

INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNICATIVE CREVICE: ‘HOW ARE YOU HOPI IF YOU CAN’T SPEAK IT’ BY SHEILAH E. NICHOLAS

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Abstract

The present article is intended to present an inquest of ‘How Are You Hopi if You Can’t Speak It’ by Sheilah E. Nicholas. Nicholas’ essay is sub-titled as ‘An Ethnographic Study of Language as Cultural Practice among Contemporary Hopi Youth’. As the title and sub-title suggest, it is an ethnographic study of Hopi community. Hopi are native North American people whose language is related to Uto-Aztecan language family. Their language loss is caused and accelerated by two factors. First of the contributory factors is the death of older generation who used Hopi language as a means of communication. The second factor is Language Shift that is gradually taking place in the community. There is also a point of difference between older generation and younger generation i.e. the former see a direct linkage between cultural identity and linguistic competence while the latter perceive cultural identity as inherent in the process of practicing culture. They view language as a cultural practice. Although they might have undergone some changes in their way of life due to external factors, yet they keep Hopi language as a cultural practice. There is a need for an effective language planning and policy.

Key Words: Ethnography, Hopi, Language Shift, Cultural Practice, Language Planning

INTRODUCTION

Hopi is a North American indigenous and tribal community. They are Native Americans of the Uto-Aztecan language family and of the Southwest culture area, who are classified with other Southwest peoples as Pueblo Indians. The word Hopi is derived from a Hopi word ‘Hopituh’ which means ‘peaceful people’. They are also known as Moki or Moqui. Nowadays, there are a little more than ten thousand people who identify themselves as Hopi. They are increasingly being integrated into other cultural groups. This social integration is undermining their cultural identity. Sheilah E. Nicholas tells us that like other tribal communities in the world, the contemporary Hopi community is

experiencing what is termed as heritage language loss. Two contributory factors have been identified by the researcher. They are:

- i. Death of the older generation
- ii. Language Shift

The researcher also asserts that there has been an increasingly prevalent trend towards English monolingualism, particularly found in younger generations. This trend is burgeoned and accelerated by an absence of Hopi language in educational and administrative and overall social structure in which Hopi people find themselves. They lack any incentive to use their language as their proficiency in their own language does not help them in their desire to ascend socially.

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Moreover, it is not the language in which knowledge is being produced. It is not being used as a medium of instructions in educational institutions, both at initial and higher levels. Hopi was essentially an oral culture so there is not much in written form about their cultural practices. All these factors make it vulnerable to language shift.

Through an ethnographic research methodology, the researcher intends to 'ascertain the impact of Hopi language shift as experienced and expressed across three generations of Hopi – youth, parent, and grandparent – and the role the Hopi language assumes in the identity formation process of contemporary Hopi youth.' The premise of the research venture is the titular question that if one is unable to speak Hopi language, one cannot call him/herself a Hopi. This is an actual question posed by a member of older generation to a young Hopi person and the response was 'I live Hopi. I just don't speak it.' The question and its answer are basically the representative of two mind-sets. One considers that one's cultural identity is largely defined by linguistic competence. The other views language as a cultural practice.

Ethnographic Exploration

Ethnography is defined as the systematic study of people and their cultures. It is aimed at exploration of cultural phenomena from an insider's perspective. Sheila E. Nicholas is a member of Hopi community, so the researcher is best suited to undertake this ethnographic research involving a cultural phenomenon i.e. language. The researcher makes it evident that the interest in 'investigating Hopi language shift' started by a realization at personal level. The researcher herself experienced an identity crisis when it was realized that the researcher is not fully proficient in Hopi language. The

remarks of researcher's mother about linguistic competence and cultural identity triggered a sense of 'growing insecurity in my personal identity as a Hopi'.

The research that began with a personal experience metamorphosed into a systematic research venture that endeavors to probe the following question: "what role does the Hopi language assume in how Hopi youth define and assert their personal and social identities as members of Hopi society and as Hopi citizens in the broader sense?"

Language is an integral part of any culture and any research that involves cultural phenomenon as it cannot be undertaken by being outside of that culture. So, an ethnographic approach is necessary to understand the complex interplay between language, cultural and social forces that cause language shift in a linguistic community. The researcher is a Hopi and she has 'used a multiple/intergenerational case study design to engage members of three households and across three generations – youth, parent, and grandparent.'" The inter-generational approach enhances the authenticity of the findings of the research.

Modern Hopi Social Order

The Hopi people are also known as '*Hopitit*'. They are a kinship-based and matrilineal society. At present, their population is just over ten thousand. The language they speak is called *Hopilavayi*. It has three dialects but they are mutually intelligible. In 1997, it was discovered that a considerable language shift has taken place. Even the daily and routine conversations between parents and children in Hopi language were becoming less and less frequent. There is a visible linguistic divide between older generation and the younger

generation as far as their linguistic habit is concerned. This inter-generational linguistic gap has created many fissures between these two groups. The Hopi youth is increasingly being involved in the activities that are non-Hopi e.g. substance abuse, gang-membership, and domestic violence.

Epistemological Facets

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that addresses the philosophical problems surrounding the theory of knowledge. Epistemology is concerned with the definition of knowledge and related concepts, the sources and criteria of knowledge, the kinds of knowledge possible and the degree to which each is certain, and the exact relation between the one who knows and the object known. Like any other cultural group, Hopi have their mythology in which they have an 'Emergence Story'. It answers their questions about their origin, way of life and their end.

Reciprocity and humility are two fundamental components of Hopi way of life. The incorporation of these two characteristics can best be seen in their corn-growing practices. They give a high regard to *tumala*, which is work done by hand. It is considered to be a part of their existence.

Social Practices

Hopi is a non-literal society for most part of its existence, so they have a rich oral tradition that is all-encompassing in nature. In this tradition, corn as a way of life is the most conspicuous concept. Then there is the presence of two characteristics of humility and reciprocity. The destiny of Hopi people also finds a place in this oral tradition.

Lingual Practices

Sheilah E. Nicholas selects three young members of Hopi for the purpose of investigating language shift. Dorian, Jared, and Justin are 19 years old from different Hopi villages. Because they are born Hopi, they "had acquired the 'cultural markers of identity' – maternal clan membership, maternal village affiliation, birth and ceremonial names – as well as ascribed roles within the social structure of Hopi, the clan kinship system". Because of their initiation into that specific cultural group, they are obliged to abide by the cultural norms of that culture. The whole society takes an active role in their socialization so that they could become full-fledged Hopi.

Social dances or ritualized public performances are cultural practices that teach Hopi children their kinship connections in a formally acknowledged way.

Language as a cultural practice means that words of any language are the product of a specific culture. It is the parent culture that gives meanings to sounds. As Nicholas asserts that "words have a home in the context of culture, in the course of daily activities, in social institutions ... they have meaning within these contexts". Language is intricately imbued in the culture in which it is spoken.

Conclusion

The conclusion at which the study arrives is that the young members of Hopi are fully aware that they have a "personal responsibility and obligation to maintain the substance of Hopi culture by adhering to the traditions in a personal way and from a personal sense of duty". Though they might lack linguistic

Intergenerational Communicative Crevice: 'How Are You Hopi if You Can't Speak it' by Sheilah e. Nicholas competence, yet language as a cultural practice can be seen in their daily activities. The younger generation, due to its contact with outside world, might have undergone some transformation, but they are still Hopi as far as their worldview is concerned. They have been successful in maintaining Hopi culture in their lives through their sustained commitment to corn as a way of life; one that continues to give purpose to and guides the Hopi people toward their destiny as established at Emergence. This fact necessitates a systematic and effective language planning and language policy development in order to maximize the influence of language.

The research is an interesting one as it has a broader application as there are many cultural identities that are associated with linguistic competence. For instance, it can be asked 'How are you Punjabi if you can't speak it?'. Similarly to be an English, one has to be able to speak English language.

But the researcher presents another perspective about language, i.e. language as a cultural practice. It suggests that if you do not have excellent linguistic competence, it does not imply that you are not a member of that cultural group.

Through an ethnographic study of language as cultural practice among young members of Hopi community, the researcher establishes the fact that it is language as a cultural practice that defines the cultural identity of Hopi youth.

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