Language Revitalization in the San Juan Paiute Community and the Role of a Paiute Constitution

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ankatavats mangwisini, yaeya hee ya he
ankatavats mangwisini, yaeya hee ya he ya
taxapu nukwituxaipuva
 taxapu nukwituxaipu va
paava ' kanixai hyang
he' yang he' yang hee yang

Round dance song recorded in 1993, sung by Johnny Lehi, Jr.

Red sun rising yaeya hee ya he
Red sun rising yaeya hee ya he
At the place where my orphan used to run
At the place where my orphan used to run
While dwelling by the water hyang
he' yang he' yang hee yang

In the fall of 1979, one of the authors accompanied a Kaibab-Paiute friend and colleague on a short visit to the San Juan Paiute settlement of Hidden Springs on the western part of the Navajo reservation. The scene made a lasting impression: parents and grandparents were calling out in Paiute to toddlers; even young people were interacting entirely in Paiute; and a young girl of 11 in long braids doing her homework by lantern light wanted to be shown how to write in Paiute. In contrast, fluent speakers of Southern Paiute in other Paiute communities were at that time primarily middle-aged and older, and no young children were learning the language. To both outside observers and to the San Juan themselves, it seemed that this San Juan community was one place where the Paiute language would continue to be spoken indefinitely. Nevertheless, today the same San Juan Paiutes who called out “wakingu’” to a wandering child or grandchild in 1979 now invariably use the English equivalent, “come ’ere,” speaking to the next generation of toddlers. Speaking English between bilingual Paiute–English-speaking teenagers and adults as well as with children has become habitual in the community, accelerating the language shift from Paiute to English.

As linguistic anthropologists who began linguistic, ethnographic, and ethnohistoric research at the request of the tribe in 1980, we have observed the patterns of language use changing over the years and are presently working with tribal members in an attempt to reverse some of the changes. Although the scenario described above certainly looks very similar to that in other communities where native languages have been irretrievably lost, there are a number of encouraging signs of language strength in the San Juan case. Fluent speakers still have many occasions in which they use the language. Even young children often have passive Paiute skills as well as other special-purpose language skills. The round-dance song at the beginning of this chapter, for example, was sung by an eight-year-old. A number of adult speakers are currently attempting to learn to write in Paiute, and many San Juan have finally accepted that their language could soon be lost if they do not do something.

Ironically, since Paiute is still the primary language of many San Juan tribal members and even members who use English phrases with toddlers often have only very rudimentary English skills, the tribe has to deal with serious translation and interpretation problems at the same time that they are beginning to worry about losing the language. In this chapter, we will examine what has led to the Paiute-English language shift, the attitudes of tribal members toward it, and
the efforts of the tribe and tribal members to deal with both the long-term goal of language preservation and the short-term practical goal of effective interaction and understanding between the English-speaking outside world and Paiute speakers. We will examine the present attempt to integrate these long-term and short-term goals in a comprehensive language program and illustrate the importance of these goals through a discussion of lessons learned while translating the San Juan's new constitution.

CURRENT STATUS OF THE SOUTHERN PAIUTE LANGUAGE

Southern Paiute is the language traditionally spoken by members of the 10 Southern Paiute communities in Nevada, Utah, and Arizona. In the Nevada and Utah communities, only a small number of the oldest members presently speak Paiute. In Arizona, at the Kaibab Paiute reservation, the situation is somewhat better, with a larger number of speakers, including a small number of speakers younger than 50.

Located on the western part of the Navajo reservation, the San Juan Paiutes are the most conservative of the Southern Paiute communities in terms of Paiute culture and traditions. In contrast to the other Southern Paiute communities, where Paiute has not been consistently spoken in homes to children for 25 or more years, Southern Paiute was the language used by speakers in most San Juan political, economic, and social situations until the late 1980s.

At present, Paiute is still spoken between fluent Paiute-speaking adults in many daily contexts in the San Juan community. In fact, Paiute is frequently necessary for fluent conversations, since most speakers older than 50 and even some younger Paiutes speak very little English. In addition, two of the San Juan Paiute Tribal Council members speak virtually no English, so council discussions are generally held in Paiute. When English is spoken at council meetings, it is translated into Paiute.

Due to the increasing number of tribal members who are no longer able to communicate effectively in Paiute, however, communication between tribal members is often neither simple nor effective. Problems occur because of the frequent necessity of translation and the ad hoc nature of such translation, as well as the variable skill of the interpreters. In addition, when interactions include a non-Paiute speaker (a situation that has become common), English is generally used—often without translation into Paiute. Young tribal workers are also frequently frustrated by their lack of ability to communicate with their Paiute-speaking clients.

As noted above, Paiute is rarely spoken to children even when the adult knows very little English. Even among those teenagers who learned Paiute as a first language, most are not longer completely fluent, and only one of the younger children is now learning the language as a first language.

RECENT SOCIAL AND POLITICAL HISTORY

The 1980s and 1990s have been a period of tremendous social and political change for the San Juan Paiute tribe. In the 1970s the San Juan were a distinct community on the Navajo reservation, where they supported themselves with subsistence farming, raising small herds of sheep and goats, and selling Navajo wedding baskets to Navajos and traders (Bunte and Franklin 1987). No San Juan living on the Navajo reservation had graduated from high school; some young adults had never been to school at all and spoke no English. The San Juan Paiutes had no access to any programs that went through the Navajo tribe, including housing and federal food programs. As a tribe which had no formal status with the federal government, the San Juan had no way to gain access to these programs on their own. They had no electricity, indoor plumbing, or telephones, and they lived in one-room homes, most with dirt floors.

In the early 1980s the San Juan became involved in two major endeavors which were to change drastically their relations with the outside world. In 1978 a new bureaucratic procedure was established to allow unrecognized tribes to apply to the Bureau of Indian Affairs for federal recognition. The San Juan, realizing that formal recognition would allow them to gain access to federal programs, began the complicated process of producing a documented petition in 1980. In addition, in 1981 the San Juan discovered that their land, both their present and traditional land, was a part of the contested land in the Navajo-Hopi land claims suit for the 1934 Navajo reservation and with the help of the Native American Rights Fund intervened in the case. The 1980s, therefore, were spent working with outside experts, anthropologists, attorneys, and the Federal Bureau of Acknowledgment and Research (BAR) to document their claims. In 1989 the tribe was federally recognized, and in 1990 tribal members testified in federal district court about their land (Bunte and Franklin 1992). Although they are still working at getting a separate reservation and therefore have not been able to substantially upgrade their housing situation, the 1990s have seen them get funding for tribal offices, including fax machines and computers, and gain access to many economic, health, and social programs. Some San Juan have also acquired GEDs (high school equivalency certificates), jobs, and extra training.

LANGUAGE SHIFT

As a result of this intense interaction with experts, other tribes, and the federal government, all tribal members are now integrated into daily bureaucratic and intertribal dealings in which English is the common language spoken. By contrast, 15 years ago San Juan Paiute speakers rarely had to interact socially with speakers who did not speak Paiute or