

July 2016

Book Review: *We Are Our Language: An Ethnography of Language Revitalization in a Northern Athabaskan Community*

Haley Albano

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Albano, Haley (2016). Book Review: *We Are Our Language: An Ethnography of Language Revitalization in a Northern Athabaskan Community*. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 17(4), 304-308.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol17/iss4/25>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. ©2016 Journal of International Women's Studies.

We Are Our Language: An Ethnography of Language Revitalization in a Northern Athabaskan Community, Barbra A. Meek, 2011. University of Arizona Press: Arizona. 202 pages, illustrations, photographs, appendix, and index included. \$29.95. Paperback.

By Haley Albano¹

In recent years, the declining state of the world's indigenous languages has warranted an urgent need to revisit those ethnographies which have made valuable contributions to the global understanding of intersectional vulnerability. This increasingly relevant text, published several years ago, is the topic of this review because it provides an essential vantage point into a community affected by the institutional disruption of linguistic autonomy. Not only does Meek provide a framework through which to understand the linguistic issues impacting a native community, but she also provides a brief context to discuss what it means to be positioned within a community as a female ethnographer. She notes in the preface that her ethnographic positioning as a woman within the community allowed her to engage more fully with the direct experiences and social knowledge of other women:

...my gender and the nature of my research led me to work primarily with women and not men. Being female, I was expected to work with and learn from women. Researching child rearing and language development also predisposed me to work with mothers and women involved in raising children. Hence, women were my socially appropriate teachers. (Meek, 2011: xvi)

This suggests that there are still existing gender gaps surrounding research methodology, and that these gaps may be related directly to the type of data that is transmitted to the gendered ethnographer in various sociocultural settings. She notes that an elder told her that "It is important that there are men teaching the boys, and women teaching the girls." (Meek, 2011: xvi) This is an interesting note, and addresses a significant occurrence of gender-based transmission in the context of interactional practice. This text is relevant to today's audience because it addresses the increasing concerns about the vitality of indigenous languages, as well as addressing the multiple and intersecting layers of marginalization affecting the social experiences of native people in everyday life.

In this moving ethnography, Barbra Meek writes about her work with the shifting sociolinguistic landscape of the Kaska language. This ethnography is the result of extensive linguistic anthropological fieldwork in the Yukon territory of western Canada and British Columbia. Meek writes specifically on the contemporary disjuncture in a native community between what is known and what is spoken. She incorporates data to show that in-home use of Kaska has decreased, despite the evidence that more about the language is known than is communicated. She writes that this silence is largely in relation to the attempted erasure and extermination of indigenous social and linguistic identities through government-implemented boarding schools existing up until 1975. This work is particularly compatible with the writing of

¹ Ph.D. student in Anthropology and Linguistics, University of Alaska at Fairbanks.

Susan Gal, and explores in some ways how the use of silence in relation to the mother tongue can be symbolic and representative of the effects of social oppression:

Indeed, it is in part through such linguistic practices that speakers within institutions impose on others their group's definition of events, people and actions. This ability to make others accept and enact one's representation of the world is another aspect of symbolic domination. But such cultural power rarely goes uncontested. Resistance to a dominant cultural order occurs when devalued linguistic strategies and genres are practiced and celebrated despite widespread denigration; it occurs as well when these devalued practices propose or embody alternate models of the social world." (Gal, 1989: 3)

Meek introduces the reader to the choices that are made, both for and by native people, about the usage of a language that is simultaneously viewed as both heritage and obstacle. For many parents in the community, encouraging a native language as a primary spoken language for their children is ultimately perceived as a threat to self-determination and global inclusion. Native language, rather than being used primarily in the home, is now taught as heritage in the schools. She draws from Pierre Bourdieu's conception of the linguistic marketplace, and claims that authorization to produce or manufacture Kaska is socially marked by authority and that its production is perceived to be limited to elders or university-trained officials. Simultaneously, heritage language intersects with the social authorization of production, and then becomes associated with the past, the elderly, the ancestors, and the forgotten. Meek importantly claims that contemporary institutionally-sponsored educational attempts towards the revitalization of indigenous languages have presented methods that are antithetical to the goal of understanding and reinvigorating local sociocultural knowledge:

Educators often present the language as an object of learning, as an artifact. Students learn lists of nouns, token expressions, and decontextualized scraps of cultural knowledge that serve only to fetishize the language. In the end, such educational events often interrupt, dislocate, or work against the goals of language revitalization by teaching children that their language is no longer a valid form of communication... (Meek, 2011: xxi-xxii)

The text begins by likening the exploration of an endangered language to walking with that language, and by considering what it means for a people when a language is lost. She also writes about the ruptures occurring in the indexing of speech, resulting from significant historical, political, and economic under-representation and mistreatment of the native community. She notes that the Yukon's government slogan "We Are Our Language" has worked against its purpose by emphasizing the importance of fluency over the production of social knowledge; symbolically further invalidating and erasing those members of the community who are not able to speak a native language. She writes also about the disjuncture that occurs between competing interests within the language community.

After the initial introduction to the community and the work, chapter one begins with an introduction to historical colonization practices. It also successfully introduces the ethno-historical context of dominant language replacement, as well as the shifting of the minority language landscape among its speakers. This includes the topic of assimilation practices, as well as the desire

for parents to have their children speaking languages that will ensure them a place in the global community: economically, socially, and politically. Assimilation, and the rejection of the native tongue, is viewed by the parents as a means to obtain equality in an increasingly globalized world. This is critical, because dominant language becomes communicated to children as the language of self-determination and personhood, where the native language becomes associated with limitation, oppression, and long-term economic marginalization.

Meek writes about programs, such as Aboriginal Head Start, as well as other initiatives implemented with the intention of repairing languages and language ideologies otherwise ruptured by structures of power. She notes here that heritage language is importantly perceived as a specialized form of knowledge of the past, rather than as a potentially contemporary and usable language that can be carried into the future. She importantly draws attention also to the alienation of younger speakers through the focus on older or more qualified speakers. In the pursuit of revitalizing vulnerable language communities, it appears to be common to place the responsibility of transmission on the shoulders of those who have spoken the language for the longest amount of time. She notes that shyness in fluency also appears to prohibit youth from fully participating in the production of heritage language.

In the second chapter, Meek addresses social practices and ideologies as they relate to the process of language revitalization. She writes about socialization, and forms of disjuncture between stakeholders with sometimes competing interests in the preservation and protection of indigenous languages. Chapter three visits a particularly strong section in language use and context. Meek notes the trend towards endangerment when adults begin to be the primary keepers and reproducers of the language, rather than children. In the fourth chapter, she writes about the effects that institutionalization of the language can have on revitalization attempts. Because people interact with one another through determined institutionalized roles, patterns of interactional speech and practice can be similarly influenced by the voice of the dominant institution. This leads to questions about authenticity of production. The chapter is filled with examples of the lessons used in classrooms, as well as graphic representations. She writes about the potential for the reproduction of power and language subordination through pedagogical methodology.

Chapter five works to address a variety of social problems, and their effects on both the community and language landscape. Issues like health, poverty, and lack of access permeate the region and her description of the socioeconomic surroundings is strong. She addresses the social issues in the backdrop of the linguistic landscape, and explains how these social conditions have bearing on language issues. She uses her theoretical background to shed light on what it means to save dying languages. She writes about social change in the context of institutions, and social practices that she believes ultimately should be in sync with linguistic changes. In the closing chapter, Meek concludes by letting the reader know that they have explored various gaps and disjuncture in the language landscape. She writes about moments of disjuncture and the interactional work of understanding language in everyday life. She also provides recommendations for the closing of these gaps.

This ethnography is a strong contribution to the field, and is highly recommended as a relevant insight into a community. I think it would have been interesting to have elaborated more on the valuable initial notes about the gendered use of, and access to, speech within the community, and also more on the reasons different conceptualizations of endangered language discourse might sometimes be combined, as noted in chapter five. The text's strength in particular is in its communication of human agency as it relates to the linguistic landscape of a people, and the different choices made in regards to the indexing of a language. She highlights the importance of

intersecting social transformation with linguistic revival, showing the reader the interconnectedness of many overlapping social issues. When reading this text, it is not difficult to see the challenges of trying to overcome many different layers of social oppression and marginalization. Not only do these challenges have to be reconciled with the challenges of being a linguistic minority, but a linguistic minority with the added obstacle of linguistic endangerment. She successfully uses the concepts of interruption, rupture, and disjuncture to highlight the gaps in both the discourse of language endangerment and in contemporary issues affecting first nation community life.

References:

Gal, S. (1989). Between speech and silence: The problematics of research on language and gender. *Papers in pragmatics*, 3(1), 1-38.

Meek, B. (2011), *We Are Our Language: An Ethnography of Language Revitalization in a Northern Athabaskan Community*. Arizona: University of Arizona Press, xvi-xxii.