

Mohave Language Planning: Where has it been and where should it go from here?*

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The Colorado River Indian Tribes (CRIT), in Parker, Arizona, include four Native Arizonan tribes, Mohave, Chemehuevi, Navajo, and Hopi. These tribes function politically as a unit, although they are distinct in terms of language, culture, and history. While all Native American languages are endangered today, for two of the Colorado River Indian Tribes, the Mohave and Chemehuevi, the language situation is critical. In this paper, we will be concerned only with language planning as it relates to Mohave. As a background for the current language planning situation for Mohave, we briefly discuss the history and current circumstances of the CRIT reservation. We provide a short history of linguistic work on Mohave, we discuss current language planning efforts focused on Mohave, and finally, we make recommendations for continued language preservation and revitalization of Mohave.¹ We conclude that language planning on the CRIT reservation must involve efforts focused on each of the four tribal languages as well as the blending of language planning efforts for all four CRIT languages to reflect the integrated social reality of the CRIT.

1 History and Current Linguistic Situation of the CRIT

The uniqueness of the CRIT reservation lies in the fact that the four tribes function politically as one unit. The history that contributes to this situation involves the collocation of two tribes indigenous to the area, Mohave and Chemehuevi, and members of two other tribes, Hopi and Navajo, who relocated to this reservation following World War II.² The Tribal Council of the CRIT reservation is composed of members of all four tribes. As of 1999, the total membership of the California River tribes, both on and off the reservation, is 3,403, Mohaves being the most numerous members.³

Mohave language use has been heavily affected by the Mohaves' history of schooling. In 1879, the first Colorado River boarding school was opened near what is now the town of Parker. Prior to that, Mohave students had been sent to boarding school at Fort Mohave in Needles, California. The boarding school experience had a devastating effect on native language use. Attempts to "civilize" and educate Indians entailed severe English-only policies, realized in the physical and verbal punishment of Indian students who spoke their native language. As a result, native language use is limited today. There are only approximately 30 speakers of Mohave on the CRIT reservation.

It is important to recognize that the four CRIT languages are each at different stages of language shift and language planning. At the moment, language loss is most critical for

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¹ We recognize that there are language planning efforts underway among the Mohave at Fort Mohave in Needles, California. We are primarily concerned here with language planning as it relates to Mohave members of the CRIT reservation.

² Of course, the Hopis and the Navajos each also have their own reservations separate from the CRIT reservation.

³ At the time of this writing, specific data on individual tribal membership is not available.

Chemehuevi, with an estimated 13 speakers remaining. However, the Chemehuevis have been actively pursuing language planning. Mohave is the next most endangered language on this reservation. While it is known that there are many more speakers of Hopi and Navajo, particularly on their reservations in northeastern Arizona, these languages are still both considered endangered. We have no estimates at this time regarding the number of speakers of Hopi and Navajo at the CRIT reservation.

2 A Linguistic History of Mohave on the CRIT Reservation

Linguistic study of the Mohave language on the CRIT reservation may be divided into two domains: 1) that which was initiated and conducted by outside researchers (non-tribal members) and 2) that which was initiated and conducted by tribal members.

2.1 Outside Research

The earliest work on Mohave by a non-tribal member was that done by A. L. Kroeber in 1911 ("The Phonetic Elements of the Mohave Language"). Kroeber's extensive work on Mohave language and culture still stands as a valuable and accurate record. J. P. Harrington is known to have worked on both Mohave and Chemehuevi, but his work has never been published. Several narrative texts in Mohave, with some accompanying analysis, were collected by Susan Penfield in 1969. None of this work has been published to date, but it remains on file in the CRIT Library/Archive. Subsequent work on the language by outsiders has been largely focused on issues involving syntax. Judith G. Crawford published a discussion of the Mohave verb 'be' in 1976 and also published several narrative texts which she had collected in Mohave around that same period of time. The most extensive linguistic contribution to the study of Mohave has been made by Pamela Munro. Her doctoral dissertation, *Mojave Syntax*, was published in 1976. She has published numerous articles on various aspects of Mohave grammar, and she culminated her work with the publication of a Mohave dictionary (with Nellie Brown and Judith Crawford) in 1992.

2.2 Research by Mohave Tribal Members

Linguistic research and planning efforts by tribal members have taken different forms over the years. After Pamela Munro's work in the 1970s, and with her help, Mohave language classes were formed. These were taught by Luther Swick, with materials prepared by Munro. A very talented native linguist, Edward Swick, also worked on Mohave. He wrote extensively about the language and published some of his work in the tribal newspaper, *Smoke Signals*, in the 1970s and 80s. Recently, there have been two notable linguistic efforts, specifically language planning efforts, by tribal members. These language planning efforts will be discussed in detail in the next section.

3 Current Mohave Linguistic Work

The CRIT Library/Archive has recently sponsored two grant proposals for language-related projects which involve Mohave. One project is a Mohave coloring book for children.⁴ The proposal for this grant was written by Amelia Flores, head of the CRIT Library/Archive, for funding under the Arizona Department of Library, Archives and Public Record Library Services and Technology Act. The Mohave received this grant, and are currently finishing the coloring book. The second proposal was written by Amelia Flores, Mohave, and Bonita Fernandez, Chemehuevi, to the Administration for Native Americans (ANA), a federal granting agency responsible for funds for the Native American Languages Act. The ANA proposal was for a project to assess the needs of the four Native languages that make up the CRIT, and to develop a plan to meet those needs.

We can see in these proposals two different levels of language planning that are being undertaken by the CRIT. On the one hand, the CRIT have written small grants for focused projects, such as the one received for Mohave and Chemehuevi coloring books. On the other hand, large-scale projects such as the one proposed to the ANA must involve all four tribes because of the governmental structure of the CRIT. In addition, language preservation and revitalization efforts must at some level involve all four tribes because of the reality of the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual character of the CRIT reservation. This is contrary to Fishman (1991), who argues that language revitalization efforts require ethnic insulation.

3.1 *The Mohave Coloring Book Project*

The Mohave Coloring Book project has taken shape through working sessions among a small group of Mohave elders, who are native speakers of Mohave, with assistance from Amelia Flores, head of the CRIT Library/Archive. Though Amelia is not a native speaker of Mohave, she is keenly interested in her heritage language and has been a driving force behind much oral history and language-related work by the Mohave for many years. The coloring book group decided on a list of words to include in the coloring book, and with the help of the Brown-Munro-Crawford Mohave Dictionary, generated Mohave equivalents for these words.

Susan Penfield, who had been written into the coloring book grant proposal as a consultant, was asked to help with a few areas of discrepancy between the elders' knowledge and the Brown-Munro-Crawford Dictionary. Susan invited her student Jessica Weinberg to come to Parker with her for a two-day trip that would involve a coloring book working session.

The coloring book working session was attended by Susan, Jessica, Amelia, and three elders whose first language is Mohave (Leona Little, Joe Sharp, and Ione Dock). We taped the three-hour working session for two reasons. First, taping provided us with an extra record of the decisions made in the session, along with our notes. Second, we believe that language-related working sessions involving groups of native speakers of the language(s) of interest yield many useful types of data other than simply the Mohave-to-English word equivalencies needed for the coloring book. As argued by Penfield and Flores (1999), these other types of data include Mohave conversational and nonverbal interactional data, expanded lexical data (for example, other than simply the items in question for the coloring book), code-switching data, evidence of beginning Mohave literacy, and attitudes, or ideologies, of Mohaves about the Mohave language.

⁴ The project also includes a Chemehuevi coloring book.

This last type of data is crucial for language planning efforts because most of these efforts depend on either accommodating or working to change existing language attitudes of a community. We believe, following Ruiz (1995), that language planning efforts should ideally originate from within the community. However, language planning efforts, either from within or outside the community, must be supported by positive attitudes from the community toward those efforts and toward the language that is the target of those efforts (Fishman 1991).

While the initial idea for the coloring book was to make it bilingual in Mohave and English, we recommended the coloring book be in Mohave only. We based this recommendation on the insight from bilingual education that when material is presented in two languages (a method known as “concurrent translation”), one which the students are more familiar with than the other, students will focus on the familiar language and tune out the less familiar language (Crawford 1995:125). The current plan is to publish the coloring book as Mohave-only, except for explanatory material in English in the back of the book, as a kind of appendix.

We recommend that the tribe undertake more small projects like the coloring book (such as more coloring books with different themes, readers for young children, books of children’s songs with accompanying tapes and/or CDs, interactive CDs for children, etc.) for several reasons. First, grants for such projects are generally easier to apply for and to receive than grants for long-term projects. Second, such projects involve a manageable amount of work in a relatively short period of time, and they gratifyingly result in a tangible product. Third, it is our hope that the increased availability of Mohave language materials (e.g., books, CDs, etc.) will generate more interest in the preservation and revitalization of Mohave among younger generations of Mohaves, in particular children and their parents. Finally, Mohave language materials are necessary to facilitate Mohave language school curricula. This brings us to the issue of the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual nature of the CRIT, which poses challenges for curricular implementation. This issue is addressed in part by the second project we discuss here, the ANA grant being developed by the CRIT.

3.2 Grant Proposal to the Administration for Native Americans

As we noted above, the CRIT applied for an ANA grant to implement a project to assess the needs of the reservation’s four Native languages (Mohave, Chemehuevi, Navajo, and Hopi) and to develop a plan to meet those needs. The application was not successful the first time the CRIT submitted it. However, they are revising the application with plans to resubmit it in the spring of 2000. Our primary recommendation for the revision of the proposal involves the Language Committee to be established in the course of the project. The committee proposed by the ANA grant application, as currently written, would consist of at least two members of each tribe. As emphasized by the wording of the grant application, the four tribal languages differ greatly in status and needs. Therefore, we suggest that one committee for all four languages may be insufficient. We recommend the grant proposal include the establishment of four separate language committees, one for each of the four languages, plus a coordinating committee with two representatives from each language committee.

In addition, we recommend that the grant proposal include a specific commitment to recruit younger generations, especially parents of children, to sit on these committees. There is an urgent need to generate interest among these generations in having their children learn their ancestral language, and in learning it themselves. Fishman (1991) argues that the most important

piece of the puzzle for reversing language shift is to ensure “intergenerational mother tongue transmission,” that is, children acquiring their ancestral language as their first language from their parents and grandparents. The challenge, as we noted, is in finding a way to facilitate this transmission of languages in a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual situation such as the CRIT. One possibility for intergenerational transmission that is especially well suited to languages such as Mohave, with only a small number of elderly speakers, is the Master-Apprentice Program (MAP). MAP, in which a native speaker elder is paired for intensive language teaching with a younger friend or relative who wants to learn their heritage language, has been primarily used for Native Californian languages (Hinton 1994). In fact, there has already been a MAP team at Fort Mohave. Implementation of the MAP method is currently being considered for Mohave on the CRIT reservation.

The four Colorado River Tribes cannot be completely insular, as Fishman recommends for communities attempting to reverse language shift, because of the organization of the CRIT government, because of intermarriage among the tribes, and because all reservation children, as well as children from the surrounding town of Parker, Arizona, attend school together. The four languages need separate committees to assess and address their distinctive needs, but the fates of these four languages must be connected because of the social, political, and economic realities of the CRIT. We hope that this connection will be addressed by a coordinating committee consisting of representatives from the four language committees.

In addition, we expect that the situation will require a commitment by the four tribes to work together and be open to innovative solutions, including cross-tribe language teaching. Our expectation is that most of those interested in learning Mohave would be of Mohave heritage. However, Mohave materials cannot necessarily be reserved for Mohave children only, both because there are many children of mixed heritage and because the children of all four tribes must be taught in the same classrooms. While Fishman (1991) is skeptical about the usefulness of schools in facilitating the kind of intergenerational language transmission that is necessary for language revitalization, the schools necessarily play an important role in generating interest among the youngest generations in their heritage languages. In addition, McCarty and Nicholas (1999) argue that schools can in fact be co-opted by language activists for language revitalization purposes.

4 Conclusions

We conclude that language planning on the CRIT reservation must reflect the integrated social reality of the Colorado River Indian Tribes, while still attending to the specific needs of each individual language. To support this goal, we recommend that younger adult generations of Mohaves (and the other Colorado River Tribes) participate in programs such as the American Indian Language Development Institute (AILDI) at the University of Arizona. Participation in such programs allows tribal members to see how other tribes are handling their language planning efforts, which can be a source of ideas and inspiration. Such programs also provide training in linguistic analysis and language and literacy curriculum development, which facilitates self-generated theoretical and applied linguistic efforts that we maintain are crucial to language preservation and revitalization among American Indians.

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