

Situation of Indigenous Languages in the United States



BRENDAN FAIRBANKS
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA



Number of Indigenous Tribes in the US



- There are 578 federally recognized indigenous tribes in the US (231 of these are located in Alaska).
- American Indian language families constitute over **50 distinct genetic units** (compared to the languages of Europe which are classified into just three families).
- Algic family (30 languages)
- Athabaskan-Eyak-Tlingit family (40 languages)
- Uto-Aztecan family (30 languages)
- Salishan family (23 languages)

Number of Indigenous Tribes in the US



Smaller language families:

- Tsimshianic, Chimakuan, Sahaptian, Alsean and Coosan families (10 languages total)

Language isolates (languages with no known relatives)

- Cayuse, Esselen, Zuni, Tonkawa

(Mithun 1999)

Language Death



- Around 300 American Indian Languages in 1492
- Only 175 spoken today
- Most barely hanging on, near extinction
- 90% of world's population speak the 100 most-used languages
- 10% of world's population speak at least the other 6,000 languages
- 5,000-6,700 languages in the world today

Current Data



By number of dead or dying languages

- Australia and New Zealand: 317 dead & dying
- South America (204)
- Northern America (163)
- South-Eastern Asia (131)
- Melanesia (81).
- These five groups account for over two-thirds of the dead and dying languages in the world!

Current Data



By percentages of vital languages

Northern America is at the bottom:

- **7% vital languages, 61% dead/dying**

Australia & New Zealand

- 9% vital, 82% dead/dying

South America

- 35% vital, 39% dead/dying

Current Data



Least impacted by language endangerment is sub-Saharan Africa.

- 80% of their languages are in the vital category
- Melanesia:
- 76% vital (including Papua New Guinea)

Mufwene's Colonization Types



- Trade
- Exploitation
- Settlement
- “Each colonisation style has determined particular patterns of interaction between economic structure that is now in place” (Mufwene 2002)

Mufwene's Colonization Types



Trade contact:

- Earliest type to emerge
- Occasional language contact as ships periodically landed at ports of call to collect trade goods
- Contact languages emerged for conducting business, but did not lead to language shift

Mulfwene's Colonization Types



Exploitation colonies:

- On-going residence by Europeans in plantations or trading centers, but they did not come in large numbers nor did they settle permanently
- Colonizer's language became a 2nd language while local languages were maintained

Mufwene's Colonization Types



Settlement colonies:

- In settlement colonies, Europeans came in large numbers, bringing their families establishing a new life in the a new land
- Language contact prolonged and deep
- Resulted in a profound language shift

Mufwene's Colonization Types



Settlement colonies:

- “Native Americans lost their languages either because they were decimated by diseases and wars, or because they were forced to relocate to places where they could not continue to speak their languages, or because they eventually got to function in the new, European-style economic world over which imposed a new language of business and industry. Unlike trade colonies, settlement colonies everywhere gradually evolved to some form of economic (and social) integration that has endangered languages other than those of the colonising European nation, or one adopted by it.” (Mufwene 2002)

American Indian Boarding Schools



- Federal Boarding Schools had a huge impact on the decline of Native American languages.



Carlisle Indian School (1879-1918)

American Indian Boarding Schools



Captain Richard Pratt's motto at the Carlisle Indian School (who ran the school):

- “Kill the Indian, and Save the Man”
- Children were not allowed to speak their native languages (punished)
- Goal was to assimilate the children to the dominate culture
- Had a devastating effect on native languages that are still felt to this day!



R. H. Pratt COL. 15TH CAVALRY

FATHER OF THE MOVEMENT IN GETTING INDIANS OUT FROM
THEIR OLD LIFE INTO CITIZENSHIP.

Language Loss



- Most profound in Australia, Canada, and the United States where land was settled by colonizers
- Regions of sub-Saharan Africa and Melanesia exhibit minimal language loss by comparison were regions not settled by the colonizers, but were only exploited for the benefit of the home country

New Threat



Urbanization

- Instead of the more powerful moving in, the less powerful are willingly (?) leaving their ancestral territories and being pulled into urban centers where they are brought into extensive contact not only with the more powerful but with many others who are equally disempowered.
- Need to learn the dominant languages in those urban areas

New Threat



Urbanization

- UN estimates that from 2007 to 2050 the global proportion of urban population will increase from 49% to 70% (United Nations 2008)
- Threat to minority languages?

New Threat



Apathy

- Unfortunately, many tribes which have a healthy population of fluent speakers (20 – 30 years old) usually do not see a need to revitalize their language.
- It's not until those fluent speakers are in their 60's, 70's or even in their 80's does the tribe realize that their language needs to be saved.

Immersion Programs



Immersion Programs



Ojibwe Immersion School



Navajo Immersion School



Cherokee Immersion School



Sauk Master Apprentice Program



We Are Still Here!



- Why save our languages?
- Our languages and cultures are beautiful!
- We save our language, we save our identity!



Miigwech! (Thank You!)



Brendan Fairbanks
fair0061@umn.edu

