

THE POWER OF LANGUAGE: INDEXICALITY
AND THE SOCIOCULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

Language choice plays a central role in the expression of individual and group identity, but it is also heavily influenced by the larger sociocultural environment. This article explores the interface between language ideology and indexicality as a means to understand the complexities of identity, belonging and power dynamics on the Flathead Indian Reservation of western Montana. Analysing the semiotic processes of indexicality frames an understanding of the circumstances and contexts in which the traditional Salish language continues to embody and perpetuate important cultural practices and beliefs of the group. Further, I argue that the interpretation of community ideologies helps to address the issue of struggles with language revitalization.

I. Introduction

The Salish-Pend d'Oreille live in a multiethnic and multilingual environment, which greatly impacts the belonging and intersubjectivities of its community members. The Salish-Pend d'Oreille of western Montana in the United States are a minority population on their own reservation, comprising only 18 percent of the total population (Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes 2013a; U.S. Census Bureau 2010). The dominant non-Native population has significantly influenced historical and current sociolinguistic practices of the Native community.

The traditional language of the Salish-Pend d'Oreille community is highly endangered, with fewer than thirty fluent speakers remaining, and would be classified as moribund (Grenoble and Whaley 2006) or as 'nearly extinct' or '8b' in the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (Ethnologue 2005). The majority of fluent speakers are elders over the age of 65. There are several individuals in the community who are semi-fluent speakers, who can be described as capable of understanding most of the spoken language, yet have some problems readily

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conveying their thoughts in it. However, despite the massive shift to English, the Salish language continues to convey important epistemological perspectives and serves as a powerful index of cultural identity for many Salish individuals. There is also a strong desire among many community members to maintain and revitalize the traditional language for the sake of younger generations. Many of the semi-fluent speakers, the youngest 24 years old, are directly involved in language revitalization programs and have themselves learned the language through study.

‘Language shift occurs in stark inequality’ according to Garrett (2012: 515), and the Flathead Indian Reservation is no exception. I therefore focus my analysis of the sociocultural environment on the power dynamics within it. Despite the sovereignty enjoyed by the Salish-Pend d’Oreille, in many social situations power is controlled by the dominant, non-Native, English-speaking population. While there is continued pressure from the dominant society, language choice by Native individuals in positions of authority can also index the ideological (non-)valuing of the language and further contribute to the shift away from the Salish language. Furthermore, because Salish language use is limited, community members who have some degree of fluency gain contextual prestige and authority, which in turn can be alienating for those without this cultural capital.

This article explores identity, belonging and power dynamics on the Flathead Indian Reservation through the interface between language ideology and indexicality. I first define the ways in which the language is viewed as iconic of Salish-Pend d’Oreille culture and identity following Irvine and Gal (2000). I explore Native power dynamics and the larger influences of non-Native society on Salish language use and identity. I close by examining how the interpretation of these semiotic processes helps to address the community’s struggles with language revitalization.

II. Methodology

The data for this article are drawn from ethnographic and linguistic fieldwork conducted with the Salish-Pend d’Oreille tribe between 2011 and 2013, in addition to my ongoing research in the community. The focus of data collection was on understanding and documenting the contexts in which Salish language use continues to convey sociocultural information, particularly in the socialization of Native youth.

I approach the issue of language shift, ideologies and cultural change through a theoretical and methodological approach to language socialization. Language socialization studies are necessarily anthropological in nature, as they seek to gain insight into the wider social structures and issues that shape and inform belief systems and practices. Examining the ways in which children are socialized into language and culture reveals these larger ideologies of the community, as well as highlighting the various social structures and power dynamics within a particular community (Kulick and Schieffelin 2004). The study of power in discourse can demonstrate the ways in which the individuals and groups within a community achieve and understand control through language and action in their everyday routines. According to Kulick and Schieffelin (2004: 362), once the structures of power and ideology have been defined and understood, they can be ‘challenged, resisted, changed, or entrenched’. As the field of anthropology is concerned with how sociocultural groups deal with modernity in the context of shifts in language and culture, it is useful to consider how the structures of power and ideology can be adapted to meet the growing concerns of language and cultural revitalization. To fully understand the changing ideologies of a particular cultural group, one must consider and examine how children or novices are being socialized to become successful participants within the community.

The research consisted of semi-formal interviews that focused primarily on documenting and understanding the language contexts and sociocultural ideological factors that contribute to the continued language shift from Salish to English. Initially, I conducted semi-formal interviews with individuals whom I knew were involved in language revitalization efforts in the community. Through these contacts, I used a snowball approach to set up additional interviews. The pool of participants was then expanded to include language-learners, teachers, planners, elders, parents and other adult community members. Interviewees came from a variety of backgrounds and represented a range of ages, genders and levels of involvement in language and cultural activities. Male and female respondents were nearly equally represented, ranged from 18 to 84 years old, and lived in towns throughout the Flathead Indian Reservation. Interviewees were directly asked about their involvement in current cultural practices, which ranged from limited activity to daily practice. Interviewees’ exposure to the Salish language also varied. Some individuals had been exposed to it since childhood, while others began to be socialized into it only later in life. Throughout the article I identify interviewees by gender and age, but keep their

names confidential. These variables were chosen to demonstrate that the ideologies and practices I analyse are reflective of my overall sample of the Salish-Pend d'Oreille and are not confined to a specific social identity (i.e. gender or age).

Through participant observation, I documented the primary contexts of Salish language use and how Salish language use then socializes children into (i) sociocultural information and (ii) traditional Salish-Pend d'Oreille cultural values and practices. I conducted observations of cultural practices, culture committee meetings, camps, traditional seasonal activities, immersion school classrooms and language courses, and participated in them. I also observed family interactions at community events, family gatherings and in the home setting. Mundane, private interactions within the home were compared to those interactions in the community, formal education settings and traditional practices. That is, I chose these contexts to examine and link micro-level socialization practices to the macro-level practices of the wider community.

As Salish language use is the primary focus of this research, the community is defined not as a speech community but as a 'community of practice', following Lave and Wenger (1991). The field can then be approached as a series of situated practices (as listed in the paragraph above) that bring together communities and trigger varying uses of the Salish language. This approach allows the boundaries of individual interactions to be fluid and dynamic, changing depending upon the relationship between or shared practices of the speakers (Ahearn 2011, Bucholtz and Hall 2006, Garrett and Baquedano-Lopez 2002, Lave and Wenger 1991). It is important to adopt this flexible definition of community, as there are a broad array of sociocultural dynamics and factors that influence language use among the Salish-Pend d'Oreille, including non-Native English speakers.

III. Salish language iconicity

The Salish language is regularly viewed as representative or iconic of the culture (Bunte 2009, Field 2009, Irvine and Gal 2000, Meek 2010), despite the decline in fluent speakers. For many individuals, the Salish language and being able to speak any form of Salish are indexes of their Salish identity and cultural upbringing, particularly in an environment where English is the norm for both the Native and non-Native communities. For instance, in the following excerpt a father is recounting his daughter's first day at kindergarten with a non-Native teacher.

Wood, The power of language

I remember she said, 'Oh, my teacher's not Salish.' I said, 'What do you mean, your teacher's not Salish. How do you know that?' And she said 'cos I said *xest sk^wek^wst* ('Good morning') and she didn't answer me, so I knew she wasn't Salish.' (male, 37 years old)

Her father had also had similar experiences himself, recalling, '[y]ou say things, and you're like, "Oh", they don't know that. Guess they're not one of us'. For many individuals, the language is not only iconic of the culture, it also grounds them in their identity and expresses what it means to be Salish-Pend d'Oreille. The following quotes represent the most commonly held ideological perspectives regarding the relationship between language and culture, extracted from interviewees' responses.

If you know the language, it's a different world from [the] white world. And you identify yourself as an Indian. You go up there and say, 'Hey are you Indian?' And then you talk your language...then they'll say you are an Indian. But if you don't do that, then, you're kind of weak on the Indian side, you know... (male, 73 years old)

Absolutely it is the foundation of culture. Without language the culture is dead. (male, 41 years old)

Think about having Kool-Aid [a powdered drink mixed with water] without sugar. You can have red Kool-Aid, but it just doesn't taste right. You add the sugar, your language, and it just, it makes it perfect, you know. Our language, we believe that it was given to us from the Creator and to help express who we are. To help explain and understand the world we live in from that perspective, and if you look at from the Creator[^s] point of view, there was a reason. (male, 35 years old)

Although the language can serve as a strong marker of identity and pride for many individuals, iconically linking Salish with the Salish-Pend d'Oreille culture can essentialize the Salish-Pend d'Oreille community and create standards of 'authenticity' that trigger feelings of inferiority for those individuals who appear not to meet the standards. When a language is viewed as symbolic of the culture, there is an alienating effect for those individuals who cannot speak their traditional language. Field (2009) describes the 'linguistic insecurity and embarrassment' among Navajo youth that has fostered their resistance to learning or continuing to learn their traditional Navajo language. Among the Salish-Pend d'Oreille community, similar anxieties were expressed by the young, adults and older speakers alike. As one interviewee expressed it, 'There's a shame aspect, I think, that is involved, and we have to not only learn the language but learn how to get rid of that shame aspect. You know, I'm Indian and I look Indian, but I don't speak my own language'

(female, 39 years old). O'Neill (1996) noted similar anxieties about language proficiency and identity in her own fieldwork with the Salish-Pend d'Oreille community more than 25 years ago:

In some of these settings, especially in the presence of 'real Indians', Cathy mutes her claims to an Indian identity, often by positioning herself as a 'student' of Flathead ways, expressing, for example, a desire to correct her shameful ignorance of the Salish language but confessing a complete inability to learn it. (O'Neill 1996: 63).

For language revitalization programmes, it can be beneficial to emphasize the relationship between language and culture. That is, encouraging individuals to learn the Salish-Pend d'Oreille culture through Salish language use is a productive means of promoting language revitalization. However, ideologically valuing the Salish language as iconic of the Salish-Pend d'Oreille can oversimplify or essentialize the culture and further alienate individuals who are trying to define their own identity. It is a challenge for language revitalization efforts to find a balance and to overcome the notions of shame and inferiority for the majority of the community that cannot speak their traditional language. I now turn to those individuals who do have access to the traditional language and culture to explore how these language ideologies are formed, justified, and realized in practice (Irvine and Gal 2000, Ochs 1992, Silverstein 1998, 2003).

IV. Salish language as cultural capital

Conversational use of the traditional language in the Salish-Pend d'Oreille community occurs in a limited number of contexts and is reserved for communication amongst elders, with few exceptions. Therefore, when I discuss Salish language use in the community, I am referring to instances when the traditional language is spoken in any capacity, from individual lexical terms to stretches of conversation. Language use in any given interaction is dependent upon several factors, including the historical and contemporary power struggles that are inherently involved in social interactions. According Bourdieu (1977a, 1977b, 1991) and Philips (2006), power, or more specifically symbolic power, is enacted by those individuals with a higher status (economically, socially and culturally), which allows them to dictate the discourse and the specific code used. In this section, I examine the ways in which Salish language use indexes power relations and types of authority.

The ability to speak Salish fluently or semi-fluently tends to be confined to a select few individuals and family groups, who also continue to maintain their traditional beliefs and

practices to a greater extent. A larger portion of the Salish-Pend d'Oreille community can speak a handful of Salishan words, including greetings, commands and basic phrases. Individuals also utilize kinship and nature terminologies to index their traditional epistemological perspectives and socialization into their culture. Salish language use provides evidence that those individuals who speak Salish have been socialized into the cultural norms and ideologies of traditional language use. Therefore, speaking Salish indexes the individual's connection, in whatever capacity, to the Salish-Pend d'Oreille culture. Ahlers (2006: 60) explains that '...any language use is a form of cultural capital, and serves to mark a language user as a member of a certain community...and as a person who engages actively with traditional culture and with their heritage language'.

However, Native individuals in positions of authority and power do not need cultural capital (in the form of Salish language fluency) to denote their belonging in the community or obtain their political positions, which can lead to the devaluing of revitalization efforts. For instance, the Tribal Council is the governing body that makes decisions on behalf of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT). The elected officials who serve on the Tribal Council typically have a higher social, political and economic status within the community, yet few of them are regularly active in traditional cultural and language practices or concerns. Several community members discussed, in formal and informal interviews, the lack of concern they felt Tribal Council members showed with regard to language and cultural revitalization efforts:

People in the community are trying to tell them [the Tribal Council], 'Well, it's important to save our language 'cos it makes them better and more successful people. Well, you're talking to this crowd who don't know Salish, but they're in a position of power, so somehow you know the internal message to them is, 'Well, I never learned it. Look at me, I've been successful.' But then they also have their own internal struggle, probably. (male, 37 years old)

I also think it's important, like, for people on the Tribal Council, you should be able to speak your language, or part of it anyway. As a leader, you should be able to understand, when someone was, is speaking to you in the Native tongue, you should be able to understand that. I think that should be a priority to them. (male, 52 years old)

As elected officials, men and women on the Tribal Council have authority and legitimacy, giving them the power to define social norms for the community. This also means that their actions are highly publicized and criticized, as demonstrated by the quotes above. The Tribal Council manages a number of projects and issues on the Flathead Indian Reservation, of which language

and cultural revitalization is only one, yet many community members expressed a desire to see more overt support of these programmes. Also, these elected officials may not choose to speak English over Salish – rather, they may simply not have been socialized to use the traditional language. However, as leaders in the community, they may be contributing to the continued shift away from Salish.

IVa. Expanded cultural capital

Individuals who command a Salish vocabulary beyond basic lexical terms also index their cultural and linguistic capital through Salish language use. To account for this, the concept of ‘cultural capital’ needs to be understood, in accordance with Bourdieu’s definition (1977a, 1977b, 1991), as the ‘sociocultural attributes, both acquired and achieved, that are highly valued in society, bring prestige to the individual, and can be converted into material capital’ (Philips 2006: 475).

Individuals with this expanded cultural or linguistic capital (i.e. fluent or semi-fluent Salish speakers) are highly respected individuals in the community, frequently being asked to offer prayers and make speeches at cultural events, requests that accord these individuals more respect, status and prestige in these contexts. According to Bourdieu (1991: 55),

speakers lacking the legitimate competence are *de facto* excluded from the social domains in which this competence is required, or are condemned to silence...which depending on social inheritance, re-translates social distinctions into the specifically symbolic logic of differential deviations, or, in short, distinction.

While non-Salish speaking individuals are typically not excluded from these domains, a distinction is created between those with the expanded cultural capital and those without. Perhaps this is why most Tribal Council members do not attend traditional cultural events, as these contexts undermine or call into question their legitimacy to represent the Native community. However, as with the Tribal Council, individuals with cultural capital can also contribute to the continued shift towards English; this is an element of the power struggles over models of identity formation, as will be seen.

Many of the remaining fluent and semi-fluent speakers serve on the Salish-Pend d’Oreille Culture Committee (SPCC), which serves the community through its guidance, documentation, and education of the language and culture (Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes 2014). The

SPCC is composed of a group of selected elders who regularly meet to manage matters of cultural significance. Individuals in the community working on language and cultural revitalization efforts typically seek approval from the SPCC before creating language programmes and culturally sensitive language curricula. The SPCC aims to promote the language and culture, yet individuals in the community feel there is a deficiency in the sharing of the resources the committee controls, such as audio recordings of traditional songs and stories.

I would like things to be more accessible and to have that responsibility of passing, openly passing on knowledge for anyone that's looking... [T]here's so many, being enrolled or not, I think there's so many people in our community who don't know, who don't have that real, real deep understanding of their own identity. (female, 38 years old)

Culture Committee is preserving the language, I know, but I think they are kind of more self-centred 'cos they want to hang onto it. They shouldn't hang on to it if they want the people to learn. They should be willing to, 'cos I know when I was asking questions to the Culture Committee, they kind of give you the run-around. You should never get a run-around when you ask a question, to try to learn something about your culture. That happened to me a lot of times when I used to ask questions. So if you send a young person to go down there to the Culture Committee, they might get a run-around and never get the right answer. And that's not right either. (male, 63 years old)

Through the management of matters concerning the language and culture, the SPCC controls the flow and access of information. Also, as individuals with authority, particularly in cultural domains, committee members have the ability to dictate the language of choice, yet they frequently use English. There are several possible reasons why the SPCC elders do not use Salish. First elders speak English simply to be understood by wider larger public. Secondly, the elders on the SPCC have been socialized for decades to use English and now do so out of habit. However, by not speaking Salish more frequently, they continue to validate the social norm of speaking English.

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) Council and the SPCC are two powerful Native institutions with different privileges and authorities, and both contribute in contradictory ways to the social norms of Salish language use and (non-)use. That is, through their practices and ideological valuing, these governing bodies shape the sociocultural norms of the Salish language.

IVb. Non-Native influences

Language choice is heavily influenced by context, especially in those situations which are influenced by the dominant population. History, economics and bureaucracy dictate that English is the everyday vernacular (Ngai 2004, O’Neill 1996). Historically, external forces have generated the language shift to English through various means, such as boarding schools, assimilatory policies and social practices. Economically, the tribal government, the CSKT, ‘...employs approximately 1,200 people and ... makes considerable efforts to support a diversified economy by providing training and resources for tribal members’ (Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes 2013b). However, the non-Native English-speaking population, both on and off the reservation, continue to control the majority of the employment opportunities and economic resources. English also dominates in the education system, from primary to tertiary levels. The power dynamics of the reservation establishes English as the language of daily interaction and education (Ngai 2004, O’Neill 1996).

As argued above, many Native individuals believe that the Salish language is important, if not vital, to their cultural identity, and therefore believe that it is important to learn the language. However, as is often the case among minority groups, these individuals also feel that English is the language of success. Consequently, they feel that they must know this language to succeed or fit into the modern world (Field 2009, Messing 2002). Younger generations of women even acknowledged that English is the language of power and therefore a means by which they can achieve greater social and power equality. Language ideologies that are dominant in non-Native society, where Salish is depreciated, are projected recursively (Irvine and Gal 2000) within Native communities, leading to internal ideological contradictions ‘existing at the intraindividual level rather than defining oppositions between stable groups’ (Field 2009: 42). For instance, Salish-Pend d’Oreille individuals who are struggling to define their identity in contemporary society may be further disoriented by the claim that the Salish language is necessary for participation in Salish-Pend d’Oreille practices. During a conversation about her desire to learn the Salish language, one woman said, ‘Language is really important to me’. After a brief pause, she looked at me and said, ‘Or is it? Or do I like the concept of Salish more than [its] reality?’

The dominance of the non-Native population and of English significantly influences both the younger and elder generations, as can be demonstrated in the following observation during a tour of Nk^wusm, the Salish language immersion school. As part of the tour, two young female

students gave a brief presentation, partially in the Salish language, describing how happy they were to be attending the school. At Nk^wusm, the girls felt they could express themselves and be proud of being Native, which was very different from their experience at a public elementary school, where they were often treated poorly for being Native. The girls also spoke of their excitement to be learning more about their language and culture at the school. One elderly Salish woman who was part of the tour expressed her joy at hearing the language spoken by young people again. She also recalled going through similar situations of mistreatment while at school during her childhood. However, she expressed a concern that these children were not learning the 'White way' and the English language, which were both necessary for participation in wider society.

Associated with the control over resources, socially and economically, is the element of racism and depreciation of Native heritage (Ngai 2004, O'Neill 1996), also noted in the previous example. In addition to observations in this study, several Salish-Pend d'Oreille individuals I interviewed related instances of prejudice that they themselves or their children had experienced. These instances can have lasting effects on the identity formation of Salish-Pend d'Oreille individuals and may even challenge their own desire to acquire the cultural or linguistic knowledge of their ancestors. The following quote is taken from an interview with a mother expressing her concern about racism:

I definitely think we need to figure out a way to make being an Indian, you know, I don't want to say 'cool', 'cos that sounds, like fleeting...but to make it to where they're proud again to be Indian. You know, to make it to where they don't feel like they have to fight and be in defence of 'Yeah, I'm Indian'. I think there are some...racial tensions in our community that definitely come into play, but I think that's up to us as a community to teach our kids how to deal with that. What to tolerate and what isn't, what you can't tolerate, or shouldn't tolerate. This belief that, in our country it, you know, racism towards Native peoples is just accepted. (female, 39 years old)

It is the non-Native residents that continue to have the dominant power throughout the reservation, due to their population size, economic holdings and control over the mass media. This power heavily influences the ideologies of Native and non-Native children in their identity formation.

V. Conclusion

Analysing Salish language use as indexical of sociocultural dimensions, particularly power dynamics, helps us achieve an understanding of the larger identity complexities of Salish-Pend d'Oreille individuals. Language as a sign can index a wide array of features about the speaker, community and society, including how power is expressed (Ochs 1992). In turn, children are socialized to use a particular language for each specific practice their community engages in (Ochs and Schieffelin 2012). Children draw upon these salient, indexical features to determine their own language preferences in opposition to these power relationships. That is, children themselves have agency and therefore the ability to change the power dynamics. As Garrett states (2012: 487), 'children's participation in language socialization practices that discursively elaborate code choice both indexes the symbolic capital of particular forms and creates subjectivities that can explain processes of change'.

It is important to not only examine the way language embodies power (both politically and socioculturally), but also how language use and ideologies are shaped by the very nature of these power dynamics. Historically, the language shift from Salish to English was primarily a result of colonial forces. While there is continued pressure from the dominant society, language use by individuals with power, authority and cultural capital within the Native community can (perhaps unwittingly) undermine the value and use of the Salish language. However, those individuals who possess cultural capital can also index their commitment to the revitalization of the language and culture through Salish language use. By possessing cultural capital or specific knowledge related to cultural events and practices, these individuals enjoy prestige in traditional contexts.

Expanding this capital into everyday mundane contexts and providing additional economic capital is key to revitalization efforts and changing the ideological values of the Salish-Pend d'Oreille. Adding economic value to cultural capital is discussed by Bourdieu (1991: 57), who states, 'one cannot save the value of a competence unless one saves the market, in other words, the whole set of political and social conditions of production of the producers/consumers'. This point is further reiterated by Friedman (2012: 491), who states that '...factors that promote or discourage the successful revitalization of minority languages' may include '...cultural capital, associations with cultural identity, and increased economics and revaluation of local cultural practices'. Economically valuing individuals with knowledge of the Salish language through teaching or other paid positions, for instance, could prove invaluable to language revitalization.

Salish language use is only one form of belonging in this community, yet it could serve as a powerful tool to combat racism and the subjugated positions of Salishan community members if it is carried out in an inclusive manner.

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Wood, The power of language

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Wood, The power of language

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