

Language Planning and Policy in Native America

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Language Planning and Policy in Native America

History, Theory, Praxis

Teresa L. McCarty

Foreword by

Richard E. Littlebear

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Front cover: Winona Castillo, age 13, and Hubert McCord, age 84, of the Fort Mojave Tribe of Needles, California. Mr. McCord is the only male tribal member who is a fluent singer of Mojave bird songs, a core cultural expression. Through a community-driven language documentation project focused on the bird songs, he and other Elders are teaching the language to Mojave youth like Winona (see p. 181). Mr. McCord's gesture in the photograph signifies affection, pride, and a forward-looking optimism for the next generation. It also conveys this book's larger message that language revitalization is not about 'saving' languages in an abstract sense, but is about strengthening intergenerational relationships and building community. Special appreciation goes to Hubert McCord, Winona Castillo, Katherine Castillo, and Natalie Diaz of the Fort Mojave Tribe, and to photographer Jeston Morris.

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Dedication

*To the memory of my parents,
Virginia Heckert Doulin and James Lawrence McCarty*

*And to the memory of our forebears in the Irish diaspora,
who, out of love for their children,
left the Irish language behind.*

Le cion agus le mórmheas

As tribal leaders our responsibilities are numerous. However, the reclamation and restoration of our heritage language and culture has visibly strengthened our Nation immeasurably. I am convinced this work is the single most important effort we have initiated to ensure the perpetuation and long-term survival of our Tribal Nation.

*Chief Thomas Gamble,
Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, October 2009*

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Any failures in the book are, of course, entirely my own.

Ahéhee'.

Foreword

Richard E. Littlebear

Teresa McCarty's *Language Planning and Policy in Native America* is a book that I have always wanted to read and learn from. However, it did not exist. Finally, after three decades of my involvement in Native American language issues, the book I always wanted to refer to has finally been written. Let me share some of my journey as it relates to languages and also tell why I am glad this book has been written.

Prior to 1980, I was against the teaching of Native American languages. All my associations, experience and learning up to that point indicated that, in order to make a living in the United States, one had to learn the English language and *only* the English language. Then I became a bilingual education director at a BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) contract school. Because I was bilingual in the Cheyenne language and college educated, it was a job I was qualified for, it seemed. So, even though I was philosophically opposed to the teaching of our Cheyenne language, I took the job. It was the beginning of a slow-motion epiphany that eventually resulted in my becoming an ardent advocate of speaking, teaching and learning our Cheyenne language. This eventually led me to become an advocate for all of our Native American languages and Indigenous languages worldwide. But, there were some glitches in this epiphany, which is the reason it occurred in slow motion.

Nevertheless, I got more and more interested in bilingual education and bilingualism as they pertained to education and cognition. I started reading about languages. Most of the research I read then dealt with studies on behalf of languages other than Native American ones. The information available about our languages was mainly linguistics-oriented. The linguistic terminology was usually arcane and way above my vocabulary level. Encountering this situation contributed to the pauses in the epiphany.

Even though I was a novice, I intuitively sensed that the research and the linguistic information were not quite appropriate for the needs of the Native American classroom situations I was then working with. These needs were lesson plans, curriculum development, classroom materials, stories and professional development related to teaching our own languages. This research, which only marginally touched on Native American languages, usually treated

our languages as anachronisms. Linguistics, as near as I could tell, dealt with our languages like laboratory specimens, ready for dissecting, categorizing, sorting and classifying. I think that the discipline of linguistics has changed to become more conscious of the need to maintain our languages.

However, as is usually the case with Native Americans, the languages of the first people here in this hemisphere were being dealt with peripherally and last. In fact, as I recall, even the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 had to be later modified to include Native American languages. This modification is a fortuitous afterthought because it brought to the forefront the dire predicaments of our languages.

I continued reading about language issues even though many of the books and articles did not specifically relate to my own Cheyenne language or to other Native American languages. For instance, much classroom-oriented research had been done for the Spanish language and other minority languages. I figured that, since this research was about language issues, then some of the issues might be relevant to our own Native American languages.

As I read, I would always be thinking, 'How does this topic relate to my Cheyenne language?' Thinking this way allowed me to make the connection between this research on other languages and my language. In the meantime, I gained a lot of knowledge about first and second language acquisition and the academic, economic, political and social issues that surrounded it.

Later, I got to thinking, 'There is something missing', and as I became more sophisticated in language issues, I came to the conclusion that that the missing piece was a comprehensive, research-based scrutiny of our own Native American languages. With McCarty's book, I did not have to be thinking, 'How does this relate to my Cheyenne language?' The information is all relevant because, to paraphrase McCarty's words, throughout the book there is the interplay of language practices at the micro level of everyday social interaction with larger macro forces that shape and are shaped by these practices. This book satisfies the need to approach our languages as more than just instruments of communication; we must view them equally as repositories of our psyches and the carriers of our ethos.

Finally, we have *Language Planning and Policy in Native America*, a book that is up to date and intensively, even excruciatingly, researched about our own languages. The whole book contains remarkable information. I would re-read portions of it and think, 'I knew this but I was not able to articulate it in either of my languages'.

For instance, I was wondering why languages end up in one of the categories discussed in Chapter 1. Then I recalled an incident from my own life. I had been away from speaking my language for about 12 months when I returned to the Cheyenne-speaking community where I was born and raised. Even though my brain was able to function in Cheyenne, there was a slight disconnect with the mechanism that produced Cheyenne language sounds. I would unintentionally mispronounce Cheyenne words and, for

those errors, was ridiculed by my peers and by some of the people who were older than me.

I almost stopped speaking Cheyenne because of this ridicule and belittlement. Being called a *ve'ho'keso* (little White boy) by other Cheyenne people was the ultimate insult at that time. However, as I reflected on this situation, I made the conscious decision at the age of 15 that I was not going to be deprived of speaking my own language, even though I had become highly proficient in speaking a foreign language, English.

So I endured the ridicule and am thankful that I did because, in less than a week, I was back to speaking the Cheyenne language as if I had never left it for almost a year. I am glad I made the decision to continue speaking the Cheyenne language way back then because personally, spiritually, economically, socially, academically and intellectually, both of my languages, Cheyenne and English, have immeasurably enriched my life.

Recalling this incident in my life made me realize the myriad factors that can lead to language shift and language death. I had almost caused them within my own life.

I also found Chapter 6 most interesting because it addresses a segment of Native American society that hardly ever gets mentioned in relation to language issues: our youth. The youth in this chapter spoke about the additive and positive nature of being bilingual. I share their viewpoint. To paraphrase a statement from one of the youth in Chapter 6, 'For me, the Cheyenne language is important because it is my language and I should speak my language rather than other people's language . . . When I speak the Cheyenne language, I think it makes me more Cheyenne and I can show to people that I am Cheyenne'. My identity as a Cheyenne is daily positively reinforced because I speak Cheyenne. I want our youth to have the same experience.

Later in the book, McCarty writes, 'Although much has been written on language shift and reclamation, studies from the perspectives of speakers themselves are relatively rare, [and] even rarer are studies centered on youth'. We must pay attention to the research that McCarty and her colleagues have gathered as it pertains to our Native American youth because these researchers have enabled youth to voice their opinions in this book.

We pay a lot of well-deserved attention to our elders and that is good. However, if an elder cannot transmit his or her language to the youth, the death of language is imminent. Ultimately, we are going to have to depend on our youth to carry on our languages. The issues discussed in Chapter 6 are much needed because we need to strategize about getting our youth to value our languages, especially since they are shifting away from them. I value both of the languages that I speak for the following reasons.

I know that being proficient in writing the English language and being able to speak it fluently has enabled me to make a living in this society. Parallel to that, being proficient in the writing and reading of the Cheyenne language and being fluent in it have reinforced my belongingness to the