

Media, Writers, Arts Session Summary

Laura Wallace

This session revolved around the power of the Native language when used in the media, writing, and the arts. The consensus of the presenters was that the power of language is that it heals; it sets the mind negatively or positively in whatever endeavor is undertaken and that it is critical to being whole and well.

A recurring theme was that the use of the native language is a catalyst toward strengthening the concept of *becoming*. This was expressed or defined as recognizing the importance of self, getting to know and accepting self.

Another theme that threaded through the presentations was that of the role of knowledge. Contrary to popular belief that knowledge is power, it was stated that the organization and use of knowledge is instead the power source. This originates from cultural beliefs and teachings that any endeavor or undertaking has both the potential for good as well as evil. It is important how we care for and use the knowledge we possess.

Three cases of indigenous language use were cited:

1. Setting. The setting determines behavior regarding language use.
2. Humanization/personalization of characters. Culture will dictate believability or sense of reality; distance in time, generations, and so forth will be diminished.
3. Cultural consciousness. Cultural context and intimacy with a culture will give a deeper meaning to the understanding of the language and the circumstance in which it occurs.

Other circumstances in which indigenous language is required include the necessity of historical truth. What is the story of the people in question, in their own language?

Economics is a factor in the promotion of the native language. It is used by merchants to reach a segment of people who contribute to the economy. For example, radio stations on or near the Navajo reservation have programming throughout every day.

Use of native language as a way of life includes the sharing of cultural information, legal rights (such as issues involving car dealers and pawns), meeting announcements, obituaries, and so forth.

A question was posed that asked how the subtler aspects of language could be maintained when going from oral to written form, and also if there was need for compromise. The answer was that a sacred ceremony could not be taped verbatim and preserved because in essence the ceremony would never end, healing would be suspended because the cycle would not be completed and closure never established. On the other hand due to the fluidity of language, interpretation could occur and there would be no need to compromise.

In response to a question about creative resources drawn upon in the humanities, it was established that the struggle to be free is a major catalyst for creativity in maintaining indigenous languages — that it is a bottomless pit.

Barriers to Native language use included:

- Non-acceptance by publishers if works are done in other than majority languages. Most authors stated it should not be a deterrent to pursuing their work.
- Difficulty in expressing oneself.
- Elders association of Native language with deep pain, historically.
- Shame of native language use by all ages.

Suggestions for strengthening Native language use included:

- Mentoring of youth by encouraging students to find a voice.
- Using of the language every day.
- Experimenting with new words.
- Getting involved in traditional activities.

Above all remember the adage — T'áá hó ájit'éego éiyá — it is up to the individual (to make it happen).

Individual Summaries (Deborah House and Jon Reyhner)

Selena Manychildren (Navajo) is a radio announcer from Gray Mountain, Arizona. She went to Phoenix Indian School, and she explained that while she was there she did not converse in Navajo language every day as there were too many things in the outside world. Furthermore, she never taught her daughter to speak Navajo because she was always on the run. She now believes that if you do not speak Navajo, you lose it.

She began her radio career with KFLAG, a Flagstaff radio station, 17 years ago and now works at the Navajo Nation's 50,000 watt AM radio station, KTNN. She said that language keeps the radio business going. She recognizes that the Navajo language is very important and that any language is important to maintain. Her Navajo language led her into a job. She believes that it is God's will, or she would not be doing what she is doing. She stated, "We should credit God for giving us a talent." She acknowledged that some Navajo people, even adults, are ashamed to speak their language. Therefore, a sideline to KTNN is trying to maintain the Navajo language. They do this by using it more than any other station. However, there is pressure from one side or the other. She stated, "If I don't speak Navajo well, someone is there to put me down."

Radio is a boost to the economy in the areas where Navajos live, especially remote areas. They carry programs such as the Diné legal services (DNA) that give information on subjects such as what people should look for in buying a new car and how pawning works. At KTNN, speaking the Navajo language is

very important; they really “make an effort to reach people. She concluded, “Our language is a way of life for a lot of us. It may lead us to many things.”

Simon Ortiz (Acoma) is a well-known writer. He stated that in teaching language, you also are teaching the cultural consciousness. In a letter to Dr. Cantoni, Mr. Ortiz explained his point of view:

As an Acoma Pueblo writer-intellectual, I’ve striven to express/employ a language that concerns itself with not only a mechanical and technical facility or use but with the poetic-literary nature it has. An indigenous language (or any language) that has only a technical articulation, no matter how accomplished, is nothing without the depth (sacredness) of the myriad connections to land, culture, and community. Literally, language as cultural consciousness brings us into being, which I tried to speak upon when I explained the Acoma language phrase, “Yaahkah Hanoh naitrah ghuh.” (personal communication, 5/9/95)

Mr. Ortiz stated, “At Acoma Pueblo, ‘Yaahkah Hanoh naitrah ghuh,’ is an announcement that means ‘there is going to be a Corn Dance.’ Literally, in a word-for-word translation, it means, Corn People will happen, will occur, or come about. They will come into being. I have heard the announcement numbers of times at Acoma, and I know what it means. When I thought of it in a material or concrete sense, that is, when I visualized the ceremony of song, dance, and prayer of the Corn Dance making it possible for the Corn Clanspeople to come into being as a social unit, then it has a literal sense or meaning, but the phrase also has metaphoric and emblematic meaning as well. Corn People are brought into being as concept through song, dance, and prayer. This is a case where the poetic power of language brings something into being, life into existence. The Corn People, Yaakah Hanoh, are brought about literally and figuratively by poetically powerful language. This is an example of a literary use of an indigenous language that can be accorded academic, intellectual, cultural (and even scientific) standing as one of the world’s humankind’s many languages.”

Ofelia Zepeda (Tohono O’odham), a college professor and writer, talked about writing in O’odham and shared examples of her writing. She explained that writers need to consider how they want to use language creatively. “We are a very poetic people. We are inherently that.” Her tribe gives high value and esteem to people who can create using language.

“Little thoughts” is what they call their first “poetry.” This poetry is about being creative with language, something that is easy for a people who have respect and appreciation for aesthetics. She read a poem about her father, a farmer and rancher who liked to collect farm tools. When someone died, he would make a cross to stand by the grave. “Go ask Albert” was his reputation.

She explained that she was inspired by Pima and O’odham rain, wind, and cloud songs. However, it is difficult to get presses to accept materials in non-English languages as Rex Lee Jim can also testify.

Rex Lee Jim (Navajo) is an educator and writer. He stated that it is not the knowledge that is important; it is what you do with it. He has been to conferences about the importance of native language but finds that they are always in English. Furthermore, books are always in English. In meetings in Window Rock, the introduction is in Navajo, then they switch into English. He asked, "Are they serious about preserving the language?"

He said, "The gods have already given you the Navajo language; all you have to do is tap into it. There is no doubt about where you are going — you are going to reach old age." He explained that his goal is to use Navajo language in everything he does, so he can reach the right way. It is hard, but it is important. He truly believes that Navajo language can prevent alcoholism and other problems. What is important is how people communicate with themselves. He declared, "If you use words like 'fuck, shit,' you are going to have a shitty life."

It is important to use language to achieve the desired end in life. He uses language to heal himself and to overcome obstacles. In his experience, "It is not the circumstances that determine what is happening to me; I am the one in control. There is a way to succeed in what ever you attempt. Language, home, mother, father, culture, spirits, gods are Navajo themes. Parents said, 'In this hogan, Navajo only.'" Because of his strong beliefs, his poems are all in Navajo. While he was studying at Princeton University, he noted how people there supported his writing and publishing in Navajo.

Anna Lee Walters (Paunee-Otoe/Missouria) is a writer and college educator. She stated that, "The ability to speak language is critical to being whole and well. There were no Indians in any books I read in school. What was there never corresponded to what I knew from life there on Greasy Creek. That absence of Indians in textbooks motivated me. My motivation was to show how the world is viewed from Greasy Creek, then and now. We should encourage students to speak, to find that voice. Sometimes elders have an emotional connection with language that is associated with pain. We handle that pain, to our detriment, by avoiding it. When we write, we have to assume some of the responsibility for disseminating our materials. If we want it that much, that is what we have to do. Because we are a small group, we cannot impose our language on anyone else. I honor who I am. I can encourage other people to speak their languages."

Discussion

In the brief discussion that followed, Simon Ortiz said, "We all want to be who we are, Indians. We deserve that. We want to be free to de-colonize ourselves. In order to be who we are, we have to recognize the colonization process, the loss of land, etc. In order to continue as who we are, we have to have cultural consciousness; its goes hand in hand with maintaining the indigenous language."

Rex Lee Jim answered several questions about the relationship between written and oral forms of language. He explained that his grandfather refused to be recorded, saying "I'm a medicine man; I pray, sing, tell stories, and act. When someone pays me to treat them, I begin at the beginning. They get well. If I was recorded, I will be in process forever and the patient will never get well."

Stabilizing Indigenous Languages

Simon Ortiz noted that culture is fluid. Language changes and meets the present reality. His reality as an Acoma person is not the same as his grandfather's reality.

Rex Lee Jim stated that, "If you know your language and culture well you can find human existence elsewhere. You can find another person of the same nature; you can connect beyond language, culture, race. That is why we want our children to learn Navajo. Not to be better, but to be better able to connect at that level."