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The cultures of Native North American language documentation and revitalization

Saul Schwartz and Lise M. Dobrin

Debenport, Erin 2015. *Fixing the Books: Secrecy, Literacy, and Perfectibility in Indigenous New Mexico*. Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press.

Meek, Barbra A. 2010. *We Are Our Language: An Ethnography of Language Revitalization in a Northern Athabaskan Community*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Morgan, Mindy J. 2009. *The Bearer of This Letter: Language Ideologies, Literacy Practices, and the Fort Belknap Indian Community*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Nevins, M. Eleanor 2013. *Lessons from Fort Apache: Beyond Language Endangerment and Maintenance*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.

Perley, Bernard C. 2011. *Defying Maliseet Language Death: Emergent Vitalities of Language, Culture, and Identity in Eastern Canada*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Shaul, David Leedom 2014. *Linguistic Ideologies of Native American Language Revitalization: Doing the Lost Language Ghost Dance*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.

ABSTRACT

The reviewed books comprise an emerging ethnographic literature on endangered language documentation and revitalization in Native North America. Language loss and preservation are pressing concerns for tribal communities, galvanizing activists and researchers to develop classroom curricula and literacy traditions in hopes of producing new speakers. While the reviewed books show that this goal often goes unrealized, we nevertheless read them as grounds for optimism. Even if language revitalization rarely increases the everyday use of particular lexical and grammatical codes, it may succeed in accomplishing another important goal: facilitating indigenous communities' efforts to create for themselves more meaningful contemporary cultures.

KEYWORDS

Language documentation;
language revitalization;
Native America;
revitalization movements

The six books under review constitute a coalescing, distinctively ethnographic engagement with the situation of contemporary Native American languages. They focus on the phenomena of language loss and preservation that are today of intense concern to tribal members and governments, galvanizing community activists and educators and creating new collaborative opportunities for scholars with diverse research agendas and commitments. Taken together, these books reveal that language documentation and revitalization both reflect and engender profoundly cultural processes—though identifying where exactly the relevant culture is happening, so to speak, is often a matter

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of perspective. At a minimum, there is *the cultural work of language preservation itself*, which is often in tension with the heritage language and associated “traditional” culture that is being preserved and reconfigured. While this might come as little surprise to anthropologists and archaeologists familiar with critical studies of tradition, folklore, heritage, museums, and other discourses and institutions of cultural objectification (e.g., Handler 1988; Handler and Gable 1997; Handler and Linnekin 1984; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998a, 1998b, 2004), the books under review do provide a new perspective on linguistic anthropology’s central preoccupation—the relationship between language and culture—that should be of interest for cultural anthropologists and anthropological linguists alike.

Since this literature follows in the wake of (and is to some extent dependent upon) the emergence of global language loss as a matter of widespread public concern, some background is in order before we delve into the books to draw out their broader implications. In the 1970s, linguists, endangered language communities, and pan-indigenous networks began mobilizing to raise awareness about language loss and resources for language preservation. The 1990s marked a significant turning point as a number of grassroots efforts culminated in prominent publications and policy changes on disciplinary, national, and international stages (Hale et al. 1992; Wurm 1996). Landmark legislation in the United States, the Native American Languages Acts of 1990 and 1992, made it federal policy to “preserve, protect, and promote the rights and freedom of Native Americans to use, practice, and develop Native American languages” (25 USC § 2901) and established funding to support preservation efforts (Warhol 2011, 2012).

The primary response to language loss in linguistics has been the activity of preservation, a broad area encompassing language documentation and language revitalization. *Documentation* involves creating and archiving permanent records of a language including audio and video recordings, linguistic field notes, and other products of basic linguistic research. These are the necessary foundation for linguistic description, which traditionally takes the form of grammars, dictionaries, and corpora of texts. *Revitalization* typically involves trying to increase the number of speakers of a language and expanding the domains (e.g., home, school, government, media, etc.) in which it is used.¹ Revitalization often draws on documentation and description as a resource for developing pedagogical materials for language learners. In the United States, grant programs overseen by the National Science Foundation and the Administration for Native Americans are primary sources of funding

¹Revitalization is also referred to as “language maintenance” when fluent speakers are available to participate in revitalization efforts, and as “language revival” when no fluent speakers of a language remain. The political and rhetorical issues surrounding alternative terminologies to describe processes of language loss and preservation are complex and now the subject of an extensive literature of their own (e.g., Duchêne and Heller 2007; Hill 2002; Leonard 2011; Moore 2006; Perley 2012). Of the books under review, Meek (2010:136–154), Nevins (2013), and Perley (2011:121–148) give sustained attention to the topic.

for a range of academic, collaborative, and community-based language documentation and revitalization projects in American Indian communities.

Even as documentation and revitalization have emerged as the primary response to language loss from the disciplinary perspective of linguistics, alternative approaches have identified nonlinguistic forces as the ultimate causes of language shift and therefore propose to address the problem at its roots through, for example, ecological planning and sustainable development (Nettle and Romaine 2000) or reducing socioeconomic inequalities or disparities in access to health care (Henderson, Rohloff, and Henderson 2014). Whether language-focused interventions like documentation and revitalization are effective in reversing language shift—whether, in the words of one of our authors, they can produce “real results” (Shaul 2014:23)—is a persistent source of concern for policy makers and stakeholders. It is likewise a concern for the authors of the ethnographic studies under review, as they seek to impart a measure of anthropological relativism into the conversation by exploring what constitutes “success” or “failure” in specific cultural contexts.

As anthropologists have been turning their attention to the cultural dimensions of endangered language preservation, a specifically ethnographic literature on language documentation and revitalization has grown up in recent years. While these ethnographers are involved to varying degrees in language preservation themselves, they are on the scene as participant observers as well as natives, outsiders, activists, and critics. In order to study language preservation as a socio-cultural phenomenon, the authors of the books under review immersed themselves in preparing dictionaries and corpora, developing pedagogical materials, and helping teach in heritage language classrooms. But while grammars, dictionaries, and corpora were once (and, to a marginal extent, still are) recognizable and publishable linguistic anthropological genres—ends in their own right—our authors are not producing such linguistic description as their primary scholarly contribution, as were their Boasian predecessors. Rather, their involvement in documentation and revitalization is a means for examining the cultural basis and significance of language preservation as a social activity. This is what distinguishes the contemporary ethnography of language documentation and revitalization from language preservation as a primary research activity in historical “salvage” anthropology and current documentary linguistics: the processes and legacies of previous anthropological research have been reconstituted as ethnographic objects in their own right. To apply Duranti’s (2003:324) delineation of paradigms for research on language and culture in American anthropology, anthropological linguistics—in which language is “a tool for cultural (or historical) analysis”—is now being incorporated into linguistic anthropology as the object of analyses framed in terms of concepts such as language ideology, indexicality, entextualization, performance, and agency.

To the extent, however, that our authors remain committed in varying capacities and degrees to the success (however defined) of language preservation, this literature can also be read as an extension or sublimation of a long-standing anthropological commitment to the preservation of diversity, now that language documentation, description, and archiving have become primarily the prerogative of linguists. Doubtless, each author's investment in successful documentation and revitalization outcomes reflects a unique combination of influences, which include the historical disciplinary legacies discussed above as well as activist and engaged approaches to research, native anthropologies, and researcher–community solidarities formed in the course of fieldwork. Regardless of our authors' motivations, one of their primary contributions when considered as a group is to demonstrate that the successes and failures of language preservation are relative to the ethnographic contexts in which particular projects unfold and the cultural expectations held by their promoters and other stakeholders.

Finally, a note on the geographical focus of these volumes. All of the books under review analyze language documentation and revitalization in Native North America, with four focusing on the United States and two on Canada. We are unaware of a similarly robust regional literature on these issues in any other part of the world, with the possible exception of minority language activism in Europe (e.g., Jaffe 1999; Urla 2012). Given that the pressures driving global language shift seem only to intensify, the coming decades will likely see further contractions in small languages and a resulting increase in initiatives to document and revitalize indigenous and minority languages around the world. We thus expect the ethnographic conversation on Native American language preservation to grow further in coming years, and we anticipate the development of similarly robust regional literatures elsewhere.

After describing the books under review, we propose that these ethnographies of language revitalization can be read as recent manifestations of long-standing anthropological attention to “revitalization movements”: intentional, organized efforts by community members to revive or maintain selected aspects of their ancestral culture that they hope will contribute to a more satisfying life in the present. We also read these books as supporting Edward Sapir's contention that “a healthy national culture is never a passively accepted heritage from the past, but implies the creative participation of the members of the community” (1924:417–418).

Doing the Lost Language Ghost Dance

We begin our discussion with David Leedom Shaul's *Linguistic Ideologies of Native American Language Revitalization: Doing the Lost Language Ghost Dance*. The book is an outlier in two respects: first, Shaul's background, prose, and style of argumentation distinguish him as the most linguistic and least

ethnographic of the authors we consider; second, the book itself is not an ethnographic monograph but rather a critique of the current state of language revitalization presented as a 62-page undergraduate textbook complete with bolded keywords and, at the end of each chapter, questions and exercises “for thinking and classroom discussion.” Taken as such, we find the book unsuccessful (we confess that it is one of the strangest scholarly texts we have ever encountered and are convinced that the publisher has done the author a disservice by presenting his work in this format).² Regardless of the book’s shortcomings, we include it here because we believe that Shaul’s explicit critique of language revitalization bears close scrutiny. In our reading, the book raises four interrelated themes with which all our other authors are in some way concerned:

1. the fundamentally cultural and symbolic nature of language preservation as a social activity,
2. the challenge of determining what constitutes the success or failure of a language revitalization project,
3. tension between local and dominant society institutions and expectations, and
4. conflicts over literacy and formal classroom instruction as opposed to other strategies for language socialization.

In *Lost Language Ghost Dance*, Shaul draws on 30 years of experience documenting and describing Uto-Aztecan languages of the Great Basin and Southwest (as well as a number of California Indian languages), using the anthropological notion of “language ideologies”—“beliefs and feelings about language and discourse” (Field and Kroskrity 2009:4)—to reject revitalization on what he calls “the official language model.” As an alternative, Shaul proposes that local language ideologies should inform language planning so that revitalization projects will be culturally appropriate and effective in meeting the needs of communities with different resources and goals.

²For example, the very first problem at the end of chapter 1 asks students to “list the total number of consonants and vowels” in a data set from Ausaima, an extinct Californian Indian language, and determine whether any of them “contrast at the beginnings of words.” It also asks students to describe the syllable structure of the language and assess whether it might be a factor in the assignment of stress. This is not something most students we know could do (or find edifying) after a barely two-page long introduction to linguistics. No indication is given as to what insight into language revitalization might be gleaned from such an exercise, as the relevance to practical orthography development (the only possibly intellectual justification for having readers solve such a problem) is not made clear. An exercise in another chapter (20) eventually asks students to return to the Ausaima data set and propose a practical orthography for the language, but the requirement that students use “only ordinary letters and combinations of letters” is not only confusing (would using a diacritic to mark stress count as “ordinary?”), it also elides many of the substantive issues associated with practical orthography development, none of which are mentioned in the text in any case. A prospective textbook adopter might question the linguistic terms Shaul chooses to discuss in the scant two-page section (1–3) on “How Languages Work.” For example, we would not devote space to terms like “prefix” and “suffix” where some knowledge could be presupposed, though we would also not opt to introduce such advanced concepts as “inverse marking” (nor use it in the non-standard way the author does to describe the complementarity of English -s as a plural on nouns and a third person singular marker on present tense verbs). Surprisingly, given the author’s disciplinary background, we find the book problematic as a resource for teaching linguistic concepts. We were surprised to find the phonetic symbol “x” described in the appendix on “Some Linguistic Conventions” as “like h in the English word hat, but made farther back in the throat” (60).

By the “official language model,” Shaul means revitalization efforts influenced by the “one nation, one language” assumption that motivated the promulgation of European national languages at the expense of regional languages and dialects beginning in the early modern period (engendering such monitoring bodies as, e.g., the *Académie française* and *Real Academia Española*). The official language model privileges standardization over variation, literacy over orality, the use of a single code across all domains over code switching, and institutional pedagogical strategies copied from foreign language classrooms over other methods of language socialization.

Although Shaul never says this outright, he implies that Native Americans are embracing these Eurocentric language ideologies as a bid for national recognition and perhaps even political survival (see also Field and Kroskrity 2009:22–24). One implication of the surrounding society’s “one nation, one language” expectation is that *in order to be a nation, you have to have a language*. In this framework, a community without a recognizable national language (i.e., one that is standardized, written, used in all domains, taught in classrooms, etc.) lacks legitimate claim to a distinctive national identity. Shaul argues, however, that trying to accommodate the dominant society’s expectations by appropriating its ideologies leads to cultural conflicts with existing indigenous language ideologies, practices, and values. As a result, the official model does not serve American Indians’ language maintenance goals.

According to Shaul, Native American language revitalization on the official model is at best ineffective and at worst counterproductive, a contention he illustrates with the case of O’odham. In the 1980s, the Tohono O’odham tribal government became one of the first to formalize tribal language policies. They passed a resolution in 1986 declaring O’odham the “official language of our people” and “the official means of oral communication ... in any and all tribal and community functions and activities” (Zepeda 1990:251). Despite the tribal government making O’odham the official national language, ample documentation and description, and decades of literacy-based educational programs, speaker numbers and domains of use for the language continue to decline. Instead of new speakers, Shaul sees a proliferation of isolated but emblematic language tokens, including “letterheads, posters for programs ... tee shirts, bumper stickers, personalized license plates, coffee mugs, and awards” (20). To the author, this does not constitute success.

Revitalization on the official language model comes in for frequent criticism throughout the book for producing “no real benefits” (ix). This is because “projects and products that do not engage the communities which they are created to serve” (vii)—such as teaching materials derived from grammars and dictionaries that are “neglected after they prove to be of little interest” (45)—fail to accomplish the “complete restoration” of the heritage language, bring it into “daily use by the community” (viii), or “significantly raise the number of speakers or contexts in which the language is used” (52). Shaul even

implies, drawing on Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony, that by borrowing the official language model, Native Americans have internalized the ideologies of the surrounding society and become complicit in their own domination (ix, 52–53). According to this view, language revitalization on the official model actually promotes rather than ameliorates language shift because it takes energy and resources from activism that could challenge the status quo and diverts it into ineffectual programs that seem promising but in fact accomplish nothing. In essence, according to Shaul, the model for language revitalization promoted by the government, linguistics, and other dominant society institutions—and embraced by many American Indian communities themselves—is actually undermining distinctively Native American languages and identities.

Shaul's blanket condemnation of the official language model—as well as his unabashed endorsement of language ideological manipulation in cases where community ideologies are not conducive to revitalization (50–52)—is made in service of another point emphasized in the book, one with which we are highly sympathetic: that local language ideologies should serve as the starting point for developing revitalization programs that are tailored to a given community's needs, interests, and resources. As it happens, in some cases these and the official model align. Shaul even presents examples where revitalization on the official model seems to have worked (34–36)—including one Native American example (Mohawk). He also provocatively states that in cases of efforts to revive languages without speakers, there is no alternative to the official model because “the nature of the situation (limited information, mostly written) ... creates a written standard by default” (39).

We are thus led by Shaul's own examples to disagree with him when he concludes that “the linguistic ideology of the official language model must be rejected” (55) but to agree wholeheartedly when he observes that “different speech communities” have “differing goals” (40) and that there are “other possible, positive outcomes” than the “complete restoration” of a heritage language as the language of everyday life (50). Indeed there are. They can range from simply increasing appreciation for a heritage language, to using the language in a limited way with an emphasis on its phatic and emblematic functions, to using the language as a prestige code or in specific domains such as classrooms, welcome ceremonies, and other formal settings (32).

The inconsistencies outlined above suggest that Shaul is caught between two conflicting standards for success. In some places, he exhibits a narrow focus on language revitalization as something that will increase numbers of speakers and domains of use, in which case community language attitudes only become relevant when perceived as obstacles to progress so conceived. Elsewhere, however, he endorses a relativistic notion of success in which language revitalization's symbolic and cultural contribution is as at least as important as quantifiable outcomes. According to this view—one which our other authors develop ethnographically—language revitalization is successful

when it draws on community language ideologies to help tribal members find locally meaningful ways of engaging with their heritage languages.

In our interpretation, then, Shaul's real target is not the official language model per se, but rather its prevalent presentation (in the form of inspirational language revitalization "success" stories—think Hebrew and Hawaiian) as a prefabricated portable model, when in fact it does not transfer automatically or effectively to Native American and other endangered language communities in diverse social, cultural, economic, political, and historical circumstances. (See also Cowell 2012, who lays out a powerful point-by-point argument for why Hawaiian is an inappropriate model for the revitalization of mainland American Indian languages like Arapaho.)

Of the many different axes along which indigenous and minority language communities differ, Shaul focuses on "ideology," which he seems to use as a stand-in for a concept of culture. Shaul points out that a number of relatively wealthy tribes invest revenues in language preservation and possess some measure (albeit limited) of political sovereignty (e.g., Cattellino 2008).³ And yet, even in such communities language shift continues, implying that economic well-being and political will are not enough in themselves to ensure a future for indigenous languages. There must be something else going on. According to Shaul, that "something else" is nothing other than the degree of alignment between the official language model and the cultural perspectives and practices of Native American communities. These may treat language as inextricable from kinship and prayer or construe the spoken, rather than written, word as language's paradigmatic form (51; see also Morgan 2009, discussed below).

In such cases, teaching students how to read and write their heritage language in a classroom may not only fail to produce new speakers or expand domains for use but may also alienate constituencies that are genuinely concerned about language loss. As Shaul points out, multi-media documentation can be used to support revitalization in communities with language ideologies that resist the standard-language emphasis on writing. He critiques the current scholarly literature in linguistics for focusing inappropriately on the importance of orthography development and other issues related to literacy; he also criticizes as ineffective Native language teaching on the official model because, in conjunction with its emphasis on literacy, it involves "teaching the target language as if it were Latin—talking about the language [in English] and concocting artificial sentences" (23). This he contrasts with acquisition through immersion, in which speakers only use the target language and grammatical patterns are left largely implicit. If we follow Shaul's suggestion to take local language ideologies seriously, however, other possibilities for language

³Area specialists may wonder whether Shaul's discussion of this point overstates the case for tribal autonomy by referring to federally recognized tribes as "domestic internal nations" (6) rather than as "domestic dependent nations" (*Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* 30 U.S. 1 [1831]), their true legal status.

socialization become imaginable, some of which lie beyond, but exist in productive symbiotic tension with, what goes on in classrooms.

Lessons from Fort Apache

In *Lessons from Fort Apache: Beyond Language Endangerment and Maintenance*, M. Eleanor Nevins compares language ideologies and speech practices common in White Mountain Apache family and religious settings with those of schools and culture centers on the Fort Apache Reservation in Arizona, finding—like Shaul—that institutional language revitalization “utilizing ideologies and textual models from the dominant society... compete with other forms of authority and other language practices in many indigenous communities” (2). A student of Dell Hymes, Nevins works within the ethnography of speaking tradition that Hymes pioneered to draw out diverse understandings of and responses to language shift across different contexts on the reservation. Along the way, Nevins develops previous ethnographic research on Western Apache language ideologies and speech practices by Keith Basso and David Samuels, and brings renewed relevance to Apache texts collected in an earlier era by Harry Hoijer.

While Nevins’ title frames the book as offering “lessons” for linguists working in language preservation, we read it differently in light of the book’s decidedly ethnographic register and approach. Our suspicion that the title may misdirect readers’ expectations is borne out by a recent review of the book in *American Anthropologist*, in which linguistic anthropologist Pamela Innes, who has worked with a different Apache community on language maintenance, regrets that Nevins “does not always remain focused on language revitalization efforts,” leaving her wishing for “a more satisfying and helpful book” (2015:859, 860).

But we believe *Lessons from Fort Apache* is best read not as an advice manual for improving revitalization outcomes but rather as an extended ethnographic analysis of Apache interactions with non-Apache people and practices that has *implications* for cultural interventions of any kind in Apache communities. At its highest level, the book is a demonstration of “the generativity of otherness” (38). By this Nevins means that cultural boundaries are symbolic systems of contrast people use to define themselves as collectivities (an “us”) in distinction to what they categorize as foreign (a “you” or “them”)—but keeping in mind that “foreign” materials and practices often comprise productive components of a given culture (Bashkow 2004). In the case of *Lessons from Fort Apache*, the operative contrast is *ndah/ndee*, where “engagement with *ndah*, or White people, is one of the ways in which people define what it means to speak and behave as *ndee*, or Apache” (38). So whereas Shaul sees cultural hegemony undermining Native communities, Nevins sees Apaches creatively engaging with the surrounding society *as they themselves*

categorize and understand it to recreate their own distinctive ways of speaking and living—that is, their own language and culture.

Each chapter in Nevins can be read as a focused study in the creative potential of the “cultural encounter” (36) and “strategies of differentiation” (22) that take place at the threshold where the *ndee*/Apache symbolic world meets that of the *ndah*/stranger. Chapter 4, for example, analyzes place names for recent government-funded housing developments on the reservation that reference English language media such as television, movies, commercials, and brand names; these include “Chinatown,” “Life Savers,” and “Over the Rainbow.” Nevins successfully ties the use of these odd English place names to the Apache naming practices described by Basso (1996): both establish an evaluative framework for attending to the moral dimension of social relations in a distinctively Apache way. In this case, English media-based place names are used to comment on recent changes in the local social order, playfully contrasting new housing developments consisting of single-family homes with the more traditional extended family residence patterns of older settlements. The place names also contribute to the construction of the reservation as a distinct speech community, in that outsiders recognize the names’ media references but remain unaware of their locally specific meanings. The boundary-marking function of these names struck Nevins when she witnessed a “border zone encounter” at an auto mechanics’ shop just outside the reservation, where she overheard a reservation resident ask a White employee to send a tow truck to fetch his broken car from his home in “Over the Rainbow” (104). The employee had no idea that “Over the Rainbow” even coded a location, much less where it was.

Nevins sees language documentation and revitalization activities as significant instances of this kind of *ndah/ndee* boundary work. To her they are “translational spaces” (178) where Apache people and interested outsiders negotiate approaches to teaching and learning, representations of Apaches in collected texts, the significance of storytelling, and indeed the nature of language itself. Apache revitalization activities have not always been successful in the obvious sense of increasing number of speakers or expanding domains of use. Nevins uses this fact not to propose better teaching strategies but to pose a larger question: “What ... is the relevance of indigenous persons and voices to the state of indigenous languages?” (221).

In a chapter entitled “Learning to Listen,” for example, Nevins tells the story of an Apache language revitalization program that was controversial on the reservation because it was perceived to be teaching the language without proper attention to social relations between elders and learners and without transmitting the speaking styles and cultural values that community members associate with Apache language socialization. This illustrates what one of our other authors, Meek, would describe as a sociolinguistic disjuncture between institutional and home-based notions of what “speaking a

language” means. For a lesson designed to teach Apache literacy, for example, Nevins worked with a speaker to record sound files for a list of words. After they finished, her consultant “recited them back ... incredulously: ‘*bijh, chizh, ch’ah, dii’i, dlq, dził, góchi* (‘deer, firewood, hat, the number four, bird, mountain, pig’)” and asked, “Is this really what it’s supposed to mean to know the Apache language?” (55). Nevins also describes pushback from consultants during the process of “concocting artificial sentences,” to borrow a phrase from Shaul (2014:23), for classroom scripts. After obliging Nevins’s request to translate a set of sentences from English into Apache, her consultant told her that “a really good speaker would not say it like that,” explaining that they would encode the information less explicitly and rely more on contextual cues and gesture to make the meaning clear (56). Nevins responded to her consultants’ concerns by emphasizing that the exercises were designed to teach specific skills rather than represent how a fluent speaker would use the language, but as Nevins recognized, this left a larger question unanswered: why classroom language instruction was so focused on grammatical competence (language as a code) when communicative competence (language as a skilled practice and socially appropriate way of being) is what made speaking Apache most meaningful from the community’s perspective (55).

In trying to make sense of the Apache language program’s eventual cancellation, Nevins observes that schools, culture centers, families, and religious settings do not all build community identity and assert authority around language in the same way. Schools and culture centers draw on the standard language ideology noted by Shaul, treating Apache “as a national language in relation to other national languages” (60). As with the materials created by documentary linguists, they work by “recasting local languages into ‘old’ forms recognizable as such within the institutions of the dominant society” (22). Thus, one of Nevins’s key points is that as much as language revitalization and language endangerment seem to be opposed, both are modernist “facets of the same process of political integration within surrounding national regimes” (22). Given the colonial history to which American Indians have been subjected, one can understand that the political recognition gained by institutionalizing Apache would be attractive to many tribal members. But for those whose authority and identities are also deeply rooted in domestic and religious contexts, language learning implies an “involvement with and awareness of family” (63) and is assumed to come about through an active form of self-cultivation on the learners’ part that is construed by Apaches as “listening.” Because of the tension that exists between these alternative perspectives on what language is and how it should be learned, school-based language revitalization programs can be both valued and controversial. But rather than seeing community critiques of revitalization programs as an obstacle to success, Nevins sees them as an opening for ethnographic engagement, an opportunity for all involved to learn more about “what wanting to

‘save our language’ means” to Apache people (28). This in turn leads her to a remarkable conclusion: that taking “steps to strengthen extended families—in terms that they themselves find appropriate—would not be out of place in language maintenance efforts” (70).

Nevins probes the processes and products of Apache language documentation along the same lines, demonstrating that diverse participants have different understandings of what an elicitation session, corpus, story, or dictionary even is. To illustrate her point, Nevins compares an Apache text that was collected in a salvage anthropological mode by Harry Hoijer in the 1930s to one that she elicited in 1996. She finds that both Hoijer’s consultant and her own (Lawrence Mithlo and Rebekah Moody, respectively) employ an identifiable oratorical speech genre to “address themselves to the researcher and attempt to alter the terms of their relationship and the purpose of their encounter” (128–129) by “engag[ing] the researcher in an exchange of perspectives” (125). Anticipating that White researchers, along with the broader society they are seen to represent, associate the Apache past with privation and ignorance, both Mithlo and Moody present their history in a way that conforms to their expectations about White stereotypes of them as poor and primitive. They then present an alternative historical narrative emphasizing the good teachings, words, and actions characteristic of Apache family life. By presenting Apaches in this way, Mithlo and Moody transform the *ndah/ndee* relationship from one in which the metonymical researcher (representing their White audience) condescends to Apaches from a position of material superiority into one in which the researcher respects Apaches for their collective moral virtue derived from the respectful manner in which they approach their kinship relations. Mithlo and Moody invite the researchers to affirm this reconfigured relationship between their societies by presenting their research “from a position of moral involvement” that reflects the new understanding of Apaches gained from the experience of elicitation. As Moody tells Nevins at the end of her fieldwork, “When you write about us ... be proud of us” (131).

Drawing on this experience, Nevins reinterprets the Americanist tradition of text collection as a “history of encounter” that “prompt[s] us to consider the symbolic use made of documentation to project historical and expected future relations between peoples” (114). But while indigenous consultants may have seen “work with researchers as a kind of diplomacy” (131), recovering speakers’ pragmatic intentions and techniques requires reading against the grain of the corpus as a genre in which documented speech events are presented as a monologic “referential record of a traditional past” (Hoijer published Mithlo’s contribution under the heading “Old Apache Customs”) rather than as a dialogue or “translanguage” (Hanks 2010:10–12) emerging from the interplay between participants’ mutually encompassing expectations (144–145; see also Dobrin 2012). Rereading the Americanist corpus for moments where “the speaker’s own rhetorical efforts compete with the

contextual frame imposed by the researcher and by the publication format of a text collection” (128) provides a better understanding of the different expectations participants brought to bear on these encounters.

While Nevins locates the production of corpora as an activity occurring at the boundary between indigenous speech communities and surrounding societies, she also demonstrates how the recontextualization of texts, stories, and even dictionaries as documentary objects once they are produced elicits new perspectives on their significance from community stakeholders. Her discussion reminds us of Becquelin, de Vienne, and Guirardello-Damian’s (2008:55) conclusion, based on research with Trumai Indians in the Upper Xingu area of Brazil, that documentary recordings are “not the same object” to community members as they are to researchers. When Nevins published an electronic version of one of Hoijer’s text collections online, for example, she received a call from a descendent of his consultants who emphasized how important it was that Nevins (unlike Hoijer) had included the names of the speakers at the beginning of each text. Doing so made it possible for Apache readers to treat the texts as “more than just words on a page” (131) because it put readers in an appropriate “listening orientation to an active but temporally deep voice” within a cultural perspective according to which “states of affairs established by ancestral actions continue to make present lives possible” (115). Nevins similarly describes how a Western Apache–English dictionary that “sits on the shelf of the reference libraries of the world as [an] addition to global multilingual resources” is “repersonalized” by Apaches, who, building on their traditional cultural appreciation for creative naming, find in it clever coinings, “signature creations reflecting the wit” of their own relatives (218). It can be surprising for researchers who develop a dictionary or other documentary materials to learn what the text means to the people whose words it contains. They may read it in unanticipated ways, as Nevins describes, or even find it significant without reading it at all (Terrill 2002).

We Are Our Language

In *We Are Our Language: An Ethnography of Language Revitalization in a Northern Athabaskan Community*, Barbra Meek examines Kaska language revitalization in the Yukon, Canada, and provides an ethnographic case study suggesting that Shaul’s skepticism toward Native American language revitalization on the official language model is justified. While the book’s title seems to promise a celebratory account, it takes on an ironic edge as we discover that “We Are Our Language” is a slogan used not by Kaskas but by the territorial government in publicity materials. While the slogan reflects the government’s rejection of assimilation and support for distinctive aboriginal rights and identities, it is nevertheless predicated on the “one nation, one language”

assumption that iconizes the relationship between language and identity while erasing from the territorial landscape nonspeakers, dialectical differences, English, and politically recognized First Nations groups that do not straightforwardly overlap with language groups (131–133).

The slogan “We Are Our Language” encapsulates the ironies and unintended consequences of ethnonational language revitalization projects. It is an instance of what Meek characterizes as “sociolinguistic disjuncture”: “points of discontinuity or contradiction, moments where practices and ideas about language diverge” and which “can appear between ideas and practices, between practices, or between ideas shared by a group or across groups—between indexical orders” (50–51). Tensions between language practices and ideologies across different social domains are responsible for the failure of language revitalization projects promoted by territorial and educational institutions, the goal of which is the restoration of intergenerational transmission. For Kaska, despite seemingly ideal conditions of government support (26), high rates of family participation in language revitalization programs (94), and good intentions all around (138), “there are realistically no new first-language speakers” (46).

Revitalization’s failure to produce new speakers leads Meek to want to understand how “today’s atmosphere of multiculturalism and aboriginal rights is ... a path for the ongoing march toward language death” (41). Like Shaul, Meek believes that institutional initiatives to valorize indigenous languages nevertheless end up inadvertently subordinating them to “the dominant state’s hegemony” by “absorbing indigenous practices into the state’s repertoire, under the guise of multiculturalism and multilingualism” (109). But rather than seeing “cultural hegemony” as a sinister first principle explaining why language revitalization fails to produce new speakers, the disjunctures Meek describes are unintended consequences that arise from people and programs working toward the same goal within different frameworks of meaning.

Stakeholders can have very different ways of understanding what is going on in language loss. While official language policies focus on declining numbers of languages and speakers remaining in the territory, “the primary concern for the Kaska language community was the disappearance of knowledge,” which includes but exceeds the linguistic code itself (148). Meek found that when they were discussing language preservation, elders often employed the Kaska term *á’i*, which refers to a wide range of order-preserving taboo practices, from kinship avoidance rules to spiritual contamination protocols (37–38). *Á’i* informs how Kaska elders understand both the causes of language shift and the importance of language revitalization. In their analysis of the situation, children are not learning Kaska because, lacking understanding of *á’i*, they fail to “respect” and “listen” (e.g., 38–39, 62–69). Yet it is important for children to “respect” and “listen” to elders so that they can come to

understand *á'i* and live a good life, free of the “hard times” that broken taboos precipitate (31–32, 145–146). In this view, language shift is a kind of side effect of a deeper socialization crisis, a breakdown in the transmission of cultural and historical knowledge.

Both Nevins and Meek, then, describe local practices of language socialization governed by idioms of “listening” and tied to notions of moral personhood. In both cases, however, the system is perceived as breaking down: Apache parents and grandparents describe younger Apaches as “White people” as a way of teasing them for failing to participate properly in family life—choosing frozen pizzas, for example, over home-cooked food (Nevins 2013:65–66)—while Kaska elders lament: “Now children don’t listen. We always listened to our mothers. When people talked, children didn’t run around, that’s how it was. Now children run around even when people are talking... They aren’t respectful” (38–39).⁴ Like Hoijer’s and Nevins’ Apache consultants, Kaska elders reconfigure the documentary encounter to serve their own purposes, but rather than engaging in cultural diplomacy like Mithlo and Moody, Kaska elders seem to conceptualize their participation in language preservation as an opportunity to educate future generations about the importance of respect—rather than “learning to listen” (Nevins 2013:47), it is a case of “teaching to listen,” trying to cultivate a listenership for a language without listeners (145–146 and transcripts on 31–37 and 62–69). (Dobrin 2008:318–19 analyzes another instance where the role of listeners is foregrounded in local understandings of language loss.)

One consequence of the association among elders, language, and traditional knowledge is that Kaska language has become a form of specialized knowledge associated closely with authoritative elders—so closely, in fact, that it discourages younger community members from trying to learn the language (39–40, 157). Some young people believe that they, too, will become Kaska speakers when they are old, overlooking the fact that the current elders learned Kaska as children because it was the primary language of their home and community (140). Shaul refers to the process by which a language becomes a form of cultural capital, used only for certain prestige functions, as the “commodification” of language. In the case of Kaska there is both cultural and economic capital at stake: the role of “elder” has now become professionalized as a job description in the “linguistic marketplace” (29–30, 109–114), with elders acting as paid “experts” analogous to linguists and other external consultants. Meek does not provide a term for this kind of situation, in which institutional practices (elders as paid experts) intensify or even overwrite community ideologies (elders as traditional authorities), but we believe that documenting

⁴Morgan, whose book is discussed in more detail below, encountered a similar discourse on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in Montana, where elders contrast their own experiences listening to lectures from their parents and grandparents with children’s interest in television and video games. Morgan notes that elders engaged in “subtle criticism of the younger generations, who they do not think listen as well as they should” (2009:221).

it for Kaska is one of the most valuable contributions made by her book (114, 148–151, 157).

We see it most clearly in the language revitalization strategies employed in classrooms, where Kaska is objectified as a code. A central theme in Meek's book, as in Nevins', is that pedagogical strategies employed in school-based language classes dissociate indigenous languages from the cultural practices and values that motivate community members' desire to revitalize their language in the first place. Classroom Kaska lessons focused on object labeling and repetition of formulaic utterances, promoting a "highly routinized, grammatically simplified style of Kaska" (83–84). As a result of this "institutional regimentation of speech" (105), "children were learning ... to be competent students, but ... not necessarily learning to speak Kaska" (81–82). In other words, Kaska language classes actually increase the gap between speakers and learners by teaching a new grammatically and topically simplified version of the language that does not include the communicative styles and interactional patterns traditionally employed when speaking Kaska.

In part, these classroom developments are products of pedagogical materials developed by government-funded organizations such as the Yukon Native Language Centre and Aboriginal Language Services. In such materials, Kaska is "submerged entirely in a sea of English" (120), while flash cards and lesson plans "reduce aboriginal languages to a compilation of nouns and token phrases, emphasizing the referential aspect of language while downplaying all other indexical dimensions" (126). The materials also encourage pragmatically inappropriate routines such as beginning every period in kindergarten through fifth grade with "introductions" (85), even though the classmates know each other (and are in some cases relatives) and despite the fact that it is considered rude to introduce oneself rather than wait to be introduced by others: "This educational routine," Meek writes, "in its directness, is awkward and unconventional, interrupting Dene interactional conventions and socializing students to use Kaska in a way that they probably never would" (126). In fact, however, such routines are now one of the most common ways of using Kaska. In an extended passage describing her experience of accompanying a family on a trip to the bush, Meek shows how the family employed the same interactional styles that were used in the classroom, essentially turning conversation into a series of greeting routines, vocabulary elicitation, and "say X" directives (95–105). Significantly, not only did adults interact this way with children, but children interacted this way with each other, suggesting that the institutionalized language practices are taking on a life of their own among younger generations.

Given that a primary theme in local discourses about the value of heritage languages is that they teach children proper behavior and important cultural knowledge (144–148), there is clearly a substantial disjuncture between what happens in the classroom (and increasingly beyond it) and what

elders in particular hope children will gain from learning Kaska. As Meek puts it:

If an indigenous language, as a grammatical system or set of vocabulary items, were intended to serve only as an index of a Yukon Indian identity, and locally as a sign of status, then simply speaking an aboriginal language, knowing a grammar, or even knowing only tokens of a grammar would satisfy the Yukon's revitalization goals. In that case, the curriculum materials would suffice. However, if grammatical competence is *not* the primary endpoint, if the goal of language revitalization includes, instead, the acquisition of social and cultural knowledge through language, then these basic lessons have failed. The ideological disjuncture has transcended the discourse and ruptured into the actual activities intended to revitalize and change the current linguistic situation. (158)

Defying Maliseet Language Death

Like Meek, Bernard Perley is a Native American anthropologist writing about indigenous languages in Canada. But unlike Meek, who conducted her research in the Yukon at some remove from the Comanche Nation where she is enrolled, who alludes to her tribal citizenship only in passing (2010: ix, xvi; cf. Meek 2011:43–44), and who addresses her work primarily to an anthropological audience, in *Defying Maliseet Language Death: Emergent Vitalities of Language, Culture, and Identity in Eastern Canada*, Perley writes as a native anthropologist about, and largely for, his home community of Tobique First Nation in New Brunswick.⁵

Drawing on his life and family history, interviews with tribal members, and participant observation fieldwork in a Maliseet language classroom at the community elementary school, Perley writes in a way that “oscillates between ‘objective’ diagnostic analytical discourses and affective ‘embodied’ discourses of language death as witnessed, experienced, and observed” (21). Perley’s multiple identities presented him with challenges not only in writing but also in carrying out the research: while his academic advisors urged him to maintain a critical distance on what he was observing (197), participating in reservation life as an anthropologist sometimes resulted in awkward and antagonistic interactions with other community members. Near the beginning of his fieldwork, one of the Maliseet language teachers responded to him as an unwelcome intruder by singing, “Here come the Anthros, better hide your dead away. / Here come the Anthros, on another holiday” when he entered the classroom (25); he later found himself addressed as “white man” after he chose not to join a First Nations blockade of the Trans-Canada Highway for fear of “losing [his] ‘objective’ distance in such a charged event” (178–182, 210 n. 18).

⁵This is not to suggest that Meek lacks a deeply personal connection to Kaska. In the preface, Meek characterizes her book, alluding to a poem by Native linguist and poet Ofelia Zepeda, as “a reflection on and analysis of the time I spent walking with an endangered language, one that may or may not be my own, but one that certainly called to me” (2010:x).

The complexities of Perley's self-positioning present challenges for his readers as well. Writing "as an advocate as well as an analyst" from an awareness of the "multiple responsibilities as well as the multiple possibilities" of his work (197), Perley embraces an engaged anthropology "where professional knowledge serves the communities from which that knowledge is derived" (3). Like many ethnographies intended for native readers as much as for anthropologists, *Defying Maliseet Language Death* is difficult to evaluate using conventional disciplinary rubrics, which, in the classic mode, assume that the ethnographer's goal is to describe "the native's point of view" (Malinowski 1922) to an audience of presumed non-native readers (Schwartz and Lederman 2011).

The challenges that the book poses to author and reader alike are intensified by the unusual and provocative stance Perley takes on the status of Maliseet, which in his estimation is "moribund" (128; see also 4). While Perley's aim is "sounding the alarm" (34) and "becoming part of the solution to the problem of language death" (3), tracing the trajectories of Maliseet revitalization programs teaches him that few in the Tobique community are as worried by language shift as he is. "Part of the irony of this research," Perley admits, "is that the tragedy of language loss is not seen as a tragedy for a large majority of the Tobique population" (56): many tribal members consider blood or aboriginality more important to their identity than language and so have the perception that "you don't have to speak Maliseet to be Maliseet" (57). So although community members might respond enthusiastically when a language class is first proposed, Perley describes at least three different programs that were started on the reservation but were discontinued or rendered ineffectual due to significant attrition (131–139). Experiencing these disappointing efforts as a participant observer left Perley with little choice but to conclude that despite heroic efforts on the part of the Maliseet language teacher, Sue, "the community was generally indifferent to the communicative health of the language" (185).

Taking this indifference seriously, midway through the book Perley begins substituting the phrase "language suicide" for "language death" in an effort to confront community members with their own "complicity in the erasure of the Maliseet language from our lives" (122). As Perley acknowledges, this attitude is in part a response to outside pressures, leading his brother to half-jokingly suggest that what they are really "practicing [is] the Kevorkian school of language maintenance" (139). Perley knows that the labels he is using are provocative, but he employs them intentionally in order to goad tribal members to move beyond a narrative of victimization in regard to the state of their language. Because community choice is involved, he says, "the language is not condemned to extinction" by outside pressures alone (142). Perley thus highlights the Tobique community's own agency in choosing to revitalize (or not revitalize) Maliseet as an aspect of aboriginal linguistic and political self-determination.

An assumed coextension of language, culture, and identity is evident in Perley's claim that "the Maliseet language needs to live for the people to live" (194), and consistent with this, for much of the book, he equates doing something about language death with revitalizing Maliseet on the official language model. As noted above, Perley concludes that tribal members are choosing against the language because they do not attend adult language classes; he also laments that "only half of the eligible students from the reservation attend the reservation school" with the rest being sent by their parents to the provincial school downtown, where Maliseet language classes are optional or nonexistent (171, 128). He rejects the notion held by some in the community that "Maliseet is an oral language and should be taught orally," seeing that position as an "acquiescence to colonial hegemony and its concomitant depreciation of indigenous languages, cultures, and peoples" (86). When the coexistence of multiple orthographies complicates the production of desperately needed literacy-based pedagogical materials (93), Perley argues that "without a single authoritative institution (be it chief and council or a language curriculum committee) to designate a single orthographic system as the standard, the competition between systems will continue to undermine language immersion efforts" (100).

But Perley's endorsement of Maliseet nationalism, classroom instruction, literacy, and standardization on the official language model is in tension with other aspects of institutionalization, which he laments as having regrettable consequences. He finds that given its role as "the 'official language' of Tobique First Nation," Maliseet is "largely used for its symbolic capital" rather than being "used communicatively on a daily basis" (196). He also expresses disappointment that at times fellow language advocates' "commitment was based on outside funding and not on a sacrifice of personal time" (196; see also 70–71, 158–159)—as noted by Meek, institutionalization can transform previously personal roles and relationships into professional ones with rather different affective valences. Jurisdictional ambiguities interfered with the Tobique community school's ability to collaborate successfully with provincial officers, fostering suspicion and "acrimony" regarding domains of responsibility and the distribution of resources (72–75, 82–84). As a result, the only output of a promising seven-year-long provincial project to create curriculum materials was "one alphabet book that nobody uses and a series of posters that speakers of Maliseet find difficult to read" due to the aforementioned orthographic conflicts (75). Perley's evaluation of the community school language program is similarly ambivalent: while he applauds that it is happening, he knows that "one teacher teaching for forty-five minutes twice a week will not maintain—much less revitalize—the language" (120). Perley concludes that despite all "good intentions... the dominant culture's education system [is] one of the key factors that continue to undermine Maliseet language vitality" both on and off the reservation (127).

The anthropologist in Perley knows to look for the “symbolic dimensions” of the “social inaction” that he documents (146); he even quotes a call by Clifford Geertz to explain human social phenomena by appealing to their cultural meanings:

The thing to ask about a burlesqued wink or a mock sheep raid is not what their ontological status is. It is the same as that of rocks on one hand and dreams on the other—they are things of this world. The thing to ask is what their import is: what it is, ridicule or challenge, irony or anger, snobbery or pride, that, in their occurrence and through their agency, is getting said. (Geertz 1973:10, quoted in Perley 2011:145)

Yet he never quite musters an analysis that can help us understand the community’s apathetic response to language revitalization programs and classes. There are hints that Perley attributes Maliseet’s moribund status to a disembedding or “disembodiment” (151) of the language from its communicative role in everyday interaction, something that classroom instruction only exacerbates. Recall that Apache language maintenance programs are often controversial because “what it means to know and speak Apache” is different at school and at home (Nevins 2013:58). Recall also how Meek analyzes Kaska classroom routines as stripping the language of its power to transmit cultural knowledge of *á’i*. In the case of Tobique First Nation, do tribal members’ halfhearted investments in institutional instruction indicate a lack of support for Maliseet, or would revitalization be more compelling if it were approached in some other way?⁶ Without an analysis of what language loss entails from a Maliseet cultural perspective it is hard to know, and Perley is left with little alternative but to double down on institutional initiatives that are, by his own account, ineffective.

Fixing the Books

While discussions of literacy by Nevins, Meek, and Perley are subsumed by those authors’ primary focus on school-based language initiatives, our next two books focus on literacy and orality more directly. The first, an ethnography, shows how a Pueblo community adopts and adapts literacy in a manner consistent with local cultural understandings of secrecy and perfectibility as sources of social value. The second, an ethnohistorical study, suggests that the common belief that American Indian languages are fundamentally oral in nature is an ideological legacy of the early reservation period, when

⁶It may not always be the case that widespread community participation is the appropriate scope or scale for language revitalization efforts. Linn and Oberly (in press) point out that it is common for Native American language revitalization to be driven by highly motivated individuals or families and then to spread (or not spread) from there to the wider community. Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer even predict that the future of many Native American languages is to “be cultivated by a small group of apprentices, each working more or less alone, with older tradition bearers” (1998:98). Native American speech communities are often multilingual with heritage languages being used alongside English, French, and/or Spanish (Leonard 2011). Given that facility with these codes is unevenly distributed within the speech community, it may be enough from a local perspective for a few tribal members (or employees of a tribal language department) to be engaged in heritage language reclamation on behalf of the whole group.

colonial agents and institutions used literacy as a mechanism for controlling indigenous people. Both of these books complicate the binary opposition Shaul draws between literacy and the official language model, on the one hand, and orality and Native American language ideologies, on the other.

In *Fixing the Books: Secrecy, Literacy, and Perfectibility in Indigenous New Mexico*, Erin Debenport describes an effort by San Ramón Pueblo to develop written Keiwa language teaching materials between 2003, when the community's experiment with literacy began, and 2009, when Debenport's involvement in the project came to an abrupt end after the Pueblo's governor decided to cancel the Keiwa literacy program and stop collaborating with non-tribal members on language maintenance.⁷ While Debenport's outsider status may contrast with Perley's positioning as a native anthropologist, both ethnographers found themselves vulnerable to accusations of being interlopers in the course of their research. In Debenport's case, the origin and termination of the tribal literacy initiative and her involvement in it took place amid San Ramón residents' growing concern that they were "losing [their] Indianness" (118) not only as a result of language shift but also due to a recent influx of gaming revenue and the tribal government's controversial decisions to set a minimum "blood quantum" for tribal membership in 2000 and to disenroll (i.e., revoke the tribal membership of) exogamous women and their children in 2007 (13).

In keeping with Pueblo restrictions on knowledge circulation, both "San Ramón" and "Keiwa" are pseudonyms, and all Keiwa language tokens in the text have been redacted, the Keiwa language data being analyzed exclusively in translation. These authorial strategies involving concealment and indirection not only support but themselves perform some of the main arguments Debenport makes about Pueblo literacy (8). While she disguises the exact location where she worked and the name of language spoken there, Debenport draws on and contributes to an extensive existing regional literature on Pueblos and other indigenous peoples in the Southwest, especially Paul Kroskity's publications on Arizona Tewa language ideologies.⁸ The legacy of past work is something the community must reckon with as well. The book begins, for example, with one of Debenport's consultants showing her a copy of Elsie Clews Parsons' (1962) *Isleta Paintings*, which contains an artist's drawings depicting secret ceremonial practices. The consultant told her, "you won't believe what this lady did" and "the artist's family still catches hell for this" (3–4; see also 55–56 on a word list collected by an unidentified anthropologist in the 1930s that was recently repatriated from the Smithsonian's archives).

As noted above, concerns about literacy in the Tobique community revolve around conflicts over orthographic systems and issues of relative prestige: for

⁷This event is discussed at greater length in Debenport 2010.

⁸Arizona Tewas are a diasporic Pueblo community, who fled their villages in what is now New Mexico in 1696, following the Second Pueblo Revolt, and resettled on First Mesa within what is today the Hopi Reservation in northeastern Arizona.

Perley, the public circulation of Maliseet online or on television is a cause for “pride and excitement” because it creates parity between Maliseet and dominant languages (2011:191–194). San Ramón presents a very different cultural context, one that demands the proper treatment of esoteric knowledge—including knowledge of Keiwa language—in order to sustain the politico-religious system that makes Pueblo communal life possible. In San Ramón, secrecy (i.e., controlling the circulation of knowledge) and perfectibility (i.e., investing effort in improving objects, practices, and relationships) are basic social values that Debenport ties together under the overarching rubric of “Pueblo propriety” (90). In contrast to influential theories of literacy advanced by Habermas (1989) and Anderson (1991) that assume that “unfettered, ‘public’ circulation is what writing is all about” (104), Debenport argues that literacy can be a means of controlling, curating, and revising information through selective sharing and collaborative editing. As suggested by both the rise and subsequent fall of the Keiwa literacy initiative, both views of literacy—as enabling dangerously unrestricted circulation and as a culturally appropriate tool for language preservation—have currency within the San Ramón community.

Debenport’s central example of how literacy can align with Pueblo propriety emerges from her experience with a dictionary project. The starting point for the project was a lexicon produced in the late 1970s by Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) missionaries working in a neighboring Pueblo. Debenport served as a “scribe” to a group of four Keiwa speakers in their 60s and 70s who met regularly for three years to revise the missionary dictionary into a suitable San Ramón Keiwa dictionary. They rewrote each headword in the local dialect using a recently developed orthography, created new Keiwa forms for Spanish, English, Apache, and Navajo borrowings, and adjusted the English glosses (30–31, 57–58). The committee invested most of its effort, however, in creating new example sentences because those in the existing SIL lexicon, which came from a New Testament translation, were deemed either ungrammatical or culturally irrelevant (21–23).

Debenport’s detailed analysis of the dictionary and its example sentences illustrates the point made earlier that documentary genres like dictionaries can be written and read in diverse ways across different contexts. Discussing first-person singular example sentences, for instance, Debenport characterizes the dictionary as “a place for recording individual life histories, and... portraits of the people involved in its creation,” and while the dictionary’s authors are unidentified and example sentences unattributed, “family members and close friends could easily use the finished document as a site for accessing scattered biographical information rather than as an undifferentiated reference work” (68). This echoes Nevins’s (2013:218) finding that relatives of speakers who contributed entries to an Apache dictionary “repersonalize” the text of what is typically read as an impersonal reference work (see also Morgan 2009:232). In the case of the Keiwa dictionary project,

however, this process was meant to work in both directions, with example sentences expressing not only “timeless truths that apply equally to all members of the pueblo,” but also “veiled comments about particular individuals” whose behavior the authors viewed critically (76).

In her account of the production and reception of the dictionary, as well as two texts produced for pedagogical purposes, Debenport emphasizes collaborative authorship, extensive revision and editing processes, and restricted circulation of the (still perfectible) “final” product. Whereas Nevins and Meek describe situations in which literacy-based pedagogical materials present Apache and Kaska language very differently from the ways the languages are used outside the classroom, Debenport shows how the authors of Keiwa texts load them with indexical connections to locally valued interactional styles. According to Debenport, “It is hoped that by learning to speak Keiwa, community members will learn how to conduct themselves appropriately and exhibit behavior and engage in activities that connect them to the pueblo and identify them as Indians, both within and outside the reservation” (73). Those involved in the language program want their texts to be able to “teach people how to be San Ramón” (22), “live life the way it’s supposed to be lived” (in the words of one dictionary example sentence [58]), and transmit speaking styles and personal qualities they feel are necessary to “be Indian” (88). Even the grammatical forms that are used in the example sentences of dictionary entries (63–79) are chosen to support the work’s overall goal of “ensuring the future of particular speaking styles and their associated values” (82).

But this presents the authors of Keiwa texts with a paradox. The most significant speaking styles and cultural practices that they want to transmit are on topics that Pueblo propriety precludes discussing explicitly. This leads to authorial strategies that, like communicative practices at the Pueblo more generally, revolve around veiling and indirection. The seemingly objective, neutral, and referential genres of dictionaries and pedagogical materials are used to communicate sensitive information devoid of its context, leaving just enough clues (it is hoped) for readers to be able to infer what is being referred to, which ranges from traditional cultural and religious practices to political critique. Thus, for instance, the example sentence “S/he was being massaged because s/he had bumps on the arm” alludes to part of a curing ceremony, but there is no metapragmatic framing to indicate that a curing ceremony is the intended context—readers must reconstruct that for themselves (81). In the case of the dictionary, “the lexicon is at once a neutral reference work and a potential place for creatively encoding salient cultural information” (64). While Debenport focuses on the dictionary’s production rather than its reception, San Ramón readers remind us of the Arizona Tewa villagers who persisted in asking Kroskrity (1998:103) what he had discovered about their ceremonies even after he repeatedly explained that his research in their community concerned “just the language, not the culture.” It seems the dictionary

authors Debenport worked with were right to assume that users would know to read beyond the document's referential surface to find hidden connections to ceremonial registers, traditional cultural practices, and contemporary political critiques.

Cultural restrictions on what can be taught in classes or included in pedagogical materials are not unusual in Native American language revitalization. Nevins, for example, describes how religious leaders on the Fort Apache reservation use their authority to impose restrictions on school curriculum content, even preventing certain words associated with Traditionalist ceremonies, such as the Apache words for *fog* and *snake*, from being used to illustrate letters of the alphabet (2013:189–190; see also Samuels 2006). This contrasts with what is happening at San Ramón. There, some of the most important knowledge to be communicated through written materials is powerful and must be kept secret. By indexically encoding this knowledge in a dictionary, an ostensibly referential genre, the authors transform the dictionary into an item of profound cultural relevance, something which itself models locally preferred styles of communication. In comparison with Nevins's description of Apache literacy, Debenport's analysis of Keiwa literacy and lexicography shows how a written form can be imbued with new cultural meanings and functions rather than taken over wholesale along with its original linguistic ideological framing. At San Ramón Pueblo, the dictionary was not (or not only) an appurtenance of a nationalist language ideology nor a vehicle for teaching language as a lexical and grammatical code. In the eyes of its authors, the Keiwa dictionary should convey a whole way of life.

The Bearer of This Letter

Mindy Morgan's (2009) *The Bearer of This Letter: Language Ideologies, Literacy Practices, and the Fort Belknap Indian Community* is an ethnohistorical account of literacy on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in Montana, where two genealogically distinct languages are spoken, Nakoda (Assiniboine) and Gros Ventre. From 1996 through 2000, Morgan was the curriculum coordinator for a collaborative project between Fort Belknap College, a tribal college on the reservation, and Indiana University, which developed materials for Nakoda language classes at the tribal college. The book begins with an account of a meeting between elder speakers, tribal college language teachers, and university linguists to discuss what orthography the project would use. At the meeting, a number of speakers claimed that "Nakoda is an oral language" and were hesitant to have it be written, a common sentiment in many American Indian communities (2; see also Meek 2010:89–91; Perley 2011:86). The source of this sentiment is what Morgan seeks to explain in her book: "how many tribal members at Fort Belknap came to believe that their languages cannot, or rather should not, be written" (3).

In attempting to explain “why Indigenous literacy didn’t emerge at Fort Belknap, especially given that other communities on the Northern Plains did have vernacular [literacy] traditions” (6), Morgan gives pride of place to the role of English literacy as an instrument of colonization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a period when “fundamental associations between English, the document, and the limits of writing [were] established” (12–13). Beginning with the founding of the reservation in the late 1800s, agents, clerks, traders, and priests used English documents to manage all aspects of reservation life. The documents included treaties, tribal enrollment and census records, ration tickets, passes granting residents permission to leave the reservation, marriage and divorce certificates, affidavits of adoption, wills, vouchers, receipts, deeds, and leases. At the same time, local colonial administrators, educators, and missionaries implemented federal policies focused on assimilating Indians by promoting language shift to English. In Morgan’s interpretation,

While the prevailing language ideology did not succeed in eradicating the languages entirely, it did succeed in placing Indigenous languages in direct opposition to English. If English was the language of U.S. citizenship, then Gros Ventre and Nakoda were the languages of cultural autonomy. If English was the language of assimilation, then Gros Ventre and Nakoda were the languages of resistance. If English was taught and used in a written form, then the Indigenous languages would remain oral. (115)

The symbolic opposition with English did not prevent Assiniboine people from appropriating English literacy for their own purposes in the early reservation period, when, as Morgan teaches us, they often wrote petitions to officials on the reservation and in Washington (64–82): petitioners would “touch the pen” as a way to “both reach and express consensus and to use that power to counteract the extensive power of the [government] agent” (72, 73). English language literacy became entrenched in the succeeding historical periods, when tribal members used it for self-government and for recording elements of their local history (143). But only with the rise of contemporary endangered language paradigm did academic and local concern about language loss produce an incipient tradition of Nakoda literacy that some in the community see as a way to preserve an important element of Assiniboine identity, while others see it as a form of ongoing assimilation (15). According to Morgan, it is the historically deep association between literacy and institutional power that makes “the transformation of literacy from a symbol of a colonial past into an example of self-determination ... difficult” (243).

Another factor hindering the development of vernacular literacy in Fort Belknap is undoubtedly the presence of both Assiniboine- and Gros Ventre-speaking communities on the reservation, which has led to “the adoption of English as the public lingua franca between the two linguistically unrelated tribes” (13; see also 198, 214). The theme of competition between “secondary”

languages arises also with respect to the other ubiquitous language in the Canadian context: French. Meek (2010:88–89) discusses the privileging of French language programming in the Yukon, and Perley deals at some length with the problem it poses for Maliseet, noting that French, unlike Maliseet, “may be redeemed for real capital” (2011:126). In an effort to prepare their children for employment and other opportunities in the surrounding society, parents encourage them to learn French (Perley 2011:126). As a result, only limited time is available for Maliseet language instruction, even at the community elementary school (Perley 2011:87–89, 127–128).

What we are left wondering is why, if “Fort Belknap is typical in that the federal policies that shaped language use on the reservation were applied uniformly to tribal groups in the United States” (15–16), did some Native American communities creatively incorporate literacy into their cultural repertoires while others did not? Morgan acknowledges that “Indigenous-language literacy existed and sometimes flourished within many communities throughout the United States” (41) but does not account for the disparity, beyond noting that by the late 19th century, when the Fort Belknap reservation was established and missionaries arrived in earnest, vernacular literacy traditions were declining across the United States due to assimilationist federal policies (41–42). We are struck by the way this account contrasts with Nevins’s interpretation of an Apache coyote story, “Coyote Reads the Letter as He Sits,” which was collected in 1929, a time when reformers were contesting but had not yet displaced assimilation as the goal of federal Indian policy. The story tells how a letter arrived during a council of religious leaders. They all tried to read the letter and failed, until Coyote took a turn and “read the paper right off without trouble” (Nevins 2013:152). Nevins encourages us to read this story in the context of efforts then taking place to develop an Apache writing system and by followers of the Holy Ground Movement to write letters petitioning the reservation superintendent for permission to hold their ceremonies (2013:120–122). These early 20th-century Apache engagements with literacy recognize that “the colonial encounter was also a documentary encounter,” but one in which Apaches were moving across boundaries as a creative act, “bring[ing] together what had been given as separate ... revealing past commensurabilities (Coyote knew how) and posing possible futures” (Nevins 2013:154,155). Debenport (2015) offers a much more recent example of a tribal government creatively engaging with an incipient literacy tradition amid concerns about the circulation of esoteric knowledge. In this case, the cluster of cultural values that comprise Pueblo propriety help account for the distinctive literacy practices that emerged, as well as the eventual decision to abandon them. While these examples from the Southwest are geographically far removed from the Northern Plains, they suggest that what may be overlooked in giving explanatory priority to historical federal policies is a cultural basis for the opposition to text-based Nakoda and Gros Ventre language maintenance.

Morgan touches on such an explanation when she interprets the “Nakoda is an oral language” ideology as a means of controlling the language’s circulation. As Nakoda speakers and domains have diminished in recent decades, religious contexts have emerged as paradigmatic contexts for heritage language use. The association between Nakoda and ceremony led the language itself to be seen as a kind of powerful knowledge subject to the same kinds of restrictions surrounding ceremonial knowledge (see also Moore 1988). In this context, Nakoda literacy is threatening because it short-circuits established methods of cultural transmission that rely on personal relationships with recognized authorities by making formerly esoteric knowledge public. These dynamics are similar to what Debenport describes for Keiwa and suggest that it is not only the government’s use of English literacy to control indigenous people in the early reservation period or assimilationist policies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that explains current opposition to literacy, but also local cultural concerns about knowledge circulation and Indianness, with some viewing literacy “as a necessary step to preserve a distinctive identity” and others seeing it as “the final step in assimilating Native identity into a Western framework” (15).

Conclusion: Revitalizing Language for a More Meaningful Culture

Toward the beginning of this essay, we introduced four themes central to the books under review. Here we would like to propose that the first of these, *the fundamentally cultural and symbolic nature of language preservation as a social activity*, serves as an overarching principle that subsumes the other three: *standards for evaluating the success or failure of language revitalization; relations between local and dominant institutions and expectations; and controversies surrounding literacy and formal classroom learning*. A concept of culture is central to language preservation not only because the methods used in documentation and revitalization *reflect* particular cultural practices and values (drawn from the surrounding society or derived from local priorities) but above all because the goal of language preservation is in some sense to help *shape* meaningful indigenous cultures, that is, to provide the symbolic conditions of possibility within which participants can live what they feel to be meaningful cultural lives. In other words, the ultimate aim of language revitalization is not just to revive or maintain the use of a particular lexical and grammatical code in a community but to use a heritage language’s association with an ancestral past to enrich the cultural present—and sustain a cultural future.

To that extent, the recent books under review can be productively read as a contribution to the longstanding anthropological literature on “revitalization movements” (Harkin 2004). This is a connection that two of our authors make explicitly, if in very different ways. For Shaul, language revitalization on the official model is dismissed as “doing the lost language Ghost Dance.”

The Ghost Dance was an American Indian religious movement that emerged in the late 19th century in response to the material pressures and humiliation of colonialism, quickly spreading across much of the American West.⁹ A common Ghost Dance teaching was that following the movement's precepts (including performing the eponymous dance) would bring about a reunification with deceased relatives and ancestors. Shaul relates language revitalization to the Ghost Dance in a critical vein, saying that both are "like a rocking chair" in that "it keeps you busy but you don't go anywhere" (2014:53). Just as the Ghost Dance failed to deliver on its promise to return the dead to life, so too language revitalization on the official model has not restored many dying languages to active use in everyday life.

While Shaul sees the Ghost Dance as a waste of effort, Debenport relates language revitalization to classic examples of revitalization movements in order to make the opposite point: "Like cargo cults or the Ghost Dance, attempts to promote the use of indigenous languages are often seen by practitioners as 'successful' despite the lack of quantifiable results or the predictions about language 'death' made by academics and media figures" (2015:112). This is because the ultimate goal—the "hope," in Debenport's terms—of language revitalization is rarely in itself linguistic. Quoting Crapanzano's (2003:19–20) discussion of cargo cults, Debenport draws an analogy between "how those hoping for cargo were really hoping for 'a new moral, social, and cultural order in which these objects figure'" and the San Ramón belief that "widespread Keiwa fluency ... would create a community in which ... readers/listeners could 'live life the way it's supposed to be lived'" (2015:116). In other words, language revitalization is not really about bringing an ancestral code back to life; instead, language revitalization uses language as a symbolic resource for broader cultural projects seeking to "recharge" the moral, social, and cultural order with ancestral knowledge and worldviews (McMullen 2004:275). From this perspective, the Ghost Dance wasn't really about the return of the dead, cargo cults aren't really about cargo, and language revitalization isn't really about language. Instead, revitalization movements use ancestors, cargo, and language as symbolic resources in an attempt to create a more satisfying cultural life.

A central feature of revitalization movements as discussed in the midcentury acculturation literature (e.g., Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits 1936) is

⁹Literature on the Ghost Dance is vast. Mooney 1896 is the classic starting point, while relatively recent treatments include Hittman 1997, Kehoe 2006, Smoak 2006, and Vander 1997. Unfortunately, despite its prominence in his title, Shaul's invocation of the Ghost Dance is not explained in the book. The sole elaboration comes in a "for thinking and classroom discussion" question in the penultimate chapter, where he explains that "if Native Americans did this dance, the dead would be restored and the world cleansed of the invading Anglo marauders" (2014:53). He seems to presuppose—unjustifiably, we suspect—that readers have sufficient knowledge of the movement to be able to draw out the implied associations between a return of the dead and the revitalization of language. Nor is it clear that a physical return of the dead was a universal expectation among practitioners. Harkin (2004:145) emphasizes mimesis of the dead and "ritual enactments of cultural dissolution and death" as central principles of the Ghost Dance in western Oregon, where it was known as the Warm House.

that they are predicated on an awareness of one's own culture as something that can be modified through conscious effort. This is evident from definitions of nativistic and revitalization movements as a "conscious, organized attempt on the part of a society's members to revive or perpetuate selected aspects of its culture" (Linton 1943:230) and a "deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture" (Wallace 1956:265). As Linton points out, nativistic movements are "selective": they do not directly seek to revive whole ways of living in their entirety; rather, "certain current or remembered elements of culture are selected for emphasis and given symbolic value" (1943:231) on the principle that reviving the selected feature will lead to the recreation of associated practices and values. As Linton puts it:

Moribund elements of culture are not revived for their own sake or in anticipation of practical advantages from the elements themselves.... The society's members feel that by behaving as the ancestors did they will ... help to recreate the total situation in which the ancestors lived. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they are attempting to recreate those aspects of the ancestral situation which appear desirable in retrospect. (1943:232)

Current Native American language revitalization follows a similar semiotic logic. Heritage languages are not revived or maintained "for their own sake"—reproducing the code is not enough. Instead, the codes are invested with symbolic value—in particular indexical connections to desired cultural practices and values, such as ways of speaking, "listening," "respect," *á'i*, religious ceremonies, national recognition, political self-determination, and Native or tribal identities. Linton's notion of "selection" is helpful for explaining why language revitalization efforts, which seek to revitalize a code out of a desire for broader social transformation often end in disappointment when the indexical links created between culture and code are challenged or severed. In the books reviewed here, we see this disappointment in community responses to classroom registers (Apache, Kaska) and the dissatisfaction some express about the proposition of native language writing (Maliseet, Nakoda). Many of the conflicts described in our books can be seen as struggles to control the indexical associations of a code that is being decontextualized from "traditional" community settings and cultural forms and recontextualized through documentation and revitalization in new written genres and institutional settings.

Conflicts about the methods used in language revitalization, for example, point to deeper conflicts about the hoped-for cultural benefits. As Morgan shows, the purpose of Nakoda language maintenance is to preserve a distinct Assiniboine identity; those who oppose literacy do so because they believe that written Nakoda actually undermines distinctiveness and represents assimilation to the practices and values of the dominant society. Meek shows that Kaska elders are invested in language preservation as a means of transmitting cultural knowledge, which is why classroom instruction fostering culturally

inappropriate scripts and referential object identification create “disjuncture” for them. And Nevins argues that sometimes even failed revitalization projects can support cultural goals: “what we need is to tell the story of engagement in language programs in ways that better recognize the success of apparent failures” when “the capacity...to say ‘no’ to programs” contributes to projects’ “political and ethical sustainability” (2013:224). If, as she points out, one of the purposes of language maintenance is political empowerment, programs that “fail” in response to community criticism may actually support the broader goals because they prove the power of indigenous actors to decide what “being Apache” means.

From this broader perspective, speaking per se need not be the only criterion for assessing the value of language preservation activities. In line with this, Perley, who expects there to be no more first-language Maliseet speakers in 20 years, concludes his book by presenting “alternative vitalities” for Maliseet. He argues that linguistic literature overemphasizes spoken language and presents a false equation between numbers of speakers and language vitality (see also Fishman 2002). He proposes that “texts, recordings, booklets, dictionaries, historical accounts, and documents” are also “ways of being for the Maliseet language” and can generate “an equally vital relationship” between tribal members and their heritage language (2011:146–147). Among the people and projects creating “emergent vitalities” for Maliseet language is Perley’s own *Wəlastəkwi Cosmogensis/Maliseet Cosmological Beginnings* project, an arrangement of paintings that incorporates language, oral traditions, prayer, and landscape. As Perley describes them, the paintings are designed to

create a sacred space for prayer and meditation. The process of designing, constructing, and experiencing *Wəlastəkwi Cosmogensis* is itself an ongoing act of prayer. The goal for this reintegration project is to instill prestige in Maliseet language, culture, and identity. It is designed to inspire Maliseet community members to reintegrate the Maliseet language into their everyday lives. (2011:199)

In essence, Perley charts a course for Maliseet as a “postvernacular” language, one that is no longer spoken in everyday communication but is nevertheless treasured for its contributions to collective identity. (The term was proposed by Shandler [2006] to describe the situation of Yiddish among assimilated Jews, who continue to value and engage with their heritage language even though they do not speak it.) If languages can die, then they can also have an afterlife in which they remain significant, albeit in different ways than when they were used as vehicles of everyday spoken communication (Schwartz 2015)—think also of liturgical-scholarly languages like Latin, Classical Greek, and Hebrew. This seems more and more to be the future of Native American languages. According to Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer,

for example, “It is unrealistic to expect the Native languages of Southeast Alaska to recover fully and thrive as they did sixty to a hundred years ago. But they can continue to be used in many ways, both oral and written, that are of enduring spiritual value to the individual and community, even if these new uses are far more limited and restricted than they would have been in the past” (1998:97).

While it is not typical in the literature on either language revitalization or revitalization movements to reference Sapir, his essay “Culture, Genuine and Spurious” foreshadows many of their central concerns. Reflecting on “the spiritual maladjustments such as are patent enough in our American life of today” (1924:410) due to an alienating system of labor in which our economic activities rarely provide opportunities for creative expression, Sapir argues that “genuine culture” is not an automatic inheritance; rather, it is made through conscious efforts by individuals to create a meaningful cultural life in the present through work with material they draw from the past. There is a profound creativity in such acts: “Genuine cultures provide individuals both with a rich corpus of pre-established (traditional) forms *and* with the opportunity to ‘swing free’ ... in creative endeavors that inevitably transform those forms. For Sapir, genuine culture has a dialectical quality, for it embodies the seeds of its own transformation” (Handler and Linnekin 1984:287; see also Handler 2005). The individual’s relation to the collective past is thus active, appropriative, and future-oriented: “far from being suffocated in an atmosphere of endless precedent [a form of culture which Sapir would see as “spurious”], the creative spirit gains sustenance and vigor for its own unfolding” (1924:419). We find Sapir’s perspective compelling because it complicates the standards for evaluating success and failure in language revitalization: even if it were achievable, a perfect replication of linguistic skills through the creation of new native speakers may still not lead individuals and communities to “a full world of spiritual satisfactions” (1924:424). On the other hand, a communal grappling with the meaning of a native language through artwork, school programming, or home socialization discourses and practices may be culturally productive whether it results in a linguistic renaissance or not. Sapir’s message is sung loud and clear in these ethnographies of language revitalization, which reveal some of the ways in which culture is genuinely being built in Native North America today from the linguistic legacies of the past.

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