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## LANGUAGE AS IDEOLOGY: THE AMERICAN INDIAN CASE

Frances Svensson

Grammarians are often harbingers of revolution. This statement (by Karl Deutsch) clearly points to the critical role of language in the definition of national consciousness which precedes revolutionary mobilization.<sup>1</sup> As communities become self-conscious about their ethnic identity and preoccupied with delineating their boundaries as groups from those of others, the role of their native languages frequently assumes a hitherto unprecedented importance. What was once taken for granted as a natural fact of life—the existence of a particular linguistic idiom differing either subtly or vastly from all others—suddenly becomes a unique, identifying hallmark of the community's existence. At the moment when the use of a language becomes self-conscious, it becomes an element of ideology. When that self-consciousness is compounded by political, economic, and social overtones of "oppression"—such as occur, for example, in colonial situations—then language serves, often along with race, as a major determinant of the boundaries between groups and therefore of who gets what, where, when, and how. Language, and race, may then become interchangeable and explosively political in their implications.

Language, in other words, while ordinarily merely seen as a part of ethnic identity, may become a critical catalyst in the emergence of ethnic ideology. Identity, in this sense, refers primarily to an individual's own emotional stance with or apart from his group, while ideology refers to the individual's affective image of the qualities of his own and other groups.<sup>2</sup> The "content" of language is recognized as embodying these qualities. Thus, at this point, language can no longer be taken for granted as an indifferent tool of communication; it becomes a tool of self-awareness and community identification, and a vehicle for the more-or-less conscious reexamination of tradition and linguistic roots. It is called upon to fulfill new functions, sometimes adaptive vis-à-vis other cultures, sometimes adversary, usually both. This process extends not only to the "borrowing" of linguistic terms, or the modification of usages,

operations of secondary importance politically speaking. Rather, language comes to carry with it the symbolic force of ethnic identity itself; it comes to signify a mobilizational force exceeding even that of race, for it permits the organization even of those who are of mixed racial descent but of relatively "pure" (monolingual) cultural identity—or who aspire to the same. In the politicized interactions of "colonialized" (politically suppressed) peoples with their politically (and/or economically) dominant neighbors, there lie many clues to the validity of this principle—for example, in the suppression of "minority" linguistic groups, the enforced or artificially stimulated substitution of one language for another, the control of education (and hence of linguistic continuity) by the dominant group, etc. In this context, the importance of language to the subject community's identity is apparent to all concerned, whatever the chances of resistance to the pattern of linguistic—and therefore ultimately cultural and political—resistance. If the subject group retains the viability to mobilize for resistance at this point, language stands out as a key point of attack on the trend toward ethnic extinction. Thus does the grammarian, broadly conceived, emerge as the existential catalyst of the revolution. And language becomes ideology.

### Ideology

The functions of ideology, as Daniel Bell suggests, are: "to simplify ideas, to establish a claim to truth, and to demand a commitment to a commitment to action".<sup>3</sup> Language can act as ideology in this sense in two possible ways: (i) as a major source and embodiment of a group's world view, sanctioning certain forms of behavior and interpretation; and (ii) as a symbol of group identity, virtually commanding a group action. This latter function of ideology is all too often neglected by writers on the topic of ideology, at high cost in theoretical adequacy. For when language comes to stand for group identity, to express ethnicity in its most pure form, to act as the core of a nativistic revival of tradition, to serve as a primary barrier against the blurring of lines of identification, then language has come to *be* an ideology. Its substantive content—any particular directive to action or perception inherent in the linguistic structure itself—becomes a secondary concern at best, and perhaps even irrelevant. It is the idea of linguistic uniqueness which becomes paramount, a social binding force of great potency. This may be true even when the original "native" language is no longer widely spoken, when many

adherents to the nationalistic cause must be attracted by the symbol of language rather than by its application, or when the ideology must mobilize large numbers of people sharing a status of linguistic and cultural (and perhaps racial) minority, but do not share the same specific language or culture. This is precisely the case with the American Indian communities of North America. The historical development of the politically, socially, economically, and racially scattered and factionalized Indian communities has led to a situation in which the development of such a symbolic ideology of broad appeal is an absolutely necessary first step in the emergence of a substantive ideology. How this has in fact occurred is the subject of this paper.

This model of language as ideology is, as all models, a simplification of complex realities. The case of American Indians eloquently supports this model, but of course departs from it on occasion. Indeed, the situations throughout history in which language and ethnic identity have played a crucial role in the emergence of a political program are so numerous and so diverse that generalizations are inevitably risky. However, the existence of an American Indian case which is now beginning to be seen in a new light may itself constitute a novel suggestion to many observers of the contemporary linguistic and political scene. Yet language is coming to play an increasingly important role in the mobilization of American Indians around the twin goals of political self-determination and cultural autonomy. Realistic or not in the eyes of the world at large, these goals constitute the core of a re-emergence of Indian presence in American society, and have already resulted in some potentially major re-structurings in such areas as Indian education, tribal politics, social patterns, etc. More than racial purity, in an age when perhaps the majority of Indian people (defined by tribal membership where blood quantum is officially calculated, as well as by self-definition) are of some degree of "mixed" (that is, non-Indian) descent, language is becoming a hallmark of the truly Indian. That a majority of Indians no longer speak their tribal languages, far from rendering this assertion improbable, makes the political importance of language in the context of mobilization all the more apparent. The re-emergence of language as a primary concern of politically-conscious Indian people is a recent, and to some extent still an embryonic, movement. But already it has effected changes within both the "traditional" (Indian-speaking) and

partially assimilated, often urban Indian populations, reorienting them towards "Indian" language as a relatively simple, clear-cut, highly symbolic issue of profound emotional and political implication.<sup>4</sup> As a strategy of mobilization, language has enormous potential (witness India) and enormous flexibility.

At the time of European contact with aboriginal North America, there were something in excess of 300 languages spoken on the continent, grouped into several (estimates vary according to classification systems) major "families." The decimation of the Indian population (for which again estimates vary from  $\frac{1}{2}$  to more than  $\frac{3}{4}$ ) through disease, warfare, campaigns of extermination (e.g., in California), etc. over some 350 years necessarily had profound impact on the survival of languages. In fact, a number of languages simply vanished with their populations, either through literal extinction or through the merging of remnant populations into other linguistic groups (some Indian-speaking, some not). This "natural" process of biological and military imperialism vis-à-vis Indian populations was, however, supplemented by a conscious policy of cultural and linguistic imperialism. It was never enough that Indian peoples were dispossessed of their birthright in land, in resources, in freedom and self-determination. Over and above these losses, Indians were expected to sustain the loss of their very identity as Indians, their culture and of course their languages. It has been noted that: "It was the Indian's great misfortune to be conquered by a people intolerant of cultural diversity."<sup>5</sup> As is so often the case, cultural imperialism as a policy reflected an apparently sincere conviction on the part of American government and society that the European tradition constituted a more advanced, a more felicitous, an altogether more desirable style of life than that of the various Indian tribes. Indeed, the implicit—and sometimes explicit—assumption was usually made that anyone, even a savage, given an acquaintance with the advantages of "civilized" life, would of course choose the latter as his preference. This, it might be added, was in spite of the curious fact that there are many instances of white captives of the Indians refusing to be repatriated to their white civilization, while there are virtually no examples of Indian captives voluntarily choosing white society.

It was early discovered that language formed a major barrier to the propagation of the benefits of white society, and in addition that the

retention of Indian language (and all Indian languages tended to be lumped together as one in white eyes) generally mitigated against successful "assimilation" of Indians into American society. Therefore a conscious policy of reducing Indian languages to marginal status was entered into. The primary vehicle of this policy after the Indian wars, when Indian populations on reservations were under the total control of the U.S. government, was education.

Although there were relatively small-scale efforts at developing Indian education programs prior to the end of the 19th century, the major thrust in the field dates from that period. A number of schools were established by the government through the Bureau of Indian Affairs to provide education for Indian students. Obviously, this was to be "American"—that is, non-Indian—education, oriented toward the assimilation of the Indian population into the American cultural mainstream. One of the first steps in this educational molding (indoctrination is hardly too strong a term) was of course the introduction of the English language as the primary medium of communication. Indeed, language became the primary tool in the process of "breaking down" the Indian student preparatory to his intensive exposure to American ways. First, Indian students from many linguistic groups, often mutually unintelligible, were thrust together in boarding schools hundreds, even thousands of miles from their homes and linguistic communities. Often, as a conscious policy, students speaking the same languages were separated from one another, effectively cut off from communication with the world in a literal sense. Then, in order to force more rapid substitution of English for the tribal languages, students were punished—often physically—for use of their native languages. The literature<sup>6</sup> contains many references to such abuses as whipping, locking students in closets, assigning heavy work tasks, denying food or rest as "sanctions" against the use of native language. When it is remembered that these penalties were being administered to students of as little as five or six years of age, and that they often persisted without respite for periods of as long as 6 or more years during which the student might have little or no contact with his family and community, it is no wonder that many of the "products" (or victims?) of Indian education returned to their communities hardly able to communicate in their native languages and psychologically undisposed to do so. Needless to say, the content of

the education thus pressed upon its Indian subjects reinforced the "subtle" psychological message of the process itself—Indian languages were held to be primitive, animal-like, inferior to European languages, and totally inadequate to the needs of civilization. Long before the Whorf hypothesis was formulated, white educators operated on the assumption that language was the key to world view, and that so long as Indians retained their own languages, they could not possibly understand, let alone accept and use, the American alternative.

### **Educational Policies**

Policies such as these, in surprisingly unmodified form, persisted in the United States into the 1950's. Investigations by groups as disparate as the National Indian Council (a semi-militant organization of young, primarily reservation and rural Indians especially active in Oklahoma and the Southwest) and the U.S. Senate Special Subcommittee on Indian Education have chronicled the abuses of Indian education. Language has always figured centrally in both the educational program and the abuses to which it lent itself. A recent report notes that "of about 300 recognizably separate Indian languages and dialects still extant in the U.S., only roughly 40% have more than 100 speakers. In the case of about 55% of all these languages, the remaining speakers are of advanced age . . ."7 That even this many speakers survive after nearly a century of policies of suppression such as the above is a testimony not merely to the cultural tenacity of Indian people; it is also a testimony that, as the Senate report of 1969 points out, the record of performance in government-sponsored Indian education programs leads inevitably to "a major indictment of our failure."<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, while the program may have been a failure in preparing Indians for successful assimilation into American society, it has been altogether too successful at undermining the roots of Indian cultural autonomy—and nowhere more than in language use.

It is the experience of a great many Indians, particularly in the generations growing to maturity during the 1920's through 1950's, that the use of Indian language demanded too high a price psychologically and socially in the school system, and in effect they opted out—often refusing to speak Indian languages themselves or to teach their children. As was remarked of one such woman: "She still speaks her native language with older members of her family, but memories

of her embarrassment in school made her determined never to teach her own eight children their Indian tongue."<sup>9</sup> In addition, other factors have conspired against the persistence of Indian languages. For example, more and more Indians during the past 50 years or so have married either out of their tribe (and into other linguistic groups) or into non-Indian populations (primarily white); in both cases, English tends to become the medium of communication. Perhaps even more important in recent years (especially since 1951 and the emergence of the Bureau of Indian Affairs' urban-oriented Relocation Program, more recently called Employment Assistance) has been the migration of Indian people into urban areas where dispersal of Indian population (there do not tend to be Indian ghettos, for a variety of reasons), the intermixture in urban Indian social and cultural programs of multiracial populations, the absence of any Indian orientation in education, etc. all militate against any retention of Indian languages, certainly among younger people.

Conscious educational policies reaching into the last decade, plus sociological pressures, have tended then to reinforce a movement away from Indian languages in ways perhaps peculiar to "internal colonies" almost entirely subject to political and social manipulation by dominant populations. The awareness among Indian parents, carefully nurtured by official and unofficial agencies (including the pervasive Christian missionary programs), that retention of Indian language might well prove a social and economic handicap, has led in some cases to a parental resistance; these parents suspect the introduction of programs designed to utilize Indian languages on those rare occasions when such alternatives have been allowed to surface. At the same time, those who advocated retention, and indeed expansion, of Indian languages were often handicapped by the artificially-imposed "freeze" on their natural development. Thus, many Indian languages have no developed orthography, existing not merely in cultural but also increasingly in generational isolation. For those languages developed in written form, usually by missionaries, no standardization has existed with respect to form, and contradictions in interpretation often remain unreconciled. Although among some tribal groups, such as the Navajo, as many as 40% of the 120,000+ population were functionally illiterate in English as recently as 1970, virtually no written materials exist in the native language (and actually Navajo, with a

tribal newspaper and a handful of stories and grammars already in existence prior to the mid-1960's, is in probably the best condition of any U.S. Indian language for a "literary take-off"). Therefore, no vehicles have existed for the use of the language on an everyday basis in written form. This leaves many languages as the preserve of the elderly and those maximally unacculturated in the American way of life, a condition which in turn relegates the language to a position ever more inadequate to the task of interaction with the modern world. Vocabulary and conceptual development remain essentially frozen in an ethnological present far removed from the 1960's and 1970's, through no inherent deficiency of the language but through lack of use and natural development. The absence of educational programs utilizing Indian languages as an instructional vehicle, and the almost total lack of Indian teachers qualified to engage in such instruction, suggested as recently as the date of the Senate Subcommittee report (1969) that this state of affairs was not apt to change.

The period of the late 1960's and the early 1970's brought some startling changes to Indian affairs, however. The increasingly radical stance of some Indian groups in their confrontation with the U.S. government may have, in terms of sheer numbers, represented a minority movement (the wariness of many reservation Indians regarding such events as the Alcatraz occupation in the spring and summer of 1970 and the sit-in at the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C. in the fall of 1972 suggests that this was at least initially the case). However, these movements arose among Indian people, spoke to Indian causes with which increasingly large numbers of Indians in both reservation and urban areas could identify, and led to the emergence of a self-conscious Indian "ethnic ideology" of which the critical underpinning was the revival and revitalization of "lost" heritage, including, important Indian languages. As the Alcatraz Declaration stated: "We feel that if we are going to succeed, we must hold on to the old ways."<sup>10</sup> Language had, of course, persisted on the reservations, in spite of all linguistic oppression, to the point where: "The BIA estimates that 2/3 of children attending its schools do speak another language."<sup>11</sup> Among the larger concentrated Indian populations, such as the Navajo, Hopi, Pueblo, Sioux, Cherokee, and Apache (and the non-Indian Eskimo in Alaska), the majority of the population retained the language to a significant degree, albeit decreas-

ingly with each succeeding generation. A fighting chance for revival existed.

### Urban Indians

Urban Indians, at or close to a majority of the U.S. Indian population according to recent statistics, had on the whole lost the use of Indian language. Significantly, one of the first gestures in the reconciliation of the two populations, and in the emergence of the new Indian "ideology" of tradition, was a conscious emphasis on language among hitherto alienated urban Indian populations. Many of the emerging leaders of such groups as the American Indian Movement, some of whom had grown up away from the tribal community and without benefit of Indian language, have consciously sought out Indian language instruction. Indian students in the newly developing Indian Studies Programs at various universities and other educational institutions began demanding the inclusion of Indian languages in the curriculum—their own if possible (e.g., Ojibwa and Sioux at the University of Minnesota), a generally agreed upon substitute otherwise (e.g., Coast Salish at the more tribally heterogeneous University of Washington). Language has suddenly come to be perceived on the conscious level as the primary vehicle for the assertion of cultural identity.

Obviously, the deterioration of Indian languages as effective vehicles of mobilization was already far advanced at this time. Extraordinary measures were called for in order even to "save" the existing languages which remained viable in the early 1970's. And the primary battlefield would inevitably be the school system. Where Indian populations had previously been allowed to exercise virtually no control over educational programs, either on or off the reservation, they began to demand a voice not merely in the pro forma administration of the schools, but also in the hiring and firing of personnel and in the development of curricula. The Navajo tribe took the lead in developing an educational program based on bilingualism and on cultural heritage (at the Rough Rock Demonstration School and at Navajo Community College); other tribes and communities have demanded (and have begun) the same sort of program. New efforts were made to develop more written materials in Indian languages, especially Navajo (other tribes, eager to imitate the Navajo experiment, lacked the core of existing materials in their languages to push ahead as rapidly). The old people, the traditional bearers of tribal wisdom

—and of such vital adjuncts as language—emerged from an apparent obscurity (surely not so complete as outsiders might have imagined, given the degree of retention of language and culture which existed even in the face of officially-sanctioned repression) to assume important roles in tribally and communally directed programs of cultural enrichment, many based on language (instruction, recording, analysis, etc.). Young Indians at universities began to inquire about techniques of developing languages for curriculum purposes—alas! at a time when many linguistic departments had turned away from descriptive and historical linguistics in favor of the more esoteric pursuit of transformational grammars. Knowledge of an Indian language assumed considerable importance in establishing Indian identity, and, increasingly, its assertion constituted evidence of an essentially militant stance in Indian politics and in the confrontation with American society. Even the normally conservative National Council on Indian Opportunity, in its Statement of January 26, 1970, recognized the importance of the new concern with language by recommending funding to implement the Bilingual Education Act and suggesting "that courses in Indian languages, history, and culture be established in all Indian schools including those slated for transfer to state control. . . ."<sup>12</sup>

In slowly responding to the Indian demand for recognition, in society and particularly in the educational system, of the validity of Indian language and the Indian cultural heritage, American society has perceived the issues not surprisingly within its own cultural perspective. Thus, "Bilingual education is proposed not simply as a bridge to the past, but for its positive value in providing familiarity and skill in the handling of different cognitive systems. In a multi-national, multi-ethnic world, language is seen as a key to identify and protect against alienation and disorientation."<sup>13</sup> Clothed in the white rhetoric of newly resurgent cultural pluralism, Indian concern for language and heritage seems not only non-threatening, but indeed rather prosaic. From the Indian point of view, however, its implications are both far deeper and far broader. As one Indian remarked some years ago when confronted with the implications of official educational policy: "The Mesquakie language, our ways, our religion are interwoven into one. All are significant to our religion. With another language we cannot perform our religion."<sup>14</sup> In the concern for language there is a concern for

the whole tapestry of Indian culture. The retention of language is a commitment to the retention of culture. The revival of one is the revival of the other.

The resurgence of Indian culture, however, can only occur through conscious resistance to the forces of American society at large, for the thrust of that culture is toward homogenization, toward the reduction of cultural alternatives to their lowest common denominator. Resistance to the whole process of assimilation requires some carefully formulated resistance to its primary components, of which language is one. This is not to suggest that the Indian, insistent on the validity of his language and culture, necessarily attempts to block out 350 years of history, to turn back the clock as it were to the days of cultural purity (a spurious concept at best). Linguistic nationalism in this case doesn't even necessarily mean the total rejection of English, though it may well mean its subordination to a secondary, utilitarian role in internal Indian community life and in the interaction of one linguistic group with another. What it does mean is the re-assertion of a vital, politically self-conscious Indian population in the heart of America, carrying forward with new weapons the age-old struggle for survival on Indian terms in the modern world.

To refer to language as ideology is an exaggeration. Language does not, cannot, in and of itself, constitute a comprehensive ideological program. Yet its emergence as a primary vehicle for political mobilization represents both a natural and a widely recurring phenomenon, in the U.S. and elsewhere. And while it does not explicitly provide a political program, yet it shapes, explicates, and carries one. It represents a commitment to ethnicity as the key to mobilization for a particular group; it guides the formation of political statements along culturally distinct lines; it defines, in an otherwise blurred context, the boundaries of a group; it recalls the depth of cultural heritage by appealing to an almost atavistic emotional core in long-suppressed populations. Out of the self-conscious examination of the language, out of attempts to shape it to new purposes and designs, comes a new and deeper awareness of what the traditional identity consisted of—and what the future identity must grow out of. The grammarian who discovers the roots and paths and processes of language, who traces the evidence of change, who codifies and standardizes, lays the groundwork for greater change—

first linguistic and then political. Language becomes an active tool in re-shaping the world. And each language is the special tool of its users, and of them alone. Out of the ferment of linguistic awareness which is beginning to pervade the Indian community, the grammarian of the "revolution" may even now be emerging.

It is by no means necessary to take an entirely deterministic view of language to argue that its role is critical to the existence of alternative cultures and programs of action. To argue that the human condition in general is enriched by linguistic and cultural diversity is perhaps an act of faith, an existential predisposition. What is politically important in the American Indian case is simply, fundamentally, that Indian people have begun to identify their languages as the core of their culture, and as a key to their never-ending hope of and struggle for cultural autonomy. The battle has been fought in the schools, in the courts, in the halls of Congress where commitments on Indian affairs are made and broken, even in the churches—including one at a place called Wounded Knee. For a very long time there have been only two strategies open to Indians in American society linguistically and culturally: to assimilate into the American mainstream, or to die Indian. The struggle is again renewed for an alternative, the possibility of surviving, of living, on Indian terms. Language is the symbolic banner of this new American revolution!

## NOTES

1. See, for example: Karl Deutsch, "Social Mobilization and Political Development", *American Political Science Review*, 60 (Sept., 1961); also Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1966).
2. See: Tamotsu Shibutani and Kian Kwan, *Ethnic Stratification: A Comparative Approach* (New York: Macmillan, 1965); also Daniel Glaser, "Dynamics of Ethnic Identification", *American Sociological Review*, 23 (Feb., 1958).
3. Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology* (New York: The Free Press, 1962), p. 401.
4. See, for example: George Manuel and Michael Posluns, *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1974).
5. Edgar Cahn (ed.), *Our Brother's Keeper* (New York: New Community Press, 1969), p. 32.
6. See, for example: Wilcomb Washburn, *The American Indian and the United States*. 4 Vols. (New York: Random House, 1973).
7. Cahn, *Our Brother's Keeper*, p. 43.
8. Special (Senate) Subcommittee on Indian Education,

- Indian Education: A National Tragedy—A National Challenge* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969), p. ix.
9. Cahn, *Our Brother's Keeper*, p. 42.
  10. Alvin Josephy, *Red Power*, (New York: American Heritage Press, 1971), p. 200.
  11. Estelle Fuchs and Robert Havighurst, *To Live on This Earth* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1972), pp. 207-208.
  12. Josephy, *Red Power*, p. 210.
  13. Fuchs and Havighurst, *To Live on This Earth*, p. 209.
  14. *American Indian Reader: Education* (San Francisco: American Indian Historical Society Press, 1972), p. 102.