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The Revitalization of Wašiw Wagayay: A View from the Inside

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology and the Honors Program

by

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Abstract

Wašiw Wagayay, the language traditionally spoken by the Wašišiw people of east central California and the Western Great Basin, is moribund and highly endangered (Mithun, 1999; Lewis, 2009). There are and have been grassroots efforts to revitalize the language. This research seeks to understand the importance, position, and purpose of the language and what is necessary to revitalize the language as seen by those involved in these grassroots efforts in the Wašišiw community of Dresslerville, Nevada. This research finds that Wašiw Wagayay is seen as more than a medium of communication; it is an integral aspect of the social fabric of the community. Language shift is seen as part of the wider social and cultural weakening of the community. Thus, revitalization efforts must address these wider social issues along side the language shift. Ultimately, language revitalization in the Dresslerville community entails a great amount of community revitalization as well.

*Keywords:* language revitalization, language shift, Wašiw Wagayay, indigenous perspective
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The Revitalization of Wašiw Wagayay: A View from the Inside

There are many different terms that identify the process in which a language ceases to be spoken: language loss, language shift, language death, language extinction. Whatever one calls it, the fact remains that the world’s languages are disappearing at a rate unparalleled at any other time in history (Crystal, 2000). In fact, there are estimates that 60 to 90 percent of the six thousand or more languages spoken on this planet will be extinct by the end of this century (Romaine, 2007). The reasons why languages cease to be spoken are varied, complicated, and often interrelated. They range from the literal destruction of a group of speakers by disease or warfare to cultural assimilation in which groups shift from the use of one language to that of another (Crystal, 2000). Due to these processes, there are speakers who see their language no longer spoken by their children and grandchildren. There are speakers who will leave this world with the knowledge that their language is soon to follow. Finally, there are non-speakers who will see the language of their people, spoken since time immemorial, precede them into death.

English is one of only eight languages that have over a hundred million speakers (Crystal, 2000). It makes sense then, that some of those who read this paper have very little to no experience with language shift. The majority of languages are not in such a secure position. In fact, 4 percent of the world’s population speaks an astonishing 96 percent of the world’s languages (Crystal, 2000). To put this in even sharper detail, while there are only eight languages with more than a hundred million speakers, there are an estimated 181 languages with less than ten speakers (Crystal, 2000). Despite this urgent situation, linguists and anthropologists only recently began to give language shift much
attention. As Crystal (2000) points out, it is only since the 1990s that language shift and
its reactionary counterparts, language maintenance and language revitalization became a
pressing concern for professional linguists and anthropologists. Language shift refers to
the gradual or sudden move from the use of one language to another, generally from a
minority language to a dominant world language. Language maintenance refers to the
continued use of a language through the adoption of specific measures, such as
community language classes, and language revitalization refers to efforts to increase the
number of speakers of a language and its domains of use (Crystal, 2000). Research of
these issues has focused on the causes of language shift (see Crystal, 2000), the diagnosis
of this shift (see Fishman, 1991), as well as methods to revitalize languages or reverse
language shift (see Grenoble & Whaley, 2006; Hinton, 2001). The focus of much of this
research has been on indigenous communities, which, for many different reasons, are
very vulnerable to language shift. Despite this surge in research and academic concern,
the growing body of literature about language shift, revitalization, and maintenance tends
to privilege the views and opinions of academics over those of indigenous communities.
This results in a dominant perspective on language and language revitalization in the
literature that does not necessarily reflect the perspective of the indigenous communities
that are often the focus of the literature.

For example, one group that has received little academic attention is the Washoe
tribe of both Nevada and California. The Washoe people, or the Wašišiw—“people from
here”—live in what is now east central California and Nevada’s Western Great Basin, in
a territory situated around Lake Tahoe (Mithun, 1999). The Wašišiw language, referred
to as Washo in most academic literature, but called Wašiw Wagayay in the actual
language, is somewhat of a linguistic anomaly. It has been argued that the language is a
very distinct member of the Hokan language family, separated about 4,500 years ago
(Jacobsen, 1964), while there are other claims that it is a language isolate with no known
related languages (Jacobsen, 1986). The number of fluent speakers that remain today is
also unclear. The language translation organization SIL International, which publishes
Ethnologue, claims that there are only ten fluent speakers of Wašiw Wagayay and
categorizes the language as nearly extinct (Lewis, 2009). Linguists who are currently
working with the Wašišiw claim that there are 13-20 fully fluent speakers, with very few
of these speakers under the age of sixty (Midtlyng & Yu, 2005). In the course of the
interviews conducted for this paper, many of those interviewed put the number of fluent
speakers who learned the language from infancy at around ten, but this number does not
include second-language learners or less than fluent speakers. The truth of the matter is
that it is difficult to pinpoint the exact number of fluent speakers. Regardless, it is clear
that Wašiw Wagayay is in a precarious position.

Wašiw Wagayay is moribund. A moribund language is a language that is not
passed on to children (Grenoble and Whaley, 2006). Unless intergenerational
transmission resumes, Wašiw Wagayay will likely disappear within the near future. This
linguistic crisis is not a sudden development. According to d’Azevedo (1986), Wašišiw
children have learned English from early childhood since the early 20th century and the
use of Wašiw Wagayay has been on a steady decline. The number of fluent speakers in
the 1950s was somewhere between one hundred and two hundred, but by 1970, that
number had dropped to less than one hundred, and by 1983 the number was even lower,
somewhere below fifty (d’Azevedo, 1986). Different reasons have been put forth to
explain this shift. Downs (1966) argues that because the intrusion of white settlers into the area was concentrated on their traditional territory, the Wašišiw experienced far greater outside pressure and influence than other indigenous groups nearby. As Downs puts it, “The Paiute raider could flee into the vastness of Nevada and escape. The Washiw had no place to hide. On all sides there were towns and ranches…The Washiw chose to adjust to the new world,” (1966, p. 78). Downs (1966) frames this language shift as a choice. There is another explanation, however, that points to outside coercion and systematic attacks on the language. The Wašišiw, along with many other native groups in this country, suffered what has been called “cultural genocide” at the hands of the U.S. government. Through institutional policies and initiatives at both the governmental and school level—the most salient examples of which are the boarding schools that native children were forced to attend—the U.S. government greatly weakened the ability of the Wašišiw to pass their language onto future generations (S.2688: Native American Language Act Amendments, 2000).

Despite the apparent need, as mentioned before, there has been very little attention given to Wašiw Wagayay by the academic community in regards to language revitalization. Jacobsen (1964) compiled a grammar of the language and more recent research examines certain structural aspects of the language (see Midtlyng & Yu, 2005; Yu, 2005). It is important that Wašiw Wagayay is studied from a linguistic standpoint and it is good that there is at least some interest in the language from the academic community, but there remains a void in the academic literature in regards to Wašiw Wagayay language shift and revitalization. Fortunately, the Wašišiw community has taken it upon themselves to stop the disappearance of their language. For example, in the
Wašišiw community of Dresslerville, a Wašiw Wagayay immersion school that taught all subjects in Wašiw Wagayay operated for several years. While the immersion school is no longer in operation, there continues to be several informal language classes offered in various Wašišiw communities. Involved in these classes are a committed core of elders, teachers, and students who are working to keep Wašiw Wagayay part of Wašišiw communities.

The Wašišiw primarily live in two communities: Dresslerville, Nevada and Woodfords, California. This research focuses on the Wašiw Wagayay language class offered in the Dresslerville community. Dresslerville is located in Gardnerville, Nevada, which is south of the state capitol, Carson City. The history of Dresslerville is rather interesting. Despite constant and direct contact with white settlers beginning in the middle of the 19th century, the federal government essentially ignored the Wašišiw for over half a century (Ford, 1989). While other local indigenous groups were allotted land by the government, the Wašišiw were made landless by the encroachment of settlers. In 1917, the federal government bought land from the settlers and created three different communities for landless American Indians: the Carson Indian Colony, the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony, and Dresslerville (Ford, 1989). Today, Dresslerville is the largest Wašišiw community. As of 2000, the last year for which figures are available, 315 people live in Dresslerville (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The median household income was just under $21,000 and 62 percent of the community had a high school diploma or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Finally, as further evidence of the advanced stage of language shift in the community, 243 of the 299 households included in the census were English-only households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).
However, as mentioned earlier, there are grassroots efforts that aim to address the language shift that is occurring in the Dresslerville community. This research engages in a dialogue with members of the Dresslerville community who are involved in these efforts. Not only is this insider’s perspective essential to understanding language shift and revitalization, but it is also important that anthropological research privileges the views and opinions of the communities in which the research takes place. By ignoring these perspectives, anthropologists and linguists stand to miss valuable information and perhaps even perpetuate the cycle that has led to the marginalization of indigenous peoples. Thus, with this in mind, the two major goals of this research are a) to understand the importance, position, and purpose of Wašiw Wagayay in the Dresslerville community, as seen by the Wašišiw involved in language revitalization and b) to learn what they see as essential to the revitalization of the language.

The Context

While there is no prior literature that can directly meet the goals of this research, reviewing relevant literature plays an important role in informing this research and placing it into a context. To meet the first goal mentioned above, to understand the importance, position, and purpose of Wašiw Wagayay in the community, this research needs to answer the question, “What role does Wašiw Wagayay play in both the individual lives of those interviewed and in the community as a whole?” Most research places questions like this within the issue of language identity, which examines how language serves as a symbol and marker of identity as well as a tool that shapes how individuals and communities perceive themselves (Crystal, 2000). Postmodern theory has greatly influenced the discourse on this issue. Most postmodern discourse rejects the
idea that there is “…any intrinsic link, even any significant link, between language and identity,” (May, 2004, p. 35). The postmodern critique of language and identity is centered on the argument that identity is not static, and that it is situational (May, 2004). As May explains, in the postmodern view, “…all forms of identity are multiple, shifting, contingent and invariably hybrid,” (2004, p. 40). The argument made in Eastman (1984) best typifies this postmodern view. Eastman claims that the relationship between language and identity is one of association and that this “associated language” does not have to be used in one’s everyday life (1984, p. 259). Eastman acknowledges that language does play a part in one’s identity, but she claims that when that language shift occurs, the “primordial sense” of one’s identity remains intact (1984, p. 261). In fact, Eastman concludes this work by saying, “…there is no need to worry about preserving ethnic identity, so long as the only change being made is in what language we use,” (1984, p. 275). Edwards (1984) deals with the issue of language identity much in the same way. For example, Edwards (1984) argues that identity is a personal thing and that attempts to promote a certain kind of identity are problematic. Both of these authors argue that language is not a necessary factor in the continuation of a certain identity.

More recent works have taken a different approach. Fishman (1997) and May (2004) point out that academic inquiry into language shift runs the risk of objectifying and separating a language from its speakers. Ultimately, language objectification treats language as a separate entity removed from the people who speak it. The relegation of speakers of a language to the shadows compromises discussions about language revitalization because it ignores perhaps the most important aspect of language: its social nature. May (2004) concedes that it is true that language may only be one of the factors
that shapes identity, but he points out that in practice it is often a very significant factor and thus the role of language in identity should not be overlooked. Along the same lines, Fishman (1997) claims that a detached scientific view often fails to express the vital nature of a language that speakers experience. May (2004) also argues for a more nuanced understanding of what Eastman calls “associated language,” (1984, p. 259).

While knowledge of a language does not limit membership in a group, it can still be extremely important to the members of that group. People might not speak the language, but they may still believe that the language is important and even that the language helps to define membership in that group (May, 2004). Upon review, the arguments put forth by Eastman (1984) and Edwards (1984) seem to be based on evidence from large and dominant languages and do not appear to take into account the variation that might be found in small and vulnerable language communities. This focus on dominant world languages and lack of research from smaller language communities may make these arguments less than relevant in regards to smaller indigenous communities. On the other hand, the argument put forth May (2004) appears to consider smaller and threatened language communities, and may hold more relevance in regards to indigenous communities.

Despite the fact that indigenous peoples have been a major focus in anthropology and linguistics for almost a century, their perspectives on issues such as language identity have only recently begun to be addressed in the academic literature. England (2003) examines language revival in Mayan communities in Guatemala. She notes that the Mayan languages are often the most important symbols of Mayan identity, even to the point that Mayans tend to see other members of their community who do not speak the
language as not fully Mayan. Nonspeaking Mayans are viewed as a kind of anomaly within the community; they are both Mayan and non-Mayan at the same time. Nicholas (2009), in her research with Hopi youth, finds that even when Hopi youth do not speak the language they still feel and claim to be Hopi because of their involvement in the Hopi social arena. The youth point to their participation in religious ceremonies and in the Hopi kinship system as evidence of the Hopi identity (Nicholas, 2009). However, these youth still value the language. In fact, they believe that they have an incomplete knowledge of the ceremonies and other aspects of Hopi life because they do not speak the language; therefore, they desire to learn the language in order to gain this full understanding and participation (Nicholas, 2009). The relationship between language and an indigenous identity is perhaps best expressed with this Welsh proverb, *Cenedl heb iaith, cenedl heb gallon*, which means, “A nation without a language is a nation without a heart,” (Crystal, 2000, p. 36).

In order to meet the second goal, to learn what the Wašišiw see as essential to the revitalization of the language, it is useful to examine prior language revitalization research. Due to the relatively recent nature of this research field, the literature that exists is quite varied. For example, some research deals largely with specific revitalization strategies. Grenoble and Whaley (2006) examine different models for revitalization as well as the actual steps that are necessary to create a language program. These models include total-immersion programs, bilingual programs, second language learning, community-based programs and master-apprentice programs. Hinton (2001) provides some very insightful observations about the day-to-day operation of language classes. She discusses basic teaching methods and advocates for an immersion teaching
style in which the class is solely taught in the target language, but the teachers mimics and performs actions, what Hinton calls “comprehensible input,” to make students understand what he or she is saying (Hinton, 2001, p.183). Hinton (1996) discusses the master-apprentice model of revitalization. Hinton pioneered this approach in order to help Native Californian communities in which advanced language shift had made other revitalization efforts unfeasible. These groups tend to have only one or two elderly speakers left, and there is a great sense of urgency to insure the continuation of the language. In this approach, a fluent elder is paired with a dedicated apprentice and they go about everyday activities with each other, but the endangered language is the only language used to communicate. Activities could include fishing, working on a truck, or simply hiking. Essentially, the goal is to create a natural social setting in which the endangered language is regularly used, which helps the apprentice reach higher levels of proficiency in the language (Hinton, 1996).

Other works focus on the diagnosis and assessment of language shift. Fishman (1991) introduces the Grade Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS). This scale is an attempt to create a more systematic approach to the revitalization of languages. The eight stages that are included in the scale all correlate to different stages in the language shift process (Fishman, 1991). The approach that language revitalization efforts take is dependent on what GIDS scale the language finds itself. For example, in Stage 8—the most advanced stage of language shift—because there are few speakers and the community is spread out, the main goal is simply to collect and record as much of the language as possible so that future generations can have the materials necessary to learn the language (Fishman, 1991). Some literature that assesses language shift focuses
primarily on linguistic issues such as the number and ages of remaining speakers, but more recent literature has begun to consider other factors. Crystal (2000) proposes six prerequisites that he believes must be present in a community for successful language revitalization to occur. All of these factors center on the relationship between the indigenous community and the dominant society. For example, the first prerequisite is, “An endangered language will progress if it speakers increase their prestige within the dominant community,” (Crystal, 2000, p. 130). Media exposure of the group via newspaper, radio, and television is one way to meet this condition. The ultimate goal is to increase group visibility in the dominant public domain (Crystal, 2000). This kind of approach takes into account the deeper social, political, and economic processes that are at the root of language shift. In fact, the famous Noam Chomsky has said, “The first causes in language loss…are not in themselves linguistics,” (as cited in Nettle & Romaine, 2000, p. 79).

Finally, a small amount of research seeks to understand language revitalization from an indigenous perspective. Hinton (2002) provides an example of this kind of research when she looks at what she calls “community-internal advocacy,” which are writings by indigenous peoples that discuss the reasons why language revitalization is important (p. 152). In contrast to much of the academic writing, community-internal advocacy takes a much more holistic perspective on language revitalization. Hinton (2002) lists four themes put forth most often in this kind of advocacy: language as healing, language as key to identity, language as key to spirituality, and language as carrier of culture and worldview. These four themes are distinct from advocacy literature written by non-indigenous authors and demonstrate the different way that many
indigenous people look at language and language revitalization. There are also
indigenous scholars who study and write about these issues. Antone (2002) says,
“Healing is found in our language,” (p. 53), and Greymorning (1999) writes about the
connection between the Arapaho language and Arapaho way of life. According to
Greymorning (1999), loss of language results in the loss of that way of life.

The Researcher

Academic literature often entails a certain kind of writing style. This style most
definitely does not include the use of the first person singular by the researcher.
However, at this point, this researcher will do just that. The main rational behind this
decision is that when it comes to qualitative fieldwork, it is impossible for the researcher
to remove him or herself from the research process. Many, if not all, anthropologists go
into their fieldwork with preconceived notions and perhaps even biases. This is simply
because one’s perspective is shaped by one’s culture and it is difficult to rid oneself of
that established framework upon entrance into a different culture. Fienup-Riordan (2000)
asserts, “Anthropology is culturally constituted. The questions one brings to the field
shape one’s answers, and different perspectives on the same “object” produce altogether
different stories,” (p. 31). On top of this cultural “baggage,” there is also the problem
that arises from the very cornerstone of anthropology: participant observation. Fienup-
Riordan (2000) calls participant observation, “The contradictory enterprise…in which
one is simultaneously actor and observer, immersed in the lives of others and reflective
commentator,” (p. 33). Thus, the very nature of this research, based on participant
observation, eliminates the possible role of a detached observer.
Therefore, since I cannot remove myself from the research process, I believe it is important that I am upfront about my place in it. My involvement with the Wašišiw community is relatively recent. I began to attend the Wašiw Wagayay classes offered at the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony (RSIC) in February 2009. I originally attended because it was a requirement for an anthropology course I was in at the time. Although I was only required to attend one class, I continued to attend because I found the language and the people in the class very interesting. As the semester progressed, my participation increased. Before the class took a break for the summer, I helped the instructor digitally record all of the lessons onto CDs. I brought my recording equipment and the class was able to participate and record certain words or phrases in Wašiw Wagayay. The children that attended the language class very much enjoyed being able to record their voices and their language, and I was struck by how much joy the class got from the use of their language.

The following fall, I continued to attend class and approached the students regarding my senior thesis, which, at the time, was going to focus heavily on language identity, and they seemed interested in and supportive of my research. However, events in the community led to the continuous cancellation of the class. Over the course of the fall semester, the class met only a handful of times. Also in the fall, I attended the Great Basin Languages Conference and had the opportunity to meet people from the Wašišiw community in Dresslerville, Nevada. Because of my interest in the language, members of the Dresslerville language class invited me to attend one of their classes. Eventually, I began to attend the language class in Dresslerville as often as I could. I had planned for the bulk of my research to come from interviews with various members of the RSIC and
Dresslerville language class and by the beginning of the 2010 spring semester, I received IRB approval for my research and was able to start the interview process. However, it was at this time that the RSIC indefinitely postponed the Wašiw Wagayay class. This meant that the focus of my research suddenly shifted solely to the Dresslerville community.

The language class in Dresslerville, just like its RSIC counterpart, is a small class, but the Wašišiw have always been a small group. I believe the largest class that I have seen since I began to attend consisted of ten people. Despite the small class size, there is a wide range of speaking abilities. Some of those who attend are fluent or very near fluent, others can understand the language when they hear it, but they cannot speak it, and others have only basic vocabulary knowledge. There is also a wide age range in the class with three different generations of Wašišiw present, spanning from elders to children. The interviews conducted for this research focused on five people from this class, the majority of whom have been involved in language programs in the community for several years. The majority of the interviews took place in a group setting. I would pose a rather broad question about language or some related issue and let the conversation continue naturally. Thus, these interviews were much more like informal conversations rather than formal interviews. In these conversations, I mostly listened and allowed the dialogue to build on concepts and ideas. I recorded these conversations from January 2010 to February 2010. I recorded these sessions with a digital field recorder and gathered just over five hours of recorded material. The interviews took place in the building where the language class is held as well as one of the student’s homes.
The original aim of this research was to gather information about language identity to see whether the relationship between language and identity fluctuated across generations and speaking abilities in Wašišiw communities. The gathered data would have been placed into the framework of other research in order to see what kinds of language revitalization strategies were appropriate in these communities. However, as I began the research process I noticed a common trend. Questions about language never yielded answers that dealt solely with language. Instead, a question about language would start a discussion about problems in the community such as alcoholism, poverty, and greed. It became clear that most of those involved with the language program did not see language as a disconnected and objectified entity—unlike some academic discourse (May, 2004; Fishman, 1997). Rather, those interviewed saw the language as part of the much larger social fabric of the community. Thus, it was impossible to discuss language issues without discussing other social issues as well. The more I talked to people the more I realized that the Wašišiw I was interviewing were not talking about language revitalization in the way that it is most often framed in the academic literature. These were conversations about community revitalization, not just language revitalization. This idea intrigued me, and I decided to shift the focus of my research and explore how the Dresslerville community members involved with the language program felt about Wašiw Wagayay and its revitalization. I realized that in indigenous communities, the insights and opinions of its members are often not valued or pursued in language revitalization literature. Instead, the literature tends to pay more attention to academics, which results in a skewed dialogue about the issues. Thus, the views and opinions of those who live in a community that is experiencing language shift have not greatly shaped revitalization
strategies and theories. This situation presents a problem. If language revitalization efforts are to be successful, they must take into account the different ways that certain communities may view language, language’s role in the community and ways to bring the language back. Therefore, I decided it was more pertinent to uncover an insider’s perspective on language revitalization, rather than pursue a purely academic inquiry into the issue of language identity.

**Wašiw Wagayay Revitalization: Past and Present**

The remainder of this paper examines the information I gathered through participant observation and the interviews I conducted in the Dresslerville community. I first examine past and present revitalization efforts in Dresslerville, which helps to place the discussion about language and language revitalization into a wider social context. The analysis of the recorded conversations is divided into three main sections. These sections examine the perspective of the Wašišiw interviewed in regards to a) the language and its relationship to identity and the community, b) the causes of language shift, and c) what can be done to revitalize the language. In order to portray accurately the views and opinions of those interviewed, these sections focus on direct quotes from the conversations. The aim is to insure that the discussion about these issues remains centered on the actual words of those interviewed. Their views and opinions will greatly shape language revitalization in Dresslerville and thus, it is extremely important that the words and the people who said them remain at the center of this research.

As mentioned earlier, there have been and continue to be language programs and revitalization efforts in various Wašišiw communities. These efforts are examples of the larger grassroots movement of indigenous language revitalization. In the United States,
this trend began with the Hawaiian organization Aha Pūnana Leo, which created the Pūnana Leo immersion schools (Kamanā, 2004). Following the Hawaiian’s example, a language immersion school in Dresslerville was created. The school was called Wašiw Wagayay Mangal. There is a consensus among linguists and language educators that total immersion programs are the best approach to language revitalization (Grenoble and Whaley, 2006). A popular model—and the model that Wašiw Wagayay Mangal followed—centers the immersion on formal schooling, in which all curriculum is taught in the target language for revitalization (Grenoble and Whaley, 2006). Unfortunately, the immersion school in Dresslerville is no longer operational. However, the examination of the processes that led to its creation and eventual dissolution will shed valuable information about how language revitalization is viewed in the community.

Wašiw Wagayay Mangal opened in early 1997, but its roots go back three years earlier. In 1994, a potluck held in Dresslerville to see if anyone was interested in language revival yielded a large turnout of interested community members. This convinced a committed core of activists, educators, and native speakers to do something about the language shift occurring in their community. This core became involved in the wider language revitalization movement and came under the mentorship of Darryl Kipp from the Blackfoot Piegan Institute as well as Pila and Koanoi Wilson from Aha Punana Leo—all well known figures in the language revitalization field. The school was modeled after the very successful Hawaiian and Piegan immersion schools. The school instructed young Wašišiw in the “normal” curriculum they would have received in public school as well as local geography, seasonal transhumance, and Wašišiw history. The
most important aspect was that all instruction was given in Wašiw Wagayay (L. Smith-Fillmore, personal communication, April 27, 2009).

Despite extensive outreach in the community and the commitment of the teachers, elders, and students’ families, the school held a contentious position in the community. By some accounts (L. Smith-Fillmore, personal communication, April 27, 2009), there was miscommunication between those families involved in the school and the rest of the community. This miscommunication resulted in misconceptions of the school and younger non-speakers tended to disapprove of the school and any elders involved. In addition, the school was not immune to the social problems that affected the community as a whole. Alcoholism and substance abuse continued to affect the lives of those involved and this created tension both inside and outside the school. Unfortunately, around 2000, tribal politics and “Washoe factionalism” began to affect the school, which caused some of the people who had been the main force behind it to leave. While the school continued to exist, it stopped being a true immersion school. Later, due to mismanagement it ran out of funds, lost credibility and eventually closed (L. Smith-Fillmore, personal communication, April 27, 2009).

Even today, several years after the school closed, feelings about the school are mixed. Some people view it as a good thing and are disappointed that it is no longer around. Others are more ambivalent about the role the school played in the community and will often point out the shortcomings of the school, such as the previously mentioned infighting. Since I am not part of the community and was not present when the all of these events transpired, I am not in the position to evaluate the different opinions. However, from what I have observed, I believe that most of the disapproval does not
stem from the immersion program itself. In fact, almost everyone interviewed agreed that immersion was the best way to bring the language back. The ambivalence towards the school seems to be directed at the people who were involved with it, rather than the school itself. For example, some of the leadership positions were filled by non-Wašišiw and some people in the community did not agree with that. Ultimately, the division in the community that caused problems for the school in the beginning continues to affect the way the school is viewed to this day.

While the immersion school no longer exists, there continues to be language classes offered in various Wašišiw communities. As mentioned earlier, my first exposure to Wašiw Wagayay was in the community language classes offered at the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony (RSIC) and this research focuses on the community classes in Dresslerville. Classes are conducted in English and generally consist of Wašiw Wagayay vocabulary lessons. In contrast to the RSIC community, Dresslerville is solely a Wašišiw community, and the class, as a whole, has had more experience with Wašiw Wagayay compared to its RSIC counterparts. In fact, there are members of the class that can carry on conversations in Wašiw Wagayay. Because of the higher level of language proficiency, the Dresslerville class is able to have more in depth instruction in the language. Recent lessons used a vocabulary list to create sentences, which allowed the students to make up their own sentences rather than just memorize phrases on a paper. This method allows the class to experiment and see how the language is structured rather than just memorize disconnected words. However, none of the people interviewed believed that these classes would lead to fluency in the language. The classes simply did not meet often enough and perhaps even more importantly there are few people outside
the class that the students could talk to, which means that class time is often the only time that some students use the language. While these classes are not likely to revitalize the language, they do expose the students to Wašiw Wagayay and provide an opportunity for them to learn about their culture. Thus, the language classes play an important role in the revitalization of the language and culture.

The Language

The first goal of this research was to understand what role Wašiw Wagayay played in individuals’ lives and in the community as a whole. In order to reach this understanding I asked rather broad questions such as, “Why is Wašiw Wagayay important?” or “What is the significance of whether you speak the language or not?” As the interview process progressed, it became apparent that the answers to these questions were not simple nor did they deal solely with the language. Those interviewed talked about their language in a way that was quite different to the way that linguists and anthropologists generally talk about language. There was no academic objectification of the language. Instead, they described their language as part of the social fabric of the community, albeit a currently neglected part of that fabric. In order to understand this issue it is best to let the community members speak for themselves.

“Our language is what makes us Washo” – D. Wyatt

Those interviewed expressed opinions that revealed just how important the language is. The quote above is from this longer excerpt, “You can’t say you’re a Washo Indian, if you can’t speak your language. Our language is what makes us Washo,” (D. Wyatt, personal communication, January 28, 2010). Another interviewee said, “I know how important it [Wašiw Wagayay] is, because that’s our identity as Washo people,” (L.
Shoshone, personal communication, February 18, 2010). Later, I asked this same interviewee what would happen to future generations of Wašišiw who might not speak the language. The interviewee responded, “They’re gonna be white! What are they gonna have? They’re not gonna be a tribe.” (L. Shoshone, personal communication, February 18, 2010). The teacher of the class, a fluent elder, framed this connection between the language and Wašišiw identity somewhat differently. He said that the main problem is that the younger generations do not know how important the language is and, “They don’t know who they are, where they come from…” (S. James, personal communication, February 25, 2010). Other participants in the interviews expressed views similar to these, even the non-fluent speakers. In fact, those who had very little speaking ability in the language still acknowledged how important the language was, both for the community and for a Wašišiw identity.

These views are similar to indigenous perspectives found in other research. As mentioned earlier, England (2003) claims that Mayans tend to see other members of their community who do not speak the language as not fully Mayan and somehow disconnected from the true community. Those interviewed expressed the opinion that the Wašišiw who did not speak or respect the language were not as connected to the community as those who did. These non-speakers are Wašišiw in the sense that they live in the community, but they have been co-opted by the “white man’s” world and no longer understand who they are and what their proper role in the community is. In addition, even though some of those who attend the language class do not speak the language fluently, they still believed that the language played an important role in the community and that it was important to speak the language. McCarty, Romero-Little, Warhol, and
Zepeda (2009) and Nicholas (2009) examine similar situations in which indigenous youth often express respect and belief in the importance of their heritage language despite their inability to speak that language.

“You Cannot Separate Our Language, Our Land, Our Traditional Ways” – M. Smokey

Wašiw Wagayay is intimately tied to the land and the culture. The quote that gives this section its title best expresses this point. One interviewee said, “How can we say we’re Washo people, if we can’t go out into these different places and talk our language to these things that were once here?” (D. Wyatt, personal communication, January 28, 2010). Another interviewee said, “It’s important for the families to just get back on to the land…a lot of people don’t even touch the earth, they’re on pavement,” (M. Smokey, personal communication, January 28, 2010). Yet another said, “You have to keep your ties with your home, you know, [be]cause this is where that language is at, right here,” (S. James, personal communication, February 25, 2010). Essentially, those Wašišiw involved in the language program see two different kinds of people in the community. There are those that are caught up in mainstream society and are far away from the land, language, and culture and then, there are those who speak the language or still value the language and are more connected to the land and culture. Those interviewed perceived special connection that exists between the language and the land. The language belongs to the land; it was created to be spoken on that land. Wašiw Wagayay is inseparable from the land and the land is inseparable from the language.

Thus, it appears that Wašiw Wagayay plays an essential role in the Wašišiw identity. Language is not the sole marker of this identity, but it is one of the fundamental
aspects, which, along with the land and culture, define what it means to be Wašíšiw. This identity, just like any other identity, is not static; Wašíšiw identity exists on a spectrum. Someone who has respect for the land and knowledge of the language and culture is well grounded and truly connected to the Wašíšiw community. The Wašíšiw in the language class see these people as living life in a healthy way that is closer to the ideal Wašíšiw identity. Those Wašíšiw who are caught up in dominant society, or who have been “mainstreamed,” and no longer speak or care about the language or the land are still generally considered Wašíšiw, but they are seen as compromised or unhealthy in the eyes of those involved in the language program. The fact that knowledge and respect for the language can distinguish between an unhealthy and healthy Wašíšiw identity in the minds of those involved in the language program suggests that language can play a significant role in the formation of identity.

The Problem

In order to meet the second goal of this research, to learn what the Wašíšiw involved in the language program see as essential to the revitalization of the language, I first needed to learn what the problem facing the language was, as seen by those interviewed. Over the course of the interviews, it became clear that language shift in Dresslerville is, primarily, a social issue. If language revitalization efforts are to be successful than they have to examine the social environment in which the language exists. As mentioned earlier, the GIDS—Grade Intergenerational Disruption Scales—concept introduced by Fishman (1991) is designed to include wider social realities in language revitalization strategies. This scale focuses on the macro level and addresses the position of the speech community in society as a whole (Fishman, 1991). While this
approach is very useful, it is still rather language-centered, and tends to focus only on factors that directly affect the language. In the conversations with the members of the language class, it became apparent that the more immediate concerns were those of a social nature, such as alcoholism, sexual abuse, poverty, and apathy. The interviewees were concerned with a larger social and cultural weakening that was occurring in the community and, according to them, language shift is just one of the outcomes of this wider weakening.

“They weren’t taught those natural ways of being a family” – M. Smokey

I asked myself, “What is the source of this weakening?” but before I could pose this question to the interview group, I had my answer: boarding schools, not simply boarding schools, but rather, the cultural dislocation and forced assimilation that boarding schools represent. The boarding schools had affected all of those interviewed either directly or indirectly. By all accounts, these schools—both those in the eastern United States and the Stuart boarding school near Carson City—did irreparable damage to family life and cultural continuity in the Dresslerville community. The title quote above refers to the fact that forced removal of children broke families apart. Even when the children returned, these families were often not able to heal fully. Children felt abandoned and alienated while parents felt powerless and defeated. As one of the interviewees put it, “Your whole world gets shaken and you have no control…and where do you fit in at that point?” (M. Smokey, personal communication, February 4, 2010). Generations of children were raised away from the language. In the schools, teachers and other authority figures punished the children if they spoke their language and taught the children to feel ashamed of their indigenous heritage. One of the interviewees told me a story about how
her grandmother would be locked in a cage in the kitchen for “acting out,” which more often meant that her grandmother had been caught using her native language. This systematic dislocation, disempowerment, and forced enculturation made it extremely difficult for the community to pass the language on to future generations. Not only was the language actively attacked, but the Wašišiw were also relegated to margins of dominant society and many had no option but to learn a new language and try to survive as best they could. One interviewee said, “We were dependent upon each other to being dependent upon something that was completely foreign.” (M. Smokey, personal communication, February 4, 2010).

This process of disempowerment finds a close parallel in the experiences of Celtic language speakers (Nettle and Romaine, 2000). Over the course of several centuries, Celtic communities were relegated to the margins of society and in that socially and economically disempowered state it was very unlikely that the Celtic languages would continue to be passed down to the children. With little resources at their disposal, many Celtic families had no option but to learn and in turn teach their children the dominant language—English or French (Nettle and Romaine, 2000). Finally in the 20th and 21st century, there were deliberate efforts by both the British and French governments to erase non-national languages and now, while, some Celtic languages are still spoken, the numbers of speakers are a fraction of what they used to be and many languages have all together disappeared (Nettle and Romaine, 2000).

“The people are literally sick” – J. Martin

This process of disempowerment continues to this day. In response to this disempowerment many Wašišiw became “numb” and problems like alcoholism and
sexual abuse became more and more common in the community. Many of those interviewed saw the community as dysfunctional or as the quote above says, “sick.” Many of those interviewed saw this “sickness” as both social and spiritual. An oft-discussed example of the social aspect of this sickness was greed. The class said that the love of money caused many problems in the community. This drive for money led to a break in the community, and people are now self-centered rather than community-centered. The question is no longer what one can do for their tribe, instead, it has become, “What will my tribe do for me?” (M. Smokey, personal communication, February 4, 2010). Greed in the community is a product of “mainstreamed” Wašišiw who are too caught up in dominant society, which is perceived as valuing individualism and economic success over the well-being of society. This has caused divisions in the community that have greatly weakened it. The vicious cycles of alcoholism and sexual abuse are also symptoms of this sickness. These issues greatly damage the community because they create a cycle in which victims become perpetrators and because the community has not been able to break the cycle, these problems never go away. In the opinion of many of those interviewed, all of this leads to a lack of respect and understanding among many Wašišiw. As one interviewee put it, “They just have no priority of being true native at all, [be]cause they don’t understand what it means to be native anymore,” (J. Martin, personal communication, February 4, 2010).

“They’re looking at the tribe as a business instead of as a family.” – D. Wyatt

The final issue that became very apparent was that those interviewed saw the tribal leadership as unconcerned and unsupportive of the language and efforts to revitalize it. The interviewees repeated the sentiment expressed in the title quote several
times. They view the tribal leadership as co-opted by the “white man’s” world, and now the leadership only cares about money rather than the preservation of their culture and language. One interviewee said, “It’s not a business; it’s a tribe. All of us, we’re all one, but, you know, they’ve got that white mentality and they don’t look at it as such and that’s why our language has been pushed off to the side….” (D. Wyatt, personal communication, February 18, 2010). It appears that the community leadership gives lip service to the importance of the language and the efforts to keep it around, but they have yet to back up their words with action. One interviewee said about the leadership, “They say, ‘Oh, we’re gonna speak Washo in fifteen years,’ but yet you don’t see any of them in class,” (L. Shoshone, personal communication, February 18, 2010). Because of this lack of support, the language program does not receive enough funds and many of those involved feel like they are on their own. If the tribal leadership is not fully supportive of language revitalization, then it is very difficult for the community to become supportive of and interested in the language.

The Solution

The challenges faced by both the community and the language are very clear, but unfortunately, the ways to face these challenges remain unclear. Not many of those interviewed could easily answer how to address these problems. The reason why an answer is not easy to come up with is that the problem is very large and very complex. There is no specific strategy that, by itself, can address language shift in the community. Over the course of the conversations, immersion occasionally came up. One interviewee, in reference to the younger Wašišiw generations, said, “We need to sit down and talk to them only in Indian,” (D. Wyatt, personal communication, February 25, 2010). There is
also some discussion about starting the immersion school again. Those involved in this
discussion were involved with the original immersion school, but, for the most part, are
not involved in the current language program. They have come up with goals for the
future school. Many of these goals aim to address the problems that the original school
faced. For example, one idea is that families with children in the immersion school
would be required to commit a certain amount of weekly volunteer hours to the school as
well as attend weekly language classes, (L. Fillmore-Smith, personal communication,
February 15, 2010). Another goal is to bring together young language advocates so that
they will be active participants in the formation of the school (L. Fillmore-Smith,
personal communication, February 15, 2010). McCarty et al. (2009) advocate this same
approach and point to the key role that the younger generations play in language
revitalization. The incorporation of these generations into the actual planning of
language revitalization can lead to more significant and effective programs (McCarty et
al., 2009). However, the aforementioned plans aside, the majority of those interviewed
did not see immersion as a practical or realistic choice. Tribal politics and lack of
support made many of those interviewed see immersion as unattainable.

Some of those interviewed expressed doubt that any language program could
bring back the language at this time. The rationale behind this view is that not enough of
the current community is concerned about the language and there is not much time left
for the fluent elders. Some interviewees thought that preserving and recording the
language should be a priority. This way, if the community does turn around in the future
and more people want to learn the language, at least there will be the necessary resources.
Unfortunately, it has often been a struggle for the Wašišiw to get access to materials from
research conducted in their communities. Thus, future recording and documentation of the language will likely be done solely by tribal members, or, at least with less outside involvement, to insure that the tribe retains control over these materials. However, some important questions remained unanswered: What will be recorded? How will it be recorded? What will be done to insure that these materials will be useful in the future?

“It’s not just about saying the words.” – M. Smokey

While it was difficult to find a clear solution to the challenges faced by the community, one important aspect of language revitalization was made abundantly clear in the interviews; “It’s not just about saying the words,” (M. Smokey, personal communication, February 4, 2010). Wašiw Wagayay is much more than a medium of communication for those involved in the language program; it is an integral part of the social fabric of the community. This social fabric also includes the land, culture and knowledge that are all part of the community. Currently, the entire social fabric is weak and struggles to remain relevant in the lives of many Wašišiw. Thus, language revitalization cannot only seek to bring back the words, but it also has to focus on the other aspects of the social fabric; it needs to be “holistic” in its approach, (M. Smokey, personal communication, February 4, 2010). A holistic approach to language revitalization would promote a Wašišiw identity and lifestyle centered on language, land, culture and community.

A holistic approach is a complicated task though, because, as one interviewee mentioned, “It’s not really a thing that can be taught…You can’t just be told how to think, or how to feel, or how to be.” (J. Martin, personal communication, February 4, 2010). This lifestyle cannot be taught; it can be fostered in a healthy community that has
a strong respect for the land and language, deep roots in its culture, and a strong connection between the members of the community. According to the Wašíšiw who were interviewed, all of these things are absent in the greater part of the Dresslerville community. Thus, at least in my mid, the first priority is to get the community healthy again. “How does one heal a community?” In a way, this question has already been answered. As discussed many times over the course of the interviews, language shift is not a linguistic issue, it is a social issue brought on by the marginalization suffered by the Wašíšiw. As Weenie (2000) points out, “It [colonialism] supplanted the existing cultures of tribal peoples, and it brought irrevocable change. We have been naïve in thinking that we had simply to revive our languages and cultures. The problem is all-pervasive,” (p. 69). Language shift is a symptom of the larger social and cultural weakening the community has experienced due to their marginalization by dominant society. As Noam Chomsky said, “Questions of language are basically questions of power,” (as cited in May, 2004, p.37). To address language shift is to address this marginalization and its lasting effects. This, of course, leads to more questions and great challenges, because the effects of colonialism are deep rooted and difficult to understand, let alone address. However, at least in the case of the Wašíšiw community, it is clear that language revitalization needs to be that same thing as community revitalization.

Results

In conclusion, this research has achieved its two major goals: a) to understand better the importance, position, and purpose of Wašiw Wagayay in the community, as seen by the Wašíšiw involved in language revitalization and b) to learn what those involved see as essential to the revitalization of the language. This research has found
that Wašiw Wagayay is a very important aspect of identity for those Wašišiw involved in the language program. The language plays an integral role, along with the land and culture, in the social fabric of the community. In fact, in the minds of many of those interviewed, the language, land, and culture are interconnected and the loss of one is a loss to all. The Wašišiw identity is seen as existing on a kind of spectrum, where those who have respect and knowledge of the language, land, and culture are seen as closer to an ideal and healthier Wašišiw identity. The Wašišiw in the language class still regard other community members who do not have this respect or knowledge as Wašišiw, but they are seen as “lost” due to their involvement in mainstream culture and society.

Those interviewed see language shift as a social problem more so than a linguistic issue. The root of all these problems lies in the cultural dislocation and disempowerment that has occurred because of white settlement in the area and forced assimilation by the U.S. government. These processes have left the Dresslerville community social weakened and “numb.” This situation leads to social ills such as alcoholism, substance abuse, broken families, poverty, and language shift. Because the cause of language shift is rooted in this deeper and far-reaching social problem, those interviewed were not able to come up with any specific strategies that would ultimately reverse the language shift in the community. However, because the problem is so far-reaching, it was clear to those interviewed that, whatever form it took, language revitalization needed to be “holistic.” Ultimately, language revitalization efforts need to focus on and try to address challenges that the language and the community as a whole face. Thus, in Dresslerville, language revitalization entails a great deal of community revitalization as well.
Discussion

The question remains, “How does one revitalize a community?” Since this question was left unanswered in the interviews, I will propose one possible approach that could lead to community revitalization. During the course of the conversations, issues surrounding the environment came up quite often. These issues included pollution, misuse of natural resources, and instances of environmental injustices in which huge corporations exploit indigenous people and their lands. In addition, as mentioned earlier, there is an extremely strong perceived connection between the language and the land. One interviewee said, “Land and language and our teachings, all of these are all working together,” (M. Smokey, personal communication, February 4, 2010). I propose that because of this intrinsic link between the language and land and this widespread concern for the environment shared by those in the language program, perhaps it would be beneficial for language revitalization efforts in Dresslerville to incorporate these environmental concerns into their larger revitalization project.

As Mühlhäusler (2001) points out, indigenous knowledge, which is intimately tied to language, provides a unique perspective and many insights on environmental sustainability. Thus, because of indigenous language revitalization’s connection to indigenous language and indigenous knowledge, revitalization efforts can play an important role in the wider movement for environmental sustainability. Involvement in this wider movement could have several positive effects on both the language and the community. The language stands to gain prestige because it contains this valuable information and the language’s relevance will increase not only in the eyes of dominant society, but also in the eyes of the indigenous community members themselves. It was
often said in the interviews that the younger generation did not value the language or understand how important it was, because they were too caught up in dominant society and concerned with the world outside the community. If the language and indigenous knowledge of their community becomes relevant in dominant society though, then it makes sense that the younger generations may recognize the value of their language and heritage. The language will most likely be used more because of the knowledge to which it is linked and more people will see the importance of speaking the language and will want to learn it as well.

The community could directly benefit from environmental sustainability in several different ways. First, if the community decides to implement sustainable energy technology, such as solar panel or wind turbines, then the installation, servicing and monitoring of these technologies could create many jobs in the community. This increase in jobs could lead to an increase of wealth, which could help to fight the poverty found in the community today. In addition, a move to make the community “green” is likely to increase its prestige in the eyes of the dominant community, which has come to support and approve of efforts to be more environmentally friendly. Ultimately, through involvement in this environmental sustainability movement, the community can fight against the environmental degradation and injustices that have been part of the marginalization it has experienced.

Perhaps the most appealing aspect of this environmental approach is that it allows the Wašišiw to fill a role that they have performed for millennia. Before any non-indigenous peoples moved into this area, the Wašišiw lived off and respected the land. They practiced a sustainable lifestyle and they learned how to gain as much benefit from
the land without harming it. Working towards modern day sustainability allows the Wašišiw to fulfill a traditional Wašišiw role in a modern world that is often seen at odds with a true Wašišiw lifestyle. By taking on this new role, the Wašišiw could prove that only their unique language and knowledge but indigenous language and knowledge in general, are still very relevant in today’s modern world. The beauty of this approach is that it is through the language and the knowledge linked to it that the Wašišiw can work to heal their community and create an environment in which Wašiw Wagayay can flourish again.

**Final Thoughts**

This research is not groundbreaking. The truth is, as mentioned earlier, other authors have said that language revitalization efforts, in order to be successful, need to be shaped and directed by people in the community and may need to address other social and cultural concerns as well (see Crystal, 2000; Nettle & Romaine, 2000; Hinton, 2002). However, language revitalization does not need groundbreaking research at this point. It needs is dialogue. This is why this research is relevant; it engages in a dialogue about language and language revitalization with an indigenous community. An indigenous perspective offers insights that are extremely valuable to language revitalization and it is time that academic discourse brings these perspectives to the table. In fact, it is time that the different perspectives are incorporated into the larger movement to stop not only language shift, but also the marginalizing processes that lead to language shift. I believe that this incorporation of perspectives can only stem from an open dialogue about these issues. Most importantly, I believe that this open dialogue needs to start in actual indigenous communities in the process of fighting language shift.
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