



What is the difference between indigenous and immigrant heritage languages in the United States?

Erin Haynes, University of California, Berkeley

Indigenous heritage languages are spoken by people whose ancestors originally inhabited the area that is now the United States (herein after referred to as Native Americans). Immigrant heritage languages are spoken by people who immigrated to the United States after European colonization. While indigenous and immigrant heritage languages have many things in common, there are two important reasons for drawing a distinction between them: indigenous languages (herein after referred to as Native American languages) receive special protection by the United States legal system. They are, at the same time, in danger of dying out with little hope of revitalization if children do not learn them.

Linguists have affirmed that all of the world's languages are complex and rule-governed forms of communication, and that no language is inherently better than any other at expressing human thought. However, Native American languages receive special legal status in the United States. Such legal status is remarkable because the United States doesn't have a national language policy, and it exists because the ancestors of the speakers of these languages lived on this continent long before other peoples arrived. The special legal status is also meant to help protect Native American languages. Because these languages originated on this continent, if people stop speaking them here, they may never be spoken anywhere again. While there are many noteworthy efforts to bring back severely endangered or sleeping languages, it is a tremendously difficult task, and much work remains.

In fact, the large majority of the remaining 175 Native American languages are in danger of losing all of their speakers; only around 10% are still commonly learned by children. Many languages have only a few elderly speakers left (Krauss 1996). The reasons for this loss are complex, but it is due in large part to the colonial practices of the past three centuries. Speakers of many Native American languages died of new diseases like smallpox, brought by the Europeans. Many other speakers were killed for their land. Still others were forcefully moved to reservations, where they might be separated from other members of their family and tribe, and no longer had anyone to speak with. In the mid-19th century, the United States government began a policy of assimilation, under which Native American children were forced to attend boarding schools, where they would be harshly punished for speaking any language but English. Under these conditions, it is a wonder that so many languages survived this long, and it is a testament to the strength of the people who continued to speak them. (See Reyhner & Eder, 1992, for more information about the history of Native American education.)

Today, much like other heritage languages in the United States, Native American languages face stiff competition from English, the de facto language of government, media, and most educational and business institutions (Crawford 1996). Unlike speakers of most immigrant heritage languages, however, people who speak Native American languages cannot go to another country to relearn what has been lost. (Note that a similar situation arises for some immigrant groups who have fled their country due to extreme turmoil.)

In 1990, the United States Congress passed the Native American Languages Act (NALA), which gives special status to Native American languages and aims to protect them from loss. This special status was granted in recognition of the sovereign position that Native American tribes have in the United States. Native American languages cannot be restricted in public places, including in public school classrooms. The law permits states to make exceptions to teacher certification requirements if someone who speaks a Native American language would like to teach it in a school. Finally, the law encourages schools serving Native American students to use their heritage languages as the medium of instruction. A later revision of the law appointed a \$2 million annual fund to be allocated to Native American tribes for learning and teaching their heritage languages. (For more information about the enactment of the NALA, see Arnold, 2001.) More recently, in 2006, Congress passed the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act, which recognizes the value of Native American language instruction and provides funds for language immersion programs, language and culture camps, and teacher training. The act was named after a Tewa storyteller who died in an automobile accident. (For an overview of laws that affect Native American languages and language revitalization, see Haynes, in press, and Hinton, 2001; for a detailed collection of U.S. documents pertaining to Native Americans, see Prucha, 2000.)

Legal status and immanent possibility of loss are the two major differences between Native American languages and immigrant heritage languages. However, Native American languages and immigrant heritage languages also share a number of important features. The languages are markers of their speakers' identities and vessels of their speakers' traditional cultures. They are important for maintaining the world's linguistic diversity. A large body of research shows that students who have an opportunity to learn their heritage language in school outperform their peers who do not have this opportunity. (See Cummins, 1992; Cummins, 2000; Howard, Sugarman, & Christian, 2003 for overviews of the research on the use of heritage languages in school.) While there are important reasons for distinguishing the two types of heritage languages, both types deserve recognition of their indispensable role in U.S. society.

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