Language affiliation and ethnolinguistic identity in Chickasaw language revitalization

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

While the primary focus in language revitalization centers on fluent Speakers, such movements occur in a wider community of partial speakers, language learners, and non-speakers. In this paper, I explore the linguistic and semiotic strategies within the Chickasaw Nation in Oklahoma that establish an ethnolinguistic definition of Chickasaw community membership, focusing on how such strategies are utilized by those who do not hold Speaker status. Specifically, I demonstrate how non-Speakers take up and reinforce ethnolinguistic language ideologies that connect them to the Chickasaw language through discourses of language affiliation via (1) a familial relationship to Speakers; (2) some level of Chickasaw language learning or activism; and/or (3) a familial relationship to the language learners and activists in the second category.

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1. Introduction

Native American communities, like most endangered language communities, face a linguistic double bind in which they come up against competing ideologies that at once demand the use of so called dominant languages in order to be considered local, national, and global citizens while simultaneously expecting them to maintain the use of their heritage languages in order to be deemed authentically indigenous. For generations, overt and covert language policies dramatically halted the transmission of indigenous languages to younger generations and limited the domains in which existing speakers could use their languages. Speaking other dominant languages such as English or Spanish, rather than indigenous languages, was the path toward economic, educational, and social success. At the same time, ethnolinguistic ideologies that equate indigenous identity with indigenous language use de-authenticate Native Americans who do not speak their heritage language. In his commentary on a special journal issue dedicated to "Indian Languages in Unexpected Places," Philip Deloria concludes that, "when it comes to language, it seems clear—at least in terms of expectations—that Indians are in a no-win situation" (2011: 175). Language revitalization, then, is often an attempt to disrupt this linguistic double bind by creating opportunities for community members to learn their heritage language(s) and broadening the contexts in which those languages can again be used (see also Shulist, 2015). In the case of the Chickasaw Nation, the first half of the bind is undermined by reconnecting economic and social success to speaking the Chickasaw language, even as the second half of the bind is reinforced through the promotion of an ethnolinguistic ideology that constructs the Chickasaw language as a primary element of Chickasaw culture and identity.

Within the history of the Chickasaw Nation, a seemingly unending barrage of obstacles has contributed to the decline in Chickasaw language use and transmission, including repression-oriented language and education policies; competition with

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dominant languages for association with prestige, economic gain, and educational success; the limited financial and political resources dedicated to linguistic endeavors; and the diasporization of potential and existing Speakers. Utilizing newly acquired economic resources, the Chickasaw Nation is working to counteract these historical realities through the promotion of language documentation and revitalization and efforts to connect socioeconomic value to Speaker status. Even as language revitalization efforts in the Chickasaw Nation work to challenge the first half of the linguistic double bind, which devalues indigenous languages in modern socioeconomic marketplaces, they also reinforce the second half of the double bind, which defines Chickasaw identity in terms of ethnolinguistic ideologies. In the case of the Chickasaw Nation, language revitalization efforts hinge strongly on connecting Chickasaw identity to the language. While much of the focus in language revitalization efforts centers around fluent Speakers, such activities occur in a wider community dynamic of partial speakers, language learners, and non-speakers who nonetheless support language revitalization. In this paper, I explore the various linguistic and semiotic strategies within the Chickasaw Nation in Southeastern Oklahoma that establish an ethnolinguistic definition of Chickasaw community membership with a focus on how such strategies are utilized by those who do not hold Speaker status within the community. As Patrick Eisenlohr (2004) argues, the "use of ancestral languages for creating ethnolinguistic identities represents a different way of figuring community" (81). This paper thus examines how language affiliates negotiate the ethnolinguistic framework of individual and community identity. In doing so I demonstrate that holding Speaker status within a community and having the ability to speak or understand a language are not always the same thing, even while the social prestige granted to Speakers is available to those without those linguistic skills.

2. Methodology and context

When examining language revitalization efforts, any number of social, economic, and political dynamics must be taken into account, as they determine what is possible. As with any social or political movement, language revitalization efforts are inherently contextualized by the communities in which they occur. These contexts include everything from the day-to-day lived experiences of community members to overarching governmental systems and policies at all levels. Whether a community's leadership supports revitalization endeavors, structurally or economically, can dramatically affect how such efforts are executed, and who is able to participate in them. For example, in her research on the revalorization and revitalization of the Kaska language in Yukon Territory, Canada, Barbra Meek (2010) demonstrates that social shifts have the potential to constrain as well as support language revitalization efforts. In this case, policies that promote Speakers may render others invisible or even stigmatized, thereby creating a disjuncture between the overall goals of language revitalization and its ultimate impact in the community. Thus, language revitalization efforts must be examined each in their own unique contexts of development and implementation. This paper explores the ways that language ideologies regarding the status and valuation of Speakers intersect with language revitalization efforts that link the Chickasaw language to an authentic, or essential, Chickasaw identity.

This research developed from ongoing fieldwork that I conducted with my tribe, the Chickasaw Nation, as a linguist and researcher at several stages of the Chickasaw language revitalization and documentation process, as well as being informed by my personal and familial membership in the community. The majority of the research was conducted over a period of 5 years (2007–2011), amounting to over 16 months total in the field in Southeastern Oklahoma. During this time, I was based in Ada, Oklahoma, which serves as the government headquarters of the Chickasaw Nation. The nature of the research and my role as a researcher have varied throughout this time, ranging from working as a summer intern in the History and Culture Department (before the formation of the Chickasaw Language Department) to collecting narratives and oral histories from Speakers as a contract linguist, and finally conducting ethnographic fieldwork of the many facets of language revitalization within the tribe.

Throughout my fieldwork, my access to tribal events was in many ways facilitated by my community membership, even as it became contextualized through my research interests. This is particularly true of my access to arenas of daily life not specifically related to language revitalization, such as the tribe's recreation center, hospital, and library, as well as my access to materials available specifically to citizens: the Chickasaw Times newspaper, the yearly calendar, and even a swag bag from the annual meeting. My research was also strongly influenced by my relationship to my maternal grandfather, with whom I lived for the majority of my research. I regularly ran into the people at places such as the grocery store, Wal-Mart, and the local park whom I had encountered in participant observation—for instance, past or future interviewees, providers of narratives in Chickasaw, and language students. Thus, my familial and personal relationships throughout the community were integral to my experience both in the interactions I had with people and in the networks I had available to me in obtaining interviews.

My analysis includes data from fieldnotes produced from participant observation and audio recordings of interviews with a range of individuals and small groups including Speakers of Chickasaw; parents and relatives of children in language programs; employees of the Chickasaw language department; participants in the various language activities; and individuals involved in other arenas of cultural revitalization. Interviews were conducted during the latter part of my fieldwork in 2011. It should be noted that many of the individuals interviewed fit into several of these categories, and not all identified as Chickasaw (politically or ethnically). A variety of additional media collected also provided invaluable material. These include language materials produced by the Chickasaw language department and items produced by the Chickasaw Nation such as the Chickasaw Times newspaper, books, t-shirts, and recordings of television commercials produced by the Nation. My aim here is to capture identity negotiation at both a micro and macro level in order to uncover how ideologies bound up with language revitalization efforts inform our understanding of the relationship between language and identity: that is, to