Promoting Advanced Navajo Language Scholarship

CLAY SLATE
Center for Diné Teacher Education
Diné College
Navajo Nation
(Tséhii, Arizona)

There is a pervasive tension that shapes this piece. By request, and for important purposes, it is being written for a non-Navajo audience. Though the non-Navajo audience is certainly not homogenous, it is the incongruities in interests, needs, and knowledge that distinguish that non-Navajo audience from a Navajo audience that concern me. The ambiguity and manipulation in Navajo-Anglo relations promote misunderstanding and mistrust, of motive and message. A major claim of this piece is that the vitality of an intellectual forum for advanced work on Navajo (and perhaps any indigenous language) must recognize the absolute primacy of the speakers of Navajo as audience. In adherence to this, I am here writing through a Navajo audience first.

INTRODUCTION

The Navajo Language Program (NLP) at Diné College was expanded over a 10-year period between 1986 and 1996. Several dozen collaborators have achieved gains throughout the NLP. This has allowed Diné College to more fully exercise its role in promoting the language. Of course, the work is built on a century-old foundation of scholarship about Navajo. Constant work has been done on Navajo at Diné College since its beginning, as Navajo Community College, in 1968, including the time that William Morgan taught here. However, I will focus on the ten years from 1986 to 1996.

The guiding principle of this recent development is both simple and profound. At the core of the best work to be done on Navajo there must lie a forum of scholars. This group must develop a synergy of critical interplay that values all community voices and concerns, and it must follow a well-circumscribed path: the seminal work is done by Navajos, in Navajo, for a Navajo audience, and for Navajo purposes. Hereafter, I will refer to this formula as that of the Core Forum. At Diné College we have promoted this Core Forum, and maintenance and promotion of the Core Forum will be pursued. Only with the goal of maintaining the primacy of this type of work are we striving for the best, as academics.

The number of issues anyone may study about Navajo is, as with any language, practically inexhaustible. To delimit these issues, it has been crucial at Diné College to concentrate on the distinction between the fields of Navajo language and Navajo linguistics, and also to clarify the significant areas of overlap and cross-fertilization. There is room in these fields for everyone. Of course, the work is difficult, and novices must undergo extensive preparation before producing work not undermined by serious errors. This is most markedly true for those who do not speak Navajo or who are unfamiliar with its structure or with Navajo life and talk. The academic careers of Navajo language and linguistics scholars follow one of three paths: (1) they do inaccurate work and pawn it off on the large and ignorant audience that wants to be told about the Indians; (2) they limit their field of inquiry to arcane matters, maintaining an etic accuracy by studying minutiae; or, best (3) they define their study focus in collaboration with a Navajo-local forum and thoroughly expose their work, at minimum, to this forum. Diné College’s task in the Navajo Language Program has been, and is, to build and nurture this Core Forum, (1) by Navajos, (2) in Navajo, (3) for a Navajo audience, and (4) for Navajo purposes.

(1) Work done by Navajo-speaking Navajos is informed by a richness of resource and an access to intuition about grammaticality and acceptability unmatched elsewhere. Both for synthesizing and analyzing Navajo, those who
speak Navajo fluently and articulately have tremendously valuable tools available. Any forum that does not include informed, collaborative, critical input from Navajo-speaking Navajos is unacceptably vulnerable to inaccuracy. This is true of all Navajo language forums, without exception, and is probably true of all but the most radically delimited Navajo linguistics work.

Navajo-speaking Navajos also have an understanding of the Navajo community and an appreciation of its openness to and need for certain foci in research, curriculum writing, and composition. Decisions about what work to do that are made with this knowledge are more likely to produce work that will be used, that will draw response, that has permanence. This permanence is one of ongoing impact, and also one of ongoing presence of authors, since non-Navajos come and go on the Navajo Nation, but Navajos stay, or at least always return. Thus work done by Navajos nurtures a Core Forum.

The second aspect of nurturance of the Core Forum is that primacy be given to work conducted in Navajo. This is difficult and has been realized only partially (though in increasingly more settings). Of course, symbolically this is important. Those who work on Navajo are often the most visible champions of the language, promoting its perpetuation. Promoting Navajo while conducting one’s professional life in spoken or written English is inherently contradictory. A related benefit of doing Navajo language work in Navajo is that it forces constant coinage and circumlocution in the language. This growing edge of the language is, in and of itself, a vital part of the organism.

Of greater importance is the fact that when talk and writing are in Navajo a social solidarity and synergy arise from the specificity of audience identification that speakers and writers make. Navajo language professionals on the Navajo Nation are struggling with the ongoing demise of the language while working at perhaps its most significant growing edge. In general they cannot waste time on marginal matters or be distracted by topics possibly more taxonomic than physiological. Theirs is a forum that needs, most of all, ideas, energy, and creative problem-solving talk. When the talk is in English, this same group (including non-Navajos, who often dominate talk) immediately becomes more disjointed. Some of the reasons are social: a Navajo speaking Navajo presents a different social self to other Navajos than does the same person when speaking English. Other reasons have to do with the structure of discourse: when talk or writing is conducted in English the presupposition pools, remarkability set, and general background knowledge of English speakers tend to constrain or propose what is said.

The third feature of the Core Forum is that the most seminal work to be done on Navajo must be addressed primarily to a Navajo audience. Frankly, this is the hardest audience to address, the one most willing to withhold approval until its standards are met, the one with the most to gain or lose, and the one most consistently patient and interested. This audience has a permanence, not of a year or two, but of a lifetime and across generations. These people have time to reflect (even years) before responding (compared to the five minutes given at professional conferences). Of course, the Navajo audience is itself heterogeneous—in what it will read or listen to and in what it knows and cares about—so finding a circumscribed audience is a problem that each writer and researcher must solve.

Giving this audience primacy has radical results. First, it shapes what is said. In some matters of a more technical or arcane nature, an academic must make more preparatory remarks than would be made to a graduate linguistics seminar at most universities. Concurrently, authors must take greater care, especially with the accuracy of data and glosses, but also with claims about processes. It is always a rigorous exercise to face an audience that, when kept in the talk, can rapidly generate counterexamples.

To the extent that work on Navajo is for purposes of the academy, such focusing will also be beneficial. When small slices of a language are carried away to be presented as data to native audiences, relatively untested work may outlive its usefulness. When a large community of native speakers, with sophisticated analytical knowledge about the language, are a sine qua non of critical audiences, the forum will have a rigor of an entirely different nature. Even small slices of data, discussed by this audience, may well be critically examined for decades. Further, as discussed next, the topics considered to be reasonable ones for research will come to be of a different nature, a radical departure from present practice, and maybe the most needed one.

What will be argued that focusing all work on a Navajo audience might prevent important advances from being made, advances that can only be made by addressing a narrow, expert audience. First, no claim is being made that the Core Forum should be the only forum. In contrast, the claim is that if the work does not eventually impact that forum it will be ephemeral. Further, although our attention in scholarship (indeed, the only thing that some will consider scholarship) is often on the most intellectually complicated and groundbreaking work, such work requires that one have a broad and deep foundation of perhaps more mundane but equally valuable scholarship.

A further contention, of racism or reverse discrimination, must also be addressed. In positing the primacy of Navajo authorship, there is no intent of exclusiveness or an exercise of blind racial politics (though