation to him, years later, both of us “grown up” now in our respective fields.

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Introduction

Every language reflects a unique world-view with its own value systems, philosophy and particular cultural features. The extinction of a language results in the irrecoverable loss of unique cultural knowledge embodied in it for centuries . . . (UNESCO 2011)

Native identities are traces, the *différance* of an unnameable presence, not mere statutes, inheritance, or documentation, however bright the blood and bone in the museums. (Vizenor 1998:35)

I begin with a consideration of the meanings attributed to indigenous languages and cultures by differently placed actors. For example, both quotes that appear as epigraphs for this introduction express affiliation with indigenous peoples, and both imply opposition to forces that would disempower them. Yet the two statements, one from UNESCO and the other from a prominent Anishinaabe author and literary critic, sit uncomfortably next to one another. The first is typical of funded documentation and maintenance projects and presents indigenous languages in relation to concepts like “worldview,” “value system,” “philosophy,” and “cultural knowledge,” all of which suggest broad commensurability with mainstream institutions. The quote reflects use of “endangerment” as a resource mobilization tactic for research and education program funding, and for influencing language policies. This is coupled implicitly with the notion of “language rights,” which casts indigenous languages within a logic of multicultural inclusion, or fair representation, within participatory democracies. It also places indigenous languages, and by implication all attendant institutions of indigenous knowledge and cultural property, at the brink of extinction and requiring technocratic forms of intervention if they are to be saved.
The second quote takes a different tack. Vizenor casts doubt upon mainstream terms of recognition: “not mere statutes, inheritance, or documentation,” and locates Native voices elsewhere, in an “unnameable presence,” or in “traces” that require radical acts of reinterpretation in order to be perceived. Importantly for problems of indigenous language advocacy, the two conflict in the role each attributes to documentation, and in the possibilities and limitations for recognition of indigenous voices therein. In the chapters that follow I present an ethnographic account of contrasts and conflicts in claims to Apache language among residents of the Fort Apache reservation in Arizona that reflect this kind of divide. Doing so reveals some of the covert politics of language documentation and maintenance, and provides a basis for bringing additional considerations into efforts to support indigenous languages and communities.

The past twenty years has seen copious scholarship devoted to language endangerment and maintenance: conferences, articles, edited volumes, books on documenting languages and developing language education materials, along with a few ethnographies of language shift and/or maintenance. A portion of this literature also addresses terms of collaboration between scholars of indigenous languages and community members. However, much of this is framed too narrowly, to the question of “how to make language revitalization work,” rather than to larger questions of processes of social mediation entailed by language programs, and the often ambivalent uptake of programs within the communities they purport to serve. Many scholars and activists treat community ambivalence as if it can be attributed to an anti-heritage language camp whose members want to assimilate to mainstream norms and shift away from their heritage languages, pitched against a pro-heritage language camp whose members want to hold to tradition and accentuate ways the community is different from the surrounding society. With this book I open up another dimension of the problem: that heritage language programs, utilizing ideologies and textual models from the dominant society, assert notions of language, and authorize ways of knowing language, that compete with other forms of authority and other language practices in many indigenous communities. Therefore, in addition to “language documentation” ethnographic attention to social relations of speaking would be usefully added to efforts to engage with communities on language issues that concern them.

As the title suggests, the book tacks between a firsthand ethnographic account of language dynamics on the Fort Apache reservation, comparable work by other linguistic anthropologists in other indigenous communities, and broader questions about language maintenance as a site of engagement between indigenous communities and the sociopolitical orders that encompass them. While one point of the book is certainly to throw into relief
ways in which language maintenance programs extend the discourses and institutions of encompassing polities, I also want to complicate any account that would reduce language programs to “internal colonialism.” Rather, my purpose is to situate language maintenance efforts more accurately within the ongoing dialectics of which they are a part. I demonstrate that many of the empowering effects of indigenous language programs can occur outside the purview of the programs themselves. A signature quality of many, I might add, is that they are rarely described by anyone as truly accomplishing what they set out to do – so as ostensible instruments of power they are full of gaps and interpretive openings. Most importantly, by recontextualizing local speech as cultural heritage, language documentation and maintenance programs cast local languages as carriers of value and as key terms of recognition in national and global arenas. In turn, members of local leadership recontextualize the products of documentation that come to represent a “heritage language” in culture centers and schools to their own dynamic purposes, retaining traces of national and international significance but subsuming these to ongoing local practices and concerns.

Ultimately, what I hope this book contributes is a precedent and a set of interpretive tools that facilitate recognition of differences in orientation between the ostensibly cooperative, but sometimes clashing, parties to “saving” a language. The ethnographic accounts I present should be viewed with this in mind. They represent my best efforts to engage with residents of the Fort Apache reservation on language issues that concerned them. They bear all the partiality of my conditions of access and theoretical orientation. I do not claim to present in any comprehensive way a portrait of Apache language shift (cf. Adley Santa-Maria 1997, 1998) or how the “White Mountain Apache” interpret language maintenance. What I do claim is to provide an account of the kinds of innovation and social complexity at play at the intersection of university-trained language experts (of which I was one, as were some of my consultants who were members of the tribe and who worked as Apache language teachers) and differently positioned actors (for example, elders, parents, and religious leaders) within this indigenous community, and reasons why similar innovative and conflictual dynamics are likely in language efforts elsewhere. My goal is to provide a means by which to listen to diverse community voices by establishing a framework through which to anticipate processes of (creative) misrecognition in indigenous language advocacy.

Throughout the book I refer to the area in which my consultants lived as “the Fort Apache reservation” and I often refer to them as “reservation residents.” This is in contrast to recent changes in terms of self-representation adopted by different offices of the tribe, who use the “White Mountain Apache Reservation” or “White Mountain Apache
Lands.” I adopt “Fort Apache reservation” here because to do so specifies a history of colonial encounter that otherwise anchors my account. The use of “Fort Apache” also locates the representational claims of the present account in that ambivalent history and positions my voice differently from those of White Mountain Apache persons, who have their own.

**Structure of the Book**

In the next chapter, entitled “Indigenous Languages and the Mediation of Communities,” I attempt to reset the frame from “languages” as objects of documentary knowledge to the symbolic role indigenous languages play in the mediation of communities within encompassing sociopolitical orders. In doing this, I adopt two strategies. First, I offer an ethnographic description of the ambivalent responses that my presence as a language researcher, and the language programs with which I was involved, provoked in persons whom I encountered in the Fort Apache speech community. I show that there is a quality of relativity to terms like “language loss,” “heritage,” “language maintenance,” “cultural survival,” such that meanings across different sectors of the Fort Apache community only apparently coincided with those imputed to the terms by researchers and educators.

And, second, I trace a history through which “saving endangered languages” has emerged as a point of global relevance for indigenous communities as well as for the language-oriented disciplines. Language maintenance, as an extension of notions of language rights, is identified as a liberal democratic discourse that bears similarly upon many indigenous communities due to parallels in histories of colonial disruption and engagement. I identify why language endangerment and maintenance represents an improvement over assimilationist policies in negotiated terms of political coordination. I propose reasons why, at the intersection of an encompassing national regime and an indigenous-identified community, there can be both political alliance and a challenge of fit between academic maintenance discourses and alternatives circulating within local communities. I make the case that ambivalence in community reception should be anticipated and recognized, because it is not at all trivial to the political role of research and maintenance programs. Chapter 2 establishes the broad argument that some ethnographic inquiry into local meanings is therefore necessary in order to attend to alternative community discourses otherwise obscured by the terms and practices of documentation and educational language programs.

In the third chapter, entitled: “Learning to Listen: Coming to Terms with Conflicting Meanings of Language Loss,” I tell the story of how I
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gradually became aware of different understandings of language loss between home and school environments on the Fort Apache reservation and the role these differences played in controversies surrounding language programs. I elaborate the way different language ideologies found expression in the contrasting pedagogies and socialization practices of extended family homes, on the one hand, and school language programs, on the other. I describe how a language program with which I was involved became embroiled in controversy because it brought these contrasting language ideologies and pedagogies into conflict with one another. I suggest that other language programs described in the broader literature occasion similar controversies and can be understood in relationship to conflicting language ideologies, conflicting pedagogies and socialization practices across extended family-centered and school-centered social contexts.

My fourth chapter: “They Live in Lonesome Dove: English in Indigenous Places” describes the use of English language mass media place names on the Fort Apache reservation in order to illustrate one, often overlooked, dimension of language shift: the use of a colonial language of wider circulation to assert, among other things, the contemporary relevance of indigenous voices (e.g. Dobrin 2012). Just as language maintenance programs subsume indigenous languages within a nationalist framework by posing indigenous grammars and texts as items of cultural property; indigenous communities very often appropriate historically colonizing languages to their own purposes, seizing upon them to pursue their own ends in their own way precisely because they are strange and connote places at a remove from familiar everyday life. I illustrate this with an example from the Fort Apache reservation in which English language mass media discourse is used to coin playful names for newly constructed neighborhoods, which are then officialized on government maps and street signs. By using idioms from English language commercial discourse for official place names, and placing these on road signs and maps, reservation residents subvert dominant expectations as they also project their voices in ways that resonate beyond the local. These are strategic acts of community definition, which draw upon established naming practices to pose shared jokes as terms of community belonging. With these names reservation residents simultaneously communicate their difference from surrounding nonindigenous communities as well as their participation in a global, mass media-infused world.

Chapter 5, entitled “Stories in the Moment of Encounter: Documentation Boundary Work,” examines language documentation as a form of cultural encounter to which linguists and the people they work with bring contrasting purposes and strategies. I trace a history of Apache documentary encounters from mission philology to salvage linguistics to contemporary documentary concerns with saving indigenous languages.
The documentation produced by linguists is often taken by language experts, and by the broader public interested in endangered languages, as the purpose of the interaction. In this chapter I attempt to make other purposes and voices audible. I compare two collected texts, which are also accounts of Apache lives: one spoken by Lawrence Mithlo to Harry Hoijer and published in a 1938 text collection, and another spoken by Rebekah Moody to me in 1996. First, I show that neither is cast by its speaker as neutral information. Rather, both are extensions of an oratorical strategy labeled *bá’hadziih*, through which the speaker presents a group with which s/he identifies to an audience that includes those figured as Other. Through *bá’hadziih* the speaker attempts to transform the relationship between her own group and the addressed Others by first invoking what the speaker anticipates to be the image held of her group from the Other’s point of view and then posing terms for its transformation. The difference between the framing purposes of documentation and *bá’hadziih* defines language research as an encounter between persons engaged in contrasting regimes of meaning.

In the sixth chapter: “What No Coyote Story Means: The Borderland Genre of Traditional Storytelling,” I treat Coyote stories, not as items of cultural knowledge, but as a voice at the edge of familiarity and otherness. I portray histories of storytelling (Kroskrity 2012) that span the colonial and documentary encounter with focus upon the transformative actions of “Coyote.” I attend to the poetic devices of Apache language traditional storytelling and show that the same features that mark them as traditional stories for language and culture documentation serve a different function in family storytelling. In the latter, storytelling orients participants to persons and landscapes as agents whose continuing influences bear upon the lives of listeners. I draw attention to the difference in relations of authority when family storytelling is repackaged as items of cultural knowledge in a school curriculum or culture center. I qualify this, though, by noting that indigenous language and culture instruction in schools is domain-specific and not totalizing, existing alongside other domains of use and other ideological processes.

The seventh chapter, “‘Some “No No” and Some “Yes”’: Silence, Agency, and Traditionalist Words,” addresses the fact that it is not at all uncommon for heritage language program developers in Native American communities to encounter restrictions posed by local religious leaders upon what can and cannot be included in school programs. For different reasons, both Traditionalists and Apache Independent Christians police school programs to insure the exclusion of words and idioms associated with Traditionalist ceremony. Some curriculum developers have lamented the silence of heritage language programs on religious tradition, noting that this excludes entire canons of oral literature and song, and reduces the teaching...
of the native language to prosaic matters, less likely to compete with English language use for the attention of young people. I propose an apparent paradox: that the silence of school programs on sacred language in fact indicates the continuing power of such language, and of local leadership who insist on its prohibition from the schools. On the Fort Apache reservation this power, linked to the continuing relevance of Apache language, is evident in the emergence of vibrant Apache language innovations outside of education programs. Two opposed religious identities: Traditionalists and Apache Independent Christians, utilize different elements of a loosely share repertoire of Apache language genres, rhetorical forms, and poetics to appropriate the Christian Bible to their own meanings and purposes. I propose that this and analogous local appropriations of symbolically global texts might be considered alongside language programs as alternate sites of production in which a heritage language is wielded by members of the community as they negotiate relations to one another and to wider exogenous national and global orders.

I conclude with a short chapter suggesting “Possible Socialities of Documentation and Maintenance,” where I draw some of the implications of the preceding chapters for more politically symmetrical language documentation and advocacy work.

My Approach

A key argument of the book is that indigenous languages exist at the threshold between indigenous communities and surrounding social orders and figure importantly into community definition at that juncture (Merlan 2009). Therefore, concerns with saving or supporting indigenous languages are articulated at the same threshold, and have a complicated relationship with local communicative practices because they are often dually articulated through historically imposed institutions like schools, on the one hand, and across generations in extended families, on the other. My concern throughout this book is to set this as the frame within which to analyze not only the play of indigenous language issues in institutions (like schools) that clearly articulate with state, federal, and international discourses; but to also recognize how community members employ language in ways relevant to local notions of indigeneity to pose alternate definitions of community, centered in family, place, and often through explicitly religious discourse.

I focus my investigation upon sites of engagement with encompassing social orders such as schools, reception of mass media, and Christianity. I show how the imputed authentic indigeneity of one’s speech is often
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at stake in self and community definitions, but figured differently across
different social contexts. At all three “sites” it is plausible to trace extensions
and transplants of institutions and discourses from outside the reservation.
Within these transplanted institutions there are strong interpretive pressures
to draw contrasts and comparisons between Apache and English languages
through terms established in the institutions of the encompassing society.
However, educational, mass media, and Christian discursive materials are
also met with and recontextualized (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Silverstein
and Urban 1996; Spitulnik 1997) within the discursive practices of extended
families and clans, and are often transformed in their reception and use
within the terms of precedents established therein (see Nevins 2008, 2010b).
In this way, I elaborate a complex local-global social field in which indigeneous
languages and acts of language use have meaning.

Another aspect of this book that distinguishes it from other ethnographic
treatments of indigenous language issues is the use of the notion (adapted
from Hanks 1986; Hymes 1966; Keane 2007; Wagner 1981) that there are
multiple modes of discursive action, or discursive regimes (also Gal 1998;
Kroskrity 2000), at play in many communities, with different entailments
for reflecting upon “language” and what it might mean to save or lose such
a thing. Minimally, we can identify one pole of contrast with a discursive
regime (premised on the a priori alienability of individual persons, lan-
guages, and goods) centered in historically imposed institutions like schools,
missions, and businesses; and another (premised on temporally deep flows
involving persons, language, and land) centered in extended family and
quasi-familial contexts, including feasts, harvests, ceremonies, and religious
revivalism (Nevins and Nevins forthcoming). To approach language and
the ways people reflect upon it, I focus upon texts, and ideological pro-
cesses of contextualization and recontextualization (following Hanks 1986;
Keane 2007; Kroskrity 2004; Silverstein 1996), for the window these
provide upon ways that members of indigenous communities orient to one
another and to more extended global orders (also Nevins 2010a). The sorts
of texts (following Hanks 1989) I discuss range from individual Apache
words to place names, stories, songs, personal names, speeches/oratory,
names of cosmological figures, but also English language phrases from
church, school, and media discourse. Such items are circulated across mul-
tiple sites and their meaning and evaluation transformed through recontext-
tualization (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Silverstein and Urban 1996).

To sum up for now, as the dueling statements with which I began this
chapter illustrate, there is gap between indigeneity as a term in ethnonational
discourses and the place that it holds as a link in a historical chain of events
between a colonizing national entity and indigenous sociocultural practices
based on other terms. Some kind of alterity, that “unnameable presence”
described by Vizenor (1998), looms in the very premise of indigeneity, but, as he indicates, has a complicated relationship to documentation efforts. Therefore, the nature of my comment upon language endangerment and maintenance rhetoric is to place qualifications and limits upon it, limits drawn from recognizing alternate voices, pedagogies, and claims upon language in indigenous communities. For many language programs that have stood the test of time, this process of attending to community critique and accommodating community intervention is already familiar in practice, but not built into the explicit theories informing programs and planning. By defining indigenous languages as a “matter of concern” (Latour 2004), the rhetoric of endangerment directly supports linguistic documentation and school maintenance programs; but it also set new conditions for innovation that extend beyond the purview of linguistic experts.

Community critiques, controversies, and interventions into indigenous language programs tend to be both underreported and poorly understood in the indigenous language endangerment literature. In many accounts of language programs, such things are treated obliquely, as obstacles to be avoided to clear the way for the “real work” of documentation and maintenance. Given the embattled placement of most indigenous languages relative to majority languages, some linguists advocate avoiding community controversies on the rationale that one should not “air dirty laundry,” or that muddying the advocacy narrative with social complications would only hamper public support for those fragile efforts that are underway. My intention is to open up the discussion of language maintenance to allow for the fact that language programs figure importantly in community empowerment, but not always in ways their designers anticipate or intend. The present effort is an attempt to enable recognition of community criticisms and interventions into maintenance programs, not as noise or obstacles to progress, but as relevant to indigenous community empowerment more broadly conceived.

Ethnography can help reframe the “noise” of community critique of language programs into alternate claims to authority and into alternate definitions of community that are themselves germane to the ongoing relevance of indigenous languages. On the Fort Apache reservation, as elsewhere, language programs are politically necessary and desired by many, but they do not exist in a vacuum. I will show how multiple ways of “doing language” coexist, interpenetrate, and sometimes conflict with one another in community language efforts. These alternatives have relevance to the political status of language programs, particularly in whether they are perceived as empowering or alienating. I elaborate an account of these processes on the Fort Apache reservation in order to make the broader suggestion that for indigenous communities in parallel historical
circumstances elsewhere we can expect that diverse ways of objectifying and reflecting upon language are also to be found, and that they reflect the meaning and functioning of language efforts in parallel ways.

References


Indigenous Languages and the Mediation of Communities

A Difficult Morning

It is 7:30 a.m. on a Monday morning in 1998, a year and a half into a nearly three-year ethnographic field term. The phone rings as I am having coffee and toast with Tom, my spouse (and a cultural anthropologist) at our rental in Pinetop-Lakeside, a reservation border town. We were preparing to make the twenty-minute drive to work in an office where we were both paid by the tribe’s health authority to develop Apache language curricula for circulation in the reservation schools via the tribe’s server. I pick up the phone and hear a loud, angry-sounding male voice: “This is Carl Collard, tribal attorney, and I am calling to tell you to cease and desist from all work on the language project. Call off your film crew and present the tribe with all your tapes. Cease and desist.” I had heard from members of the tribe’s cultural advisory board that the tribe’s legal office was currently pursuing several lawsuits against film companies, and against an international amusement park, all of whom had broken terms of permission for filming and commercially reproducing an Apache girl’s coming of age ceremony called the Sunrise Dance. I was alarmed that our work was now being perceived in the same light. I tried to explain that I was not involved in any commercial venture but was a linguistic anthropologist hired by the tribe as a consultant to develop Apache language curricula. I noted that the project was run by an educational office of the tribe and directed by tribal members. I told him that I did not have a film crew, but did have an old 8mm camera that I, along with several tribal members, including employees of the tribe’s culture center, had used for filming a Sunrise Dance as part of a project jointly sponsored by that office and the Arizona Humanities Council. I was still in the process of producing copies of the tapes for
all the families who participated as well as for the culture center, as stipulated in the Arizona Humanities Council grant award that he could find on file at the culture center. I also directed him to the dissertation research proposal I had submitted to the tribe and to the subsequent proposals submitted for language materials development projects through various tribal offices. I wanted him to know I was not trying to hide what I was doing, or to steal anything from the tribe, but this only provoked him to yet louder reiterations of “cease and desist.”

A group of us at the health authority had been working for roughly nine months on the Ndee Biyati’ Apache Language project, where our purpose was to create language materials that were to be hosted on the tribe’s server and accessible through it to reservation schools. We had developed an interactive alphabet, narrative-based activities placed in a “typical” extended family household that was rendered with the drawings of a talented young Apache cartoonist, as well as a unit on clan names and kinship terms. We had just begun to present these in venues that included the tribe’s culture center, several classrooms in schools on the reservation, and an intertribal education conference. In all venues they were received with apparent enthusiasm. However, with increased circulation came rumors, and, to add tension to the mix, this was an election year, with council seats and the tribal chairmanship at stake. Some candidates running for the council voiced criticism of the project’s reliance upon computers, and cast doubt upon the motivations of the nontribal members involved (myself and my husband) at political meetings that were reported upon in the tribe’s newspaper, the Fort Apache Scout. In the same week the computer lab at Alchesay high school was broken into and vandalized, leaving each monitor disabled. As I will explore in greater detail in the following chapter, the language project was singled out for criticism along several fronts, which rode atop a political dynamic in which affiliation against the project was part of ongoing election year politics. I thought (correctly) that the attorney’s call was the end of the language project, and I also worried (needlessly, as it turned out) that it meant the end of my relations to many of my ethnographic consultants as well.

When the chairmanship is at stake, there are usually two candidates, and all the council candidates affiliate with one or the other of the chair candidates. Campaign events, accompanied by feasts and speeches, are held in the yards of extended families, with political affiliation to councilman and chair traced along relations of kinship. For any given family the effect is to talk about one’s own group and candidates in first person plural and to refer to political opponents as “the other side.” Like everyone else, we had friends and consultants on both sides of the election year political divide, but were closest with the extended family of Rebekah Moody, who had a brother running for tribal council and a brother-in-law running for the
chairmanship. Consistent with the political nature of family alliance, I was one of the many women who were not Rebekah Moody’s biological daughters, but who were conferred a sort of diplomatic kin status. I addressed and referred to her as *shimaa*, or ‘my mother’ and she addressed and introduced me as *shizhaazhé West Virginia*, or ‘my daughter from West Virginia,’ often playfully, or in ways that suggested that the term as applied to our relation was always a creative act. She and others also commonly referred to me in casual conversations among the family as *ndah it’één*, or ‘White girl.’ The ambivalence of our relation as both kin and *ndah*, or Other/White, was sometimes a source of tension in the broader family, but also a focus of interest, joking, and creativity. In our work with the language project it was the members of Rebekah Moody’s extended family who had at times offered the most thoroughgoing criticisms of the project design (treated at length in Chapter 3), but who, even so, also devoted a good deal of their time as unpaid consultants helping develop the Apache language content.

Tom and I were concerned that association with two now controversial *ndah*/White researchers might prove to be a political liability for the people closest to us across the several offices and families with whom we were involved. We prepared ourselves for the possibility of losing friends, quasi-family, and consultants in this heated political climate, especially now that I had been identified a persona non grata by the tribal attorney’s office. I knew of another linguist who had left the community after being asked to stop working with the tribe on language efforts because of parallel conflicts. So there was some basis for anticipating estrangement.

As it turns out, becoming the target of political and legal attacks did sever our relations with the particular language project, but it brought all our other consultants in Rebekah Moody’s family and in other tribal education offices into closer dialogue, involvement, and empathy with us. Suddenly we were enmeshed in many of the same conflicts and paradoxes that they had to deal with. “Now you know what it’s like,” was something we heard many times, and comments like “everyone says they want to save the language but when you try something, they don’t want it.” By running up against acrimonious opposition and by publicly failing to complete a project, we had become involved in dynamics that were recognizable and a source of shared stories and troubles with many in the reservation community. We learned that language projects, and persons – including tribal members – associated with them, were often received ambivalently and often became the target of controversy, despite the fact that nearly everyone voices concern about keeping Apache language going in the face of apparent loss in fluency among young people. The ambivalence and volatility
we encountered was widespread – experienced by outsiders and tribal members alike on the Fort Apache reservation.

One of the motivations for writing this book is that Fort Apache is not unique in this respect. Conflicts surrounding indigenous language projects are common, but with notable exceptions (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1998; Hofling 1996; Wilkins 2000), remain underreported in the language maintenance literature. When I have presented papers about conflicts surrounding the Ndee Biyati’ Apache Language Project to audiences that include those involved in indigenous language documentation and maintenance, I am inevitably approached by audience members who share similar stories from the communities in which they work. That is, other language projects in other indigenous communities occasion controversies despite apparently widespread interests in “saving” a language. With this book I suggest that ambivalence emerges from contrasting ways of reflecting upon language, and contrasting ways of contextualizing language in social relations. In the chapters that follow I will draw out paradoxes and conflicts surrounding Apache language, or Ndee Bik’ehgo Biyatí’, on the Fort Apache reservation and suggest that parallel dynamics can be found in other indigenous communities. I argue that such contrasts are implicit in the terms through which indigenous communities are related to surrounding socio-political orders and are germane to the meaning and political status of indigenous language maintenance efforts in ways that often go unrecognized by language planners.

Relevance of Endangerment and Maintenance

Language endangerment is a matter of concern (Latour 2004) voiced by linguists and by members of many indigenous communities, and this concern provides a vector of mutual relevance and therefore a basis for university-accredited language professionals to engage with issues that members of the broader public care about. It was certainly relevant to my engagement with residents of the Fort Apache reservation. And, in my position as a professor at University of Nevada Reno, language maintenance has been the focus of conversations initiated by Paiute, Washoe, and Shoshone language educators, all requesting forms of greater university involvement in their language efforts. Linguists and other language experts use the authority they have acquired through university accreditation to advocate for funding and institutional support for programs designed to save and maintain endangered indigenous languages.
Distinct from the local community discourses that will be the focus of the rest of this book, minority language advocacy is almost always advanced across another contentious political field: that of state and national politics. Here advocates for minority languages face opponents in the form of majoritarian, “English-Only,” or other monoglot standard (Silverstein 1996), language movements. Becoming involved as both a researcher and an advocate for the development of community infrastructure is profoundly immersive. The struggle to build infrastructure in the face of institutional inertia in the schools and in the face of opposition in state governments provides terms of coordination and common cause between researchers and communities.

My research term, like that of other linguists and ethnographers on the Fort Apache and neighboring San Carlos reservation, occurred within a political climate in Arizona that, following similar developments in California, was perceived by many reservation residents as increasingly threatening for indigenous and other minority languages. Most of the legislation hostile to Native American languages that people were discussing during my field term was drafted in order to marginalize another linguistic minority with indigenous ancestry but whose colonial legacy afforded different terms of identification: Spanish-speaking immigrants from Mexico. On the Fort Apache reservation political sympathies ran to the immigrants. Reflecting a history of raiding and trading with Mexican villages, one of the more common clan affiliation terms still in circulation is Nakat'yén, which many translate as ‘Mexican clan.’ My consultants reported being mistaken for Mexican immigrants when they traveled to Phoenix or Tucson. Members of my extended family expressed appreciation for Mexican parents whom they heard speaking to their children in Spanish in public places, with remarks like “that reminded me of the way my Dad talked.” For many, the anti-immigrant political discourse was also an assault upon Mexican families that, like their own families, they cast in morally valorized contrasts with White, majoritarian norms.

Just following my field term in 2000, an English-Only political movement was successful in passing proposition 203 (Crawford 2001), also known as the “Unz initiative,” which not only withdrew state funding for bilingual education, but mandated exclusive instruction in English for state-funded schools, with exemptions for federally protected Native American language instruction. More recently, in 2010 Arizona passed SB2281, which “prohibits a school district or charter school from including in its program of instruction any courses or classes that . . . are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group.” An aspect of this legislation required the retraining or removal of any teacher who speaks English with “a heavy accent” (Jourdan 2010), which one might