In the spring of 1997, a number of Acoma Pueblo tribal members embarked upon a campaign to revitalize concern about Acoma language retention in their community. Envisioning the potential impact of engaging community resources to address this challenge, a plan began to emerge for developing and implementing community-based initiatives designed to stem further Acoma language erosion and to attempt reversal of a critical shift toward English.

Since the initial community discussions of 1997, a series of events has brought together a core group of Acoma speakers who have focused their efforts on building a foundation of understanding about issues of native language loss and revitalization in their community. These initial experiences, which are currently in progress, underscore a number of issues that point to the complex nature of language restoration work in Native American communities. A critical part of this process has involved the collection of data in the community focusing on language use in the community and the present status of the language. This has been used to plan, develop, and pilot Acoma language immersion programs for the community.

This essay begins with a background presentation of past historical influences that have helped shape and contributed to the current status of the Acoma language. Some of the key findings from data collected in the community and the events that have influenced community language planning are described. Past efforts to address Acoma language retention are discussed and provide insight into the choices and decisions that have guided efforts in the Acoma community thus far.

THE ACOMA COMMUNITY

Acoma Pueblo is one of 19 Pueblo Indian tribes in New Mexico located in the northwestern region of the state. The Keres language is spoken by six of these pueblos, including Acoma. Members of Acoma and of its adjacent neighbor, Laguna Pueblo, are considered the western Keres speakers. The two tribes are geographically located some distance from the remaining Keres language communities situated further east along the Rio Grande. Some linguists consider the Keres language family to be an isolated language group (Davis 1959) with no known affiliations to other native languages in North America.

The sprawling reservation community of approximately 3,000 enrolled Acoma tribal members is located 64 miles west of Albuquerque. The total tribal rolls are actually greater by at least another 2,000 or so members; however, many families live off the Acoma reservation in nearby towns, where job resources are more readily available (1998 Acoma Tribal Census Records). In a limited sense, the reservation provides some isolation from urbanized centers, although recently the rise in New Mexico’s tourism industry and opening of a tribally operated casino off the reservation now brings additional numbers of outside visitors to the pueblo. Most visitors come to see the famous “Sky City,” a tourist reference to the Acomas’ ancestral village, which sits atop a 350-foot sandstone mesa. Located 15 miles north of the old village are the modern-day villages of Acornita, McCartys, and Anzac. Most tribal members live in these villages, which are closer to the major east-west interstate highway and local schools, and provide access to electricity, natural gas, and running water.
The ancestral village of Haak’u (the traditional Acoma name), on the other hand, is occupied by a few Acoma families year round, including individuals who are annually appointed by the caciques as the spiritual caretakers of the pueblo. Water, fuel, and food must all be taken to the top of the mesa, as the old village has no modern conveniences such as indoor plumbing, running water, or electricity. Most Acoma families have homes in the modern-day villages but still maintain family homes at the old village as well. Acoma families return to the old village for feast days, native religious observances, and other community events throughout the year.

The gradual move of the Acoma population from the main ancestral village to the three northern villages, beginning in the late 1800s, was influenced in part by the entrance of the railroad that ran directly through the Acoma reservation (Minge, 1976). The railroad provided the first modern means of transportation for Acoma children attending federal boarding schools off the reservation after the turn of the century. It also introduced wage-earning labor to the Acoma male population and created a limited pipeline for manufactured goods and American-made products to enter into Acoma life.

The old village of Haak’u serves as the center for the pueblo’s native religious observances, and it is here, when Acoma families come together, that the use of the native Acoma language plays a key part during ceremonies and social functions. This is especially true among older and middle-aged adult generations in the community. During these events the old village is usually closed to the non-Indian public, with some events lasting several days. Thus, Acoma families have the opportunity to engage in the social and ceremonial discourse that is a key aspect of public use of the language and is available for younger generations to observe and hear. With few modern conveniences available in the old village, it is possible during these events to shut out one medium of English language intrusion, namely television. However, unconscious habits of using English have been increasingly observed among native speakers in these settings and threaten to undermine the continued use of the Acoma language for purposes of public and private discourse.

**ACOMA GOVERNANCE**

Acoma Pueblo is one of the few tribes in New Mexico that has retained a traditional system of governance, meaning that each year the pueblo’s secular governing officials, tribal council members, and native religious appointees are made by the religious leaders of the pueblo, namely the caciques. Only men can serve as tribal officials. The secular officials consist of a governor, two lieutenant governors, a tribal interpreter, and a tribal secretary. Additionally, there is a tribal council consisting of 12 men and 3 tribal sheriffs. The titles of several of these offices reflect their origin in the Spanish colonial rule imposed on indigenous people during the 16th century. The offices were integrated over time with the indigenous form of governance, which predated early Spanish contact. Hence, yearly appointment of tribal leaders includes both secular positions and traditional religious leaders. The indigenous societal structure was based upon a cooperative relationship and interdependence of various clans and societies. These groups provided a complex support system of collective responsibility for the well-being of the whole community. Each had some part in carrying out various religious functions and providing for the material needs of the community through collective functions and activities.

Today, Acoma clans still function as the social foundation for a matrilineal society. The role of native religious leaders in appointing secular and native religious positions continues to uphold the sociocultural and socioreligious systems of the pueblo. Thus, appointed secular leaders such as the governor and other tribal officials play an important role not only as public leaders who provide an interface between the tribe and the outside world, but also as protectors of the internal core of traditional governance and native religious leadership.

In the domain of governance therefore, oral Acoma language use continues to be an important part of council deliberations and public meetings involving the community, as well as in conducting the internal affairs of the pueblo’s socioreligious life. Within this domain, however, the variance in mastery of formal Acoma discourse is becoming increasingly apparent. Older fluent adult speakers still use the language with ease in these contexts, while younger adults rely on a mix of English and Acoma or on English only. Many in this latter group have not yet mastered the more complex structures of oral discourse, while others simply do not either understand or speak the language.

**EARLY SPANISH CONTACT**

When 16th-century Spanish explorers and settlers arrived in the Southwest, new cultural, political, economic, and religious influences were introduced and adapted to varying degrees in all of the pueblos, including Acoma. For instance, the economic livelihood of Acoma Pueblo before contact centered upon an agricultural lifestyle. With the arrival of the Spanish, new cultivation tools, domesticated animals, and even new crops added to the agricultural life of the pueblo. Thus, the Spanish names for these items were eventually incorporated into the Acoma lexicon as well (Miller 1960).

Perhaps far more significant, however, was the influence and adaptation of a Spanish socioreligious system imposed