

Minowe: Speaking Well through the Ages - A Journey of Language Suppression and Revitalization

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Abstract

In this essay, we traversed the journey of Native American languages from the boarding school era to the present day. We delved into the strategies employed by the U.S. government to steal indigenous voices, the tragic and on-going impact of these policies, and resilience and creativity that has gone into linguistic revival. Looking at the state of indigenous languages today, we explored the varying ways that indigenous communities have endeavored to revive their languages and found cause for hope. Specifically, we looked to the case of the Ojibwe Nation as a model of exemplary language revitalization and examined that its combinations of institution-based support, innovative use of technology, and grassroots movements can serve as a template for further revitalization efforts.

Keywords: Indigenous, Language, Native American, Boarding School, Ojibwe

1. Introduction

Language is not solely a medium of communication; it is a cornerstone of cultural identity. It is a repository of all the history, wisdom, and traditions of a community. This importance of language holds true for all societies, and perhaps even more so for indigenous communities like Native Americans, where languages have been deeply interwoven into their existence and primarily passed down orally. They defy simple word-for-word translations as they often express concepts wholly unique to the cultures that birthed them. In 1936, American linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf, while studying the Hopi language, concluded that indigenous languages contain perspectives and intuitions that are simultaneously beyond the reach of sufficient English translation and possessed of logic that is every bit as justified pragmatically and experientially as any language he had encountered (Pereley, 2019). Each word, phrase, and expression in these languages encapsulates a unique perspective of life and nature often specific to a population that can number only in the hundreds. Once the last speaker of a given language passes on, so too, do the last vestiges of the wisdom and history that the language bears.

In the late 15th century, as Western colonizers arrived in the Americas, Native American languages numbered in the hundreds (Patrick, 2019). This linguistic diversity reflected the depth of Indigenous culture but also exposed the vulnerability of these languages to systematic efforts of elimination. Geographically proximate tribes spoke distinct languages, making it necessary to learn them separately (Patrick, 2019). These languages, rich with the echoes of countless generations, faced significant threats. American officials promoted assimilation through methods like boarding schools, aiming to replace indigenous cultures with Western Judeo-Christian values. They sought to, in the words of a prominent supporter, “kill the Indian to save the man” (Fear-Segal and Rose, 2016, p. 32).

Central to their strategy, one informed by a centuries-spanning tradition of colonial conquest and cultural chauvinism, was the eradication of indigenous languages and the insistence upon speaking English. These Native American boarding schools were one of the primary instruments of this policy. Native American children were forcibly

removed from their families and communities, prohibited from speaking their native tongues and coerced into using English. The aim was clear: to suppress Native American languages, thereby eradicating an essential part of their identity. For years this war was waged to heartbreaking effect. However, the narrative of Native American languages is not one of erasure and loss alone. Despite systematic suppression, these languages persisted, carried forth in songs, and stories, passed down through generations. Remarkably, tribes kept their languages alive, defying those who sought to extinguish them ruthlessly and efficiently. Today, in a world markedly different from the era of boarding schools, these languages are experiencing a revival. Through a combination of community-driven initiatives, policy measures, and the strategic use of technology, Native American languages are being reclaimed, learned anew, and used with pride.

In this essay, we will traverse the journey of Native American languages from the boarding school era to the present day, revealing the strategies employed by the U.S. government to steal indigenous voices, the on-going impact of these policies, and the inspiring resilience demonstrated by indigenous communities in the face of injustice. We will explore the significant role of legislation in supporting language revitalization efforts and examine how modern technology is facilitating this resurgence. We will also study the case of the Ojibwe Nation as a model of successful language revitalization, before reflecting on the prospects of Native American languages. This is a history that is steeped in tragedy; however, it is lined with optimism due to the courage, ingenuity, and dogged determination of the indigenous communities that outright refused to let their cultures fade into obscurity. This story is, in essence, a tale of repression, resilience, and revival.

2. Historical Background

Native American languages, comprising over 350 distinct languages across 60 language families north of Mexico, reflect the depth and diversity of indigenous cultures (Patrick, 2019). These languages, essential for understanding the world through different tribal perspectives, reflected countless generations thriving in a world vastly different from that of European colonizers. A significant divergence between indigenous tribes and newcomers was the role of oral tradition in education and cultural preservation. Despite the diverse range of Native American cultures, reliance on spoken word over written records was nearly universal (Grande, 2015). Culture, history, religion, and practical skills were transmitted through oral tradition, with each language offering a unique lens to interpret the world, reflecting specific beliefs, customs, and land relationships (Treuer, 2010). Native American education, though less institutionalized and literacy-based than European models, was equally effective in imparting cultural wisdom. It involved a complex network of storytellers, singers, historians, and family members collaborating to pass down knowledge to successive generations. This millennia-old tradition enabled individuals to learn their cultural intricacies and acquire vital survival skills (Stout, 1992). However, European and American colonizers, rooted in Eurocentric perspectives, devalued Native American language and culture (Phillipson, 1992).

The colonization of North America posed a significant question for European settlers and their descendants: how to deal with the indigenous population. Early efforts involved forced removal, dishonest treaties, reservations, and conflict. However, in the late 19th century, a shift towards cultural assimilation emerged. Educator and Pan-Indianist, Fayette Avery McKenzie, encapsulated this shift suggesting that Native Americans were either inherently inferior or products of deficient culture. If they were deemed inferior, assimilation would be cruel, and political rights would be unjust. But if it was a matter of lacking “experience and tradition,” there would have been hope through forcibly removing indigenous people from their familiar environments to “civilize” them (Eastman, 1984). McKenzie’s view was prevalent at the time, leading the U.S. government to pursue forced cultural assimilation, particularly targeting Native American languages and traditions. The Dawes Act of 1887 marked the beginning of this strategy, dividing reservation lands into private parcels. While reservations allowed some self-governance and cultural identity, the Dawes Act, along with subsequent Curtis and Burke Acts, compelled individuals to abandon their tribal identity and live under the laws and customs of the state or territory in which they lived (*The Dawes Act*, n.d.). Every aspect of the act was aimed at yoking Native Americans with Euro-American customs. It represented a dramatic shift for the tribes economically, agriculturally, socially, religiously, and legally. As tribes spent the latter part of the 19th century adjusting to the new norm, the US government established boarding schools through the Bureau of Indian Affairs to

assimilate Native American children into American customs. By 1900, twenty-five such schools operated across fifteen states, intensifying linguistic and cultural erosion within indigenous communities. Language suppression and replacement played a pivotal role in the government's pursuit to 'civilize' or 'Americanize' Native American populations, making English the essential lingua franca. This started with education, and it started with Native American children.

The Carlisle Indian Industrial School was the pilot school of this new strategy. Richard Henry Pratt, the founder of Carlisle, and coiner of the bone chilling promise to, "Kill the Indian, save the man," already had a long history with Native Americans when he opened the school in 1879. He believed that Native Americans needed to be removed from their own culture's corrosive influences. He expressed his views at the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Correction in Denver, emphasizing, "They must get into the swim of American citizenship. They must feel the touch of it day after day, until they become saturated with the spirit of it, and thus become equal to it" (Treuer, 2010, p. 133). He requested funds to bring 300 young Native American to Carlisle to teach them English and American skills (Fear-Segal and Rose, 2016, p. 29). Upon arrival, Native American children were systematically stripped of their cultural identity. Their hair, clothes, and names were discarded, and English was enforced as the exclusive language of instruction. Native languages were strictly forbidden, even among peers, often enforced brutally with punishments like beatings, mouth washings with soap or lye, and confinement in jail cells for non-conformists (Treuer and Keenan, 2022). In addition, for students unfamiliar with English, additional hardships pushed them to learn. They were denied books and instead given slates and chalk for rote exercises writing English names for common objects (Stout, 2012). Even those resisting these changes found it challenging to communicate in their native tongues. Boarding schools deliberately mixed students from various tribes, ensuring English was the only means of communication with both teachers and peers. These practices not only distanced the children from their linguistic heritage but also instilled in them a deep-seated fear and shame associated with their native languages (Treuer, 2010).

The deliberate suppression of Native American languages caused a significant break in intergenerational transmission, with many children losing fluency and struggling to communicate with their families. John Rogers, for instance, realized he could no longer speak his native Chippewa to his own parents after years at a Native American school (Child, 1998). This language loss hindered transmission to subsequent generations, leading to rapid decline. The U.S. government's assimilation policies also reshaped Native American societies, further distancing them from traditional practices, including communal living and native languages (Child, 1998). These policies, combined with societal pressures, had a lasting impact, contributing to the decline of Native American languages.

While the focus of this essay is language, it would be a mistake to not note that the long lasting and multigenerational effects of these schools defy reduction. Students at Native American boarding schools were subject to death, disease, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and myriad other forms of torture, both emotional and physical. When the ripple effects are examined today, it is often an impossible task to specify the cause of trauma. What must be noted is that these policies and schools not only robbed countless Native Americans of the ability to take meaningful part in the traditions of their ancestors. They robbed them of the ability to meaningfully communicate their trauma. To heal. To make sense of what had happened to them or share and unburden themselves to their loved ones. Language, their language, was essential in that process. Unfortunately, today, many of these languages are either severely endangered or on the brink of extinction.

3. Indigenous American Languages Today

The United States government's assimilation policies, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, had a lasting impact on Native American languages, leading to severe endangerment and extinction by the 20th century. These policies disrupted intergenerational language transmission, leading to a decline in fluency. Activist, scholar, and Michipicoten First Nation member, John-Paul Chalykoff, recalls being raised with his grandmother being the last fluent speaker of Ojibwe in his family. "After she passed away, my mother's primary source of Ojibwe ended," notes Chalykoff. His family's story is a common one as fluent speakers of these languages grow older on average. Today Chalykoff devotes his time to revitalizing and preserving his tribe's languages but notes that it is "a puzzle I know I can't fully complete" (Chalykoff, 2023). Native American children in boarding schools lost their native languages,

causing rapid speaker declines, even resulting in some languages becoming 'sleeping' with no fluent speakers. Additionally, English-only enforcement in these schools instilled fear and shame around using Native American languages, which persisted into adulthood, further decreasing language use (Wharton and Shelton, 2013). Native American languages being situated as 'inferior' to Euro-American counterparts eroded their social esteem and discouraged preservation efforts in succeeding generations. The puzzle that Chalykoff worries cannot be completed is not solely a matter of preserving the voices of elders, but finding those that are willing to carry them for successive generations. The sentiment expressed by White Earth elder Joe Auginaush, "We're not losing our language, our language is losing us" (Treuer, 2010, p. 15).

Despite all this, Native voices have been growing louder in recent decades. The latter half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century have seen a resurgent interest in these languages. Sparked by a growing recognition of the value of linguistic diversity and cultural heritage and driven by a desire to reclaim cultural identity and promote community resilience, Native American communities have been leading efforts to revitalize their languages. Robust conversations of when and how to harness and spread heritage languages are being had across multiple tribes. Bolstered by legislative support and the advent of modern technology, these conversations are writing a new chapter in the story of Native American languages.

Since the very beginning of the efforts at suppression, Indigenous communities have creatively employed strategies to preserve their linguistic heritage, initially through subtle and personal resistance. In Indian boarding schools, students found covert ways to communicate in their native tongues despite oppressive conditions. Despite the threat of punishment, many children persisted, driven by pride and the need for connection (Davis, 2001). Storytelling sessions, songs, and other traditional ceremonies often became covert spaces where languages could continue to be used. Historian Kevin Whalen notes that these clandestine meetings led to previously rare occurrences of intertribal friendships and cultural exchanges, laying the foundation for Native American civil rights activism in the twentieth century (Whalen, 2018).

In the early 20th century, organized political action for language revitalization gained momentum as some tribes developed writing systems, teaching languages within their communities, and documenting them. These initiatives countered assimilation policies and paved the way for further organized revitalization efforts. The late 20th and early 21st centuries witnessed a significant policy and legislative shift regarding Native American languages. Federal laws recognized the value of these languages and aimed to support their preservation. The Native American Languages Act of 1990 encouraged the use of indigenous languages in schools, contrasting with the boarding school era, and granted official status for business and governance purposes (S.2167 - 101st Congress, 1990). Another significant legislative measure was the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act, enacted in 2006 and reauthorized in 2019. It provided grants to Native American language educational organizations for language immersion and restoration programs. These legislations played a vital role in supporting the resurgence of Native American languages, reflecting a more positive, culturally respectful approach and recognizing Indigenous rights.

Beyond policy and fighting for legislation, grassroots community initiatives have emerged as potent drivers of Native American language revitalization. Tribes have established their own language programs, including immersion schools for children and language classes for adults. Some have adopted "language nests," inspired by New Zealand Māori communities, immersing young children in their native language from an early age (McInnes, 2017). These programs blend traditional and modern teaching methods and often involve elders as keepers of linguistic and cultural knowledge. They provide a full curriculum in indigenous languages, not only teaching the language itself but also using it as the medium of instruction for other subjects. This approach is designed to promote fluency among younger generations and ensure the language's day-to-day usage. In addition to preserving language, they safeguard the transmission of culture (McQuillan-Hofmann, n.d.). Intergenerational learning is a common approach, where elders actively engage with younger generations to pass on their language and culture.

For adult learners, many tribes offer language classes that cater to various proficiency levels. In many of these programs, elders play an integral role. As the primary bearers of linguistic and cultural knowledge, elders often serve as teachers and mentors, working directly with younger learners in an intergenerational exchange of knowledge. This intergenerational approach not only promotes language learning but also strengthens community bonds and ensures the transmission of cultural values and traditions.

Technology plays a crucial role in modern language revitalization efforts as well, offering powerful tools to promote and preserve Native American languages. Language learning apps provide interactive lessons, pronunciation guides, and practice exercises, making language acquisition accessible to a wider audience, regardless of location. Digital archives and databases house audio, video recordings, dictionaries, grammatical guides, and texts, ensuring these resources are readily available for language preservation. Social media platforms serve as hubs for language promotion, fostering a virtual community of speakers, sharing resources, and conducting language challenges. In the digital age, these tech-driven initiatives adapt and thrive, safeguarding Native American languages against future loss.

Language revitalization plans cannot be implemented identically in all situations. While many, if not all, of these tribes face uphill battles after centuries of oppression, their economic, social, and political situations can vary in meaningful ways. There are no cure-alls when it comes to reclaiming their voice. However, grassroots political and community organization, educational initiatives, and inventive use of available technologies seem to be a common thread in the more successful of these efforts.

4. A Potential Path Forward

When viewing the Herculean task of Indigenous American linguistic revival, it helps to have examples to examine. The Ojibwe Nation offers an illuminating example of a community-driven language revitalization effort. Their efforts at revitalization have utilized political action, grassroots community work, educational reforms, and the innovative use of technology to great success. With fewer than 1,000 fluent speakers left, the Ojibwe language was identified as severely endangered in the 20th century (Maher, 2021). However, the Ojibwe community has not let this discourage their efforts to recover their linguistic heritage. Over the past few decades, the Ojibwe have implemented several initiatives to promote language learning and usage within their community. This has included the establishment of Ojibwe language immersion schools, like the Waadookodaading Ojibwe Language Immersion School in Wisconsin, which teach all academic subjects in the Ojibwe language. Immersion schools have proved invaluable in linguistic revivals because it, in contrast to bilingual education which seeks to supplement language learning that is occurring at home, will help students develop fluency even for children whose homes are losing their grasp on their indigenous language (Hinton and Meek, 2018). These schools not only equip students with linguistic skills, but also immerse them in the cultural context in which the language is embedded.

Moreover, the community has embraced a holistic approach to language revitalization, involving all age groups. Intergenerational programs engage elders as fluent speakers and cultural knowledge bearers, actively educating younger generations. Community language classes empower adults to contribute to language preservation (Katona, 2023). Community language classes provide opportunities for adults to learn and contribute to language preservation. To connect their language directly to the culture that they hope to preserve, the Ojibwe organize cultural events in the Ojibwe language that highlight tribal traditions using the Ojibwe language. This elevates the language from an abstract concept to be studied to a living breathing entity that unites the community intergenerationally (Morgan, 2005).

Embracing technology, the Ojibwe community has created online resources like the Ojibwe People's Dictionary, a talking Ojibwe-English dictionary. They've also launched interactive language-learning apps, offering accessibility for learners of all levels, with over a dozen such apps available. An Indigenous NPO, Grassroots Indigenous Multimedia (GIM), has taken the lead with innovative technological use by creating a video game entitled *Reclaim!* that instructs players in Ojibwe while calling on them to use that language over the course of the game. GIM is also taking the lead in an essential, albeit less glamorous, role that technology plays in language revitalization efforts: archiving and documenting the language. As in all cases of linguistic revitalization, as elder numbers continue to dwindle, the preservation of their voices is vital in both honoring their roles as cultural caretakers and the construction of curricula that will pass on their language (Hinton and Meek, 2018). The digitization of indigenous records and voices, as well as the use of technology in the spread of the language is particularly important as it tends to reach younger speakers more meaningfully as well as lead to intergenerational collaborations by inverting the elder-youth dynamic (Dwyer et al., 2018).

Lastly, the Ojibwe community actively advocates for support at the local, state, and federal levels, successfully securing funding and policy backing for their language programs. Since the middle of the 20th century Ojibwe people

have been advocating for themselves when they saw that their language and culture were not being served or respected by local governments. Ojibwe smartly and frequently engaged in non-violent protest and activism in order to gain the educational reform that laid the foundation for their linguistic revival. By clearly and peacefully voicing their objections underrepresentation and erasure, the Ojibwe were able to form public schools and tribal colleges that catered to their unique cultural heritage (Peacock and Day, 2000).

Throughout all aspects of the Ojibwe revival, and indeed many others like it, there is a common thread that runs counter to the sensibilities of many that earnestly desire to help them. In all these revitalization efforts, a balance must be struck between substantial and meaningful assistance on the part of federal, state, and local governments, and tribal autonomy that allows for tribes to conceive of and implement curricula that is responsive to their urgent and ever-developing project without getting bogged down in bureaucratic quicksand. In several notable linguistic revitalization projects, and specifically in that of the Ojibwe, activist efforts have been frustrated not only by nationalist demands for assimilation, but also liberal ideas of communal decision-making (Lo Bianco, 2018). Heavy-handed and broad-brushing policies designed to encourage equity and raise standards can place unnecessary burdens on Indigenous language schools already struggling to find willing and capable teachers. In the case of the Ojibwe, schools that were given flexibility over areas like curriculum development, staffing, and learning spaces were able to find success even when funding was lacking (Morgan, 2005).

5. Conclusion

Language's role in a culture's identity is so intricately woven into our cultural fabric that it is often difficult to parse exactly how much it touches. It is the way we make sense of ourselves and the world around us. It's how we express emotions, relay histories, teach, and self-reflect. Its importance is simultaneously obvious and ineffable. This much was clear to the men that sought to pry it from the mouths of indigenous peoples in the pursuit of their cultural genocide. If indigenous peoples couldn't speak their language, they ceased to be truly unique and separate from those that sought to assimilate them. It is an astounding feat of resilience that these languages survived at all, and of the utmost importance that they continue to survive. The case of the Ojibwe Nation demonstrates how a community-driven, multi-faceted approach to language revitalization can yield promising results. It underscores the importance of incorporating language learning within cultural contexts, engaging all age groups, leveraging digital tools, and actively advocating for supportive policy measures while fighting for self-determination. Through these means, Ojibwe went from a language on the brink of extinction to one that is the primary mode of instruction in schools from pre-K to university level classes. What was once spoken in whispers in boarding schools is being loudly and proudly communicated intergenerationally across the US and Canada. Similar such efforts need to be supported wherever there are willing indigenous communities to implement them. Furthermore, allowing for self-determination is an essential component of this support. In many ways, it is truly a matter of life and death. Indigenous people are subject to some of the poorest health outcomes across America, and language revitalization could potentially play a positive role. Research has linked language revitalization to positive health outcomes at both an individual and community level in Australia, Canada, and the United States (Walsh, 2018). In addition, the creation of spaces that allow for indigenous peoples to communicate in their language can lessen stigmas and foster relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples (Walsh, 2018). The success of language revitalization projects is far more than the righting of past wrongs. These programs offer a hope for indigenous communities to better make sense of their past as they plan for a future that was almost stolen from them. They offer a lens through which they can begin to restore and rebuild what took them millennia to build, on their own terms, free of oppression.

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