

***Ayali*¹: Is it Time to Say Good-bye to American Indian Languages?**

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This article examines American Indian languages in North, Central and South America to determine how the numbers of native speakers have changed over the course of the last century. Historical research and interviews with American Indian linguists and historians indicate that nearly all American Indian languages in the United States are in danger of becoming extinct within the next forty years. Three languages are examined more closely to develop a better sense of the extent of the language loss: Chickasaw, Shawnee, and Navajo. Probable causal factors contributing to the language loss are also discussed including policies of assimilation and stigmatization, modernization, the increased necessity of English, and destruction of the American Indian's native cultural and environmental habitat. The article also includes a survey of methods currently being used in language revitalization efforts and the ensuing stabilization or even increase in speakers that is possible from such efforts. In conclusion, this article discusses the inevitability of further language extinction and the necessity of continued and increased revitalization efforts to prevent additional loss.

Introduction

Language is as important to a culture as its history. This is especially true in American Indian societies. According to the Chickasaw Nation, Chickasaws believe that their language was given to them by *Chihoowa* (God), and it is their obligation to care for it: to learn it, speak it and teach it to their children; it is a gift from the ancestors for all Chickasaw people. So, how did this prized gift from God reach the point of teetering on extinction?

Before the North American continent was settled by the Europeans, it is estimated that there were approximately 2000² different American Indian languages (Columbia University, 2007). Of these

¹ *Ayali* is "Goodbye" in Chickasaw (Munro, 1994)

approximately 2000 languages, only 300 were used north of Mexico in the United States, and only an estimated 180 are still in use today (Rickerson, 2004). The situation has become critical; the 2010 U.S. Census revealed that only 5% of American Indians speak their native tongue.

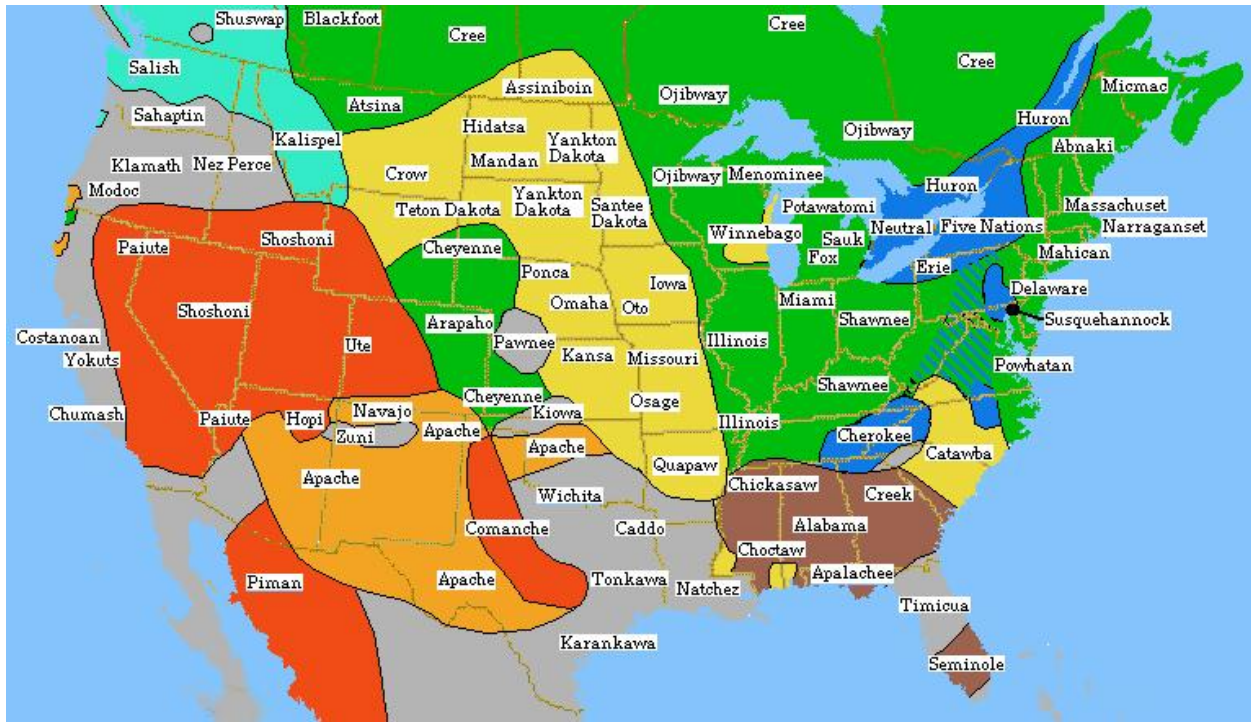
Native tongues are disappearing at an alarming rate. Idaho's Coeur D'Alene has only five remaining speakers. Marie Smith is the last remaining speaker of Eyak, a language native to the coast of Prince William Sound, Alaska. In 1994, Roscinda Nolasquez of Pala, California, passed away, marking the extinction of Cupeño. Many linguists consider California to be one of the world's linguistic treasure troves. It served as the origin of approximately 100 languages, including Esselen from Carmel and Obispeño from Santa Barbara, both of which are now extinct. Only 50 Californian languages remain, and just two or three have as many as 200 speakers (Sampat, 2001).

According to researcher David Treuer (2008), only three Native American languages now spoken in the United States and Canada are expected to survive into the middle of this century. Truer (2008) also notes that many languages have just a few speakers left -- two or three -- while others only have a fluent population in the hundreds. University of British Columbia Assistant Professor of Anthropology Christine Schreyer agrees with the three-language survival estimate, noting all three of the languages, Cree, Inuit (Inuktitut) and Ojibwa, are in Canada (UBC, 2012). The Indigenous Language Institute is only slightly more optimistic, positing that without restoration efforts, no more than 20 American Indian languages will still be spoken in North America by 2050 (Cohen, 2010).

Linguists such as Michael Krauss (1992) note that unless scientists and community leaders direct a worldwide effort to stabilize the decline of local languages, nine-tenths of the linguistic diversity of mankind will be doomed to extinction. Krauss (1996) also posits that languages are more likely to disappear as a result of the destruction of the cultural habitat of their speakers than because of direct attack upon their use, such as being forbidden to speak a language other than English in public. One of the major contributing causes of this destruction was the policy of Americanization. This effort was compounded by passage of the Dawes Act of 1887. The Dawes Act was closely followed by the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, which was also part of Americanization policy to ensure Indians became US citizens (Hoxie, 1984). As a result of these Acts, Indians were often forbidden to speak their own languages and perform their tribal rituals, thus having their culture suppressed while having that of the white man forced upon them.

Native American languages are divided into 25-30 small groups based on the language style and type (Figure 1). There are around 25 million native speakers of the surviving American Indian languages throughout the Americas. The vast majority of these speakers live in Central and South America, where use of the native language continues essentially as it has from inception. In Canada and the United States, only about half a million native speakers of an American Indian tongue remain (Native-languages.org, 2011). Further, it is estimated that there remain 62 spoken indigenous languages in Mexico, 103 in Central America, and approximately 1000 in South America (Lewis, 2009 and Athena Review, 1997).

² Because of the inherent difficulty in obtaining exact numbers of indigenous language speakers and tongues, reported numbers widely vary depending on source. I have taken every effort to examine multiple sources, using numbers in this article that are reported by a majority of reliable sources and are consistent with other reported data.



Native Languages of North America

Key to Language Families	
	Algonquian
	Iroquoian
	Muskogean
	Siouan
	Uto-Aztecan
	Athabaskan
	Salishan
	Eskimo-Aleut
	Mayan
	all others

Despite comparatively high numbers, the numbers of indigenous languages speakers in Central and South America are diminishing just as their counterparts in the United States, though some languages do remain fairly stable. The Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America (AILLA) (2012) notes that some Latin American indigenous languages have very large numbers of speakers, with two languages named as official languages of their respective countries.

This article examines the number of indigenous languages across North, Central and South America in an effort to identify trends in the number of languages still being spoken. Research is expected to indicate a continued disturbing pattern of language loss and extinction. Probable causal factors will be examined as will possible methods of revitalizing languages.

Fluent speaker numbers in the United States

It is estimated that in 1492, around the time of Christopher Columbus’s arrival to North America, there were 300 separate tongues native to some 1.5 million American Indians in what we now call the United States. By the end of the 20th century, 175 American Indian languages were spoken in the United States, but only 20 were widely known, and 55 were spoken by only a few elderly tribal members; 100 other languages were somewhere between the two extremes (Encyclopedia of Native American Languages, 2012). As of 2010, 54 languages were documented as extinct in the United States, with

another 131 documented as endangered in degrees from definitely to critically endangered (Moseley, 2010).

Apache County in Arizona has 37,000 speakers of American Indian languages, the highest concentration in the United States. Sixty-five percent of indigenous language speakers live in just three states -- Alaska, Arizona and New Mexico. Additionally, nine counties within these three states contain half the nation's tribal language speakers (United Press International, 2011). The most commonly spoken American Indian language in the United States is Navajo, with more than 169,000 speakers nationally -- nearly nine times larger than the second- and third-most commonly spoken languages of Yupik and Dakota, each with approximately 19,000 speakers (United Press International, 2011).

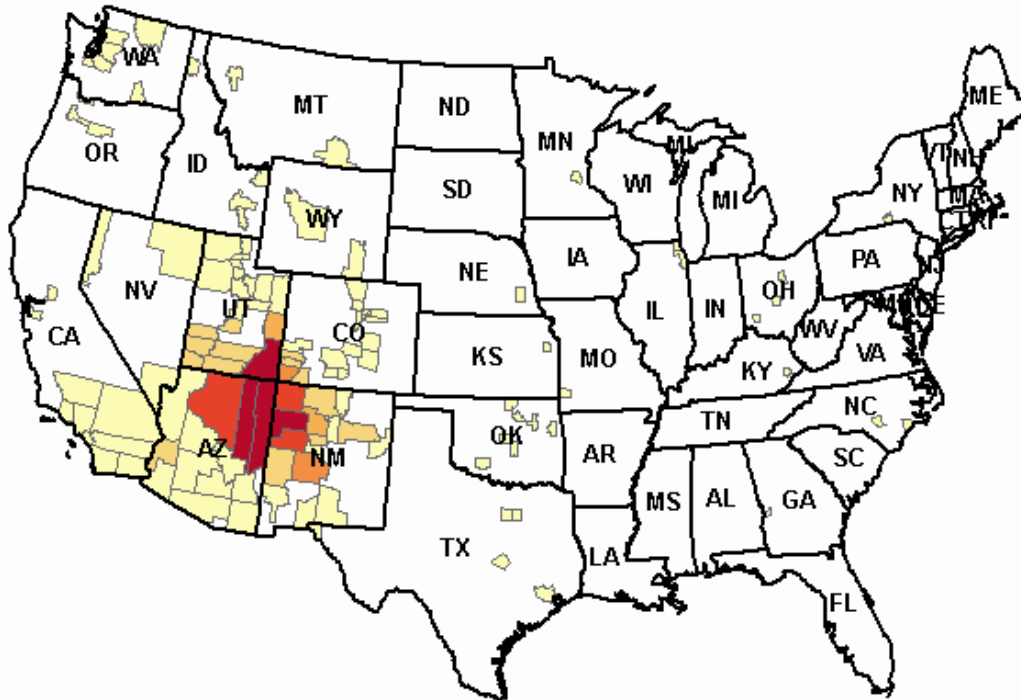


Figure 2: Navajo Speaker Concentration as of 2010

Notes Ben Barnes of the Shawnee Tribe, there has been a westward trend of diminishing language in the United States that closely mimics American settlement. As Figures 2 and 3 indicate, this pattern is clearly visible with much higher concentrations of speakers in the west.

Native American languages are disappearing quickly in the United States. Among kindergartners in one Navajo reservation school district, fluency dropped from 89 percent at the beginning of the 1980s to just a few percent by the end of the decade (NPR, 2012).

An endangered language is considered to be a language that parents no longer teach to their children and is not actively used in everyday matters. Such languages are considered likely to become extinct. Of the roughly 175 Indian languages still spoken in the United States, only 20 are still spoken by mothers to babies (Brooke, 1998).

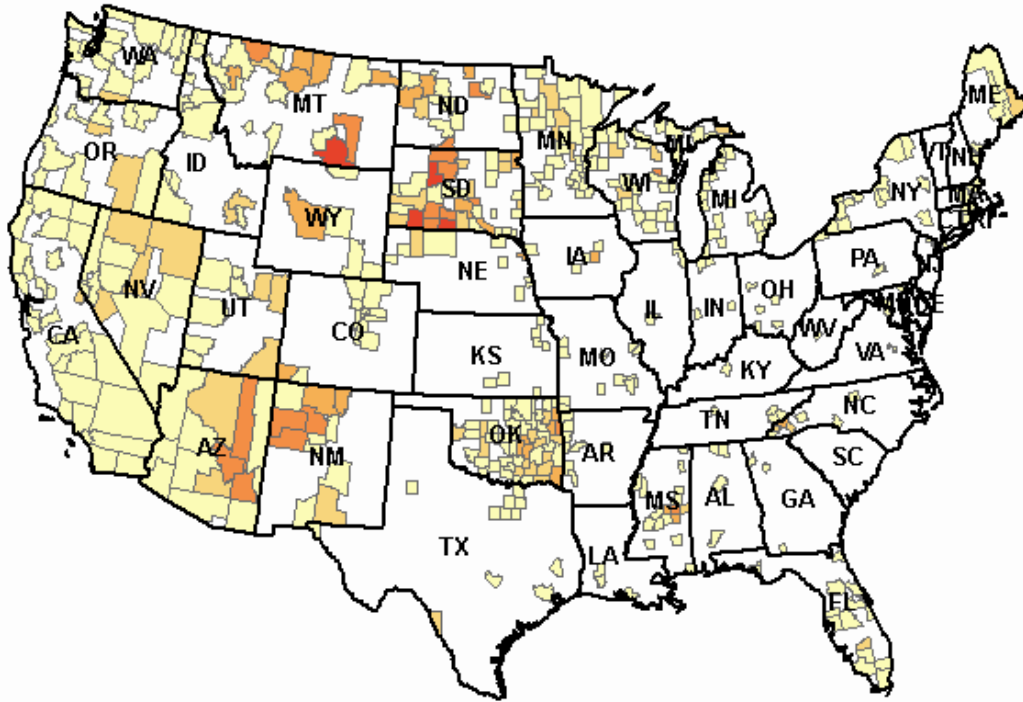


Figure 3: American Indian Speaker Concentration (excluding Navajo) as of 2010

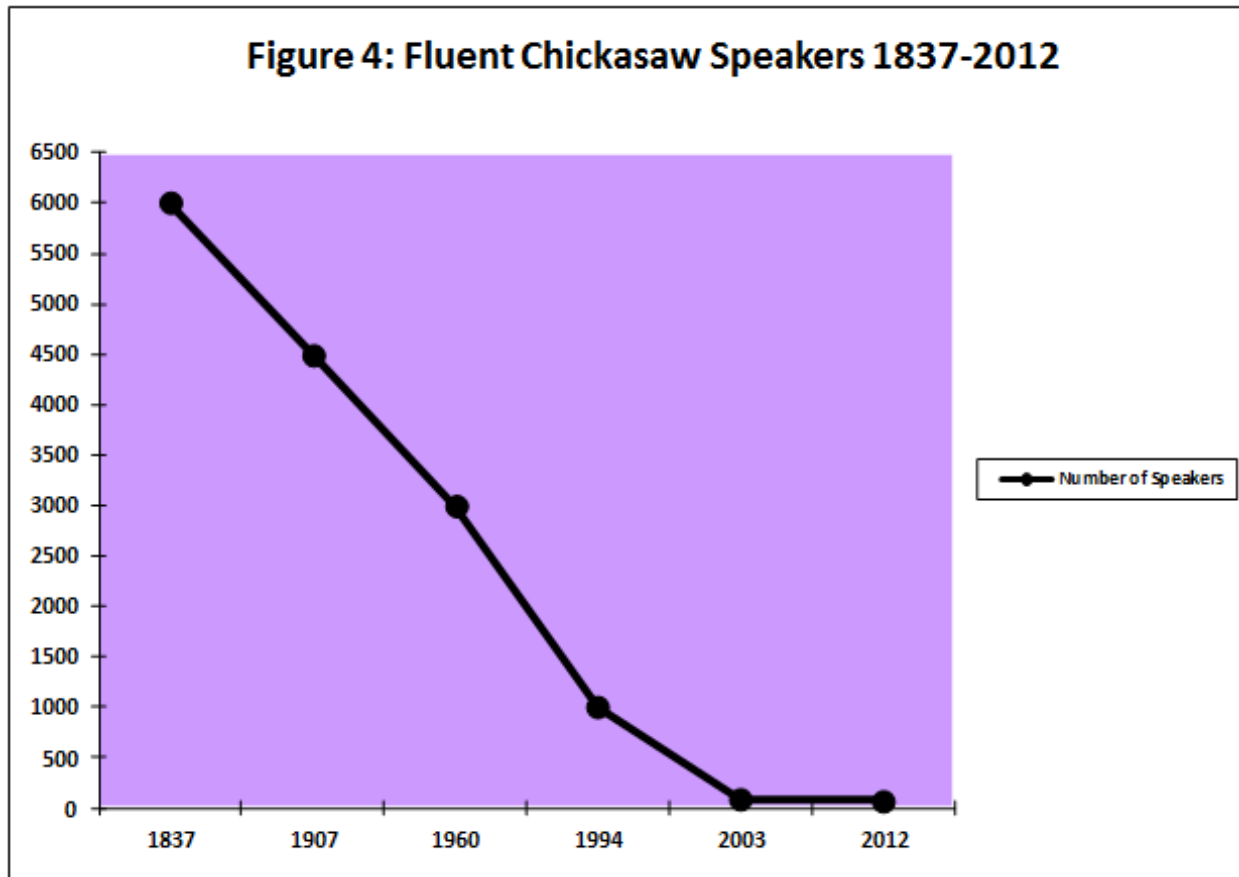
According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2012), the current language use questions in the U.S. Census gather data on how many people speak a language other than English at home, what languages are spoken, and how well English is spoken. These specific language questions have only been asked since 1980. In the U.S. Census from 1890 to 1970, the questions were even more vague and did not list other individual languages (Appendix A). As such, there is difficulty in determining exact numbers of speakers of each American Indian language for years prior to 1980.

Adding to the difficulty is another issue: the Bureau of Indian Affairs has conducted a regular census since 1790, with all records being kept in the National Archives in Washington, DC. However, the 1940 and later censuses are not available for public use because of a statutory 72-year restriction on access for privacy reasons (National Archives: 92 Stat. 915; Public Law 95-416; October 5, 1978). Additionally, only persons who maintained a formal affiliation with a tribe under federal supervision are listed on these census rolls (National Archives, 2012). Because of the tremendous difficulty in obtaining the desired numbers for this research, I consulted the linguistic experts and historians of the three tribes studied in greater detail in this article.

Chickasaw

Chickasaw is a Muskogean language of the American Southeast. It is very closely related to Choctaw and many linguists consider the two languages dialects of a one single language. There are approximately 1000 speakers of Chickasaw today (Native-Languages.org, 2011). It is considered “severely endangered” as determined by by the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) who regularly publish a list of endangered languages around the world. A

“severely endangered” language is a language spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves.



Prior to 1837, virtually all if not entirely all Chickasaw citizens were speakers of the Chickasaw language. Around Oklahoma statehood in 1907, Hinson (2012) estimates a majority of citizens were speakers. Post World War II, there appears to be a significant drop in the number of speakers. By the 1960s approximately 3,000 people spoke Chickasaw (Figure 4), and by 1994, the estimated number of fluent Chikashshanompa' (Chickasaw) speakers was less than one thousand.

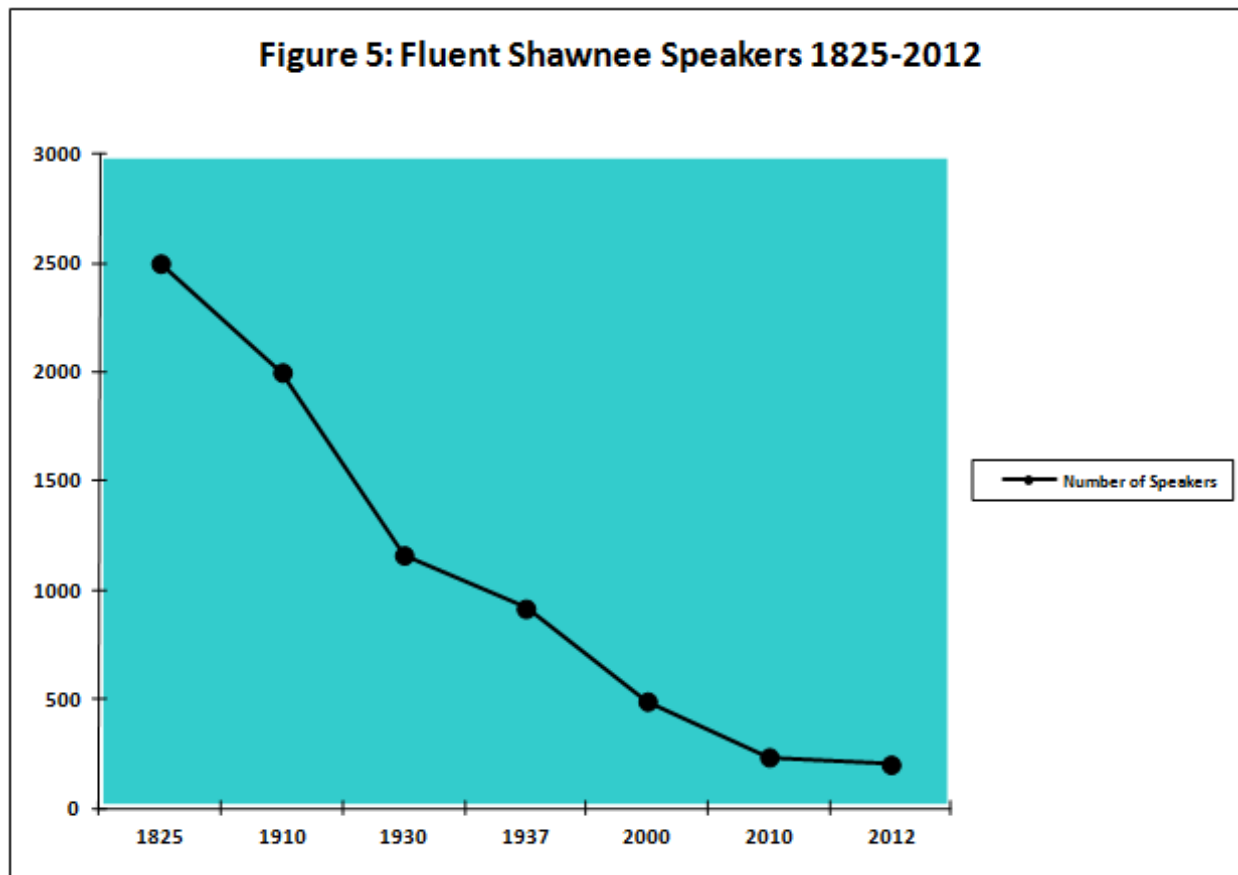
In 2003, the Chickasaw Nation Division of Housing conducted a survey of citizens which included questions regarding language. Of 2,588 surveys returned, only 91 people identified themselves as fluent speakers at that time. Other estimates of the number of fluent speakers range from about 600 to about 70. By 2007, that number was reduced to 120, and as of 2012, approximately only 75 native, fluent speakers remain, all of whom are older than 55 (Hinson, 2012, and Chickasaw Nation, 2007).

Since 1960, few children have learned the Chickasaw language as a primary language. Many of the fluent speakers today are 65 years of age or older. A recent study by the Chickasaw Nation indicated the Nation could lose its last fluent speaker in 20 to 30 years if nothing is done to revitalize the language (Chickasaw.org, 2012).

Shawnee

Shawnee is an Algonquian language spoken by 200 people in Oklahoma. It is most closely related to the Sauk-Fox and Kickapoo languages (Native-Languages.org, 2011). It is also considered “severely endangered” by UNESCO.

Originally estimated to number around 10,000 members in the 1700s, the Shawnee scattered and formed three separate groups: the Absentee Shawnee, the Eastern Shawnee, and the Cherokee Shawnee, also known as the Loyal Shawnee, who constituted the main group of the Shawnee prior to the Civil War. This last group was relocated to Oklahoma from Kansas, where they purchased land and were incorporated into the Cherokee tribe in 1869. They remained part of the Cherokee Nation until 2000 (Warren, 2012).



The Shawnee and their language would become pivotal pieces in United States history. Around 1800, the Shawnee language was considered essential by anyone desiring to trade in beaver fur, one of the top commodities at the time particularly among the French (Barnes, 2012).

The Shawnee were never a particularly large tribe. Mooney (1928) places their entire number at 3,000 in 1650.

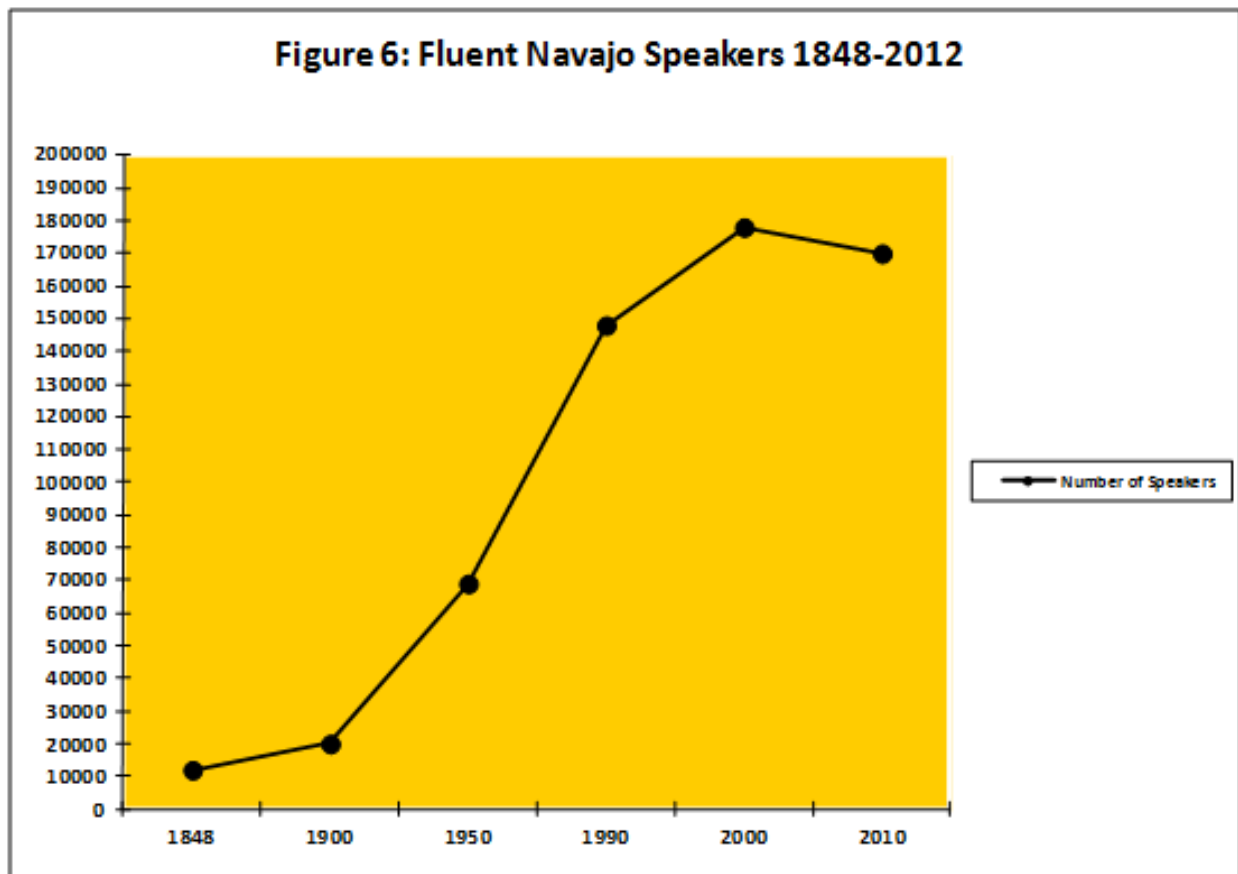
As Figure 5 indicates, this number had decreased to 2,500 by 1825, and to 2,000 a century later in 1910. By 1930, the number had dropped to 1,160 as English became more prevalent; by the year 2000, it had fallen to 490. As of 2012, there are fewer than 200, most likely nearer to 20, fluent speakers of Shawnee (Shawnee History, 2012, the US Census Bureau, 2011, Access Genealogy, 2012).

Warren (2012) notes that World War II is a clear dividing line between fluent speakers and those raised in English-language homes. Almost all of the fluent speakers are age 70 or older. Prior to World War II, the Big Jim Band of Absentee Shawnees, in and around Little Axe, had a very healthy language with nearly all Shawnee were fluent.

Barnes (2012) concurs with the assessment of the elders comprising nearly all fluent speakers of Shawnee. He cites the high morbidity rate of the language as a direct result of the fluent speakers being elders who are in their 80s and 90s. He holds the number of truly fluent speakers at less than 20, and notes the irony of a language that was once considered essential is now headed to extinction.

Navajo

Navajo is an Athabaskan language of the American Southwest. Nearly 150,000 Navajo Indians speak their native language today, making it the most-spoken indigenous language in the United States (Native-languages.org, 2012). The American Community Survey of 2007 reported 170,717 speakers of Navajo, making it the only American Indian language to warrant a separate line in census statistical tables. The majority of speakers live on the Navajo Nation and, of these speakers, 2.9% were monolingual with no knowledge of English (American Community Survey, 2010).



Navajo belongs to an entirely different language family than the great majority of other American Indian languages. An expert in American Indian languages would likely have little to no insight into the Navajo language as its phonetic and grammatical structure is like none other. Navajo belongs to the *Na Dene* language family, as does another American Indian language, Apache. The ancestors of the

Navajos and Apaches migrated more than a thousand years ago southward from the region of the Athapascans in northwestern Canada and eastern Alaska (Thayer, 2012).

As Figure 6 indicates, the Navajo have a highly unusual speaker number pattern, one that is in direct contrast to Chickasaw and Shawnee as well as most, if not all, of the other American Indian languages in the United States. Navajo is so unique that it holds an even greater distinction in world history: it was the unbreakable communication code language used by soldiers in World War II known as the Navajo Code Talkers (Thayer, 2012).

The Navajo are a rarity-- their population has continued to grow as other tribes have steadily decreased and even disappeared (Parry, 2011). Despite that distinction, the Navajo language is still considered to be “vulnerable” by UNESCO. This distinction means that while most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains, such as the home.

As late as 1930, 71 percent of Navajos spoke no English, as compared with only 17 percent of all American Indians at the time (Census Bureau, 1937). The number who speak Navajo in the home remains substantial—148,530 in 1990, or 45 percent of all American Indian language speakers (Census Bureau, 1993).

At present, many Navajos of all ages speak the language, and more than half of their population speaks Navajo at home. Many parents still teach their children Navajo as their first language, and the Navajo continue to use their native language for everyday communication. US Census data show that between 1980 and 1990 the percentage of Navajos ages 5-17 who spoke only English rose from 12% to 28%, and by the year 2000, the figure reached 43% (University of Arizona, 2008).

Navajo accounts for approximately .3% of Americans who speak a language other than English at home. This percentage is comparable to Hebrew, Yiddish, Khmer, Hmong, and Laotian (Shind and Bruno, 2003). In Arizona, Navajo is the third most commonly spoken language after English and Spanish (Feal, 2011).

In 1848, the number of Navajo Indians was approximately 12,000. By 1900, the number had grown to 20,000, and by 1950 the number had reached 69,000, despite a growing trend of learning English. The numbers continued to grow: in 1990, the US Census listed 148,000 speakers of Navajo and 178,000 by 2000. In 2010, that number had decreased slightly, indicating a possible stabilization, with 170,000 speakers.

The problem with such numbers is that the population of Navajos is also increasing. As such, though the number of speakers has increased, the percentage of Navajo speakers remains at about 50%. Further, there is cause for concern. Today, fewer than five percent of Navajo children under age 5 are speakers of the language (Speas, 2012). Whether the growing trend will cease and the numbers stabilize or decrease remains to be seen, but one fact remains: the Navajo have without a doubt, defied the odds and succeeded in sustaining their language while most other American Indian tribes in the United States have not.

Fluent speaker numbers in Mexico, Central and South America

The numbers of fluent speakers of American Indian languages differ greatly in Mexico, Central and South America when compared to those in the United States. This is likely a result of the enduring communities in remote areas who have remained much the same as they have for the past few

centuries. Mexico and Central America have large aboriginal populations employing a number of indigenous languages, such as Nahuatl, spoken by about 1.5 million people, and the Mayan tongues, native to about 4 million people (Encyclopedia of Native American Languages, 2012). Moseley (2010) reports that there are no languages extinct in Mexico, though 91 languages hold varying degrees of endangerment.

About 80 percent of South America's indigenous languages are spoken by approximately 10,000 people, and 27 percent are approaching extinction. In Brazil, though 180 native tongues are still spoken, 42 are already extinct, and most of the remaining languages are rapidly being replaced by Portuguese. The country has lost a number of "isolates" -- languages that have no contemporary relative. In the Amazon region, few native languages have more than 500 speakers any longer and many are down to less than a hundred. Karahwyana, for instance, has 40 remaining speakers; Katawixi has 10; and Arikapu has just six (Sampat, 2001).

In South America, the surviving Quechuan linguistic family, which includes far more native speakers than any other aboriginal language group in the Americas, accounts for some 12 million speakers. Another flourishing language of indigenous South Americans is Tupí-Guaraní, which has approximately four million speakers (Encyclopedia of Native American Languages, 2012).

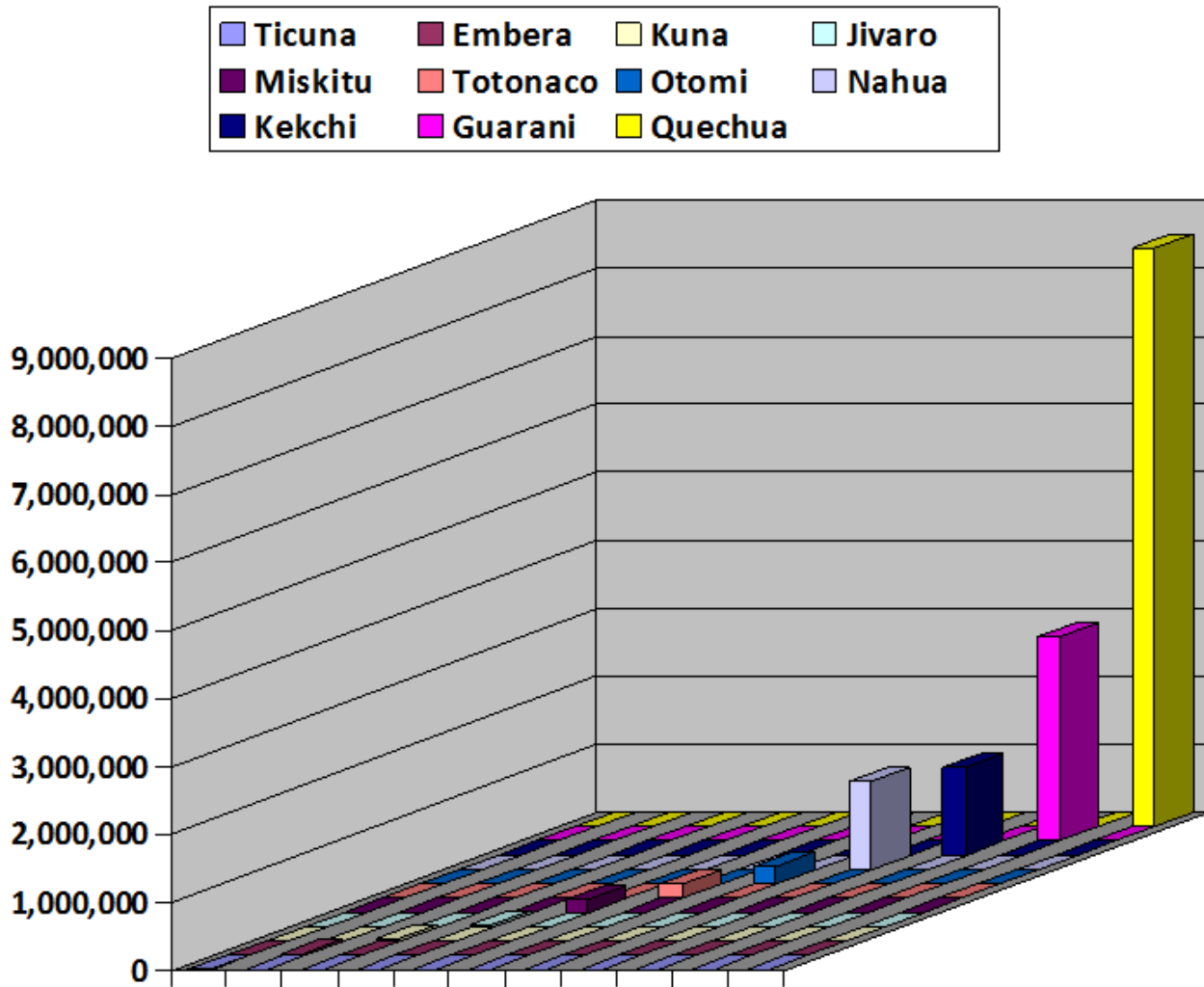
Research shows that the majority of present native language speakers are located south of the United States. These top languages are Quechua--7 million; Mayan languages --more than one million; and Nahuatl--more than one million (Western Washington University, 2012).

Most native languages in Latin America are spoken by fewer than 5,000 people - significantly fewer, in many cases. Oluteco, a Mixe language of Veracruz, Mexico, is only spoken by about a dozen elderly people (AILLA, 2012). However, another language, Huave, which is native to Mexico, has approximately 10,000 speakers. In fact, Huave continues to thrive partially because parents are still speaking and teaching the language to their children. It also continues to be used in all aspects of life within the community (AILLA, 2012).

The AILLA (Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America) notes that some Latin American indigenous languages still have very large numbers of speakers (Figure 7). Two are official languages of countries along with Spanish: Quechua in Peru, and Guaraní in Paraguay. The AILLA (2012) also notes, however, that such presence can change very quickly if the government was to decide to build a highway through the area or the young people find it necessary to move to the city to find work.

The Athena Review (1997) identified a total of 34 language families and more than a dozen isolated stocks with about 1000 individual languages in South America. Austin (2008) estimates that in South America there are more than 500 native languages still being used on a regular basis, though in varying numbers. As Figure 7 indicates, there is a significant variance amongst native speakers of Latin American languages. Four languages post significant speakers, and three have a moderate number of speakers; the bottom four languages each have 50,000 or less speakers. On the high end is Quechua, which boast 8.5 million speakers as of 2000. On the low end is the Ticuna language with only an estimated number of 21,000 speakers in the year 2000.

**Figure 7: Indigenous Language Speakers in Latin America
Estimated Numbers as of 2000**



In 1975, Quechua was made an official language of Peru “coequal with Spanish” (Hornberger and King, 1998). Though this declaration of equivalent status was reversed, Quechua has remained an official provincial language of Peru since 1979. The number of native speakers has remained above eight million for decades and it continues to be spoken throughout South America in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Ecuador as well as in academic circles.

Languages such as Ticuna, Embera, Kuna, and Jivaro have not fared as well. These languages have seen their numbers dwindle in the past several decades. Austin (2008), disagrees with the estimated 21,000 speakers of Ticuna, but notes that even his estimate of 41,000 indicates a dwindling number of speakers. He attributes the language’s decreasing numbers to the fact that Ticuna speakers have largely relocated to isolated jungles along the upper Amazon and other remote areas, as have many speakers of indigenous languages.

Displacement is a common thread amongst the Latin American indigenous languages. Native speakers are slowly pushed more and more remotely as towns and populations grow. This coincides with what has occurred in the United States.

Why Is Further Extinction a Possibility?

Probable Causal Factors

Though Central and South America have also seen decreasing numbers of indigenous peoples and speakers fluent in their languages for the past couple centuries, the effect seen in the United States is far more dramatic and incomparable. My research points sharply to the direct effects of Americanization (and subsequent stigmatization of American Indians) and modernization as the most probable causal factors of American Indian language extinction.

Americanization

By the middle of the 20th century, as a result of European conquest and settlement in the Western Hemisphere, approximately two-thirds of the American Indian languages had already died out or were dying out, yet some flourished. Still other aboriginal languages are only now being discovered and investigated by researchers. Some authorities suggest that about one-half of American Indian languages in the United States have become extinct. Of the languages still in use, more than half are spoken by fewer than 1,000 persons per language, and most of these speakers are now bilingual. (Encyclopedia of Native American Languages, 2012).

Krauss (1996) posits that languages are more likely to disappear as a result of the destruction of the cultural habitat of their speakers than because of direct attack upon their use. He places the blame on the policy of Americanization. Barnes (2012) agrees, noting that once English entered the equation, there has been no peer system in place, particularly with the Shawnee tribe to teach others the native language. As a result, it is dying out with the elders. Notes Shreyer, languages of colonizers have taken over and it is the indigenous and minority languages that are being lost (UBC, 2012).

Between the years of 1790 and 1920, the United States mounted an assimilation effort known as Americanization, aimed at forcing indigenous people to accept and become more like the white man:

Beginning in 1887, the federal government attempted to "Americanize" Native Americans, largely through the education of Native youth. By 1900 thousands of Native Americans were studying at almost 150 boarding schools around the United States. The U.S. Training and Industrial School founded in 1879 at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, was the model for most of these schools. Boarding schools like Carlisle provided vocational and manual training and sought to systematically strip away tribal culture. They insisted that students drop their Indian names, forbade the speaking of native languages, and cut off their long hair. Not surprisingly, such schools often met fierce resistance from Native American parents and youth. But some Indian young people responded positively, or at least ambivalently, to the boarding schools, and the schools also fostered a

sense of shared Indian identity that transcended tribal boundaries
(Pratt, 1973).

This Americanization campaign was compounded by the Dawes Act of 1887 (also called General Allotment Act, or Dawes Severalty Act of 1887), which dispensed meager plots of tribal lands back to the Indians in exchange for their agreement to become US citizens and give up some forms of tribal self-government. The stated objective of the Dawes Act was to stimulate assimilation of Indians into American society and individual ownership of land was seen as an essential step (Kappler, 1902).

The Dawes Act was closely followed by the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, which was also part of Americanization policy to ensure Indians became US citizens (Hoxie, 1984). The actual text of the Indian Citizenship Act (Appendix B) stating all Indians are to become Americans is as follows:

BE IT ENACTED by the Senate and house of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That all non citizen Indians born within the territorial limits of the United States be, and they are hereby, declared to be citizens of the United States (US National Archives, 1924).

As a result of these Acts, Indians were often forbidden to speak their own languages and perform their tribal rituals. Linguist Margaret Speas notes that until the 1960s, many Navajos were taught only English in schools and were punished for speaking their language in or around the classroom. In the late 1800s and into the early part of the 1900s, some Navajo children were also forcibly removed from reservations, as were members of other tribes, and raised in white communities, where they were taught to be Christians and told to shed their cultural heritage. As a result of decades of these kinds of policies, many Navajo adults eventually stopped speaking their language to their children over the years, and the percentages of Navajo speakers began to drop (Pfarrer, 2011).

As another example, Oregon's Siletz reservation, established in 1855, was home to the endangered language Siletz Dee-ni. The reservation held members of 27 different Indian bands speaking many languages. In order to communicate, people adopted Chinook Jargon, a pidgin or hybrid language. Between the use of Chinook Jargon and the increased presence of English, the number of speakers of indigenous languages dwindled," (Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages, 2009).

During the 1900s, the importance of speaking English became nearly inescapable. It became the language of trade; therefore, knowing English became economically profitable. Indeed, many tribes, in particular the Navajos, recognized that to "get ahead" people now needed to speak, read, and write English (McLaughlin, 1992). As a result, American Indians who did not assimilate in other ways, chose to begin speaking English as a means of creating better opportunities for their families.

Stigmatization also lent itself to aiding the Americanization process, if only inadvertently. When the colonists settled in America, they were greeted by red-skinned men they labeled as dirty, uncivilized savages. Over time, they began to categorize the Indians into two types: noble and ignoble savages. The Indian woman was either a princess or a drudge, the Indian man an admirable brave or a fiendish warrior. Alcohol symbolized the fatal exchange: it turned once noble savages into "the poor, degraded, and humbled specimens which alone can be seen along our frontiers." Resistance was futile. Should the

Indians accept the inevitable and embrace civilization, they would be destroyed by its vices; should they resist civilization and go to war, they would be destroyed by its avenging sword (Dippie, 2008).

The negative connotation continued over the centuries and by the 1900s, this perception slowly began to permeate reservation boundaries creating a stigma that still exists today in some parts of the United States. American Indians began seeking to rid themselves of being connected with a stereotype of the drunken, impoverished Indian by adapting to more traditional American ways of life, such as forgoing their native tongue in favor of English. Such devastating experiences leave a legacy of ongoing emotional trauma, resulting in an unending vicious cycle that many American Indians are forced to endure throughout their lives (Weaver, 2009).

Indeed, the surgeon general's report on mental health identified has stigma as being "the most formidable" barrier to mental health (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999) and experiences of historical loss and forced acculturation alter the wellbeing of many American Indians (Nelson, 2011).

Modernization

In 1930, the anthropologist Robert Redfield was the first to use the term "modernization" to describe linked processes of urbanization, literacy, secularization, and familial dismemberment. Redfield noted that modernization was fundamentally a cognitive, even spiritual event: A peasant, encountering a city for the first time, "develops a correspondingly new organ, a new mind," (DeConde, Burns, Logevall, 2001).

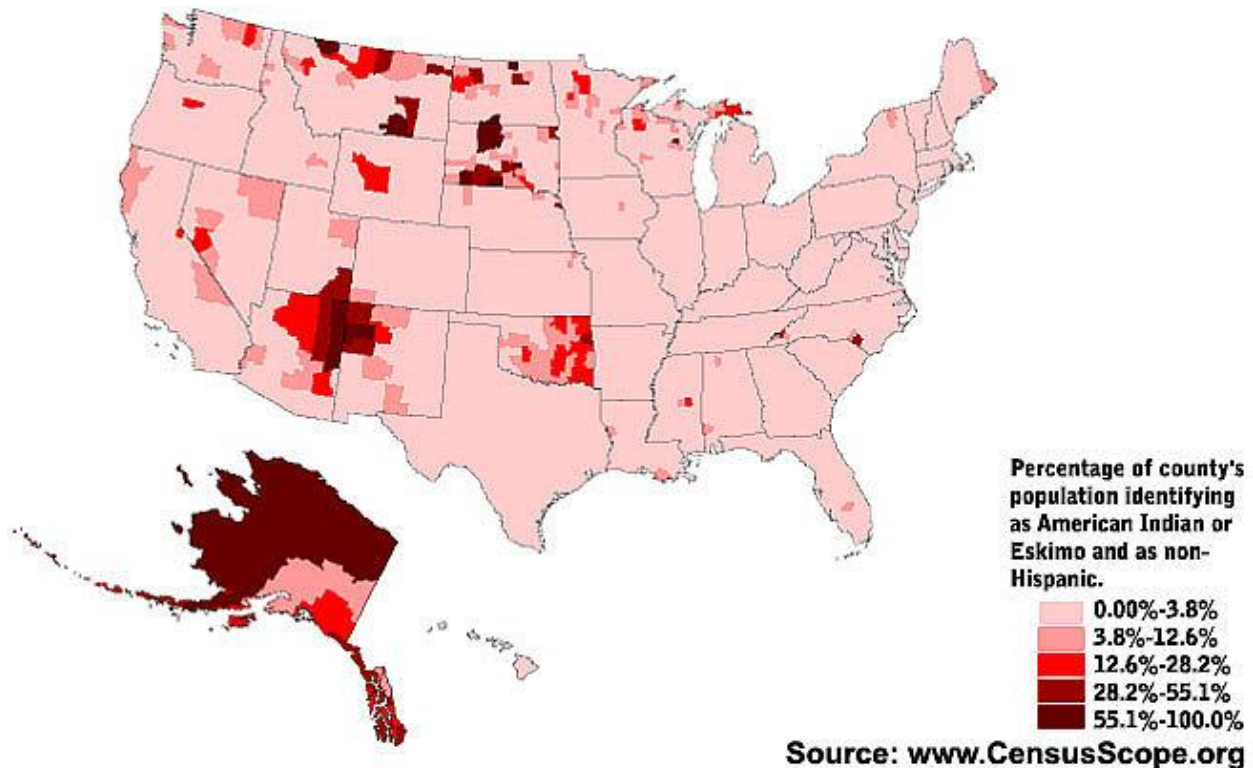
Modernization theory shaped the foundations of American Indian policy from the development of the first boarding schools and reservation land allotments to the Indian New Deal and Termination. The central thread that connected these sometimes contradictory policies was that success, or, for that matter, survival within the capitalist economic system, required cultural change. Western society became synonymous with the "modern" and therefore was not only desirable but also the ultimate cultural destination on the road to economic development (Native Pathways, 2004).

One of the main reasons tribes in Central and South America have endured is because of their tendency to remain in naturally isolated and remote areas away from outside influence and modernization. The jungles and river basins in Central and South America, proven to be inhospitable to modern life, have served as a thriving refuge for tribes in those areas, much like the barren and desert-like conditions of Arizona and New Mexico have served the Navajo. The Indians thrive in these austere areas and conditions, and have made them their own, while the general population remains in more "civilized" and modern communities.

Such areas are quite common in Central and South America and thus the Indians there have largely stayed in the same general vicinity for centuries. In the United States, increased immigration and surging populations have forced people into all by the most severe areas, coincidentally, the areas most densely populated by American Indians. The westward migration pattern of settlers closely mirrors the remaining Indian settlements (Barnes, 2012).

Figure 8 shows how Indian settlements are mostly on the western and northern periphery of the United States, with only isolated patches of Indians in the central areas, usually indicative of reservations. In the United States, one-third of American Indians continue to live on reservations (US Diplomatic

Mission, 2009). In fact, the largest reservation in the United States is that of the Navajo, comprising about 16 million acres, or about 25,000 square miles, approximately the size of the state of West Virginia (Indian Health Service, 2012).



Such data shows a positive correlation with Indians remaining on their reservations and boasting a large population of fluent speakers. Similarly, the native population of Alaska, the Eskimo, also largely left untouched, is also high.

Revitalization Initiatives and Efforts

Why is it important that we prevent the extinction of American Indian languages? Aside from the obvious fact that we are losing a piece of our history that cannot be honestly resurrected, Gibbs (2002) notes that “even if a language has been fully documented, all that remains once it vanishes from active use is a fossil skeleton, a scattering of features that the scientist was lucky and astute enough to capture.” Indeed, Linguist Ken Hale has compared the loss of a language to “dropping a bomb on a museum. It destroys a culture, intellectual wealth, and works of art,” (Hale and Hinton, 2001).

In the United States, the alarming morbidity rate of American Indian languages ultimately led to a Congressional act aimed at counteracting the decrease. In 1990, Congress passed the Native American Languages Act which aimed to empower Navajos and other indigenous speakers to become fluent in both written and spoken Navajo (Wilkins, 2003). The Act noted that “the status of the cultures and languages of Native Americans is unique and the United States has the responsibility to act together with Native Americans to ensure the survival of these unique cultures and languages,” (Native American Languages Act, 1990).

The Act went a step further, noting that “there is a widespread practice of treating Native American languages as if they were anachronisms...there is a lack of clear, comprehensive, and consistent Federal policy on treatment of Native American languages which has often resulted in acts of suppression and extermination of Native American languages and cultures,” (Native American Languages Act, 1990). President Bill Clinton would take an additional step just a few years later. According to the Minority Rights Group International (2009), in 1994 the Clinton administration awarded \$1 million to be used for 18 American Indian language revitalization programs.

To counteract policies aimed at Americanizing the American Indians, Navajo tribal leaders enacted laws as early as 1984 that mandated instruction in Navajo language and culture in elementary and secondary schools in the Navajo Nation. The Federal Native American Languages Act granted them the authority to make that instruction mandatory on their reservations and territories (Pfarrer, 2011).

However, as early as the late 1970’s, a program was established in a Navajo community in Northeastern Arizona which sought to create a bilingual-biliteracy program. In establishing the program, community and education leaders addressed the question of what roles English and Navajo should play in the Navajo development from a traditionally oral to an increasingly literate culture. It was pointedly noted that Navajo was never meant to be a written language and that literacy was an alien idea (McLaughlin, 1992).

Ultimately, the community did incorporate indigenous literacy. By 2005, Navajo was used in the local school, church, and in Bureau of Indian Affairs texts, though it had not found its way into everyday life. McLaughlin (1992) noted there were few instances of letter writing, list making, or creative writing in Navajo outside of school. However, he also noted that Navajo literacy had also gained economic importance because biliteracy creates economic opportunities, especially for Navajos, within schools, the principal employer in the community (McLaughlin, 1992).

Such efforts in the Navajo community may very well have been a preemptive strike against the rapid negative slide in fluent speakers faced by other tribes. In recent decades, other tribes have recognized the severity of the situation and have begun their own various revitalization efforts.

In 1997, the Crow Tribal Council adopted resolutions declaring Crow the official language of the reservation in Montana, honoring fluent speakers as “tribal treasures” and encouraging all tribal members to speak the language. The language is now being taught in several schools on the reservation, known as *Apsáalooke*. Elsewhere in Montana (which boasts seven reservations) by the end of the 1990s, the Northern Cheyenne began offering a summer language camp for children which was taught by the five elders who still spoke Cheyenne fluently; in Missoula, summer language classes began being offered; and a state decision to ease the certification of Indian language instructors led to a surge in language instruction (Brooke, 1998).

Leanne Hinton, professor emerita at the University of California, Berkeley, created the Breath of Life program in California in 1992 to revive dormant languages in the state. Representatives from at least 25 different tribes with no native speakers have participated in the group’s workshops. In 2010, Yale received a federal grant to create a similar program based in Washington, D.C. (Cohen, 2010).

Sampat (2001) notes that a few languages are slowly making a comeback, with the help of community groups, governments, and linguists. In 1999, four students in Hawaii graduated from high school

educated exclusively in Hawaiian—the first to do so in the century since U.S. annexation. Their achievement was made possible largely by Punana Leo, a nonprofit organization dedicated to reviving the language, which now has 1,000 speakers.

In 2002, the Association on American Indian Affairs (AAIA) started an inter-generational program of instruction in the Dakota language called Dakota Iapi!, a two-hour weekly class held during the evening and taught by a qualified Dakota-speaking teacher. The program has led to increased usage of the language, including bilingual signs at tribal businesses and the increased use of Dakota within the tribal government. The program has continued and expanded, with the current phase focusing on using “new media” to aid in the instruction of the language (AAIA, 2012).

In 2005, the Kituwah Preservation and Education Program (KPEP) of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians initiated the development of a 10-year plan for the revitalization of the Cherokee language. The program was the first project utilizing several significant investments from Cherokee Preservation Foundation. To kick-off the program, the Foundation funded a survey whose results indicated that 460 fluent speakers were then living in Cherokee communities. The survey showed that 72 percent of the speakers were older than the age of 50, and that elder speakers are dying far more quickly than new speakers were emerging (Cherokee Preservation Foundation, 2012).

In 2007, the Chickasaw Nation was awarded a grant of more than \$93,000 from the Administration for Native Americans to conduct a language survey and design a master-apprentice language program (Green, 2009). This program paired fluent speakers with apprentices who were willing to devote the time and effort necessary to become fluent speakers in 18 to 24 months. Each of 10 fluent speakers are teamed with an apprentice who has some knowledge of the Chickasaw language. Teams make a commitment to spend two hours each day, five days a week, communicating in the Chickasaw language (Green, 2009).

Are such efforts enough to revitalize a language? Krauss (1996) believes it is feasible, though far from easy, to prevent and even reverse linguistic extinction. He notes, “It is possible to halt the repression of local culture and promote the production of materials, written texts, and radio and television broadcasts in minority languages. One can preserve taped and written samples; one can encourage the use of a traditional language for songs, special social events, ceremonies, and rituals.”

Conclusion

Is it time to say good-bye to American Indian languages? Research indicates that the number of American Indian language speakers will continue to decrease and, with numerous tribes having only a handful of speakers remaining, the obvious conclusion is the extinction of additional American Indian languages. Such extinction is the result of several causal factors: Americanization, stigmatism of the American Indian, modernization, and the loss of isolated territories.

Data showed a continued, significant decrease in speakers of American Indian languages particularly in two of the three languages profiled (Chickasaw and Shawnee), and a slight decrease in, and perhaps a stabilization of, one language (Navajo). Research indicated that for most tribes, the remaining speakers are the elders. Once they pass on, there will be no one to keep the languages alive. As discussed, a language can disappear for many reasons, but as the biologist, historian, and linguistic scholar Jared Diamond notes, “the most direct way...is to kill almost all its speakers,” (Sampat, 2001).

Research has made it clear that tribes in secluded areas, such as reservations, jungles, and remote locations largely left untouched by modernization, are the tribes that continue to endure and even thrive. As we saw with the Navajo, remaining somewhat isolated has enabled them to actually increase in population and number of speakers during the past century. American Indians in the United States residing outside a reservation setting cannot win a war against modernization, but revitalization efforts can neutralize the negative effect. Reinforcing the importance of native language while also recognizing the necessity of English is critical; in the modern world knowledge of more than one language is a highly valuable commodity.

Is it possible to reverse the damage? I believe significant improvement can be made, though it will take time and additional losses are likely until the number of new speakers exceeds those speakers who are passing away.

Revitalization programs to curtail the loss of language and increase speakers are rapidly developing. Such efforts could potentially stabilize the numbers of speakers and even lead to an increase as new speakers emerge. However, learning a language takes time, and results from current revitalization programs will not be known for years, even decades. Hoffman (2012) notes that producing fluent speakers requires 600-700 contact hours of exposure. Many new school language programs consist of only 24 hours of education in the language per school year. At this rate, it would take 25 years to reach the minimum 600 hours of exposure needed to become fluent. As an example, only three-fourths of the minimum hours of exposure, or 450 hours, will be met by students who take three years of Dakota language at the University of Minnesota. Despite the long term good, unfortunately, such revitalization efforts may be a case of too little too late for many languages currently verging on extinction.

For most tribes, language is the cultural glue that holds a community together, linking generations and preserving a heritage and values. Bruce Cole, the former chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities which sponsors language preservation programs, has called language “the DNA of a culture,” (Cohen, 2010).

American Indians are an inherent part of the United States, and their culture and language should not be allowed to fall into extinction. Americanization and modernization have significantly and even, perhaps, mortally wounded the precious languages of the indigenous peoples north of Mexico. Thus, despite the delayed results, continued and broader revitalization efforts to increase speakers and prevent extinction are not only a good idea, they are imperative.

My grandfather, John Bunyan McLaughlin, was a full-blooded Chickasaw born in 1889 in the Indian Territory of Oklahoma. In his final days, the family had been called to the hospital, only a few miles from his birthplace, and warned that the end was near, as he was speaking gibberish and had a very high fever.

The entire family gathered and went in together, braced for the worst, to begin saying their farewells. As they entered his room, he sat upright and began greeting everyone brightly and quite effusively, saying he wanted to go home. The family was relieved that his condition wasn't as poor as they had feared and turned in confusion to the nurse who had just entered the room. Quite innocently, the young nurse stated that he had been this bad since the early morning, and the fever had caused him to be delirious and start speaking nonsense. My family had to explain to the nurse of this hospital in

Chickasaw Indian territory, that yes, the end may be near and he may have a high fever, but he was most definitely not speaking gibberish; he was speaking Chickasaw. It was 1974.

We are at the point of no return. Cohen (2012) notes that “in order for a language to survive and resurrect, it needs people talking it, and for people to talk it, there has to be a society that works on it.” Quite simply, if we do not continue to work on language revitalization, it will indeed be time to say goodbye to American Indian languages.

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