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## ARTICLES

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### Indigenous Youth as Language Policy Makers

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This article offers a grounded view of language shift as experienced by Native American youth across a range of early- to late-shift settings. Drawing on data from a long-term ethnographic study, we demonstrate that the linguistic ecologies in which youth language choices play out are more complex than a unidirectional notion of shift might suggest. We focus on 3 areas of the research: youth language practices, communicative repertoires, and language attitudes and ideologies. The portraits of language use that emerge show these to be dynamic, heteroglossic environments in which youth deploy diverse sociolinguistic abilities for specific purposes in the context of peer, school, and community cultures. Further, we argue that youth's communicative practices represent de facto manifestations of language policy making. The final sections examine the mechanisms underlying this implicit policy making and the implications for school-community language planning and youth empowerment.

Key words: Indigenous youth, language planning and policy, language practice, language ideology, heritage-language loss and revitalization

Nobody speaks [the Indigenous language] anymore . . . [Youth] don't know anything about their language. (Parent interview, December 7, 2005)

I just want to learn my language . . . it is a big important part of my life if I am going to be a Native. (Youth interview, June 1, 2004)

These statements, by a Native American parent and youth, illustrate the complex ideological forces underpinning language practices in communities undergoing rapid language shift. The excerpts also suggest the generational disjunctures between bilingual adults who choose not to

socialize their children in the Indigenous language, due to their own negative experiences with linguistic assimilation, and youth who are negotiating the place of their heritage language in their lives and identities in a situation of unequal power relations.

In this article we provide an analysis of language shift “on the ground,” as experienced by Native American youth across a range of early- to late-shift settings. Following Schiffman (1996) and others, we take a broad view of language policy as implicit and explicit, overt and covert, *de facto* and *de jure* (McCarty, 2004). Our goal is to interrogate the “real policy” in these settings (Shohamy, 2006) by attending closely to Native youth’s discursive practices. In complex settings of language shift, it is often children who set the language policy of the home (Parsons-Yazzie, 1996/1997). “Children make decisions, conscious or not,” Shohamy (2006) points out, “as to the language(s) they want to use at home, with their peers and in the public domain, depending on a variety of considerations” (p. 48). Responding to social pressures that marginalize their languages and identities, youth often act “as tiny social barometers [who are] acutely sensitive to the disfavored status of their elders’ language and . . . choose to speak the more dominant tongue” (Harrison, 2007, p. 8). These decision-making processes, we argue, are *de facto* manifestations of implicit language policies. Informed by shared meanings about language constructed within peer culture, the culture of schooling, and broader frames of reference, this informal policy making profoundly influences language choices. While these processes can (and do) structure language shift, they also foreground the agentive potential of youth in family-, community-, and school-based language planning.

Drawing on data from a large-scale study of language shift among Indigenous communities in the U.S. Southwest, we examine the interaction of micro and macro forces that influence youth language ideologies and practices. We focus on 3 key areas of our research: (a) contemporary language practices in Native American communities; (b) youth communicative repertoires; and (c) youth language attitudes and ideologies.

We preface our discussion with some demo-linguistic background. In 2006, 4.5 million people in the United States (1.5% of the population) identified as American Indian and Alaska Native, including 2.9 million people who reported only American Indian and Alaska Native heritage (DeVoe, Darling-Churchill, & Snyder, 2008, p. 8). There are approximately 1,118,000 Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders in the U.S.—0.1% of the population (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). Native Americans represent more than 560 sovereign Indigenous nations and 619 reservations and Alaska Native villages. In 2000, 72% of American Indians and Alaska Natives 5 years or older reported speaking only English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006, p. 7). However, these numbers should be used with caution, as speakers may overestimate their language ability or deny it due to linguistic discrimination (Krauss, 1998). In addition to Alaska, the majority of Indigenous-language speakers reside in the southwestern United States, where our study was carried out.

## INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH<sup>1</sup>

From 2001 to 2006, we conducted a federally funded study of the impact of Native language shift and retention on American Indian children’s language learning, identity formation, and

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<sup>1</sup>All data, statements, opinions, and conclusions herein reflect the view of the authors and research participants, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funding agency, tribes or tribal councils, the Arizona Board of Regents, or

school performance. The participating sites, selected to represent a cross-section of Indigenous languages, language vitality, demographic characteristics, and school types, included:

1. A Navajo prekindergarten–grade 12 school, Beautiful Mountain (all names are pseudonyms), at which perhaps a third of entering students speak fluent Navajo but where rapid language shift is under way;
2. Two Akimel O’odham (Pima) communities near a large metropolitan area, Ak Wijid and U:s K:ek, within which nearly all Indigenous-language speakers are beyond child-bearing age, and where a second, linguistically unrelated language, Pee Posh (also called Maricopa) is spoken by a handful of elders ( $\leq 10$ );
3. An urban public charter school, Bahidaj High, serving primarily Tohono O’odham teenagers whose heritage language (mutually intelligible with Akimel O’odham) is still spoken in the reservation communities from which students are bused daily, but by increasingly fewer young people; and
4. Three schools in a large urban public school district, Black Foothills, attended by children from a trilingual Indigenous-language/Spanish/English community with 100–150 Indigenous-language speakers, most beyond child-bearing age.<sup>2</sup>

Altogether, the 7 participating schools enrolled 2,039 Native American students.

Each community served by these schools had experienced major upheavals as a result of colonization, and in all cases, coercive English-only schooling has been a leading cause of language shift. As the data show, these experiences left a residue of ambivalent language attitudes, encouraging parents to socialize their children in an alien tongue—English.

### Community-Based Action Research

The study was guided by principles of participatory action research in which inquiry is situated in local concerns and community stakeholders are active agents in the work. At each site, we worked with teams of Indigenous educators identified as community research collaborators (CRCs). The CRCs facilitated entrée and access, validated research protocols, assisted with data collection, and participated in coursework on language planning and ethnographic and sociolinguistic research methods. As we discuss later, the CRCs are also the critical change agents who are applying the study’s findings to local language planning.

### Research Questions, Data Gathering, and Analysis

For the purposes of this article, we focus on 3 key research questions:

1. When, where, and for what purposes do youth in these settings use the Indigenous language and English?
2. What is the nature of the youth’s communicative repertoires?

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<sup>2</sup>At some tribal members’ request and to protect the tribe’s privacy, we do not name the Indigenous nation or language associated with the pseudonymous Black Foothills Unified School District.

3. What attitudes and ideologies do youth hold toward the Indigenous language and English?

We employed an ethnographic, case study approach, making 80 site visits over 5 years to collect data, plan with the CRCs, and report back to tribal councils and other stakeholders. Data collection included demographic records, audiotaped interviews with 168 adults and 62 youth ages 8 through 21, questionnaires (600) to elicit language practices and ideologies, observations of language use and teaching, documents (lesson plans, school mission statements, etc.), and student achievement data. The qualitative data produced more than 3,300 single-spaced pages of text, and of those data, the ethnographic interviews constitute the largest corpus. In structuring interviews, we adapted Seidman's (2006) 3-interview sequence, condensing his tripartite format into single 60- to 90-minute interviews that included:

1. A focused life history, concentrating on language learning at home and school;
2. Details of language use at home, school, and in the community; and
3. Normative assessments of the role of families, community members, tribal governments, and the school in language education planning.

Qualitative data were coded using NVivo 7, a software tool for coding, organizing, and retrieving text data. Quantitative data were analyzed using correlation analysis to determine relations between students' language abilities, the school curriculum, and academic performance. (For a more detailed account of the study methodology, see McCarty, Romero-Little, Warhol, & Zepeda, 2009.)

#### CONTEXTS FOR INDIGENOUS-LANGUAGE USE: "EACH GENERATION IS SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT"

Figure 1 shows educators' assessments ( $N = 102$ ) of the percentage of their students who hear the Native language spoken at home. At Ak Wijid Community School (AWCS) and U:s K:ek Community School (UKCS), both located within a larger Akimel O'odham community with a few Pee Posh speakers, adults reported that 20% to 40% of their students hear Akimel O'odham spoken at home; a few youth have grandparents who speak Pee Posh at home. At Bahidaj High School (BHS) and the three schools in Black Foothills Unified School District (BFUSD), educators reported that up to 60% of their students come from homes where the Indigenous language is spoken. At Beautiful Mountain Community School (BMCS), nearly all educators agreed that 60% to 100% of their students hear Navajo spoken at home.

Figures 2, 3, and 4 show youth responses ( $N = 393$ ) to questionnaire items asking them to identify who speaks the Indigenous language and where they hear it spoken. Youth overwhelmingly reported being "overhearers" of the Indigenous language. By far the largest number of students who reported hearing the Indigenous language "all the time," speaking it, and being spoken *to* by Native-speaking adults were Navajo youth. Tohono O'odham, Akimel O'odham, Pee Posh, and BFUSD students indicated that their parents and grandparents speak the Indigenous language—but typically not *to them*.

As shown in Figure 3, youth are most likely to hear the Indigenous language at home (47% to 90% of students), community cultural events (50% to 66%), and tribal events (60%

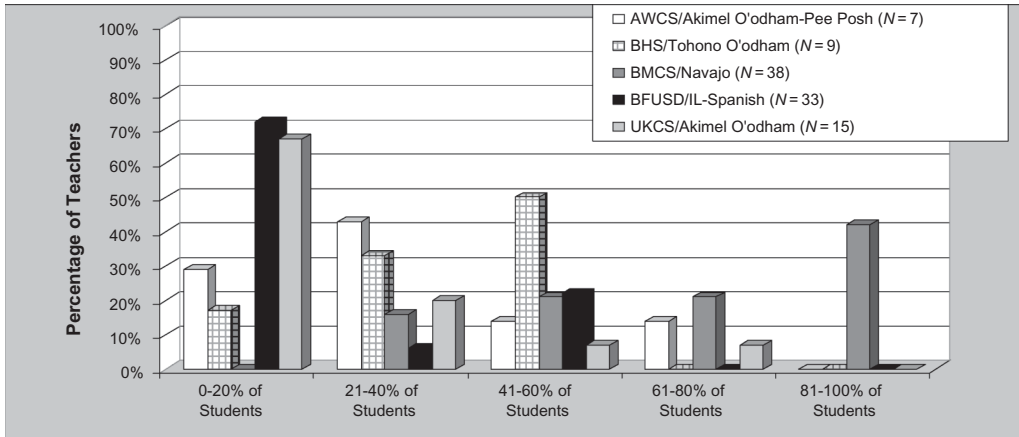


FIGURE 1 Educators' assessments of the percentage of youth who hear the Indigenous language (IL) spoken at home.  
 Source: Native Language Shift and Retention Project Teacher Questionnaires. AWCS = Ak Wijid Community School; BHS = Bahidaj High School; BFUSD = Black Foothills Unified School District; BMCS = Beautiful Mountain Community School; UKCS = U:s K:ek Community School.

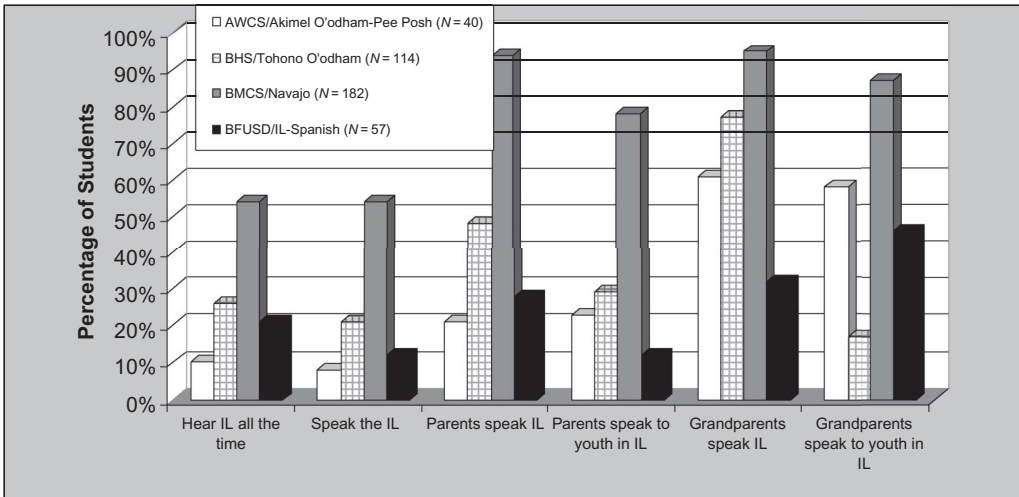


FIGURE 2 Youth self-reports of who speaks the Indigenous language (IL).  
 Source: Native Language Shift and Retention Project Student Questionnaires. AWCS = Ak Wijid Community School; BHS = Bahidaj High School; BFUSD = Black Foothills Unified School District; BMCS = Beautiful Mountain Community School; UKCS = U:s K:ek Community School.

to 81%). Navajo youth also commonly hear Navajo at the local store, the chapter house (the local branch of government), ceremonies, and on regional radio broadcasts. For BFUSD students, church and community religious activities remain strongholds for Indigenous-language use.

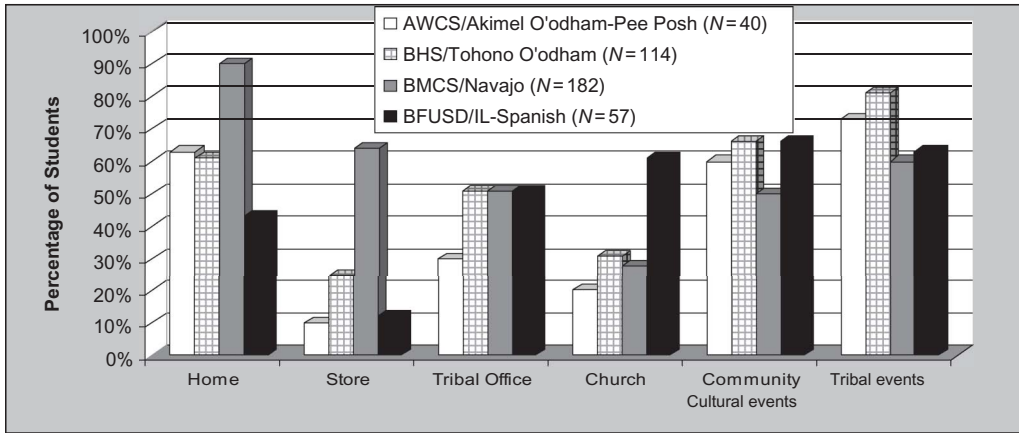


FIGURE 3 Youth self-reports of where they hear the Indigenous language (IL) spoken in the community.

Source: Native Language Shift and Retention Project Student Questionnaires. AWCS = Ak Wijid Community School; BHS = Bahidaj High School; BFUSD = Black Foothills Unified School District; BMCS = Beautiful Mountain Community School; UKCS = U:s K:ek Community School.

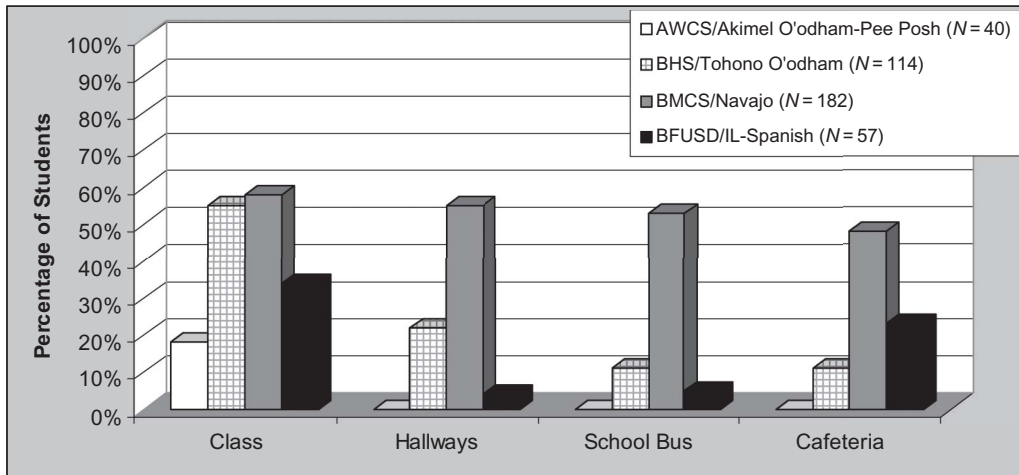


FIGURE 4 Youth self-reports of where they hear the Indigenous language (IL) spoken at school.

Source: Native Language Shift and Retention Project Student Questionnaires. AWCS = Ak Wijid Community School; BHS = Bahidaj High School; BFUSD = Black Foothills Unified School District; BMCS = Beautiful Mountain Community School; UKCS = U:s K:ek Community School.

Figure 4 shows youth reports of Native language use at school. BHS and BMCS had the most school-based Native language use, and 55% to 58% of students, respectively, reported hearing and using Tohono O’odham (BHS) and Navajo (BMCS) in class. Twenty-two percent of BHS students and 55% of BMCS students reported hearing the Indigenous language informally in the

hallways. In contrast, no AWCS students reported hearing Akimel O’odham or Pee Posh outside the classrooms designated for Indigenous-language teaching.

These questionnaire data are amplified by interviews. At Ak Wijid, where all adult participants agreed that few students speak Akimel O’odham, a bilingual educator nonetheless observed that 2 students who were experiencing difficulty at testing time had family members who “speak O’odham all the time.” The teacher correctly surmised that these students “must speak O’odham” but were “just not speaking [it in school]” (interview, November 3, 2005). A 12-year-old revealed that he had learned Pee Posh and O’odham from his grandmother as a young child and that both languages are spoken at home (interview, June 2, 2004). A 13-year-old described a peer whose “mom talks [Akimel O’odham] to her and she can understand” (interview, June 1, 2004).

In BFUSD, youth’s sociolinguistic environments include the Indigenous language, English, and Spanish. One youth reported that at home his parents and grandparents speak “sometimes [the Indigenous language], sometimes Spanish, and then English” (interview, April 2, 2004). Youth also described parents using different languages in different domains: “My dad speaks English when he is working . . . and my mom speaks both . . . English and [the Indigenous language]. But if they were to go outside [the reservation], they would speak English” (interview, May 11, 2004). Similarly, youth reported that different languages are used with family members of different generations, as reflected in one youth’s account that her father “talks [the Indigenous language] . . . to the elders” but uses Spanish or English with younger generations. A trilingual BFUSD educator summed up these language practices this way: The elders speak Spanish, the Indigenous language, “and maybe a little English”; the “next generation speaks English, Spanish, and [the Indigenous language]” and is literate in all three; while the “generation that is coming up . . . is English only. . . . So we have a trilingual family but each generation is slightly different than the one before it” (interview, March 30, 2004).

At Beautiful Mountain, educators noted that their Navajo-dominant students come from more rural areas—“the ones that live kind of way out . . . without electricity and running water”—reinforcing the pejorative stereotypes identified by Lee (2007) that associate speaking Navajo with “backwardness,” poverty, and lack of Western education (interview, April 28, 2003). And, while Beautiful Mountain adults did not agree on the numbers of students who are fluent in Navajo, many Navajo youth insisted that “everyone speaks Navajo out here” (interview, May 5, 2004). These responses are borne out in the questionnaire data, as shown in Figures 3 and 4.

### Dynamic, Heteroglossic Linguistic Ecologies

From early- to late-shift settings, these data show that Native American youth are growing up in highly complex, heteroglossic sociolinguistic environments (García, 2009). In their homes and communities, children are likely to hear varieties of one or more Indigenous languages spoken by older family members, alongside multiple varieties of English and, in some cases, Spanish. There is a continuum of Indigenous-language use in these communities, with the greatest and most variegated use within the Navajo community and the least in the Akimel O’odham and Pee Posh settings. Yet within all communities there is an intricate interweaving of different languages and varieties for distinct purposes, depending on sibling order, relative age, social status, and social function and domain (the strongest domains being ceremonial and cultural activities and the weakest being the home).



Although English is the language of choice in both school and community for most youth, and the language youth say they are “most comfortable” speaking, their English repertoires are complicated, with different varieties being used for different purposes. The school is a primary domain for academic English—a variety that may have little currency in the home and community. As the next section indicates, this is of consequence in school labeling practices and students’ performance on English standardized tests.

### YOUTH COMMUNICATIVE REPERTOIRES: “THEY’RE ALL DIVIDED”

Our data on youth’s Indigenous-language abilities derive from self-reports on questionnaires and in interviews, a methodology validated in other Indigenous settings where formal language assessments are unavailable (Holm & Holm, 1995; Platero, 2001; Spolsky, 1975). On these measures, adults characterized youth’s Native language abilities as limited, with approximately 40% to 100% of educators ( $N = 102$ ) reporting that fewer than 20% of their students were fluent speakers of an Indigenous language. Interview data shed further light on these data. Akimel O’odham educators agreed that although “there’s probably a few [students] that know [Akimel O’odham] . . . but to be able to speak fluently . . . I doubt if we have any” (interview, May 14, 2003). In more than 25 years in the community, one teacher reported knowing “only one student that was completely fluent in O’odham” (interview, February 27, 2004).

Educators of Navajo students expressed more divergent views of their students’ Navajo abilities, with some insisting that *none* of their students were fluent speakers and others judging the number to be 70% to 90%. One Beautiful Mountain educator summed up Navajo students’ language proficiencies this way:

I’d say one-third have a hard time understanding English. Then, one-third . . . will understand [Navajo] and speak some, and one-third [are] fluent [in Navajo]. So they’re all divided (interview, April 24, 2003).

At the same time, educators agreed that their students had receptive abilities in the Indigenous language, acquired through in- and out-of-school activities.

Educators’ views of their students’ Indigenous-language abilities were poignantly illustrated in the metaphors they chose to describe the Indigenous language: “There is this *afterglow* of a language,” one administrator said (interview, May 11, 2004). “There are only *remnants* of an active [Indigenous] language,” another educator maintained (field notes, October 28, 2005). The Indigenous language is “*withering away*,” yet another educator remarked (interview, May 11, 2004).

With some exceptions, students’ self-reported Native language abilities mirrored adults’ assessments. At Ak Wijid, only 3 students (8% of those sampled) listed Akimel O’odham alongside English as a language spoken fluently. At Bahidaj High, 24 students (21% of those surveyed) listed English and Tohono O’odham as languages in which they were orally proficient. At Black Foothills, 7 students (12%) said they spoke the Indigenous language fluently along with English and/or Spanish. The highest percentage of youth who claimed to be fluent speakers of the Indigenous language were Navajo, nearly half of whom reported speaking English and Navajo fluently, including some who identified Navajo as their primary language. In interviews, Navajo youth consistently rated the number of fluent Navajo-speaking peers as

75% to 80%. Across all sites, a small percentage of students reported being able to read and write the Indigenous language, with the highest percentages at BHS and BMCS where regular Native language classes were in place.

Data on students' English abilities derive from criterion-referenced and standardized tests, questionnaires, and interviews. On questionnaires, educators of O'odham students identified all their students as fluent in English. The exceptions were students whose primary language is Spanish or Navajo. At the same time, a significant number of students were identified as LEP on the basis of their test performance. In combination with their assessments of students' Native language abilities, these designations led some educators to characterize youth as "semi-lingual," "language-delayed," or lacking proficiency in *either* the Native language or English—characterizations we take up in the following sections.

### Hybrid Communicative Repertoires

As the study unfolded, we were increasingly impressed with the hybridity of youth's language practices. These multiple and intersecting discursive qualities are captured by the notions of *communicative repertoires*, *pluriliteracies*, and *translanguaging*. The construct of communicative repertoire, Martin-Jones and Jones (2000) say, signals varying degrees of expertise in different languages and literacies and "the complex ways in which people draw on the language and literacy resources available to them as they take on different identities in different domains of their lives" (p. 2). Notions of pluriliteracies (García, Bartlett, & Kleifgen, 2007) and translanguaging (García, 2009) get at the fact that "languages are not compartmentalized in a diglossic situation, but rather they overlap, intersect, and interconnect" in a fusion of languages, dialects, and semiotic systems, all of which are part of an individual's and a group's communicative repertoire (García et al., 2007, pp. 10–11, 12).

In short, the youth draw upon multiple semiotic systems for different purposes in specific contexts. Their communicative repertoires include different linguistic expertise (receptive, spoken, written) in diverse varieties of one or more Indigenous languages, English, and, in some cases, Spanish. We did *not* find "semi-lingual" children, although that stereotype persists. As we discuss later, although these communicative repertoires are certain signs of language shift, they also represent resources that, with proper support, can be strategically (re)positioned to counter the shift.

### LANGUAGE ATTITUDES AND IDEOLOGIES: "I WOULD LIKE TO KNOW MY CULTURAL LANGUAGE"

The concepts of language attitudes and ideologies have been well discussed in the literature (Baker, 1992, 2006). According to King (2000), "While a language attitude is . . . a specific response to certain aspects of a particular language, language ideology . . . is a set of beliefs concerning a particular language, or . . . language in general" (p. 168). To this we would add that both attitudes and ideologies invoke tacit assumptions about language varieties that index speakers' social status, and in this sense, they are hegemonic. As Tollefson (2006) notes, it is by virtue of their common sense naturalization that language ideologies construct and reinforce linguistic and social inequality (p. 47).

The Indigenous youth in our study expressed both positive and negative attitudes and ideologies toward English and the Indigenous language. On the one hand, English was viewed as universal and necessary; on the other hand, it was viewed as a language of colonization. Participants regularly referenced sentimental attachments to their heritage languages, emphasizing their centrality as markers of unique Indigenous identities. At the same time, they described feelings of Indigenous-language insecurity and shame, as we discuss below.

### English as Necessary versus English as a Language of Conquest

Not surprisingly, youth and adults placed a utilitarian value on English, describing it as a “business language” and a “language of survival.” As one educator stated, “This is the 21st century . . . [and] they [youth] have to compete in the dominant society, which means you have to compete in English” (interview, December 13, 2005). Asked whether knowing English was important and why, these were typical youth responses:

Because it is something most people know how to speak (interview, June 1, 2004).

Yeah, because mostly everyone around speaks some English (interview, June 1, 2004).

If I go to college, I have to talk to professors and things . . . in English instead of my [Native language] (interview, April 1, 2006).

English was also viewed as a marker of high social status. “I think as they get older,” a grandmother said, “they think they are more civilized if they can just speak English [only]” (interview, April 9, 2006). The corollary was a high value placed on “standard” (schooled) English: “I remember people [making fun of Navajo speakers] because they had that broken English accent,” a Navajo teacher said, “so in my mind . . . I was going to learn to speak [standard/schooled] English” (interview, May 14, 2003).

But participants also viewed English as an alien, intrusive language—a tool of assimilation and conquest. These language ideologies were repeatedly expressed in the context of Anglo-American schooling: “Some [parents and grandparents] had really bad experiences in school, so they said, ‘Forget it [speaking the Indigenous language]. . . . It’s all ‘English, English, English’” (interview, May 10, 2004). Youth described these experiences in trenchant terms, as in the statement of a 16-year-old who remarked that English had literally killed his ancestors with words: “A long time ago they [Whites] killed Navajos with their White tongue even though we don’t know what they said” (interview, May 5, 2004).

### Indigenous Language as a Source of Pride versus Shame

Youth expressed deeply held sentimental attachments to the heritage language, binding it iconically to local Indigenous identities. Even those who did not claim to speak the Indigenous language referred to the Indigenous language as “my cultural language,” “my blood language,” and a “foundation . . . to back you up.” The ties between language and identity are also evident in the contrasts youth drew between English and the Indigenous language, as in one youth’s comment that, “I really *am* speaking English instead of my culture” (interview, June 1, 2004).

Youth placed a utilitarian value on the Indigenous language and bilingualism/multilingualism—a value not typically associated with minoritized languages or their speakers. “I get the best of both worlds,” a high school student stated, adding that he wanted to become a medical doctor, “and to do that I have to know how to communicate with patients in Navajo and . . . English” (interview, May 5, 2004). Knowing Navajo “gives you a chance to communicate with elders,” another youth said, “and it gives you a chance to listen to what they have to say and learn stuff from them in Navajo” (interview, May 6, 2004).

In these discourses, youth voiced concern about the future of their heritage languages and the role of families, communities, and schools in language maintenance and revitalization. Maintaining Navajo is important, a young man said, “because the language is dying out. . . . Navajo is supposed to be spoken at all times in the house . . . and [parents] should not be treating their Navajo like this” (interview, May 5, 2004). “Right now, we’re losing it,” a Tohono O’odham youth said, “so it’s very important for me to learn about it and to speak it” (interview, April 19, 2004).

At the same time, youth and adults acknowledged language practices that ran counter to these desires. Maintaining the Indigenous language “is extremely important,” a teacher said, “[but] in my household, it’s all English” (interview, April 29, 2004). “I always hear people say, ‘Oh you need to treasure the language,’” another teacher stated, “but when it comes . . . to their own homes . . . they speak English” (interview, April 29, 2004).

Further, not all youth shared sentiments of heritage-language pride. “Jamie,” for instance, whose primary language is English, insisted that the Indigenous language and culture are “just the past” (interview, May 5, 2004). Yet Jamie was trying to learn his heritage language in school. These contradictory ideological currents run throughout our data. One educator reported that some students had told her, “I’m not going to learn [the Native language]. . . . I hate it” (interview, December 12, 2003). Another teacher described the Indigenous language as “dead” to many of her students, stating their rationale as: “‘We live in an English-speaking society. Why should we learn this? What are the benefits?’” (interview, May 14, 2005).

Asked to reflect on these negative attitudes and ideologies, participants repeatedly referenced the legacy of colonial schooling. “Parents said they did not speak to their children in Navajo because of shame and guilt,” an educator stated (interview, March 27, 2003). “It’s being told that [the Indigenous language] is stupid,” a 16-year-old declared, adding, “you . . . forsake who you are, you give up having to learn [the Indigenous language] . . . in order to accommodate the mainstream life” (interview, May 6, 2004).

As we have reported elsewhere, linguistic shame and guilt lead some youth to deny their Native language abilities. In the context of peer and school culture, a youth stated that young people “are judged by other people that speak English more clear than they do, and they . . . feel dirty about the whole thing, and that’s why they put on a fake front and try to make people believe they speak more English than [the Indigenous language]” (interview, May 5, 2004). Students won’t speak the Indigenous language, a teacher reported, “because . . . they might be made fun of” by their peers (interview, May 27, 2005). When youth who speak the Indigenous language “are around others who do not [speak the language] . . . they are made fun of and . . . are too ashamed to keep carrying on the conversation in their language,” an elder concurred (interview, August 9, 2006).

Feelings of language shame are compounded by youth insecurities about their language abilities. “They’re afraid they’re going to make mistakes,” a Navajo educator explained, “and if they

do, they think that students will start laughing about them” (interview, May 27, 2003). These findings are supported by studies in this theme issue and other recent Indigenous youth language research (cf. Lee, 2007; Meek, 2007; Nicholas, 2008; Tulloch, 2004; Wyman, 2004).

### IMPLICIT LANGUAGE POLICIES

In this section we consider the mechanisms (Shohamy, 2006) through which youth in these settings construct language policy in everyday social practice. We are informed by the work of Shohamy (2006) and others who argue that language policy “can exist at all levels of decision making about languages . . . as small as individuals and families [who make] decisions about the languages to be used by individuals, at home, in public spaces, as well as in larger entities, such as schools” (p. 48; see also Spolsky, 2004). In this sense language policy can be conceptualized as implicit and informal, and therefore “more difficult to detect” (Shohamy, 2006, p. 50). For the cases profiled here, these implicit policy making mechanisms can be detected within a social complex characterized by (a) dynamic, heteroglossic linguistic ecologies, (b) hybrid communicative repertoires, and (c) conflicting language ideologies. How youth and adults negotiate this sociolinguistic terrain can abet language shift, but may also open new “ideological and implementational spaces” (Hornberger, 2006) for heritage language reclamation. We turn now to consider these different possibilities.

Data from this large-scale study show that language shift is much more complicated than the mere replacement of one language by another. Even in communities with few Native speakers, children are likely to be “overhearers” and “understanders” of one or more Indigenous language(s) and varieties thereof. These varieties mark speakers’ locale, age, and social status – knowledge tacitly acquired by children in their everyday social interactions, and which, when asked, they thoughtfully articulate. Some youth have high levels of spoken proficiency and, through bilingual education programs, are developing literacy in their heritage language. Meanwhile, they are adding to their communicative repertoires multiple varieties of English and, in some cases, Spanish. These practices, as Martin-Jones and Jones (2000) point out, are “observable in specific events, but also operate on a socio-cognitive level” (p. 5).

Yet, for most youth in our study, English is the language of choice. This too is complicated, as different varieties are used for different purposes. The school is the primary domain for academic English—a variety that children may have little exposure to outside of school. As a consequence, youth may be stigmatized as “semi-lingual” or “language delayed”—school labeling practices that devalue their communicative repertoires and create a vicious cycle of less support for their heritage language development.

This situation is complicated by ambivalent and conflicting language attitudes and ideologies. Asked whether they believe it is important to learn to speak their heritage language, youth in our study overwhelmingly (87%;  $N = 336$ ) responded that it is “very important.” Many spoke repeatedly of the symbolic link between the Indigenous language and a unique Indigenous identity. Further, they expressed concern that local Indigenous identities were in danger of being left behind. At the same time, youth acknowledged feelings of linguistic shame, tracing this to the punitive English-only schooling endured by their elders and ongoing linguistic and racial discrimination that associates Indigenous languages with poverty and “backwardness”—as one youth said, “like they haven’t experienced anything in the world” (interview, May 5,

2004). On a daily basis, virtually every societal message these youth receive—from the language privileged in their print environment, in the media, and via technology to overt and covert schooling practices that parse “academic” (empowering) knowledge from “traditional” (disempowering) knowledge—conveys the supremacy of English. Youth take up these messages in diverse ways—resisting, accommodating, and sometimes feeling compelled to “forsake who they are.”

Within their peer groups and interactions with adults, youth may, as a consequence, cloak their language abilities or their interest as heritage-language learners. The hybridity of their communicative repertoires may also give rise to linguistic insecurities. The net effect of this sociolinguistic complex is to curtail opportunities for rich, natural, peer and child-adult interaction in the Indigenous language—and to construct a de facto policy that the Indigenous language is “better left unspoken” (Pye, 1992, p. 80).

### LANGUAGE POLICY AND YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

In the policy making scenario above, heteroglossia, hybridity, and translanguaging are constructed in negative terms, as evidence of language deficits, shame, and hindrance. How would this scenario be transformed if we employ a language-as-resource approach (Ruiz, 1984), taking seriously youth’s expressed desires to maintain their heritage languages, foregrounding their critical capacities and agentive potential, and cultivating their sociolinguistic strengths?

Schools and educators can play a vital role in these transformative possibilities (Hornberger, 2008). There is growing evidence that Indigenous/heritage-language education strengthens children’s acquisition of the Indigenous language while promoting healthy ethnic identities and high levels of academic achievement (Fillerup, 2005; Hermes, 2007; Johnson & Legatz, 2006; May & Hill, 2008; Wilson & Kamanā, 2006). Our research indicates that in dynamic settings of language shift, realizing these outcomes requires reframing explicit, official policies to reflect and valorize the heteroglossic linguistic ecologies in which Indigenous children are growing up. As Wilson and Kawai’ae’a (2007) write for Hawaiian-medium education, a crucial component is what is called in Hawaiian *honua*: “places, circumstances, structures where use of [the Indigenous language] is dominant” (p. 38). Lee (2007) adds the need to strategically reposition peer pressure from a negative to a positive force by creating opportunities for youth to use their heritage language to engage issues of relevance in their everyday lives: “If [the Indigenous language] is to attain status equal to English in school contexts, it needs to be related to the world of today’s teenagers” (p. 29).

We are witnessing the beginnings of these possibilities at some study sites. At a school with a limited (1/2-hour per week) Indigenous-language program, the CRCs mounted a community-wide language planning effort that included teacher workshops on “*honua-like*” Indigenous-language immersion and Saturday language classes for children, youth, and adults. These initiatives are working their way back into the schools via their teacher-participants and a newly created office of tribal language and culture headed by one of the CRCs. At another school, the CRCs are working closely with parents and school leaders to implement a voluntary Indigenous-language immersion program in the elementary grades. The first class began in 2007 with 8 children; by the end of the school year, 15 students were enrolled, and the following school year, 3 immersion

classes were in place from kindergarten to grade 2. The school continues to expand immersion into higher grades, including for youth at the middle school.

By working collaboratively with families to create opportunities for young children to learn their heritage language, these language planning efforts reshape the ideological and sociolinguistic terrain for the coming generation of adolescents. These projects are also ripe with possibilities for engaging today's youth in the language planning process. "I want to share my language with little kids," a high school student told us, adding that she felt personal responsibility for this because "their families don't always do it" (interview, May 5, 2004).

The conditions in which young people's decisions about language are made can alternately empower them to take the risks necessary to sustain a minoritized language or constrain their choices and imagined futures. Along with other authors in this theme issue, our research shows youth to be informed, thoughtful, and vested stakeholders in Indigenous language reclamation (cf. Tulloch, 2004). Moreover, they are positioned as *de facto* language policy makers whose choices are highly consequential for future generations of language learners. But youth cannot single-handedly counter the myriad pressures on their language practices; they need support from more powerful language policy authorizing agents.

Community-based action research of the type discussed here can be a galvanizing force for bringing together educators, parents, and other community stakeholders to address the pressures on youth language choices. The next step is inviting youth directly into these language planning processes, thereby carving out new ideological and implementational space (Hornberger, 2006) for youth self-empowerment. As one youth in our study emphasized, this type of research "is a really a good thing . . . [It is] finding a way to bring the language back to the Native people" (interview, May 5, 2004).

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