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## SACRED AND SECULAR ISSUES IN NAVAJO EDUCATION

**Theodore B. Fernald and Paul R. Platero**

This chapter is a report on the language and culture discussion that took place at the Athabaskan Conference on Syntax and Semantics at Swarthmore College on April 26, 1996. We will attempt to express the nature of the dialogue and represent the main ideas that emerged in a neutral, unbiased manner. The goal here is to lay out some of the main issues so that the dialogue can continue and involve additional people. By agreement with the participants, the views represented here will not be attributed to any individual, but to the discussion as a whole. Certainly there is no one who will agree with everything that is in here, since conflicting views are expressed. The group did not seek to achieve a consensus but to initiate discussion of these considerations.

### **13.1 The Issues**

Since the 1970s there has been a serious decline in the transmission of Navajo to the youngest generation. It is estimated that 80% of Navajo preschool children could speak Navajo in the early 1970s. Platero (to appear) reports a 1992 study he conducted which found that only 45.7% of Navajo preschoolers could speak Navajo. Only 17.7% were monolingual in Navajo. Thus, despite the fact

that the Navajos constitute the largest population of indigenous North Americans, the Navajo language is undergoing a drastic decline in use. Although adults constitute a significant population of Navajo speakers, the median age in the Navajo Nation is 19 years, and when there is a serious decline in the use of a language among young children it is clear that the language is threatened.

The reasons for this decline are many, ranging from official opposition in the past by the U.S. government to economic pressures to speak English to an inability of the Navajo government to launch and sustain programs that would strengthen the status of the language. To address all these issues would require more time and imagination than we were able to muster, so we chose to examine a particular problem in detail and to discuss a particular sort of strategy for addressing it.

One factor that makes it difficult to teach Navajo language and culture in schools has to do with the fact that various religions are represented in the Navajo Nation. Some Navajo parents follow traditional Navajo religion; other parents subscribe to or hold beliefs that are influenced by other traditions: for example, Catholicism, a variety of Protestant denominations, Mormonism, and the Native American Church. It is believed by many that traditional Navajo culture makes no distinction between what is sacred and what is secular. This might mean that any effort to teach any aspect of Navajo culture in the classroom will necessarily involve teaching religion. But teaching religion in schools is problematic since not everyone has the same religious beliefs, and, in addition, it would violate the doctrine of the separation of church and state which could affect public funding for the schools. Occasionally, efforts to teach some aspect of Navajo culture in public schools have led parents to remove their children from the class. Some parents oppose any effort to teach anything about Navajo language or culture in classrooms out of fear that their children might be taught religious principles inconsistent with the family's beliefs. Nevertheless, many Navajos who have adopted other religions still wish to hold on to some aspects of their heritage.

If there were some way to separate the secular from the religious aspects of culture, it would be possible to teach the secular subjects in schools and leave religion as a matter of personal choice. People would continue to respect their religious beliefs, but they would not practice religion in schools. Many questions arise at this point. From the point of view of a traditional Navajo, it may not seem possible to make the distinction between sacred and secular matters. Part of the traditional view is that everything is sacred. For other Navajos, certain traditional practices conflict with the precepts of other religions and others do not. From their point of view, avoiding the conflicting areas in schools might be sufficient to allow the other subjects to be taught. Still others would like the living tradition of Navajo culture to survive through the next century and beyond, but they fear that if it is not possible to teach any aspects of culture in schools, the tradition will not be passed along to the youngest generation.

### **13.2 The Discussion**

These were the issues we chose to discuss. We did not reach a consensus, nor did we expect to, but we did clarify some of the issues and set the stage for the discussion to continue.

The discussion began with a panel of four speakers. The panel was followed by an open discussion. Many of the participants spoke of their own experiences in schools growing up. Many had experienced the policies of the U.S. government, which was trying to do away with Navajo language and culture. They recounted stories of their experiences in government schools where they were not permitted to speak Navajo. Several had soap put in their mouths when they were caught speaking Navajo. One classroom had a policy that you would have to keep your nose inside a circle drawn on the chalkboard if you spoke Navajo. If you moved your nose for any reason, the teacher would whack you on the legs with a yardstick.

In the early part of this century, the U.S. government mounted tremendous opposition to any effort to preserve American Indian languages and cultural traditions. Along with other Indians, Navajo children were shipped as far away as Chemawa, Oregon and Carlisle, Pennsylvania, to boarding schools run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). The policy was to remove Indian children as far from home, language, and culture as possible and to try to keep them separate from others who spoke the same language. This had a devastating effect on other Indian groups. The effect was less damaging to the Navajo culture, since there was a large population of Navajo students in all the boarding schools. This at least made it possible for them to speak with each other in Navajo, but they were subject to punishment if they were caught.

There is no official opposition anymore (although this may change if efforts to make English the official language of the United States are successful), but the Navajo culture is more severely threatened than ever. The government's policies in the past have already done substantial damage that may even (already) be fatal. Many graduates of schools have become teachers and have continued to carry out the old BIA plan to rid children of their native language and culture.

### **13.3 Separating the Secular from the Sacred**

Efforts to exclude discussion of all traditional knowledge from the classroom have the effect of excluding the Navajo language from the classroom as well. For most people, this is an unintended consequence. If we could draw a line between sacred and secular aspects of culture, language and the study of it would be included in the secular area. Certainly there are words that are rich in sacred meaning and cannot be fully understood without a grasp of the sacred tradition. Discussing such words might not be appropriate for public schools. However, the study of the Navajo language and grammar is clearly a secular enterprise. Distinguishing the sacred from the secular would allow Navajo language instruc-

tion in public schools and constitute a major contribution in efforts to preserve the Navajo language.

One of the participants in the conference pointed out that there is a continuum between secular and religious aspects of culture. If we were to try to use this strategy, we would need to identify areas that are clearly secular and those that are clearly religious. There would be many areas left in between. We would have to recommend that those areas also be left out of the classroom and instead be dealt with in private. Any proposal would be controversial, but perhaps there would be some areas of culture that nearly any Navajo parent would agree could be taught in school. For example, pollen offerings, prayers, and chants are clearly sacred matters, and at least certain aspects of the visual arts, music, and philosophy are secular.

Another participant holds the belief that the Navajo culture is a single, unified entity and that one cannot isolate what is sacred from anything else. This person said the Universe has one song and we all sing that one song. It is not possible to divide the culture into parts. However, there is another approach that may allow the culture to be studied in schools. Anglo colleges are able to teach courses in comparative religion without teaching that any one of the religions is actually true. Students do not participate in religious practices, but they are shown how the practices are done and what they are taken to mean. Then students decide for themselves what to think. The difference between learning about religion and being taught to follow its tenets is mainly a matter of pedagogical technique. What the elders teach is meant to be shared. There are schools where the teachers are trusted to pass along cultural knowledge. They have experience with implementing these ideas.

Another participant reasoned as follows: Navajos follow various religions, but the people still have a common identity. What do they all hold in common? The ability to retain *k'e* and language are a common bond among all Navajo people, regardless of religion. *K'e* is a concept of relationships beyond the family that includes the clanship system. When you meet someone, the relationship in the extended family of clans is established. An additional meaning for *k'e* is about harmony and service with other people, animals, nature, the land. It is an all-encompassing concept. If you do not live in accordance with *k'e*, your life falls out of balance and needs to be restored. Even people who went through the BIA boarding schools retained some concept of *k'e*; the most core aspect of Navajo identity survived. But sometimes things change when people have children. What the BIA tried to do to them, they unintentionally do to their children. How can this happen? It may be that parents associate the English language with education due to their own experiences with school, and because Navajo was stigmatized in the BIA schools, some of this attitude remains. This speaker proposed adding to curricula instruction in secular things that every Navajo ought to know: how to bottle-feed a lamb, dig for wild carrots in the spring, make herbs into soup, build a fire. Additional areas of knowledge that should be included are how to build a house, care for livestock, provide for the family, and speak the language.

Another participant pointed out that missionaries drew a line between religion and secular culture based on their own assumptions about the universe, but they drew the line in the wrong place. Missionaries dictated which parts of Navajo culture could be retained by Christians. Navajo people need to do this for themselves. This speaker also said we must have respect for the followers of all religions. Preachers, politicians, language teachers, and medicine men are the orators who have gotten people together in one place and who touch many people all at once. They are the people who preserve the language. We shouldn't alienate any of them because they all serve a purpose.

### **13.4 Maintaining the Language**

Participants in the conference agreed that parents need to be impressed with the fact that Navajo is very hard to learn as an adult. Children have a special ability to acquire language, but this ability is lost as one becomes an adult. One participant argued that some drastic steps must be taken if we are to preserve Navajo. It is not enough to teach people a few phrases. We need to create situations in which people must use Navajo.

There was also a call for efforts to change the attitude some people have towards Navajo and to make it more attractive to use for young people. It was suggested that the language needed to be glamorized. Another participant replied that the language doesn't need to be glamorized; it is perfectly fine as it is. Another said that 'glamorize' may not be the right word to use but that the idea of improving its appeal to young people makes sense. Some felt that improved teaching techniques were called for. However, others thought that the language should be used as a language for popular culture: there need to be books, movies, and television shows in Navajo.

It was also pointed out that Navajo language and culture teachers are in a difficult spot. They are sometimes criticized by Christians for promoting traditional religion, but they are also criticized by traditionalists and neotraditionalists who feel the teachers are setting themselves up unreasonably as experts on the language and the culture. The participants in the conference felt this was an unfortunate situation. Teachers for the most part do the best they can. Unless people with more expertise than the teachers are willing to come forward to do the job, there is no point in criticizing the ones who are willing to try. This kind of criticism is very damaging to efforts to preserve the language and the cultural traditions.

### **13.5 Conclusion**

The participants were for the most part in agreement that it would be a good thing to use Navajo as a language of instruction in public schools, but how to do that was a matter of contention. Is it possible to deal only with secular aspects of culture in public, leaving people free to hold their own religious beliefs

in private? If such a separation is not acceptable, can teachers at least expose students to Navajo culture as a subject of classroom study so they can learn about it without actually participating in religious practices that would be objectionable to Navajos of other faiths? These two strategies are not so very far apart. Each involves walking carefully along a fine line, either between the sacred and the secular, or between study and practice. Each strategy has been implemented in an educational setting, and this discussion would benefit from further input from those teachers who walk these fine lines.

On two key points, all the participants in the conference seemed to agree. Navajo people must come to better understand the gravity of the situation. The Navajo language is severely threatened. It will cease to exist except in books unless the people want to preserve it badly enough to continue this discussion and act upon the outcome. The situation will be hopeless unless people are willing to overcome their differences and work very hard to save the language. Even if everyone agrees to the basic objective of preserving the language, it will not be attained if no compromise on a course of action can be reached.

The other crucial point is related to the first. People must understand that Navajo is a modern language and as capable of expressing complex, even scientific, thought as any language is. It is true that much of the access Navajo speakers have to their heritage will be lost if the language is lost. But Navajo is not only a language of the past. It can be a language of the future as well, if the people are willing to work together to preserve it.

As a final note, we would like to point out that everyone concerned about the future of the Navajo culture has a lot more in common with each other than not. We all have the goal of trying to help the Navajo language and culture survive. It would be a shame if our differences were to prevent us from accomplishing what we all want.

## **Reference**

- Platero, Paul (to appear). Navajo Head Start Language Study. In Ken Hale and Leanne Hinton (eds.), *A Manual for Language Revitalization*.