Who can speak Lenape in Pennsylvania? Authentication and language learning in an endangered language community of practice☆

Miranda Weinberg, Haley De Korne*

Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania, 3700 Walnut St., Philadelphia, PA 19104-6216, USA

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

How are new speakers of an endangered language created? In this paper we draw on a three-year ethnographic case study to explore the processes through which a group of learners at a Pennsylvania college came to be identified as speakers of Lenape, a language indigenous to the eastern United States. Using a communities of practice framework, we analyze how language learning was facilitated and how the identities of community members were negotiated and contested through processes of authentication. A community of practice lens affords a useful framework for understanding how this successful learning community functioned, and for identifying factors that may benefit other language revitalization initiatives.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Becoming a speaker of a language, whether through unconscious acquisition or intentional effort, is a multi-dimensional process that potentially implies changes in both communicative competence and identity. Becoming a speaker of an endangered language is often an even more complex process due to contestations around identity, authenticity, and what it means to be a speaker. In this paper we explore the processes through which a group of learners came to be identified as speakers of Lenape, a language indigenous to Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York states in the U.S., drawing on a three-year ethnographic case study. Using a *communities of practice* framework (Lave and Wenger, 1991), we illustrate dynamics of identity authentication and language learning in a language revitalization initiative located at a college. Through ethnographic observations, interviews, and documents we describe how this community of practice, which included both heritage and non-heritage learners, facilitated language learning. We also describe how the identities of community members were negotiated and legitimated. We argue that a community of practice is a useful framework for understanding how this successful learning community functioned, and for identifying factors that may benefit other language revitalization initiatives. Following discussion of several key concepts in the paper, we describe the context, methods, and turn to an analysis of how

the community of practice formed among Lenape students at Swarthmore College served to foster language learning and authenticate speech and speakers.

1.1. The authentication of speakers and language competence

In recent decades there has been growing interest in the promotion of endangered languages (e.g. Hale et al., 1992; Hinton and Hale, 2001; Hornberger, 2008; Krauss, 1998). A diminishing number of speakers is one of the standard symptoms of language endangerment, and consequently many communities consider a growth in the number of speakers as a core goal of efforts that aim to maintain or revitalize languages.[1] Who is, or can become, identified as a speaker of a language is a complex, negotiated process. There are numerous factors contributing to the rocky terrain that a speaker or learner of an endangered language must navigate to be identified as such, many of which are discussed by other contributions to this volume. Here we touch on several factors of particular relevance to our case study of the Lenape language community in Pennsylvania.

Essentialist perspectives on language and identity, fostered by (post)-colonial nation-states' efforts to control social categories, behavior, and communication norms, are dominant in many parts of the world (Calvet, 1974; Cameron, 2007; Duchene and Heller, 2007). These perspectives influence what it means to "speak a language" or "have a certain identity," often assuming a fixed relationship between the two. For instance, in the colonial and post-colonial era U.S. politicians believed that "by educating the children of these tribes in the English language […] civilization would have followed at once" (Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1868, p. 43). Speaking only English was perceived as a way to facilitate the cultural assimilation (or "civilization" in the eyes of the dominant culture) of Indigenous Americans and as a prerequisite to being a legitimate member of the nation-state. This one-language-one-identity ideology resulted in a policy of language extermination through boarding schools that had a significant impact on the decline in the use of Indigenous languages across the U.S. (McCarty, 2013). Although human rights and self-determination discourses have gained ground in the U.S. and elsewhere (e.g. Native American Languages Act, 1990; UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007), essentialist or determinist ideologies of language, nation, and identity remain common (Flores, 2014). For example, a 2014 Coca-cola advertisement that featured a patriotic song, "America the Beautiful," sung in seven different languages (including one Native American language) resulted in negative public reactions and the creation of the slogan #SpeakAmerican on social media (Sacks, 2014). This illustrates that a one-nation, one-language, one-identity ideology remains a reality that Indigenous language speakers and learners have to cope with today, as they did centuries ago.[2] Establishing the value of Indigenous languages (and multilingualism in general), and the right to learn and use them publicly is an on-going battle in the U.S.

Aside from navigating societal ideologies of monolingualism and cultural homogeneity, participants in language revitalization are also subject to the categorizations established by academic disciplines and popular media. Speakers of endangered languages are often categorized through strategies of enumeration: binaries (speakers, non-speakers), tallies (an estimated 2000 speakers of language A), ordinal arrangements (a 'first language'/'mother tongue' speaker of X, the 'last speaker' of Y), or other forms of calculation (50% of an ethnically or geographically defined population Q speaks language R) (Dobrin et al., 2007; Hill, 2002; Moore et al., 2010). In addition to counting speakers, accounts of language endangerment in popular media and documentary linguistics also often fuse language with identity into one seemingly static whole, adhering to monolingual norms and echoing nation-state discourses (Duchene and Heller, 2007; Muehlmann, 2008, 2012). Although many scholars advocate constructivist or post-modern understandings of language and identity as shifting, performed phenomena (e.g. Harris, 1990; Hopper, 1998; Makoni and Pennycook, 2007), documentary linguistics typically adheres to fixed and quantitative frameworks for understanding speaker status (Dobrin et al., 2007).

The discipline of applied linguistics, in particular second language acquisition, has also become associated with language endangerment in recent years (Cope and Penfield, 2011). This discipline constructs similarly essentializing perspectives of speakers and learners, traditionally separating the "native" or "target" speaker from the learner and focusing on the acquisition of standardized languages among individuals in formal, monolingual settings (Pennycook, 2001; Rampton, 1990). Flexible notions of speakerhood, incorporating identity, motivation, and other contextual factors, have been introduced into applied linguistics (e.g. Norton and Toohey, 2011); however, speakers are still commonly ranked based on quantitative and monolingual targets, including conceptualizations of accuracy, fluency, and complexity (Housen and Kuiken, 2009).

Endangered language education often involves factors not considered by mainstream documentary or applied linguistic research, including non-standardized speech and writing practices, participants with varying degrees of reception and production abilities, few formal learning materials, the influence of multiple languages in multilingual settings, and unpredictable institutional supports (Meek, 2010; Moore, 2012; Muehlmann, 2012). In our study of the Pennsylvania Lenape reclamation movement our aim is not to count or rank speakers of Lenape (as in much documentary linguistics) nor to test learners' abilities against an idealized target norm (as in much applied linguistics), but rather to explore how a group of learners acquired language abilities, and how they were (or were not) perceived to be speakers of the language. In this way,

---

[1] In this paper we use language revitalization as an umbrella term to refer to the range of responses to language endangerment that seek to reverse the trend of diminished use of certain languages.

[2] The issue of Indigenous identity in the U.S. is fraught with political disputes over tribal status, among other issues, and is beyond the scope of this paper. We maintain our focus on identity within a language learning community, in this case the Swarthmore College class.