

Lakhota language and identity in Pine Ridge, SD

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Abstract

The Lakhota language, like many other Native American languages, faces a decline in young speakers. Can the culture exist independently of a language and can the people have the same feeling of belonging to it even after the language has been lost? The following study analyzes the relation of language and identity in a situation when most members of a tribe are no longer able to speak the language. It is based on interviews with 52 participants carried out on Pine Ridge Reservation. The study compares the opinions of speakers of the language with the non-speakers with the objective to find out what alternative signs of identity people use when they are not able to speak the language. The analysis focuses on the attitude to the language, it is trying to answer the question whether it is necessary to speak the language to be Lakhota and what do the people think about the eventuality that the language might disappear completely.

Introduction

Many linguistic studies concentrate on negotiation of one's identity through specific language usage in relation to identity and race (Bucholtz, 1995, 2006; Gaudio, 2001), language and gender (Bucholtz – Hall, 2004, 2005, 2006; Eckert – McConnell-Ginet, 2003; Silverstein, 1985) and from the point of view of language choice in multilingual environments (Gumperz, 1971; Kroskrity, 1993; Woolard, 1989, 2003; Casesnoves Ferrer – Sankoff, 2004; Pujolar, 2001). The following study of Lakhota language and identity examines to what extent the Lakhota people use their native language as a sign of identity in the situation where some people are still able to speak Lakhota while others are not.

The article focuses on the macro-level demographic category of identity, which is the feeling of belonging to a specific ethnic group, Lakhota or more specifically Oglala Lakhota on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Considering the difficult situation of the language that is described later in the article, and the fact that most people are not able to speak it fluently, I decided to compare the difference in the perception of language importance for establishing one's Lakhota identity between the

speakers and non-speakers of Lakshota. My expectation was that the speakers of the language would use this ability as a principal sign of their identity while the non-speakers would be looking for some other signs of belonging to the group. One objective of the study was to find out what role the Lakshota language plays in establishing Lakshota identity and what other signs of identity participants use when they are not able to speak the language. Another objective was to discover the general attitude to the language, to find out to what extent the tribe members realize the danger of losing their language completely and how they feel about this eventuality.

The importance that the tribe members attribute to their language determines to a great extent the possibilities of language conservation and revitalization. According to many sociolinguists, including Hinton and Hale (2001), Yamamoto (1998), Zimmermann (1999) and Šatava (2001), one of the most important factors in revitalization is the attitude of the users of the language. For this reason I decided to concentrate my analysis especially on the opinions of the non-speakers not only because they are in the majority, but also because they would have to exert greater effort to help the language to survive.

Language and Identity

At one of his lectures at the University of Colorado John Marshal III said that he found his Lakshota identity through the language. When being asked whether the children will be able to find their identity without the language he answered he thought so. My question is whether it is possible and what is the relation of language and identity.

Studies of this relation have a long tradition. Edward Sapir (2003, pp. 28-29) examines the relation of language, race and culture concluding that "races, languages and cultures are not distributed in parallel fashion" but at the same time he claims that "language does not exist apart from culture." The identity of a person or a group of people embraces all three of the concepts of language, culture and race. Norma Mendoza-Denton (2002, p. 475) defines identity in the following way:

The term 'identity' functions outside of linguistics to cover variety of concepts; for our purposes, we will understand identity to mean the active negotiation of an individual's relationship with larger social constructs, in so far as this negotiation is signaled through language and other semiotic means. Identity, then, is neither

attribute nor possession, but an individual and collective-level process of semiosis.

Similarly, the following analysis will use the concept of identity as a sense of belonging to a larger social construct, a tribe. This inner sense of belonging to a group is not easy to describe, as every individual shares certain parts of cultural and ethical values with others in the group but at the same time he/she also differs from the rest of the group. Identity is then a complex process of negotiation regarding the relation between an individual and the group. In spite of this, most people are ready to claim that they belong to a certain nation, ethnic group, clan or religious group and many would identify themselves with more than one. *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* makes the simplest definition of identity: "Your identity is who you are". This might seem rather unspecific, but in the following study the participants were asked about their identity and for this reason we have to take into account what the general public, not only the linguists who specialize in this field, understands under this term.

The contribution of language to one's identity can be basically observed on a scale with two extreme positions. One identifies language as essential sign of identity while the other sees the relation as more complicated and would be reluctant to make this simple equation.

Peter Burke (1993, p. 70) says that "One of the most important of the signs of collective identity is language. Speaking the same language, or variety of language, as someone else is a simple and effective way of indicating solidarity; speaking a different language or variety of language is an equally effective way of distinguishing oneself from other individuals or groups." Our specific use of a language can place us geographically, it can sometimes indicate our gender, and it can also indicate our membership in a certain socio-economic class. In everyday life we can see many stereotypes based on language use: an especially famous example was artistically presented by G. B. Shaw in his *Pygmalion*, but everyone, in fact, makes similar judgments on a daily basis. For this reason Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982, p. 7) claim that "social identity and ethnicity are in large part established and maintained through language."

The other position perceives the category of identity itself as somewhat more problematic. Richard Handler (1994, p. 29) argues that the concept of identity corresponds with a theory of culture where nations are imagined as natural objects or things in the real world with a unique identity that can be defined by reference to precise spatial, temporal and

cultural boundaries. For this reason he prefers to avoid the notion of identity completely as he claims that: "Groups do not have essential identities; indeed, they ought not to be defined as things at all. For any imaginable social group –defined in terms of nationality, class, locality, or gender– there is no definitive way to specify 'who we are', for 'who we are' is a communicative process that includes many voices and varying degrees of understanding and, importantly, misunderstanding" (Handler, 1994, p. 30). Even though this argument sounds reasonable most people do have this inner sense of belonging to some larger concept of nation, race or community. The people themselves simply feel their identity, they want to belong somewhere because this feeling gives them security of not being alone.

It seems that the relation of one's language and one's feeling of belonging to a particular group is rather complex and cannot be solved by a simple equation: language = identity, but on the other hand language plays an important role when we think of being members of a group. Detailed analysis of relation between language and identity was offered by Bucholtz and Hall (2005). According to these two linguists, this relation can be tracked on various levels. "Identities encompass (a) macro-level demographic categories; (b) local, ethnographically specific culture positions; and (c) temporary and interactionally specific stances and participant roles"(p. 592). Another claim that the same authors make is that "identities are relationally constructed through several, often overlapping, aspects of relationship between self and other" (p. 585). When we establish our identity we establish it as "belonging to certain group" or "being different." In fact, we usually establish our identity as belonging to a group and then we coin our own individual identity that differentiates us from the rest of it. Nevertheless, this is not a subject of this study as it concentrates on the first subset, macro-level demographic category, the one that Burke (1993) calls "collective identity".

Various studies also focus on the choice of language (Etxebarria, 2002; Kroskrity, 1993; Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986; Schaengold, 2004; Siguan, 2001; Woolard, 1989) demonstrating that: "The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a peoples' definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment" (Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986, p. 4). By using one language, dialect or variety instead of another, people establish their identity in relation to others, either as part of the group or as not being part of it. This is particularly frequent and important in multi-lingual environments like Catalonia (Woolard, 1989; Pujolar, 2001), Euskadi (Etxebarria, 2002) or

Navajo (Schaengold, 2004) however, it is only partly applicable on the case of Lakhota as some members of the tribe have the possibility of choice while others don't.

Lakhota language and history

The history of the Lakhota language parallels the history of the Lakhota Nation. The Sioux tribes migrated to the area of the Great Plains in the 17th and 18th centuries and until the beginning of 19th century they had only minimal contact with European culture. They were colonized in the second half of the 19th century (1868 – 1890). The milestones of the history were undoubtedly the Second Laramie Treaty of 1868 that established the boundaries of the Sioux reservation including the Black Hills, the victorious Battle of Little Big Horn in 1876 and the Massacre of Wounded Knee in 1890. After this event the Lakhota were settled in reservations in South Dakota, Montana and Minnesota. Nowadays most of them live on one of five reservations: Pine Ridge, Rosebud, Cheyenne River, Standing Rock and Lower Brule.

The end of nineteenth century was also the beginning of the assimilation process and the beginning of the language loss. The prestige and social status of Lakhota language was very low in this initial period of contact, but most destructive for the language and the Lakhota society and culture in general was probably the system of boarding schools that had already been used in other Indian reservations since the 1870's. It was prohibited to speak the native language in boarding schools, and the students were punished for using it. Many people who are 40 years old or older still recall their traumatic experience from these institutions: *"I was punished for speaking my language, and that was 1958, and corporal commissions still existed until 1973."* The situation started to change slowly after the 1968 Bilingual Education Act and the 1975 Lau Remedies, which provided funding for bilingual education. Nevertheless, the practices of boarding schools were still used in the 1970's. For the Lakhota, this means 80 years of attempts to eradicate the language. The result was that parents decided not to pass their native language on to the next generation; they chose not to teach their children Lakhota to save them from similar trauma. Many people who can speak the language today say they learned it from their grandparents, unless they are over 70. However, it was not only the boarding school system but the general environment that was not favorable to the language. One teacher summarized his experience in a simple sentence: *"When I was young, it*

was not cool to speak the Indian language, others were laughing at you and so I didn't want to speak it."

Since the late 1970's there have been attempts to maintain and revitalize the language but these attempts have not had much success yet. When we look at the Lakhota language now, we can hardly speak about a bilingual environment, and for this reason the situation is different than in the above mentioned studies of Woolard (1989) or Schaengold (2004). Presently most Lakhota people don't have the possibility of choice regarding the language as they can speak only English. It is rare to hear everyday conversation in Lakhota and even at the meetings of the Tribal Council the interventions in Lakhota are exceptional. A *Lakota Language Survey* undertaken by Oceti Wakan (2007) claims that 19% of people on the Pine Ridge Reservation speak Lakhota (1,649 out of 8,886 interviewed) but only 2% under the age of 6 and 3% of children and youth between 7 and 17 years of age. The average age of a fluent speaker is about 65 now, and for this reason we can expect that the pessimistic predictions about the language passing away may really become true in a few decades. In spite of some attempts to support the language at school, the situation of the language seems to be critical. Nettle and Romaine (2000, pp. 177-178) explain that: "Without transmission, there can be no long-term maintenance [...] When a language is no longer being passed on at home, efforts to promote it outside that domain – in church or school, for instance – usually end up being symbolic and ceremonial." The above mentioned facts make evident that Lakhota language is endangered even though there are still thousands of fluent speakers.

Methodology

The research reported here was carried out on the Pine Ridge Reservation, SD during 2007. The survey about the language and identity was part of a more extensive project about the attitude of the Lakhota to their language and about the situation of the language at schools. During this study 52 members of Oglala Lakhota tribe were asked to answer 15 questions in a questionnaire, and the whole participation was recorded in the form of an interview if the participant agreed, which was in more than 90% of cases. The reasons for recording were multiple. First, some of the questions were open ended and if not recorded, the participants would have to write extensively, which would probably discourage them and make them respond in the simplest way. Second, it was frequent that the participants were expressing their opinions about the language throughout the whole

session, giving interesting comments and explanations to yes/no questions or simply expressing their opinions when they felt like that. Another reason was that the recorded answers opened space for more detailed analysis.

For the purpose of this study the 52 subjects were divided in two groups. One consisted of 26 fluent speakers, most of whom (80%) were teachers of Lakhota language, and the other of 26 non-speakers, who claimed not to speak the language at all, or just "a little." Their opinions were compared in order to find out how the fact of being able to speak the language influences the opinions about its importance. Naturally the average age of the second group was lower than the first's corresponding with the above described demographic situation.

The analyzed part of the survey consisted of 2 yes/no questions, 1 question to be answered on a Likert scale, one question with ranking options and two open ended questions where recording was particularly useful as it provided space for the participants to express their opinions without the limitation of pre-set choice. The six questions were the following:

1. Would you like to see Lakhota become the required language for official business/politics on the reservation?

YES – undecided – NO

2. Do you think that the ability to speak Lakhota gives people more respect in the community?

YES – undecided – NO

3. It is necessary to speak the Lakhota language to be Lakhota.

Strongly agree - Agree - Undecided - Disagree - Strongly disagree

4. What are the most important parts of cultural identity?

RANK from 1(most important) to 4

knowledge of Lakhota ceremonies and spiritual values

knowledge of Lakhota history, treaties and politics

knowledge of the language

knowledge of the ancestors and kinship

others:___

5. Explain in detail what makes you feel Lakhota.

6. How do you feel about the possibility that the Lakhota language might disappear completely?

Even though the formal information about the participants included age group, gender and household composition, the only variable that has

been taken into account in the analysis was the category of speaker versus non-speaker. In addition to the information documented in the questionnaire and on the recordings the analysis includes my field-notes and observations.

One of the observations made me realize the pitfalls of the questionnaire and formal interviews in general as some of the participants gave the impression of being examined and thus they were looking for "the correct" answer. A participant even expressed opinion: *"I feel like I failed"* after the interview. For this reason the collected data requires a great deal of interpretation and cannot be taken for the "objective truth." It is possible that the same participants would express quite different opinions in a less formal situation or if they had more time to think about the question. However this doesn't mean that the data collected in formal interviews is useless, because the fact that the participants consider some answer as "the correct one" is also valuable information.

Who is Lakhota?

Parallel to Woolard (1989) who was asking "Who is Catalan" we can ask "Who is Lakhota?" We will also find more criteria to answer this question. In fact the question who is Native American is frequently asked and studied as it has many important legal consequences. Individual tribes usually set the criteria themselves where one of the most frequent factors is the blood-line of parents and grandparents. Based on this blood quantum criterion the tribes set a limit for being an "enrolled tribe member." For the Lakhota it is 1/2, while for the Arapaho and the Crow Nation 1/4, and only 1/8 for the Wichita. These differences demonstrate that the percentage of Native blood is in fact an arbitrary line that serves to limit the number of tribe members, and it may not reflect an individual's feelings of belonging into the tribe. Even though this criterion was not supposed to be one of the points of my analysis, I encountered it with unexpected frequency. Many individuals talked about it either in a positive or a negative way and some even volunteered to show me their ID card, where this was indicated. The following are just a few examples where people speak about their Lakhota status in relation to blood.

[1] *I'm a full-blood*

[2] *Three quarters of Lakhota blood. My mother is full-blood and my father is half.*

- [3] *The younger people nowadays don't really consider that, but the older people, especially like the full-bloods, they judge you by how much Lakhota you are, it's a..., I'm used to it now because that's what I'm known as a half-breed, he's a half-breed, they look at you and judge you like that.*
- [4] *I don't know, considering that me, my last name, I mean I've been on reservations and stuff, ...my last name, I got criticized because of my last name, ..., like for instance I was new,...., these guys go by blood, quantity of blood, ..., What's your last name?*
- [5] *Full-blood, half-blood, 21/60, that's a white man's concept, there is no formula I can take blood out of you and say..., that's all divisive measures and we swallow it, we eat it like candy.*

On one hand we can see proud proclamations of certified blood quantum in the examples [1] and [2], on the other hand it was not unusual that people were feeling injustice in this division like in the example [3] as they didn't feel less Lakhota than others but in spite of that they were only "half-breeds". In example [4] we can see that it is not only blood but also a surname that makes a person either full-status Lakhota or lower rank Lakhota. Evidently there are typical Lakhota surnames, even though they are used in English translation they make allusion to a Lakhota bloodline. The participant in the example [4] had a Spanish surname and in spite of his Lakhota bloodline, his mother was a "full-blood," he experienced the humiliation of being considered less Lakhota than others. The example [5] might sound like a general complaint of the "wašiču" (white man), but in fact the division between enrolled tribe members and non-members is also, and most of all, about money and at this point we can see the connection with a "white man" quite clearly as most of the money comes to the Reservation from the white man in the form of State subsidies. Another interesting point is the terms the people use. While full-blood sounds positive, "half-breed" is usually used for horses and dogs. In general this "legal" criterion might seem illogical and inconvenient for establishing one's belonging into the tribe; nevertheless, it is often and popularly used not only in legal situations but generally for judging oneself and other people.

Ancestors, ceremonies, history, or language?

Turning from legal aspects to popular definitions, Woolard (1989) found four alternate criteria for the definition of Catalan identity: birthplace,

descent, sentiment/behavior, and language. There is no doubt that these criteria will play their role also for the Lakhota but at the same time we will find some other criteria that will correspond with Lakhota cultural background.

First of all it is necessary to say that this is not a search for one single criterion that would be the definition of Lakhota identity, in fact many participants when asked about the most important parts of cultural identity automatically answered: "*All of the above*" or "*All of them*," which means that they are not mutually exclusive but complementary. The examples below make a list of some aspects that the participants mentioned after being asked what makes them feel Lakhota:

[6] *Being on this Reservation, I've lived here over 30 years.*

[7] *My elders, like my family tree on my mom's side, where I'm from, the roots.*

[8] *My heritage, probably my background, where I come from.*

[9] *It's who you are, it's how you are raised, your upbringing, your grand parents, your ceremonies you went to, that you are Lakhota named.*

[10] *Probably like, the only thing I can say is probably my culture, culture, my people, at the same time chiefs, because I come from a chief family.*

[11] *I can't explain, it is the way you feel you can feel no other way, you get born into it.*

[12] *That's in your soul, that's in your blood line, that's in your heritage.*

[13] *You are Lakhota that's Thunkášila given, God given.*

[14] *That's in your soul, that's religious, being Lakhota is a religious thing.*

[15] *The ceremonies, everybody relies on the ceremonies, we go to sweat-lodge.*

[16] *Carrying a pipe, speaking the language, knowing my family history. The first one is probably the main one, the spirituality part.*

[17] *Not for me, but for other people, they feel like they are Lakhota when they get into a special Pow-wow, beadwork and leather and they go to pow-wow dance and they feel like they are Lakhota. But as for me I am Lakhota. I have beadwork and all that but I don't wear one.*

[18] *People are playing with our pipe too much, I don't know where they are getting all the visions from, but it is supposed to be really sacred ..., Lakhota ceremonies is way out of my line, because these little kids should*

be taught the values, how to respect and honor their parents and brothers and sisters, and who they marry.

[19] *Living the values on a daily basis.*

[20] *To be able to speak it, to be able to practice the values, to be able to teach others.*

[21] *Lakhota in my sense, what they taught to me, is more about the state of being like mind and body doesn't mean the color of your skin, doesn't mean the length or color of your hair, basically the old people say its hard to be Lakhota, meaning Lakhota in definition meant a friend, a buddy, the ultimate ally and it is hard to be that.*

[22] *There is a behavior amongst Lakhota people, that's just there, just from looking at the Lakota person you know he is a Lakhota.*

[23] *Know who you are and your history because a lot of our kids today they don't know our history and I think it is important thing to know about the treaties, it has to do with everything, the language, the culture, ceremonies, everything.*

[24] *Knowing the language.*

[25] *Because I can speak, I know my kinship, I was raised with the culture, ceremonies, traditions.*

[26] *The language, the language and knowing where I come from.*

Example [6] associates the identity with the place, with living on the reservation but in fact that was not a very frequent opinion. On the other hand many participants talked about their family as a source of their identity as we can see in the examples [7], [8], [9], [10] and many others. People usually talked either about the more "Lakhota-blood" part of their family or at least the more traditional part of it. In the example [10] it is interesting to notice that the participant was proud of coming from a chief family and so he mentions "the chiefs" as the authority that gives him the feeling of identity.

The examples [11], [12] also make reference to a family or a blood-line but in a less direct, more sentimental way: "*you get born into it,*" "*that's in your soul,*" up to the point that it passes to the religious aspect in the example [13]: "*Thunkášila given*" or identifying Lakhota with religion as in [14]. The spiritual part of being Lakhota was pronounced rather often as in examples [15] and [16] because practicing

the ceremonies, going to a sweat-lodge and pow-wows gives many people the feeling of belonging to the community and demonstrates their pride to be Lakhota.

However, example [17] expresses that some people consider these demonstrations as "searching for identity" and proof of being Lakhota by those who have some doubts about their descent, while it is unnecessary for those who are real, "full-blood" Lakhota. Similar opinion [18] criticizes this exaggerated reliance on ceremonies and reminds that people should concentrate more on traditional Lakhota values instead of "*playing with the pipe.*"

The Lakhota values were another frequently mentioned marker of identity as in the examples [19] through [22]. Among these values belong *respect to self and others, humility, honor, sacrifice, generosity, perseverance*, and others that are depicted in many traditional stories. Respect was the most often repeated one, as there are currently a lot of violence and other social problems on the reservation. These values used to be practiced and considered virtues in past and even at present are still considered a moral code that is valued and admired by the elders and that the teachers try to teach their students in Lakhota studies classes. However this effort is usually not reinforced at individual households and for this purpose these traditional values are not respected by most of the ethnic population. In spite of that, they keep being considered as a marker of Lakhota identity.

There is no doubt that knowledge of history is important for Lakhota people because there were many important events, especially in the last 200 years, that influenced the fate of Lakhota nation. Nevertheless its contribution to the feeling of identity was mentioned rarely [23], which means that most people do not consider it very important for their personal feeling of identity.

The last set of examples [24] through [26] highlights the language as a primary source of identity. Fifteen out of 26 Lakhota speakers mentioned that speaking the language gives them a feeling of identity and they usually mentioned it in the first place.

In general we can see that the sources of identity vary by individual. In addition to the criteria found by Woolard (1989) in Catalonia, in the case of Lakhota an important role is played by the spiritual part of their cultural heritage and their traditional values. The most frequently repeated criteria were a mix of family, spirituality and language for those who could speak it.

Is it necessary to speak the language?

The question whether it is necessary to speak the Lakhota language to be Lakhota was one of the focuses of my investigation and for that reason also one of the questions I asked the participants. The results I obtained were not surprising and confirmed the hypothesis that the speakers of the language will mostly agree while the non-speakers will mostly disagree. The exact statistical figures are displayed in the next section, which compares the two groups of participants. In this part I would like to discuss some reasons for affirmative and negative answers, and also add some observations made during the research.

When we try to answer the question for ourselves we might be at a loss. For one part it is difficult to imagine not to speak one's own native language and for the other the question is set as rather exclusive - if you don't speak the language XY, you can't consider yourself to be XY. Who would we be if we didn't speak our language? One of the participants who was surprisingly a speaker of the language expressed the following opinion [27]:

[27] *I strongly disagree because that's a divisive measure people use in our reservation, just because someone didn't teach you the language that doesn't make you any less Lakhota than anybody else.*

It is evident that those who don't speak the language are in this position because someone, usually their parents, didn't teach them. They are not to be blamed for the situation and many of them consider themselves just as Lakhota as anybody else. On the other hand it sometimes happens that the inability to speak the language may prevent the rites of passage. The case I had the opportunity to observe regarded a traditional Sun Dance ceremony that was supposed to be passed from one generation to another. Nevertheless this transmission did not happen because no-one from the younger generation could speak the language. I do not want to discuss the matter of who didn't teach the younger generation the language, but this is a situation where non-speakers of the language do not have the same rights as the speakers. This example shows that even though most people would logically agree with the opinion [27], there are situations when this is not true and the fact of not being taught the language in fact makes one "less Lakhota," as he/she does not qualify for some of the rights.

The opinion [27] was unusual for a speaker of the language because most of them agreed with the statement that you need to speak the

language to be Lakshota. Two of more usual opinions of Lakshota speakers are the following [28], [29]:

[28] *Without the language you don't have nothing. Without the language you wouldn't know how to address the kinship, without the language you wouldn't know how to address your ancestors, without the language you wouldn't even understand why are the ceremonies conducted the way they are, and without the language you wouldn't even know why the treaties happened on the first place because the whole basis was the language.*

[29] *Along with the language, what we are envisioning, you know, the values will follow, the culture will follow, because a lot of our kids, they are not only not being taught the language, they are not being taught their culture, so they are adopting a lot of the things they see on the TV, and a lot of it, sometimes is negative, you know, with the hip hop, or the gangster, you know stuff like that.*

These opinions express how much the culture is bound to the language and the mutuality of this connection. The first [28] suggests that losing a language means losing the culture at the same time, the second one [29] expresses that bringing back the language would bring back the culture and the traditional values.

Further observations I made confirm the importance of the language and how much it is valued by both speakers and non-speakers. First of all, it was much easier to convince the speakers of the language to give me an interview about the language than the non-speakers because the speakers felt self-confident talking about this topic. One non-speaker even refused an interview sending me to her sister, who was a speaker, saying: *"she will be happy talking to you,"* which later happened. Another non-speaker [30] told me how she regretted not speaking the language and a story about her work at Wounded Knee Memorial [30].

[30] *I had the opportunity when I was staying at uncle Peter's but I didn't take it. I regret it now. That's why I kick my ass now because I had the opportunity to learn everything, language, traditions. [...] I was working at Wounded Knee Memorial and the visitors were constantly asking me whether I speak the language and I had to say NO. It was embarrassing. I left the job after a month, it was embarrassing all these questions.*

It is not surprising that she didn't feel comfortable with an interview about language, and she actually started to talk openly only after she finished the whole questionnaire. After that she relaxed and talked about her boarding school experience and how she misses the ability to speak the language.

Another experience was that the participants misinterpreted the question about their household composition, which was one of the formal ones but unexpectedly it also supplied some language data:

[31] *Q: What is your household composition?* (options: Lakhota – non-Lakhota – mixed)

A: I am the only one that speaks, my children don't.

While the question is about "ethnic" classification of a participant's household, the answer identifies Lakhota with Lakhota speaker. There were more cases when participants misinterpreted this question. Some identified Lakhota with full-blood Lakhota, according to the legal criteria discussed above, but others identified it with the language expressing indirectly that Lakhota is the one who speaks Lakhota.

Some participants also mentioned the language itself and the way they see the world through the language - examples [32] and [33]. They associated Lakhota with Lakhota values and culture and English with the English-speaking world. If you say something in Lakhota, it holds true because it is backed with the value of honor.

[32] *Speaking, when you speak Lakhota you can express yourself more clearly than in English.*

[33] *We call English the liar's language. That's the problem with English. So it's not necessary to speak Lakhota to be Lakhota but it entitles problems and you should be aware of those.*

Even though the logical answer to the original question seems to be negative because it creates a disqualifying criterion for many people who consider themselves Lakhota, taking into account all this evidence, I reluctantly agree that the language must be present for Lakhota to be Lakhota. I write reluctantly because I realize that it is a problematic answer, on the other hand, the evidence and the opinions of the people confirm that to be Lakhota with all the rights and full cultural background you need to speak the language. It is not necessary to be "full-blood," but the language gives all the rights, self confidence and deeper view in the

traditional culture. It is still possible to be Lakhota without speaking the language but some of the essential properties that people generally associate with being Lakhota disappear. Without the language you can participate at the ceremonies, just like I participated at some of them, but you don't have the right to perform them.

Speakers and non-speakers

One of the hypotheses of this investigation was that there would be differences between the opinions of speakers and non-speakers regarding the importance of the language, and some of them were already discussed in the previous sections. Specific answers to questions 3 and 4 can be found in the in the following tables:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
speakers	8	5	2	6	5	26
non-speakers	3	3	4	12	4	26

Table 1: Results of question 3 (*It is necessary to speak the Lakhota language to be Lakhota.*)

	ceremonies and spiritual values	history, treaties and politics	language	ancestors and kinship	Total
speakers	3	0	15	6	24
non-speakers	8	3	7	8	26

Table 2: Results of question 4 (*What are the most important parts of cultural identity?*) - number of participants who placed individual criterion on the first place.

As expected, the speakers of the language mostly agreed that it is necessary to speak Lakhota to be Lakhota while with the non-speakers the situation was opposite. The same repeated in the next question, where 15 out of 24 speakers marked language as the most important part of cultural identity, while non-speakers marked evenly ceremonies and spiritual values and ancestors and kinship. In question 5 (*Explain in detail what makes you feel Lakhota?*) 15 out of 26 speakers mentioned, usually

foremost, that it is language that makes them feel Lakhota but the non-speakers didn't have the possibility to say that.

This comparison of speakers and non-speakers is not surprising, however the surprising fact is that there was still a considerable number of non-speakers who strongly agreed (3) or agreed (3) that it is necessary to speak the language to be Lakhota and 7 who placed language first in question 4. How is it possible that 6 participants considered themselves Lakhota, didn't speak the language and agreed that it is necessary to speak the language to be Lakhota? There are more possible explanations. One of them is that they spoke the language "a little," which was actually case of 5 of them, and they considered this as sufficient. Second is that they considered this answer as the "correct" one because the questionnaire was about language and yet another is that they realize the importance of the language, even though the result is not favorable for them, as we could see in example [30].

While the speakers always had the logical possibility to say "language," when explaining what makes them feel Lakhota (question 5), the non-speakers were sometimes trying to do the same. The examples [34] and [35] demonstrate that not having the possibility to say "speaking the language" they were at least claiming relation to someone who does.

[34] *My mother was half and my father was half and we have always been Lakhota, they both were fluent Lakhota speakers.*

[35] *My mom, [her family], they speak it.*

[36] *Just the way of life, the way I live my life, interactions with ceremonies, going to sun dances and speaking, learning the language.*

Another interesting opinion was expressed in the example [36], where one non-speaker claims that "learning the language" gives her connection to the language and Lakhota identity.

In the introduction I wrote about the importance of the speakers' attitude to their language, which was the subject of question 2. While questions 3, 4 and 5 gave different results for speakers and non-speakers, the answers to question 2 (*Do you think that the ability to speak Lakhota gives people more respect in the community?*) did not vary.

All speakers (100%) and most of non-speakers (81%) agreed that the ability to speak the language gives people more respect in the community. This demonstrates that the language is highly valued by all

Lakhota people and the ability to speak is generally appreciated. We can notice this positive attitude also in the examples where non-speakers are looking for some connection to the language and give the seemingly illogical answers to questions 3 and 4.

In conclusion we can observe that both speakers and non-speakers were claiming their relation to the language and many of the non-speakers do in fact realize its importance. The comparison reveals that the speakers mention the language more often as a sign of their identity, because the result is favorable for them, but at the same time it also reveals that even the non-speakers realize its importance and that the general attitude to the language is very positive. The ability to speak the language is prestigious, and because the number of people who speak it is diminishing, we can expect it to be even more prestigious in the future.

Lakhota as a "required language"

Lakhota is a co-official language of the reservation, but the reality is that it is not often used in everyday life. Question 1 (*Would you like to see Lakhota become the required language for official business/politics on the reservation?*) was supposed to reveal whether the speakers of the language would place more importance on the language or solidarity with non-speakers. The expectation was that the speakers would divide in two groups while all the non-speakers would give negative answers.

However, the results were unexpected as 24 out of 26 speakers (92%) answered "yes" and only two were "undecided". The solidarity with the non-speakers was evidently less important for the speakers than the language itself. It is obvious that if Lakhota became a required language it would be an advantage for the speakers and so they opted for their own advantage. Even more surprising were the results among the non-speakers.

[37] *No, than I won't know what's going on.*

The example [37] is one of the very few logical answers, while 19 out of 26 non-speakers (73%) answered affirmatively, 4 (15%) were undecided and only 3 (12%) said simply "no". The question is how can someone who doesn't speak the language answer that he/she would like it to be the "required language." Trying to make explanations parallel to those in the previous section, it is hard to imagine that those who speak the language "a little" would consider it sufficient for official business and politics,

which means that they would exclude themselves from this. The influence of the "correct" answer and solidarity with the interviewer is one possible explanation.

The other one is that the non-speakers may be in a momentary lapse of reason and under the influence of speaking about the language, were ready to make the sacrifice of not speaking and possibly learning the required language of the reservation. I believe that if it came to a real official vote, most of them would change their opinion but in spite of this, the fact that they were able to imagine that situation for a few seconds speaks about their attitude to the language and demonstrates their feeling of its importance. This result highlights the conclusions of the previous section that even the non-speakers have positive attitudes about the language, consider it an important factor of Lakhota identity and a prerequisite for the survival of Lakhota culture.

Is Lakhota going to disappear?

According to the above mentioned survey of Oceti Wakan, the disappearance of the language is probable in the not too distant future. Although there might remain a handful of people who will still speak it, the language will practically disappear because most people will never have contact with it. The sad fact is that during my stay on the reservation I encountered very few people under 35 who could speak the language. The objective of question 6 (*How do you feel about the possibility that Lakhota language might disappear completely?*) was to find out what Lakhota people think about this eventuality and disclose their emotional ties to the language.

[38] *It's possible and scary.*

[39] *It kind a makes person sad, I mean there should be a lot more younger people speaking it, it's just all the elders, it probably will, if they don't get it in schools you know, it probably will disappear, cause I don't see many schools teaching it, they probably have classes but the kids probably don't take it seriously.*

[40] *It's sad but it's also something people should be more aware of, I think that a lot of people don't know that it's disappearing and I think if they had more knowledge that we are losing it more people would try to learn it.*

[41] *I feel really strongly that we can't let it, we have to fight to keep it, we can't stand by and watch let it disappear, we have to struggle to fight, that's how I feel about that.*

[42] *I don't think it's gonna disappear completely. There will be always someone speaking it.*

[43] *Never will happen. The colonial people wanted this, and they made these predictions.*

[44] *How do I feel? I don't care.*

[45] *If the language disappeared it would be a huge loss to spirituality, because without knowing the language then you even won't know what songs go with what ceremonies, proper songs, what ceremonies. My grandpa Albert always told me that language has to be there when ceremony is conducted. Grandpa Albert said that language needs to be there when you speak with the creator, especially when you are carrying the pipe. You are Lakota, it comes from your blood, you carry the pipe. It has no meaning in English.*

Most of the answers to this question fit in two categories. The first can be characterized by two frequently repeated words: "sad" and "scary", examples [38], [39], and [40], in the second category the participants do not admit this eventuality like in the examples [42] and [43]. The first group realizes and admits the danger that the language might be lost, some of them blame the young for not learning it, others the school and many say that there should be something done about it like the opinion [41]. The second group is more optimistic, they believe that the language will somehow survive, either thanks to schools or that there will be enough people to learn it and conduct the ceremonies. They see the language around them and believe that it will always be there. However it seems that there is also a third group of people. The participants knew that the interview was about language and they were also pre-selected by the fact that they agreed to participate in an interview about language, so the opinion [44] (*I don't care*) was exceptional, but the information the teachers supplied supports the idea that there are many more people who don't care.

The teachers even reported about notes on returned progress reports saying that Lakota is of no importance and asking why they teach it. The teachers frequently complained that parents do not reinforce the effort that the school makes in language teaching. The last opinion [45] summarizes one of

the major concerns: can the ceremonies be conducted without the language? The language has already disappeared from everyday life and most people are accustomed to this reality; however, the spiritual part of being Lakhota is closely tied to ceremonies and I haven't met anyone who could imagine the ceremonies without the language. It is possible that the language might become an "Indian Latin," ceremonial language that only a few will understand. For some people this will remain equally sad and scary like the complete death of the language, others might consider it the maximum one can expect in given situation. The simple fact is that the language is gradually leaving and it can be reversed only if Lakhota people make a major effort to save it. The answers that the participants of this study gave throughout the interviews suggest that most of them realize the danger, value the language highly and they can at least imagine this effort as expressed in question 1.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that there is certain feeling of belonging to the group among the Lakhota that we can call a feeling of identity, self-identification with Lakhota culture and the general Lakhota values. Analysis of the relation between the language and this collective identity confirmed the hypothesis that the ability to speak the language mediates a strong feeling of identity to the speakers of Lakhota while the non-speakers have to use other sources of their collective identity. The importance of the language for both speakers and non-speakers was expressed in various contexts. The non-speakers often claimed relation with someone who speaks the language, they agreed that the ability to speak the language gives people more respect in the community, and the majority of them could even imagine Lakhota as a required language for official business and politics on the reservation. In addition, the analysis revealed other important aspects of Lakhota identity, where the most frequently mentioned were family and blood-line, traditional Lakhota values and the spiritual part of Lakhota culture.

Even after this detailed analysis it is difficult to answer the key question, whether it is necessary to speak the language to be Lakhota. It is evident that speaking the language gives an individual all the rights, respect, self-confidence and deep knowledge of the culture while not speaking the language excludes the individual from leading the ceremonies but it doesn't exclude him/her from participation that can be important for the feeling of identity. In general, we could say that it is necessary that someone speaks the language for the Lakhota to be

Lakhota. It doesn't have to be every person but the language must be present at the ceremonies and for this reason at least some people have to speak it. If the language disappeared completely it is very likely that the culture would follow and consequently also the feeling of belonging to this culture. The feeling of identity depends essentially on the Lakhota culture and the culture depends on the language. Even though Lakhota language doesn't run the risk of disappearing completely in the short term, it is hard to predict whether the few speakers left will be enough to maintain the whole culture and it is even harder to predict what will happen in the long term.

At this point we can ask with Joshua Fishman (1996a): "What do you lose when you lose your language?" His answer is the following (Fishman, 1996a, p. 81): "When you are talking about the language, most of what you are talking about is the culture. That is, you are losing all those things that essentially are the way of life, the way of thought, the way of valuing, and the human reality that you are talking about." It is evident that to reverse the language shift and revernaculize Lakhota language will require major effort from every community member but without this effort the Lakhota language will pass away changing forever Lakhota society, culture and feeling of identity.

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