

A young girl with braided hair, wearing a white and blue traditional Native American dress with fringes and a large feathered headdress, stands in a desert landscape under a blue sky with clouds. The background shows a vast, open plain with distant mountains.

## What Does it Mean to Lose a Language?

Investigating Heritage Language  
Loss and Revitalization among  
American Indians

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*“Our language, our Himdag, is the number-one source of our soul, our pride, our being, our strength, and our identity.”*

—Arlene Joyce Hughes,  
O’odham Language Educator

Arlene Joyce Hughes is a native speaker of O’odham, the heritage language of the Akimel O’odham, or River People, who live within the 372,000-acre Gila River Indian Community south of Phoenix. Hughes, who is working on a bachelor’s degree in education at ASU, is all too cognizant of the fragility of her heritage language; of the more than 15,000 members of her tribe, perhaps fewer than 10 percent are fluent speakers of O’odham. For the Pii Posh or Maricopa who also reside within the Gila River Indian Community, the number of fluent native speakers — all elderly — can be counted on two hands.

*James Sundust (standing, far right), with his O'odham language and culture class at Gila Crossing Community School.*



The language situation at Gila River is, unfortunately, typical of Native communities throughout North America. Linguists estimate that prior to European contact, 300 to 500 Native languages were spoken by peoples indigenous to what is now the United States and Canada. More than 200 of those languages remain, but only 34 are still being acquired as a first language by children. The causes of heritage language loss are complex, and include the legacy of colonization, genocide and explicit federal policies designed to expunge Native languages and cultural traditions. The more recent influences of English media, technology and schooling also have taken a toll (see sidebar). Yet even as more Native American children come to school speaking English, they still tend to be labeled as “limited English proficient” and, as a group, to fare poorly in school.

How can we understand this paradox, and how can we use that understanding to enhance educational opportunities and outcomes for Native American youth?

These questions drive an ongoing study in which we are co-principal investigators with Linguistics Professor Ofelia Zepeda of the University of Arizona. The Native Language Shift and Retention Project involves a five-year, \$850,000 research grant from the U.S. Department of Education Institute of

Education Sciences. We are working with nine school sites and five tribal groups in Arizona: Navajo, Akimel O’odham or Pima, Pii Posh, Pascua Yaqui, and Tohono O’odham (formerly called Papago, and linguistically and culturally related to Akimel O’odham). The sites represent a cross-section of language groups and heritage language vitality — from bilingual communities to those such as Pii Posh with only a few elderly speakers — urban and rural-reservation settings, and public, tribal-community and charter schools. To date we have conducted 190 in-depth interviews with adults and youth, administered 500 questionnaires and collected school-achievement data at these sites. Our goal is to identify adult and youth attitudes toward the Native language and culture and to examine correlations between children’s attitudes toward and proficiency in the heritage language and English, their sense of self-identity, and their school performance, as measured by local and national assessments. Ultimately, we seek to inform local, state, tribal and federal language-education policies and practices and thereby to

Schools historically have been primary sites for efforts by mainstream society to eradicate Native languages and cultural traditions. Arlene Joyce Hughes recalls that as a first grader, “I did not speak English and a teacher heard me speaking in O’odham. She grabbed me by my hand and dragged me into a closet in the basement. I heard her walk away. I thought I was going to remain in this place forever. Today I can still smell the mildew of the dark closet with the little light coming from beneath the door and the sound of footsteps from above. I am happy to say that these acts did not stop me from speaking my language.”



*Teresa L. McCarty, Alice Wiley Snell Professor of Education Policy Studies (left) and Mary Eunice Romero, assistant professor of curriculum and instruction*

improve education services for Native youth.

An important part of the project is the involvement of local co-researchers — tribal members and educators such as Arlene Joyce Hughes — whom we call Community Research Collaborators or CRCs. CRCs are the key change agents poised to implement project findings once the research project ends.

What are we learning from this research?

First, there is a strong consensus among individuals at all project sites, young and old, about the importance of retaining Native languages and the value of those languages in children's personal, social and intellectual development. As one Navajo youth who aspired to be a medical doctor told us, knowing Navajo "allows me to get the best of both worlds." Another youth reported that knowing Navajo helped her in school "because you

can compare the two languages" — a cognitive advantage called metalinguistic awareness that is borne out by research among bi-/multilinguals around the world.

Second, there are significant correlations between the teaching of Native languages and cultural studies in school and student performance on English standardized tests. Our charter-school site, for example — a college preparatory high school — emphasizes a rigorous academic curriculum in English that also includes a strong Native-language component (even teachers, Native and non-Native, study the language), along with courses in O'odham basketweaving, ethnobotany and permaculture. On the most recent administration of state-required AIMS tests, this school not only improved over previous years, it gained significantly more than the state and county averages

in many subject areas and grade levels.

Conversely, in a school that once had a highly-rated Native-language program but curtailed it in response to reduced federal funding and the pressures associated with English standardized tests, recent student scores on those tests decreased by as much as 50 percent over what they had been when the Native-language program was in effect.

Third, this study reaffirms, as Arlene Joyce Hughes' words so eloquently convey, the importance of heritage languages to family and community strength and well-being. Language — particularly oral language in traditionally oral American Indian communities — is the means through which parents and grandparents socialize their children and grandchildren, imparting all that a community and a people believe their children ought to learn and become. Language is a kind of "socio-cultural glue." When that bond is broken, intergenerational ties and relationships within communities also are ruptured. "It is language that carries the nature and character of who we are and how we relate with one another," a Pueblo leader relates "Once we've lost that, we have lost everything." The ability to maintain a heritage language as a robust, vibrant language, and thus the socio-cultural foundation for familial and communal well-being, is fundamental to tribal sovereignty, self-determination and cultural survival.

### **So what does it mean to lose a heritage language?**

Our research leads us to believe that a more productive approach is to ask what it means to maintain and promote heritage languages and the immense cultural and intellectual knowledge they encode. Every language is a repository of millennia-old human wisdom; every language is part of our human heritage. Given the innate human capacity to master multiple

languages, must proficiency in the language of wider communication — in our case, English — come at the expense of the mother tongue? In a globalizing economy and a post-9/11 world, the need for bi-/multilingualism is becoming increasingly apparent.

Our data suggest that bi-/multilingualism — enabling children to “get the best of both worlds” through heritage language education — confers cognitive advantages, enhances students’ self-efficacy and cultural bonding and may have the additional effect of maintaining and promoting a familial and communal sense of well-being. In other words, maintaining one’s heritage language while learning additional languages contributes to a strong self and collective identity, helping children to succeed in school and later life. As one graduate of our charter-school site reflected, “I can always look forward to the future, while still looking back at the past to find out who I am. As long as I know my background, I can have some sense of pride and can know that I won’t get lost.”

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*Arlene Joyce Hughes (right), a native speaker of O'odham, uses storytelling techniques to teach the language to other members of the Akimel O'odham tribe living on the Gila River Indian Community south of Phoenix. It is estimated that fewer than 10 percent of the tribe's 15,000 members are fluent speakers of the language.*



*Hughes leads Helen Janet Allison (left), and Carley Jackson (center), both of Gila River, in counting to 10 in O'odham.*