

SP Native American Languages (North America)

Indigenous peoples of the continent now called North America have suffered enormous losses under the processes of colonial assault and exploitation: the loss of population at the rate of 90 percent for most areas through the interplay of disease and genocide; the theft of the land and its resources, and destruction of animal species and plant habitats; the loss of traditional lifeways through aggressive assimilationist policies, including the loss of ceremonial vitality through systematic and legal proscription via government agencies and church institutions. All of these have been devastating for indigenous nations. Yet the greatest loss is perhaps only now coming into full effect. After withstanding an intensive siege throughout recent centuries the indigenous languages are now quickly falling silent in rapid succession. With them the indigenous cultures, religions, and the environments they inhabit are, once again, and in some ways more so than ever, in peril. The intricate knowledge of local ecosystems and the complex relations to the environment that grow out of indigenous languages are now jeopardized.

Whereas as much as half the world's known languages were lost over the previous 500 years of colonial expansion, the losses are now accelerating dramatically. The next twenty years could witness the demise of half of the world's approximately 6700 languages. A century from now, at present rates of loss, as much as 90 percent of human linguistic diversity will succumb to silence. Globally, one language disappears on average every two weeks according to the United Nation's education and science arm, UNESCO. Of course, the great majority of these endangered and disappearing languages are carried by indigenous peoples. Within the present area of the United States, over 73 percent of the remaining indigenous languages are spoken only by the grandparents' generation. Numbers such as these give stark clarity to the extremely limited time for addressing the global language crisis. And the magnitude of the loss of language for an indigenous heritage must be measured by the immense value of language to a multitude of diverse and rich cultures in their complex relations to their living environment. As Chris Jocks, a Mohawk scholar from Kanawake in southeastern Canada, has written:

There is no way to decide which is more devastating: the loss of practical knowledge in such realms as history, natural science, and social organization; the loss of stories and jokes and all the richness of human experience they carry; the loss of skills of perception trained by Indigenous linguistic structures; or the loss of depth in our relationships with Other-than-human beings (Jocks 1999: 219).

To appreciate the difficulties involved in keeping alive the linguistic and cultural heritage of indigenous nations requires an understanding of the genocidal assault they have sustained. Waves of physical decimation were followed by generations of systematic cultural genocide in which enormous resources were expended in efforts to break traditional continuity between the culture-rich elders and the youth who were taken out of their homes and sent to government and church boarding schools and later public education facilities. The Dawes Allotment Act of 1887, which divided lands previously held in common by native nations into individual holdings, was devastating to indigenous languages. It led to the isolation of the remaining indigenous-language speakers in many communities, leaving them separated by miles of rural countryside.

Land Loss and Language Loss

This link between land and language loss represents more than just another indicator of the social and economic assault on traditional communities. For indigenous peoples the deep life-connection between their languages and their land are real and powerful. Grounded in the conviction that knowing the Earth's own language is essential for sustaining life, Jeanette Armstrong of the Okanagan in British Columbia has insisted:

The language spoken by the land, which is interpreted by the Okanagan into words, carries parts of its ongoing reality. The land as language surrounds us completely, just like the physical reality of it surrounds us. Within that vast speaking, both externally and internally, we as human beings are an inextricable part – though a minute part – of the land language.

In this sense, all indigenous peoples' languages are generated by a precise geography and arise from it. Over time and many generations of their people, it is their distinctive interaction with a precise geography which forms the way indigenous language is shaped and subsequently how the world is viewed, approached, and expressed verbally by its speakers (1998: 178–9).

Indigenous languages intertwine with the living environment at many levels. The languages connect an intricate web of complex relations between land, climate, plants, ceremonies, social structures, and living history in particular landscapes. For many communities certain classes of stories are only to be uttered during designated seasons of the year. Snow should be on the mountains for the Diné of Arizona and New Mexico to relate bear stories. The utterance of indigenous speech is understood to effect the physical world. Traditional Kiowas of the southern plains rise early to pray the sun up. Traditional hunters of

the northeast utter ceremonial words of thanksgiving in order to ensure a relationship of reciprocity and a continued supply of game animals. Careful sensibilities of observation are carried in the languages. For the Micmac of Newfoundland and Labrador, names ascribed to trees change from season to season as the sound of the wind blowing through them shifts over time (Nettle and Romaine 2000: 16). Even the sense of the physical self is mediated by the landscape and articulated through language. For Wintu speakers of northern California, the “right” arm is not identified according to an orientation taken from the center of the individual human body. Instead, it is spoken of in terms of the person’s orientation to the surrounding land, so that the “west arm” and the “east arm” could both refer to the same right arm as one changes directions within the landscape (in Hinton 1994: 58).

A complex cultural interplay between geography and indigenous language can also be expressed within a society. The language of the Western Apache in the American southwest situates them within a landscape and traditional history through the naming of the land, which acts as a guide to appropriate moral and social behaviors. This is a cultural world born by a language in which storytellers are hunters using stories about the names in the land to stalk their fellow community members. As Lewis Benson expressed it:

I think of that mountain called *Tséé Ligai Dah Sidilé* (White Rocks Lie Above In A Compact Cluster) as if it were my maternal grandmother. I recall stories of how it once was at that mountain. The stories told to me were like arrows. Elsewhere, hearing that mountain’s name, I see it. Its name is like a picture. Stories go to work on you like arrows. Stories make you live right. Stories make you replace yourself (Basso 1996: 38).

Endangered Languages, Endangered Species

Scholarly attention to linkages between species endangerment and patterns of language loss among indigenous peoples took shape in the early 1990s – including the terminology of language endangerment itself. The academic discussion was spurred by an article from Michael Krauss. He classified those languages that were no longer being learned by children in the home as moribund, a condition beyond endangerment, “for, unless the course is somehow dramatically reversed, they are already doomed to extinction, like species lacking reproductive capacity” (Krauss 1992: 4). He provided viability statistics for Alaska, where only 2 of 20 languages are being learned by children, leaving 90 percent of the languages moribund. For the entire USA and Canada he listed over 80 percent of the 187 indigenous languages as already moribund with no natural means of reproducing themselves. Even

Navajo, which had over 100,000 speakers a generation ago, he concluded, had “an uncertain future” (Krauss 1992: 7). The situation remained uncertain in 2004; only about 30 percent of Navajo children began their formal education speaking Navajo. The patterns of language retention among other indigenous nations suggests that all indigenous languages within the boundaries of Canada and the U.S.A. are endangered.

Krauss went on to compare the pattern of global language loss to that of endangered and threatened mammal and bird species, where the percentages considered to be in danger of extinction were much lower. He contrasted the lack of attention to indigenous language endangerment to the greater levels of public concern for endangered species and argued for increased valuing of human languages:

Any language is a supreme achievement of a uniquely human collective genius, as divine and endless a mystery as a living organism. Should we mourn the loss of Eyak or Ubykh any less than the loss of the panda or California condor? (Krauss 1992: 8).

Scholarly interest in relationships between language and natural environments has expanded and includes some aspects of the new sub-field, ecolinguistics. In 1996 the non-governmental organization Terralingua was founded to preserve linguistic diversity and explore connections between linguistic and biological diversity. Though some scholars remain dismissive of connections between language loss and environmental degradation – the majority working in this area hold that there is a strong correlation between ecosystem decline and the erosion of indigenous cultures and their religions – and that the vitality of languages is an especially important variable.

The most compelling discussion to date has been presented by Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine, who contend that the connections of indigenous peoples to environments are intense, ancient and unique. They demonstrate the remarkable overlap between regions with high concentrations of biological and linguistic diversity, and they argue that losses for both domains are due to the same underlying causes, namely, powerful forces controlled by social elites. Their expansive discussion of “biolinguistic diversity” foregrounds the detailed classification systems demonstrated by many indigenous languages, which provide “verbal botanics” useful for categorizing the natural environment. They argue that indigenous languages offer potentially rich contributions to scientific theories and to such problems as land management, marine technology, plant cultivation, and animal husbandry. They offer a sophisticated theory of the “ecology of language” where a language is understood to be enmeshed within a social and a geographical matrix that can be valuable to the project of sustainable development:

There is now widespread agreement that the problem of sustainable development is more likely to be solved if indigenous systems of knowledge and languages are valued and brought into play . . . Delicate tropical environments [for example] must be managed with care and skill. It is indigenous peoples who have the relevant practical knowledge, since they have been successfully making a living in them for hundreds of generations. Much of this detailed knowledge about local ecosystems is encoded in indigenous languages and rapidly being lost (Nettle and Romaine 2000: 166).

Indeed, the demise of any indigenous language represents a double loss. At a primary level, language loss severely jeopardizes the irreplaceable storehouse of richly detailed knowledge of plants, soils, terrains, sacred loci in the land, animal behaviors, and patterns of fish, bird, and insect life. Such knowledge has been developed and refined for thousands of years and integrated within a gendered human society in relation to the larger cosmos, seasons, and spirit worlds. Beyond this loss of knowledge associated with particular plants and local environments, which have been meshed with superb technologies, sophisticated medicinal practices, and elaborate social structures and religious traditions, the very process of indigenous knowledge development has been arrested.

Beginning in the waning years of the twentieth century, native nations took up the challenge to revitalize their languages. By so doing they endeavor to keep alive their unique and fertile epistemologies and thus their languages' essential role in the ceremonial life of their communities, as well as in promoting ecological knowledge and environmentally sustainable lifeways.

Richard A. Grounds

Further Reading

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- Basso, Keith H. *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996.
- Jocks, Christopher. "Living Words and Cartoon Translations: Longhouse 'Texts' and the Limitations of English." In Lenore A. Grenoble and Lindsay J. Whaley, eds. *Endangered Languages: Language Loss and Community Response*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Hinton, Leanne. *Flutes of Fire: Essays on California Indian Languages*. Berkeley, California: Heyday Books, 1994.

Krauss, Michael, "The World's Languages in Crisis." *Language* 68 (1992), 4–10.

Nettle, Daniel and Suzanne Romaine. *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World's Languages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

See also: Traditional Ecological Knowledge; Yuchi Culture and the Euchee Language Project.

Native American Spirituality

Native American spirituality is a hybrid form of religion that is clearly different from the highly specific beliefs and rituals that identify particular tribal religions and distinguish them from one another. Native American spirituality is a pan-Indian phenomenon involving native peoples from many different tribes. It is also a religious movement that thousands of people without any native ancestry identify with. Because of its syncretic character and fairly recent origin, Native American spirituality is sometimes regarded as inauthentic. However, most scholars of religion recognize that living religions are always changing and subject to reinterpretation and reinvention. From that perspective, Native American spirituality is as "authentic" as many other forms of religious life.

Native American spirituality first emerged in the nineteenth century as native people from different cultures found new areas of common ground, and as reverence for nature developed as an important force within both native and Euro-American cultures. Native religious leaders and non-native admirers alike pointed to an underlying spirituality of nature characteristic of all Native American cultures. This emphasis on a common nature spirituality underlying different native religions contributed to cooperation among native groups and challenged Western tendencies to view native religions as forms of heathenism that ought to be left behind if not actively suppressed. During the late twentieth century, respect for Native American spirituality became widespread as part of a general increase in ecological sensitivity throughout American religious life.

The historical development of Native American spirituality can be described in terms of an evolving conversation between Native Americans and Westerners about religious respect for the Earth. In the early nineteenth century, the Shawnee leader Tecumseh referred to the Earth as his mother in an effort to explain to a U.S. Army officer his resistance to the seizure of Indian lands and his understanding of the difference between instrumental Western ideas about land and native ideas about the spiritual powers inherent in local environments and forces. Later in the century, the Sahaptin leader Smoholla described the Earth as the mother of mankind and spoke against forcing native groups in the northwest basin to plow arid land for farming with figures of speech that