



NICHES FOR MINORITY LANGUAGE USE: WHAT DOES CIVIL SOCIETY SUPPORT?

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Theoretical background

This presentation draws on social science literature to raise issues related to the creation of niches or domains of cultural activity that support minority language use. The particular focus is on the contrasting situations two groups of minority language speakers in Arizona, speakers of Spanish and Navajo. I present these issues as illustrations of some of the many economic and social dynamics that shape language policies and practices. These groups represent some of the contrasts related to size, geographic concentration, and connections to public spheres of economic and media presence that affect community maintenance of a language in addition to English. Findings raise questions about the extent to which economic and communications institutions of civil society can contribute to language survival.

Though abbreviated, this overview highlights some of the factors influencing minority language survival amidst the generally English dominant cultural context of the US. Here I shall summarize only the external factors that shape niches for language use; the individual, social-psychological concomitants of minority language maintenance such as effect on self-esteem, social aspirations, and academic persistence, all vital to individual and community welfare (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995) are beyond the scope of this brief treatment.

First, definitions and delimitations: what, precisely, are the domains of activity constitute civil society? The term has been used in different ways by scholars from different intellectual traditions, with many European scholars focusing on non-state-centered voluntary associations, often linked with social protest, while much North American discourse is "defensive about social transformation, nostalgic in its vision of the social order, and hostile toward the redistributionist state" (Benhabib, 1999, p. 293). Many European scholars would exclude the economic sphere from inclusion under this rubric. However, the division between economic life, one of the principal arenas of public interaction for many individuals, and other aspects of social experience is neither categorical nor stable in all circumstances; transactions related to economic activity are conditioned by social circumstances and have a component of interpersonal or intergroup interaction, thus implicating and reflecting societal expectations and mores (Zelizer, 1999). Some political theorists (e.g., Keane, 1998) contend that excluding economic activity from the realm of civil society is not warranted, for so doing unduly constricts the social phenomena that could otherwise contribute to analysis, a point made tellingly in Pérez-Díaz's (1999) discussion of recent developments in Spain. Given the relative paucity of information on many sociolinguistic aspects of minority language use (as opposed to the psycholinguistic, also understudied but generally approached within a cognitive paradigm

based on individual performance), it is arguably valuable to include as many candidate domains as possible to illuminate the relevant issues. Overall, then, some (but not all) contemporary theorists would license inclusion of economic activity as an aspect of civil society worthy of scrutiny.

A comprehensive (and, to some, atheoretical, though scholars cited in the prior paragraph would deny this) default definition would ascribe to civil society all social functions, including economic interactions not



originating from or directly responsive to state requirements, that do not belong to the state. Clearly such a definition has different consequences for relatively more centralized economic and political systems versus decentralized ones. Although the global dominance of command economies has decreased dramatically over the past two decades, the degree of centralization in the domains related to civil society still affects possible niches for language use. Arizona might be considered an apotheosis of the federalized US system in which most economic functions are managed by private rather than public enterprises. It is thus appropriate to ask whether such a system permits or promotes activities that support minority language use.

Underlying this exposition is a concern for the nature of pluralism in liberal societies (Galston, 1999), specifically questions about the range of civil institutions necessary to support minority language use to sustain the degree of language fluency needed to promote and ensure individual and social harmony. Can any of the institutions of civil society offer opportunities for language use different from what is found in schools? (I will not directly consider issues of educational language policy here; see McGroarty, 1997, for discussion of US educational policies shaped by federal-local tensions, and McGroarty, 2002, for treatment of some of the broader social themes in current language-in-education debates in the US.)

Arizona's language distribution

Some notion of the size and distribution of each language group provides a basic context for discussion. The state's population of just over five million in 2000 (all population estimates from US census tallies; US Census Bureau, 2000), represents a 40% increase over the 1990 total and made Arizona one of the US's two fastest-growing states (the other was Nevada). Of this total, almost 64% self-identified as White, non-Hispanic; one-quarter (25.3%), nearly 1,300,000, self-identified as Hispanic; 4.5% percent, almost 256,000, self-identified as American Indian or Alaska Native; 2.9 % as African American; 2.9% claimed two or more races, and 1.7% as Asian. (The US Census did not include a question about language for all respondents, though some language questions were included on longer forms completed by selected subsamples of respondents.) Census data, then, suggest that about two-thirds of the population would speak English (and only English); about a quarter would be speakers of Spanish and/or English; and that other groups of minority language speakers would be far smaller.

Three caveats apply. First, all Arizona minorities (in addition to some non-minority

rural communities) have claimed an undercount, often considerable; hence these figures imperfect as they are, probably represent a conservative estimate of potential speakers of a language. Also, because there are 21 different tribes in Arizona, there are several different indigenous languages at issue, although the Navajo, whose territory includes parts of three states, are the largest group. Second comes the matter of linkage between census categories and language proficiency. As Fishman (1989) has long noted, a self-identity claim of membership in a certain group has no necessary connection to language proficiency, and the salience of both ethnic membership and ethnic mother-tongue claiming varies with both historic era and individual situation. The number of Hispanic background persons who speak Spanish or Native Americans who speak their respective languages cannot be determined accurately from these data, for there is no question about language in the general census. Still, it is immediately clear that the number of potential users of Spanish is far larger than the number of people who might potentially speak a native American language. Third, and perhaps most pertinent for accurate assessment of minority language maintenance and use, classic sociolinguistic scholarship (e.g., Fishman, 1989), ethnographic accounts of the lives of bilinguals (e.g., Valdés, 1996; Zentella, 1997) and contemporary social theory, particularly that taking a constructivist bent, emphasize the mutability, heterogeneity, and situation-specific nature of cultural practices (see Benhabib, 1999), which would include language(s) used. In the workplace domain, as elsewhere, one observes a range of language practices, from well-defined separation of languages to combinations of two (or more) languages used according to task and interlocutor demand. (This is one of the reasons it is difficult to sustain a claim that bilingual skills inevitably lead to occupational advantage: see McGroarty, 1990. Such skills are relevant if linked to local labor markets and opportunity structures, but the considerable variety in each of these militates against claims of invariant positive effects.) Despite the limitations of census data, they provide an approximation useful as a point of departure.

Economic, social, and technological factors shaping language use



Examining possible economic bases for minority language use, we find the situations of Spanish and Navajo in Arizona to contrast in many ways, even though both languages precede the arrival of English speakers by at least three to four centuries. The differences bear on niches for language use. A border state, Arizona, like California, demonstrates the continuous influence and influx of Mexican workers needed in former times for the state's agricultural and mining operations and in more recent decades for the many service jobs related to tourism. Despite (or, in part, because) much of Arizona had in fact been part of Mexico, Mexican workers arriving in recent decades have met with what Portes and Rumbaut (2001) call a relatively unfavorable context of reception: though their labor is crucial, the environment of the host society has not been particularly welcoming.

Conditions for Spanish speakers in Arizona have not favored the kind of enclave economy observed elsewhere, for example, as a result of the first post-Batista wave of Cuban settlement in Miami (see Light & Gold, 2000, and Portes & Stepick, 1993). Still, the dramatic growth of the Phoenix and Tucson metropolitan areas in the late 1980s and

1990s demanded a steady stream of workers in the construction and hospitality industries; Mexican workers and other Spanish speakers arrived in very large numbers.

Concentrations of Spanish speakers near larger metropolitan areas have created communities where Spanish is regularly used. The Arizona media market supports a lively Spanish language market for cable TV and nine Spanish-language radio stations with differentiated programming, including the regional music of northern Mexico, talk shows, contemporary and religious music. Many commercial and public safety hotlines routinely offer choices in both English and Spanish. Because most Spanish speakers in Arizona live in or near urban areas, they have regular telephone service. Thus Spanish speakers usually have contact with other Spanish speakers and with electronic media to model and reinforce the language. Depending on location, they may also have access to a growing number of community newspapers and other print media in Spanish (Armendariz, 2002). A biweekly magazine, *Cambio*, publishes articles in English and Spanish; its circulation is 25,000. (Most Spanish language print media are recent; Phoenix has no regular Spanish language newspaper comparable to *La Opinion* in Los Angeles.) The Phoenix area was also home to a Spanish language web portal, *quepasa.com*, whose fate mirrors other dot-com enterprises of the late 1990s; it is now in reorganization. Shoppers from Mexico are targeted in Spanish-language advertising by many malls in the Phoenix and Tucson areas. Some urban areas and towns have a long history of Hispanic-owned small businesses reflecting the traditions of entrepreneurial activity that have supported many immigrants. Such businesses often employ family members and other co-ethnics who are likely to share a language. Thus Spanish has become a language of mainstream economic activity in Arizona, as it is in many parts of the United States (Dávila, 2001). Use of Spanish media does not necessarily denote lack of interest in English media; many bilingual Spanish speakers like the option to access to material in both languages, when possible. See Dávila, 2001, McGroarty, 1996).

Speakers of Navajo, like speakers of most native American languages in the state, are a more rural population. The Navajo Nation, the largest in the US, overlaps the four states of Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and Colorado, and has a population of over 200,000, of which about half speak Navajo (McCarty, 2002), an Athapaskan language. It surrounds the Hopi reservation, where two typologically distinct languages, Hopi (Uzo-Aztecan) and Tewa (Azteco-Tanoan) are used along with English. The traditional Navajo way of life related to care of livestock has changed dramatically in the latter half of the 20th century. Federal laws and trusts dating back to the 19th century greatly restrict the possibilities for individual ownership of land and of water rights, essential to much economic activity in the high desert environment. Because of the history of federal domination, there are few opportunities for private economic activity on the reservation itself; unemployment is high. Many Navajos regularly travel back and forth between the region's larger cities and their families' home places on the reservation. Sometimes families move together, establishing a household in Phoenix or Albuquerque; sometimes a parent must leave children in the care of others and work off reservation, as conditions dictate.

Hence, speakers of Navajo are fewer, more geographically dispersed, and less likely to live close to other speakers of Navajo than are Spanish speakers. There is a radio station that broadcasts in Navajo and English, and follows a largely country-western format aimed at listeners from 21 to 60 (Peterson, 1997).



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Advertising on KTNN is done in both Navajo and English, depending on the product, the desires of the sponsor, and the capabilities of the particular DJ doing the broadcast. No TV station carries regular Navajo programming, though at present most--but not all--Navajos have electricity or a satellite dish and so can view television. Conventional telephone service is still not available on all parts of Navajo, ostensibly because of the cost of laying lines in large expanses of territory with relatively few customers, although the growing availability of cellular and mobile phones has enabled some modest improvements in the last few years. Most speakers of Navajo use English rather than Navajo as the language of print literacy; the effort to create 'scripts' for native language literacy remains a challenge to educators, though it has been successful in some bilingual schools and in some churches serving Navajo communities (McLaughlin, 1992). Most public schools have internet connections, so students have some access to channels of electronic communication at school. Navajo language educators at Diné College, a tribally-controlled institution in Tsaile, Arizona, have developed a variety of computer-based programs for teaching both the Navajo language and aspects of traditional culture such as the clan system. Because such materials have been developed for computer delivery, they can be used wherever students and teachers have access to the necessary platform; at present, this means mainly in schools.

Contrasting options for language maintenance

These descriptions of the respective situations of speakers of Spanish and Navajo in Arizona indicate that there are contrasting options that support minority language use, even though both groups constitute a numerical minority. Spanish speakers, particularly the majority of them who reside in or near urban areas, have the larger numbers, residential concentration, proximity to the Mexican border, possibilities of working with and for other Spanish speakers, and access to Spanish-language media, both radio and television, that can sustain proficiency in Spanish, at least in the domain of oral skills. The size and concentration of the Spanish-speaking population means there is a viable commercial market for goods and services catering to Spanish speakers. For them, given access to Spanish use and Spanish speakers in many of the activities of civil society outside the confines of a classroom, it may not be essential for schools or other public bodies to promote use of Spanish. Navajo speakers, on the other hand, come from far smaller communities much more widely dispersed across a large area; they are older, on average, and less likely to work in an environment where Navajo is used regularly. Their access to Navajo via electronic and print media is more limited than is access to Spanish for Spanish speakers. Hence, for Navajo and for languages like Navajo, maintenance of language vitality may well require new and imaginative approaches to creation of natural and appropriate niches for language use and innovative combinations of public, non-governmental, and private resources to promote, develop, and sustain language abilities.

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