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Next Step, Social Oblivion?

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This short position paper will consider three questions. First, what are the social and cultural consequences of language loss among North American Indian groups? Second, what is being done to counter this massive language loss? And thirdly, what are some of the tactics we might employ to counter such language loss, if indeed we think it is a problem? Hopefully, this paper will convince the reader that language loss for North American Indians is a very serious problem.

Several years ago Wallace Chafe of the Smithsonian Institution made an assessment of the “health” of Native American languages. The result of his survey was appalling, to say the least. Language loss among North American Indian tribal groups was staggering. Some fifteen years have passed since Chafe’s survey and so far as one can ascertain, language loss has continued at a rapid rate. Thus, the modern situation is even more dire than Chafe’s research indicated some fifteen years ago.

Anyone acquainted with American Indian groups knows very well that native languages are almost gone in large areas of North America; such areas as the West Coast, the Great Lakes region, western Oklahoma, and so on. Even in areas where Indian languages are intact—eastern Oklahoma, the Southwest, and some parts of the Great Basin and Plateau areas—native languages, if not on the verge of extinction, are eroded to some degree. Now what does all this mean for the social and cultural survival of North American Indian groups?

First let us take social survival. For some North American Indian groups the native language is the most important symbol of collective identity; a symbol which functions to preserve the group. In most places if it is not the symbol, the native language is at least an important symbol of collective identity so that when a native language “goes”, minimally an important symbol of collective identity usually goes with it. This, of course, lessens the chances of social survival for a hard-pressed minority people, and most North American Indian groups are certainly hard-pressed minority peoples.

In some areas, the native language has functioned as a boundary maintaining device; that is to say, the use of the native language determines who is a member of the group and who is not. Among other Indian peoples, the native language has functioned further to keep important areas of life and culture hidden from the culturally imperialistic eyes of Euro-Americans. In such tribes this kind of “secrecy” is an important psychological factor which contributes to group survival. To recapitulate; in many groups the native language has functioned as an important collective identity symbol, as a boundary maintaining mechanism, and as a way to preserve important life areas.

There can also be indirect damage to other important cultural symbols as the native language disappears. In some North American Indians groups—Iroquois, Mesquakie, Choctaw, etc.—the native religion or else a native Christianity is the major collective identity symbol. However, if the native language disappears in such tribes it will be almost impossible to preserve the native religion. In the case of a native Christianity, such a religious pattern would very quickly become a standard Christianity, not a native Christianity; and therefore could not function as a collective identity symbol. In conclusion, one could say minimally that in most tribes the native language has functioned and now functions as an important mechanism to help insure social survival and that without the native language some groups would be hard put to continue as unique and distinct peoples in 20th century America.

However, even if an Indian group survived socially there would be considerable cultural loss. One can argue with the Whorfian hypothesis which postulates that the very thinking of a group is embedded in language structure. This hypothesis has yet to be proven or disproved by research. However, most scholars would agree that a great deal of the unique culture of any people is contained in the concepts of their language. There is no doubt, in that sense at least, that language is a primary cultural vehicle so that loss of a native language means a significant cultural loss. Many Indian groups without their native languages would simply become Brown Americans as people of African descent have become Black Americans.

The third consequence of language loss by North American Indian tribes in the American milieu is that if English becomes the language of an Indian group, most groups will lose any chance for separate intellectual autonomy. They will simply become, as have many working class Americans, creations of the

media, particularly T.V., and of an educational system which provides people with slogans and bromides to meet situations rather than developing independent analytic ability. If one looks at most of the working class in American cities today, one could almost come to the conclusion that they are the creation of a media and an educational system which has created them to work, consume, fight wars and sanction “the system” but certainly not to do any independent thinking.

Further, not only is the chance for independent intellectual autonomy precluded by language loss, but in the nature of the case there is no chance for the development of an independent literary tradition. Even if a people survive the loss of their native language, there is a strong possibility that they will become simply a low status American variant.

Now, having painted this rather bleak picture, it behooves one to ask that if the situation is as serious as it is painted above, what is being done to deal with this massive language loss; a condition which is both endangering the possibility of survival and at minimum bringing about cultural decay? Well, it appears that not much is being done! Most of what are called-lingual efforts among North American Indians could better be termed language recovery attempts. These language recovery attempts have been sponsored by Title IV of the Indian Education Act and resemble traditional language courses, primarily for the lower grades. By and large, these courses are simply language appreciation courses; that is to say, the child learns how to count or to say simple phrases or to develop a limited vocabulary but no ability to speak or to “handle” the language. In most such schools the students speak English on the playground, as well as in the family context and among their peer group.

It does not seem that these language recovery attempts have even slowed language erosion in those places where the native language is relatively functional. In those areas where the native language is gone or almost gone, these attempts have not revived it. At worst, such programs have trivialized American Indian languages, making Indian languages the domain of small children. Further, there has been very little promotion of native research to develop functional and socially sanctioned native language writing systems, much less a body of literature. To summarize, language recovery attempts on the part of school systems have simply had little positive effect in most places and in a few places have had a negative effect.

If this analysis is correct, then we need a whole new approach to language recovery and/or the slowing of language erosion. We might very well consider some complete immersion programs in the style of the Berlitz programs. If the Berlitz language schools can teach white suburban housewives the basis of functional French or Spanish in six days, then one should be able to do the same for Indian languages in a couple weeks. However, such programs would necessitate some significant community involvement. One cannot revive a language or slow the loss of a language if English continues to be the functional language of the home and public events. One of the difficulties at the present time is that the majority of these “bi-lingual programs” are the exclusive domain of the school, almost completely without community involvement. Many times Indian communities are not aware of what the school is trying to do, and if they are aware, they are willing to leave those matters in the hands of the school. They look to the school to single-handedly do the job of language recovery or the slowing of language loss; a task which can only be done by a major concerted effort on the part of both the school and the family.

It is unlikely that even complete immersion programs will bring about language recovery in those groups in which the native language has almost disappeared. However, these complete immersion programs with community involvement might at least slow language loss in those communities in which the native language is still functional to a degree.

For those communities in which the native language is not functional then the development of a class of language specialists in the style of American Jews may be the best those tribes can do at this point in history. It might be possible to create a class of language specialists who could maintain an intellectual tradition and a native religion in such tribes. One might also be able to give the Indian children of these tribes some acquaintance with the native language so they could participate meaningfully in ceremonies, in the way that Jewish children and lay adults are able to participate in Jewish religious services.

Then, after Indian languages are fairly secure we might turn our attention toward the development of independent literary traditions in order to strengthen Indian cultures and Indian chances for survival.