

ELDERS, LANGUAGE ADVOCATES, AND LINGUISTS I A VIEW FROM INDIAN COUNTRY

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I Introduction

I must confess that I did not pick the name of our presentation. During the course of working with Mary Linn, one of Professor Yamamoto's graduate students, the three of us have spoken many times about the nature of interaction between academia and the native community. Professor Yamamoto had inquired sometime ago if I would be willing to present some thoughts to this Conference, and in exchange for his appearing at my Oklahoma Native Language Use Conference in October of this year, I agreed. Prof. Yamamoto had asked several times for the topic of my paper, but as I had never presented a linguistic paper before, I was unsure as to a title. Fortunately, Akira had a deadline and assigned one to me, which covers the issues he and I discussed in the past, and I hope to discuss now. Part of my difficulty in not being able to decide upon a name came from never previously attending, let alone presenting at this type of gathering. While I have interacted with Akira and my co-presenter, Mary Linn, as a group I did not know what needed to be said or how to say it to real live linguists. The more I thought about my dilemma, the more I realized that what I needed to assess was the perspective from which the target audience approached the areas we, myself and linguists, approached our common subject, Native Languages. Thus, the framing of the topic started to fit the presentation's title.

II Group Definitions

While I have a post graduate degree (in law), I have little exposure to linguists as a group, let alone what they would be looking for in attending a seminar or symposium. If I was addressing either a tribal gathering, or a meeting of language workers, such as I did three weeks ago, I could use any of several previously thought out subjects. I know quite a bit about the subject of Native Languages, and in other settings can discuss various language issues for hours. I do not know the linguistic community, nor what shared interests or values they have in common. Nor am I particularly interested in knowing that a linguist is defined as one who studies linguistics, or similarly useless definitions. What I have thought about over the past several years is what defines a linguist's role within my community, or within Indian Country in general.

A Who Defines Who

The title of our presentation lists three categories of people. If we analyze these three definitions what we are looking at are two different world views that identifies two possible groups of people into three different sets. From an Indian country perspective there are really two groups, us Indians and the outsiders coming in to get something, i.e., linguists. Within our communities we obviously further divide ourselves through identification, such as an elder, ceremonial, church goer, who our family is, our clans and so on. On the other hand, linguists will see themselves and language speakers, and more recently recognize language advocates. There is a convergence between Indians and linguist in that both understand, or define linguists. However the "elders" definition derives internally from Indian culture. Language advocates has a linguistic feel to it, whether or not it came from the Indian community.

In the past it has not appeared to the Indian community that academia has known much about our internal process. If the linguistic journals are anything like the other academic articles and journals I have seen, few are written by people from the communities subject to the studies. Thus, most written definitions and concepts have little input from these communities. As mentioned above, my problem is that I do not really know my target audience's needs. That means that we do have something in common, as I do not believe that most linguists understand the needs of the Indian community. Once we understand each others needs, then we can find ground in our common subject.

B Linguists

As a beginning, let us look at what I mean by the above phrase "approached our common subject." I have distinguished that from share or common interests. The term "subject" to me infers that "thing" to which we are both trying to understand or analyze, i.e. Native languages. We are interested in that subject though, for different reasons. Linguists quite likely self-identify as linguists. Most have probably gotten a formal degree in linguistics, or related field, and are trying to make a living in their chosen profession. I would assume that linguists find Native languages intellectually fascinating, challenging, or the like. I imagine that in a true linguist discussions about syntax and phonemes and such get the blood flowing. An occasional linguist may even have some nobler calling such as to help the endangered languages of the world survive. From this perspective linguist are defined by what they do, and what they do is study the structure of Native languages.

When linguists come to Indian Country,¹ they will introduce themselves as linguists, or should at least. Linguists will also divide the community they come to into several categories that they have been taught at the university, such as titled above: advocates, fluent speakers, linguistic resources, etc. The task of linguists will be to first determine the fluent speakers and which people can help fill in the gaps in linguistic information. This defines the Indian community into categories based upon linguistic resources. This assignment into categories learned at the white institutions has little to do with the way that Indian communities see themselves.

C The Native Community

While I, and my relations, are also extraordinarily interested in Native languages, the reason for our interest is fundamentally different from most linguists. Our obsession comes from a desire to be able to use the language, whether with each other or in ceremonies. Generally, I do not even define myself as a language advocate. I do identify as a Euchee and as a member of the Polecat ceremonial ground. I have over the years worked at learning my language, and coordinated language classes and activities. My mother, and aunt, have aided in these efforts, as have several other elderly speakers. However, I do not believe that most of us would offhand base our identity upon a study of our native language. We often think of ourselves by our role in community, and sometimes that role involves language. Our language is a living thing which defines us as people, as opposed to linguists who have decided to become linguists through an acquired action.

When a linguist first shows up in an Indian community, whether because they were invited or because they feel they have some inherent right to study Indians, the Tribal community can have two, sometimes simultaneous, reactions. First, who the heck is this white person and who invited them? Second, good, now we have someone to save our language for us. The Indian community thus defines a linguist as one who has specialized knowledge or tools that can help the tribe's

language survive At the same time a linguist is also clearly defined, at least initially, as an outsider

It is by no means guaranteed that the linguist will survive the first few interactions within the tribal community. Within our own efforts I have seen at least one linguist show up and tell us they were going to help us and here is how that is going to happen That particular linguist met with a few elders, but because of the linguist's attitude, the other speakers discouraged further participation I warned my Indian friends and relations in Kansas and Wisconsin about that one and have not since seen that linguist. Here, especially, we defined a linguist by what they could do for us, which in this instance was seen as stealing part of our knowledge without giving back the respect we were due

III. Dynamics of Language within Community

From my discussions and readings of Profs Ofelia Zepedia, Leanne Hinton and Akira Yamamoto, I am aware that at least a portion of the linguistic community is cognizant of the community dynamics of Indian tribes However, as an Indian who tries to make a living by working daily with the tribal governments and tribal members, I am always reminded of the intense lack of understanding of tribal relations by all classes of outsiders This is especially true of first time rookies While the study of languages may be at the core of linguistics that knowledge is of little use if the linguist cannot function within the Native community Part of that ability to function comes from understanding some of the larger issues that make Indian Country unique

A Tribal Re-emergence

When it comes around to Indian country, certain commonly held conceptions crash into reality This is what I call the Black Elk Speaks syndrome Most people's knowledge of Indians comes from the popular mediums, whether written or visual The pop culture hits about various Indian warriors and chiefs predominate, as do books such as Black Elk Speaks These books while interesting and powerful, when read by non-Indians tend to enhance the romantic conceptions non-Indians hold about our communities Most of this genera do not speak to the sovereignty struggles of modern Indian tribes, nor about the nature of daily tribal interaction

The time line that indicates the point where the Indian wars of the 1800's stopped also for the most part marks the point where writers cease to explore Indian history One is hard pressed to find books about Indians from the period of 1900 up to 1968 or so In fact often the most interesting and in depth discussions about that period are found in federal court cases² Beginning in the 1970's, the Indian tribes started reasserting their sovereign powers For many tribes these sovereign powers had laid dormant since the late 1800's, or worse, were suppressed by the Federal government.³ This new period of self-determination, which continues today, saw tribes beginning to administer their own social service programs, set up tribal court systems, and start using their taxation and regulatory power While many of these institutions are patterned on American counterparts, they operate in a distinctly Indian manner⁴

B Loss of Language

During the same time that the Tribes reasserted their institutions, their languages began slipping away from them Since most linguists who are interested in Native languages probably well know these figures, I will not go into a quantitative description of the current status Some few tribes appear to have a sufficient mass of speakers to hold their language for a while Most

Tribes that I am personally familiar with are staring at the total loss of their language, and have been for some time. Even the Kickapoo Tribe of Oklahoma where we have to routinely provide translators for the young people of the tribe because they are uncomfortable with English are moving forward with Kickapoo Language programs. However, I feel that too many tribes are just beginning to approach this problem with any self-realization of the current danger. Often the real language work is carried on by individuals, with or without tribal support. Nonetheless, there are some extraordinarily dedicated Indians working with their languages.

Thus, for the first time Indians are now studying their language. In the past, meaning as little as thirty or forty years ago, use of Indian languages was common place. Indians did not see a need to study their language as their language was still in use. Even though the language may have been seen as a gift from the creator, as with many things that we use daily, most Indians took their language for granted. However as this calamity approaches, some of us Indians refuse to let our language slide quietly into mere archive or museum artifacts. As Indians begin to work with their languages, they will naturally begin looking at the linguistic field for tools in their language retention efforts. As we Indians do so we will bring with us our world/community perspective. Part of this perspective must be that with limited resources, time, and people, we must ask what does a particular line of research do for us? In other words, though historical or anthropological linguistics may be intellectually fascinating, as people working for the survival of our languages such pursuits waste our time.

Throughout Indian country the age of the remaining speakers continues to increase. When I began to seriously pursue learning my language in 1980, my mother's uncle John Snow was about 73. I worked with him and several others of his generation. There were also many speakers ranging down to the mid-fifties. Today I have some six to eight fluent speakers that I can work with, only one of which is below their mid-seventies. As my pool of speakers gets older it also rapidly decreases. Between Good Friday of 1996 and the first week of June, five fluent speakers of Euchee passed away. I relied upon three or four of those for help. Additionally, the remaining speakers have their good and bad days. Our regular Tuesday night class fluctuates from four or five speakers to one or two, depending upon how their health is that day.

This aging pool of language speakers means that the cause of saving the language faces constraints beyond the mere dedication of students of the language. Tribal members trying to learn their language must take into account the health of the speakers, and their moods as age begins to effect them. While the speakers that I know are all passionate about seeing their language survive, they occasionally have all they can do to simply go through the day. Trying to teach some one the language strains even healthy speakers.

The Tribal language worker has several functions in these settings. Not only is he or she trying to learn the language, but they are often the relation of the speaker, or have been close family friends for generations. This can make the learners very protective about their elderly. While to a linguist these speakers may be resources, and in good situations their friends, these same speakers are my relations. What we in Euchee call "zokala" carries with it a great deal more meaning and responsibility than its English equivalent. I have come to see the speakers class period as a good deal more than simply a way to learn my language. Several of us credit it with helping one of the elders pull through cancer treatment. The Class showed that what she knew was still valuable, even indispensable. Through the class she got encouragement and fellowship, essential tools in dealing with any illness.

From what I have seen around Indian Country, this is not an unusual situation. A natural question is then how many units on geriatrics are part of field work courses in the linguistic departments of universities? Certainly the ability to deal long term with people is as important a tool as knowledge of linguistic components. Some academics may disagree with this position, but what they fail to realize is that as Indians reassert themselves what we consider important will

become controlling. It is after all, our language. There has been a great deal of press about teaching ethics in law schools or communications skills in medical schools. The reason that these skills are deemed important is because lawyers' and doctors' livelihood depends upon their ability to deal with people. I would classify field work in linguistics in the same category, perhaps even more so.

IV Why do Linguists Need to Know This?

An argument I have heard of late about saving Native languages is that we are like Amazon rain forests: there may be some secret knowledge locked away in our tongues that can help save white people. Well, what if there is no such knowledge? So long as our language is alive, its ours and it ought to live. Linguists need to work to insure the continued "use" of native tongues, not study and preserve them in vaults, because it is the right thing to do. Arguments about knowledge or worth are intrinsically western oriented, resembling the Chicago School of economic thought, place a dollar value on everything, and then a rational decision can be made about its relative worth and how much one is willing to pay to keep it or save it. If we Indians buy into this, we have done two things, we have abandoned part of our continuing non-western world view, and we have accepted a structure of argument where we can never win. Our language is important because it exists, period. Indians working to continue the use of their language simply define their language as important without qualification or use of structured argument.

While the pool of speakers may be reduced through age and death, the pool of tribal language workers is kept small through the enormous amount of dedication that it requires, normally without any financial support. Thus both Indian speakers and learners are often very limited in number. Throw into this a field linguist who shows up and seeks to monopolize the elderly speakers' healthy free time. The elder is simply not going to have sufficient time or energy to devote to the competing interests of the parties seeking his or her time. From my perspective if this happens, hopefully the Indian student will win out over the linguist. However, this does not always happen. Sometimes the family of the elder may in fact promote the academic as a way to enhance the image or status of their elder. The perception can be that working with a college professor looks more important, or gives more recognition to the speaker. This status can be of value to an elder who has worked and lived their whole life with no particular recognition. Nonetheless, it dooms the language to extinction, and can foster resentment in the rest of the community, and hamper the linguists' efforts to work with other speakers.

If linguists, and their departments back home, fail to buy the right thing argument, let them also remember that we can control Grants. What I call the vested interest of linguists' argument. Despite federal budget cut backs, there is still federal money for tribes devoted to language preservation. Additionally, if we here in Lawrence turn our eyes northward, we find at least four tribes within 70 miles of here. Two of those tribes now have casinos, with more expansion coming. These tribes are beginning to seriously look at language efforts, and may well funnel casino revenue into those efforts.⁵ If the tribes look to outside expertise, they may seek the assistance of linguists. While I do not know about linguistics departments, I know that other departments will often encourage their faculty to secure grants, and may even view that as enhancing their status in the department.

Lastly, as I have hinted through out this article, linguists usually come to Indian country, not vice versa. To be blunt, if the linguist does not recognize and work within at least some of the parameters we set down, the Indian language workers will get upset. If that happens, they will tell Grandma, or their wife's cousin's uncle, the tribal Chairman, whether in this state or five states away. Indian country is tightly connected nation wide, and events in one state are quickly known

about everywhere. Bad or difficult consultants reputations spread quickly into all corners of the Native community. Failure to learn how Indians define the work to be done with their languages can and will prevent linguists doing their own work.

V Conclusion

In the past linguistics has been the sole province of academia. As tribes and Indians commence to study their own languages they will bring their own perspectives with them. As with any added diversity, this will cause problems for the old guard, and create opportunities for the creative. However, it will force a shift from the scientist impartially observing its subject to a more interactive model. As each side begins to better understand the interests and needs of the other, it is likely to produce better results for each. Old definitions may be adjusted and new ones added. At times though, there simply is going to be no way in which both sides can be accommodated, as when the last ceremonial speaker needs to teach an apprentice in order to carry on tribal ceremonies. In that instance the linguist must simply back off and say, how can I help the student. If that happens, the linguist will have done the right thing, whether he or she is rewarded for it in this life or not.

NOTES

¹From the Indian community perspective, linguists simply fall into a generalized "professor" category, which we view with feelings ranging from interest to something akin to a locust plague. At one of our Euchee Language Immersion Camps, at one point we had three certified linguists, two anthropologists, plus one graduate student of unknown discipline. Also present were two Euchee speakers.

²See Harjo v. Kleppe, 420 F. Supp. 1110, (D. Ct., D. C. 1976).

³For those unfamiliar with federal Indian law and doubt the sovereign nature of Indian tribes, remember that Tribes had the power to wage war, and thus the resulting treaties with the United States. Sovereigns wage war, non-sovereigns stage rebellions.

⁴See Frank Pommersheim, *A Braid of Feathers*.

⁵If you doubt this possibility, in 1994 the Mashatucket Pequots donated 10 million dollars of casino revenue towards building the Smithsonian American Indian Museum on the Washington D.C. mall. *Native People*, fall/winter 1996, p. 32. While a museum is not linguistics, it illustrates that some tribe now have money to preserve things they deem important. Language may be one of these items.