

LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY AND PRACTICE AMONG NAVAJO  
COLLEGE STUDENTS AT DINÉ COLLEGE

by

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

*And I told you, the thesis about us injuns is not a matter of what's right or wrong, it's just your perspective of us.* –Johnny Two Feathers (Instant Message on November 21, 2005)

Problem Statement and Background

Until recently, *Diné Bizaad*, the Navajo language, was considered the only American Indian language safe from the encroaching threat of language shift to English. Today many young Navajos are no longer learning to speak the Navajo language. Increasingly younger Navajos choose to speak English rather than Navajo, despite the predominance of spoken Navajo in many regions of the Navajo Nation (House 2002:54). Navajo language activists, educators and scholars adamantly point out the grim signs of Navajo language attrition, in order to gain public support and funding for language revitalization programs. Unfortunately the attitudes younger Navajos and their parents have about the Navajo language serve to undermine revitalization efforts (Benally and Viri 2005). “Language attitude,” according to Tsunoda (2005:59) “is one of the most crucial factors regarding the fate of endangered languages.” Utilizing a qualitative ethnographic methodology, I facilitate a collaborative exploration of language attitudes held by Navajo college students attending Diné College, the tribally controlled college located at the heart of the Navajo Nation, the small community of Tsaile, AZ. This study is intended to benefit the Navajo Nation by providing information about the language values of this particular age group.

## Indigenous Language Loss

The tragedy of indigenous language loss cannot be overstated; the Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous Rights in Education, framed by the World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education (WIPCE) “declared the use and preservation of Native languages to be a fundamental human right” (Bennaly and Viri 2005:85). The following portion of the Coolangatta Statement is offered in Bennaly and Viri (2005:86), and is available online (<http://www.ankn.uaf.edu/IKS/cool.html>). The section on the value of Indigenous language conveys the fundamental importance these languages serve in the lives of all Indigenous peoples:

2.3 Indigenous peoples have strong feelings and thoughts about landforms, the very basis of their cultural identity. *Land gives life to language and culture.*

2.3.1 Indigenous languages in all forms are *legitimate and valid means* of communication for Indigenous peoples.

2.3.2 Language is a social construct; *it is a blueprint for thought, behavior, social and cultural interaction and self-expression.*

2.3.3 *Language is the medium for transmitting culture* from the past to the present and into the future. Acknowledging that many Indigenous languages have been destroyed, the 1999 WIPCE asserts that Indigenous languages are the best way to teach Indigenous knowledge and values.

2.3.4 Languages are the foundations for the liberation of thoughts that provide *direction for social, political and economic change and development.*

2.3.5 *The survival and revival of Indigenous languages is imperative* for the protection, transmission, maintenance and preservation of Indigenous knowledge, cultural values, and wisdom (Coolangatta Statement).

The Coolangata statement is similar to others found within the human rights policy of organizations like the European Union, the Organization for American States, the Organization for African Unity, and UNESCO (Grenoble and Whaley 2006:2). These statements speak to the values indigenous people attribute to their respective Native languages and traditions.

### Navajo Language Attrition

Because information about the extent of fluency and language practices of Navajo adults is significantly lacking, Benally and Viri (2005:94) use speaker age as the primary means to predict fluency among Navajos. Navajo language speakers over 40 years of age are more likely to be fully fluent in Navajo than speakers under 30 years of age, who are least likely to possess any proficiency in the language. Many within this group, of which most of my research population is a part, are best described as “latent” speakers of Navajo—those that can understand Navajo but cannot speak it (Benally and Viri 2005:94). A comparison between Spolsky’s (1970) and Platero’s (2001) studies indicates that the number of monolingual English speakers among Navajo first graders quadrupled over a span of twenty-two years. This suggests a dramatic language shift from Navajo to English, which began surfacing 35 years ago when the first monolingual English speaking Navajo students entered Navajo schools on the Navajo Nation (Spolsky 1970). The Navajo language is considered severely threatened, falling somewhere between stage six (“some intergenerational use of the language”) and stage seven (“only adults beyond child bearing age speak the language”) in the eight stages classifying language

endangerment (Reyhner 1999). However, the historical strength of the Navajo language and culture creates favorable circumstances for its revival (Francis and Reyhner 2002:48).

Lianne Hinton (1994) discusses the importance of language to Indigenous communities. She shows the power of language in shaping the world by quoting the final sentence of a Maidu story: “As he talked, he transformed it” (Hinton 1994:61). When combined with verbal symbols in the ceremonial context, Navajo visual symbols “refer to the past and present at the same time, resulting in the intensification of experience” (Griffen-Pierce 1992:99). Claire Farrer (1994) refers to this as the ‘mythic present’ where time collapses. The Navajo language, *Diné Bizaad*, like *Diné Bahaane’* (the Navajo oral tradition), and *Diné Nitse’kees* (Navajo thinking) are all structured by movement. Griffen-Pierce (1992:24) explains how these function together in the ceremonial context:

What Toelken (1979:253) calls “the metaphor of movement” permeates Navajo mythology, religion, language, and thought. Navajo origin myths are rich in images of heroes traveling for sacred knowledge and healing power. Hoijer (1964:146) explained, “Myths and legends reflect this emphasis [on movement] most markedly, for both gods and culture heroes move restlessly from one holy place to the next, seeking by their motion to perfect and repair the dynamic flux which is the universe.” In healing ceremonials, motion plays a major role not only in the ritually directed movements of the patient, the chanter, and the God Impersonators, but also in the prayers that include the well-known phrase, *sa’a naghái bik’ée hózhó*, which evokes balanced, beautiful conditions that surround the petitioners in every direction as they travel along.

This emphasis on movement in the ceremonial process is reflected in the Navajo language. As Hoijer explains, the wide variety of positional morphemes that attach to

verbs show the “nature, direction and status of such movement in considerable detail” (Griffen-Pierce 1992:25).

In addition to threatening the ceremonial process, language shift also poses a threat to Navajo children’s academic success. Numerous studies have shown that Navajo children placed in bilingual/bicultural programs academically out-perform Navajo students placed in monolingual English classrooms, as shown by their higher scores on standardized tests (Benally and Viri 2005:99-101; Arviso and Holm 2001). Dramatic behavioral changes in Navajo elementary students were documented when the Fort Defiance School adopted a bilingual program. The once monolingual elementary school shifted from English-only to a bilingual/bicultural school, developing a Navajo language immersion program for Kindergarten and first grade students (Benally and Viri 2005:100). English is introduced in the second grade, where 50% of the instruction remains in Navajo. According to Benally and Viri (2005:100):

Positive results became evident through observing the behavior of the students and the improvement of their academic skills. Students, Arviso and Holm observed, came to “act more like traditional Navajo children.” In addition to learning the language, Navajo students began to take on the expected social behaviors of a properly trained Navajo child...they displayed proper etiquette as befitting the various social situations they came into. Furthermore, rather than being quiet, children became more active and verbal. Arviso and Holm further state that “students were at once more focused and more relaxed” (Arviso & Holm, 2001:209).

Some parents, teachers, and elders are aware of the language shift from Navajo to English and perceive the impending harm to the Navajo cultural knowledge base as a major threat to students’ academic and social success. Benally and Viri (2005:99-102) point out that not all parents and teachers of Navajo children are cognizant of the critical

state of the Navajo language. Furthermore, many parents, teachers and elders continue to insist on teaching children English rather than Navajo because of their perception that avoiding Navajo will ensure stronger skills in English. Many parents and teachers within this group rely on the false hope that ‘others’ will take responsibility for passing on the Navajo language, and often deny the endangered state of the Navajo language. The inaccurate perception that the Navajo language is strong and stable serves to undermine the efforts of Navajo language activists who are aware of the critical state of the Navajo language (Benally and Viri 2005:97-98). Challenging parental apathy and complacency about Navajo language shift are important consciousness-raising efforts by Navajo language activists.

Unreliable funding for the incorporation of bilingual/bicultural approaches destabilizes programs that otherwise benefit from strong community support and parental involvement (Francis and Reyhner 2002:13). Benally and Viri (2005:98) point to the lack of monetary support by the tribal government as key to the funding problem: “Even though the Navajo Nation government has enacted a Language Policy statement supporting and endorsing the Navajo language, it has not allocated funding to support it.” Aside from funding shortages, these programs suffer other deficiencies: a shortage of reading and writing materials in Navajo and a lack of teachers trained to teach Navajo literacy and oracy (Benally and Viri 2005:98). Properly trained teachers who speak local languages fluently are very difficult to find. Quite simply, those who are trained are usually not fluent, and those who are fluent are often not formally trained (Grenoble and Whaley 2006:189). Furthermore, Platero’s (1992) study of teacher-student interactions in

several Navajo Head Start programs points out teachers' preference for teaching and speaking in English rather than Navajo in the classroom. Through their practice in the classroom, teachers reinforce to students the inaccurate message that English is more appropriate than Navajo in academic environments (Platero 2001:95-96).

### Significance of Research

Little academic research concerning the language attitudes and practices of Navajo college students is available. Therefore, I investigated the attitudes that Diné College students have about the Navajo language and their use of the language on the Diné College campus. Knowledge of their attitudes and practices provides insight into the kinds of situations on campus they find conducive to speaking the Navajo language. My research follows the ethical guidelines offered by Max (2005), by producing academic information that can contribute to specific needs of those in my research population. This information directly benefits the Diné College Cohort Program that seeks to provide a forum to encourage student to speak and learn the Navajo language.

Cohort Program co-coordinators Miranda Haskie and Erik Bitsui are exploring several options to facilitate and increase Navajo language use by students at Diné College. This program currently targets developmental first year Diné College students who place lower than freshman level on a computerized placement test. The goal of the program is to “use Navajo cultural roots for students’ success” (Bitsui, personal communication). Currently the Cohort Program is developing a language immersion program in the dorms for Cohort students. Within two years the program will become

available to all incoming Diné College students (Bitsui, personal communication).

Because individuals' attitudes about a particular language relate strongly to their decision to speak or learn a language, developing an understanding of Diné College students' attitudes about the Navajo language will contribute insight to language revitalization programs, like the Cohort Program, so that they are better able to productively tailor their programs to the needs of this particular age group.

To understand the kinds of situations and speaking genres in which students appear to prefer speaking Navajo, I utilized an ethnographic approach to data collection and observed the students' language use first hand. These situations and speaking genres could potentially be simulated by the Cohort Program, to more productively encourage students to speak Navajo. Through our interviews students provided detailed descriptions of their past experiences with speaking Navajo, along with distinct reasons for needing the Navajo language in their individual lives. Descriptions of both language usage, and the needs students expressed for using Navajo, could be assets in developing a language revitalization program tailored to the students of Diné College. Additionally, I explore the aspects of students' discourse about language that may relate to a larger set of Navajo youth discourses. Some of these perpetuate a negative image of Navajo speakers, while others serve to generate pride in being Navajo and speaking Navajo. Understanding the way younger Navajos generate knowledge about the language may be vital for programs which critically confront negative stereotypes and myths about speakers of the language. Furthermore, Navajo hip hop music, all in the Navajo language, may provide an excellent language teaching aid to which students respond positively.

The qualitative approach employed in this research, builds upon and complements work by Navajo language and culture activists and educators (Benally and Viri 2005, Deyhle 1986, Lee 2005, House 2002, McLaughlin 2001). House's (2002) critical examination of adult Navajo language ideologies investigates the way adult Navajos living in the Tsailé community position themselves in relation to essentializing discourses about the "benefits of being American" and the "benefits of being Navajo." She examines the negative consequences of both discourses and their application to language revitalization programs. Then she suggests that Navajos turn to traditional approaches of problem solving to formulate a plan for language revitalization. House (2002:85-103) also points out an important schism between the spoken values about the Navajo language and the actual practice in speaking the language, from her fieldwork among Navajo people. My research with Navajo college students shows greater consistency between their spoken values about Navajo and actual language practice. My findings probably do not contradict those of House (2002). Rather, I believe the difference is related to generational and political differences between the populations with whom we worked.

McLaughlin's (2001) research explores and defines the way non-pedagogical uses of Navajo literacy empower Navajo youth attending the Rough Rock demonstration school. His model for ethnographic writing about Navajo issues offers insight into language practice and explores the wide range of venues for ethnographic data. Donna Deyhle's (1986) ethnographic description of Navajo and Ute high school students' commitment to break dancing as a form of youth empowerment served as a model for

conducting an ethnographic investigation of the intersection of pop culture movements and the experience of younger Navajos. Deyhle's work directed my attention to Navajo hip hop, a similar genre of youth empowerment and resistance.

Benally and Viri's (2005) summary of Navajo language shift suggests that the age group most important in reversing the shift consists of Navajos under thirty years of age. The mean age of Navajos living within the Navajo Nation is 22 years old (Navajo Nation Census 2000), which shows that the Navajo Nation is a strikingly young population. My own observations in the summers of 2003, 2004 and 2005, were of college students within four to five years of this age. This age group is quickly becoming the parents of the next generation of Navajos (Benally and Viri 2005). This means that their thoughts and beliefs about the Navajo language and the value of teaching it are likely to affect the language choices of the coming generation. My research seeks to understand the relationship between the value young Navajos place on speaking Navajo and their response to language and culture programs. This type of analysis may help increase the efficacy of programs such as the Diné College Cohort Program's language immersion program.

#### Fieldwork and Methods

I conducted formal fieldwork at Diné College in Tsaile, AZ, from June 5, 2005, until August 8, 2005, which consisted of participant observation and conducting semi-structured interviews with Diné College students. At the end of my first week at Diné College, I discussed my research interests with the students at a dorm meeting. I received

the permission of the Navajo Historic Preservation Committee and the Diné College dorm supervisor prior to my visit to ensure that my research was done in accordance with Navajo Nation research guidelines.

### Entering the Field

Lila Abu-lughod (1991) writes about the importance of writing against the homogenizing aspects often embodied in the use of the term “culture.” She discusses several ways ethnographers can write *against* culture. One of the crucial ways to accomplish this is to describe how anthropologists relate to the people and places that are being researched. This serves to create less distance between the anthropologist and those with whom they work (informants or consultants). The following vignette explains how I came to do research on the Navajo Nation and how I developed this specific project concerning the language ideologies and practices of Diné College students at Diné College.

When I first came to the Diné College campus in the summer of 2003, I had driven 10 hours from my apartment in Lubbock, Texas, to the dorm room the College housing department had arranged for me prior to my visit. The first summer I enrolled in classes and subsequently spent two more summers (2004 and 2005) on the campus. Dr. Deborah House, the professor who suggested I work on the Reservation at Diné College, advised me to spend a month taking classes, just to make certain I would be comfortable staying there for future fieldwork. These courses shaped my understanding of Navajo language and culture. House (2002) conducted extensive language ideology research

over a ten year period, while living and working in the Tsaille community. Her research focused on teachers at the college and elementary school, and with other adults in the community. In order to complement her adult language ideology focus, I limited my own research to the experiences of the college students.

The first summer I came to Diné College, I introduced myself to the students as “just another student.” I was in the process of completing my bachelor’s degree by taking a political science correspondence course. When I walked into my dorm room on that first day, my roommate had already moved in. She looked at me, and I felt I could read her mind. “Oh god, I have to room with a white girl...” That night we talked and I tried to get to know her as she laid across her bed, kicking her feet into the air. Credence’s Clearwater Revival was playing on her massive stereo. I do not remember everything from that night. I did not write it down. I was nervous with my new position among a group of people I did not really know. Introducing myself the second summer presented similar difficulties, as none of the students from the previous summer were enrolled. As I carried my belongings from the car to the dorm, I was met with suspecting stares. My roommate, a 16 year old high school student, was kind to me and introduced herself by name. Immediately thereafter she explained that although she was Navajo, she did not and would not date any Navajo boys. She may have said this with the hope of establishing a better relationship with me, an Anglo female. After a few weeks of taking classes and interacting with the dorm students, I began developing friendships with some of them. The following summer (2005) things went much smoother; many of the same students from the previous summer were enrolled in summer school in 2005.

From my perspective, each of the three summers at Diné College seemed markedly different. This may be related to the fact that there was an entirely different group of students who attended the college in 2003. There was considerable overlap in the students who attended Diné College in the summers of 2004 and 2005. The first summer was important because I finally had the chance to learn about Navajo culture from Diné teachers in the Navajo Indian Studies (NIS) program. Several of the dorm students were enrolled in the same classes, which provided common ground on which we could relate to one another. During this time, I began paying careful attention to the way students used both Navajo and English. That summer, I became convinced that none of the students were fluent in Navajo. The following summer (2004) things were much different; new students came to summer school and at first, most of them seemed to speak or understand Navajo. During these first two summers I refined my interest in understanding students' language choices to be more specifically geared toward figuring out whether peer groups offered social incentives for individuals to speak Navajo on campus.

During my fieldwork in 2005, I realized this question could not be effectively investigated during the summer session. I then reformulated my research project to focus upon the research question I examine here. A crucial turning point in this research process was my conversation with Eric Bitsui, a teacher and the Cohort Program Coordinator, with whom some of my friends in the dorm suggested I discuss my research. Mr. Bitsui patiently listened as I explained my campus research interests. He then explained his involvement with the campus Cohort Program which was interested in

developing a Navajo language immersion program on campus. Mr. Bitsui explained the program would be offered in the student dorm, and would focus on immersing students in the Navajo language as well as offering incentives to encourage them to speak it in the dorm context. Because English was the norm for most communication, albeit inconsistently so, the program hoped to facilitate increased student communication in Navajo. From our conversation, I realized that my research could offer helpful information about students' language practices, as well as insight into their past and current experiences with the Navajo language. I hoped this focus could potentially point to genres of speech and situations in which students indicated, through interviews, increased comfort in speaking Navajo.

As I lived on campus, some students had initial difficulty accepting my presence. On one occasion Katy, a student in one of my classes and a dorm resident, explained to me most students from "other" places and of non-Navajo ethnicities do not adapt well on campus, and become so depressed and lonely they eventually leave. Terrence, another dorm resident, was quite annoyed by my role as an anthropologist. Other students considered him a source of information about Navajo culture and encouraged me to interview him. When I approached him about an interview, he explained he was thoroughly disgusted with both anthropology as a field of study, and with anthropologists as people. He had read old anthropological texts about Navajos and absolutely did not want to be "used" by me in a data mining process. Furthermore, many of the students who did participate in interviews were explicit that I was not to distort their words with analytic interpretations. I believe they participated because they wanted my research to

be a forum for their thoughts about the Navajo language. For this reason, I have tried to present extended student narratives, organized around pertinent themes that emerged in the grounded theory analytic process, described below.

### Fieldwork

My role as a participant observer was informed and defined by literature I read before entering the field. Of primary influence was Saville-Troike's (2003) approach to the ethnography of communication, which offers a methodology geared toward understanding situated speech practice, or the way a particular speech community uses language socially. Using this approach entailed combining informal qualitative interviewing strategies and participant observation experience, in investigating the situationally driven language practices of this student population. Looking at situated speech practice (language usage) required my paying close attention to which person communicated what ideas to whom, where speakers communicated their ideas, when they chose to communicate them, why they chose to express what they expressed, and the way they chose to convey their thoughts to others.

I participated in student life as a registered student resident at Diné College over the course of three summers. I enrolled in five classes during the first two summers. In June, 2003, I lived on campus for one month of the summer session. During this time I took Wilson Aronilth's "Introduction to Navajo Culture" and "Navajo Philosophy." I lived on campus for two more months during summer of 2004 and took Martha Jackson's "Navajo Language for Non-Speakers," Avery Denny's "Holistic Healing," and O.J.

Vacinti's "Navajo History." These courses shaped my understanding of Navajo language and culture. Many of the students living in the dorm were enrolled in the same classes, which provided me the opportunity to observe their classroom language decisions.

In addition to taking courses at Diné College, I joined students in the cafeteria for daily meals, allowing me to observe their interactions with cafeteria staff and other students outside of the dorms or classrooms. I participated in the same routine activities as other dorm residents. I shared a dorm room with a roommate; I attended school sponsored events (such as concerts, baseball games, and student meetings) and dorm room parties; I helped in preparing weekend lunches for others and enjoying the weekend lunches other students prepared; I walked to Wilkinson's Trading Post and Tsaile Lake; I sat around the dorm fire and played dominoes; I took short trips to the nearby town of Chinle. Most of the students with whom I interacted were within five years of my age. The similarity in our age made it much easier for me to interpret students' words and actions, and for them to accept me as a friend. All of these activities were accompanied by conversation, which was mostly in English but sometimes in Navajo. The similarity between our ages may have afforded me greater access to student activities. In total, I estimate that I had the opportunity to interact with and observe approximately fifty students over the course of the three summers.

My observation time focused on situational Navajo language use among students. I documented what I saw and heard each time students communicated in Navajo with Diné College faculty, staff and other students. As I observed these encounters, I noted the following, when possible: (1) *scene* (genre, topic, purpose, and setting), (2) *key*

(emotional tone), (3) *participants* present, (4) *message form* (language or variety choice), (5) *message content*, (6) *rules* for interaction, and (7) *norms* for interpretation (Saville-Troike 2003:110). Documenting my daily observations required making jottings in a notebook (Bishop 1999:76-81), which were typed into field notes at the end of each day. Drawings and other items collected during fieldwork were kept in a sketchbook. I also kept a personal diary of my own thoughts, concerns and frustrations. These multiple documentation strategies, allowed me to revisit my observations and analyze the fieldwork setting. My observation of and participation in these interactions facilitated a more accurate interpretation of what I heard, saw and discussed with other students during our interviews (Saville-Troike, 2003).

I conducted and recorded interviews with 21 students during the summer of 2005. I created a structured interview schedule prior to my visit but did not rely solely upon those specific questions. I used open ended, spontaneous questions as well. During our interviews, the schedule served to remind me of the types of questions I wanted to ask. Having a list of questions helped me be more relaxed during the first interviews and prevented my initial anxiety from interfering with my ability to ask important questions.

I also conducted two group interviews. The first group interview was a class of six students, but was not very helpful. The students did not speak much and seemed fairly uncomfortable in the situation. This coupled with the low quality of the digital recording prevented an adequate transcription. I later discarded the interview. The second interview was with two friends (Michael and Celeste). The rest of my interviews were one-on-one with individual students. Most of the interviews took place in the

context of my dorm room, where we would be less likely to be disturbed (my roommate was usually away). Two interviews were conducted outdoors as a matter of convenience for the students. The interviews averaged around 30 minutes and ranged from less than fifteen minutes to over an hour. The first students I interviewed were close friends. In turn, they recommended I interview specific students, and in some cases even asked the students to participate on my behalf. This strategy was beneficial in creating initial interview environments where students felt comfortable with me, and I in turn felt comfortable with them. Interviews with close friends were the longest. I believe these students' familiarity with me increased their willingness to take my questions seriously. Students I did not know, but who were referred to me by other students, offered significantly less in-depth information. I believe several of these students were intimidated by the digital recorder I placed between us, my presence as an Anglo researcher, and the Texas Tech Internal Review Board consent form that looks and reads like a legal agreement. These factors created skepticism in students who did not know me well.

Prior to conducting fieldwork, I intended to investigate the way peer group communicative styles relate to individual students' decision to speak Navajo. Unfortunately, after a few weeks at the college during the summer session, I realized that this project was less feasible than I had thought. First of all, there were simply not enough students during the summer session to support that project. Students did not display the same group loyalties in the summer program that they did in the fall. While I felt this project would make a significant contribution, I had to revise my project in the

field to be more feasible in the summer school situation. After much deliberation, I decided I needed to employ a research design that would take advantage of the intimate situation fostered by the summer school program. Several students mentioned to me that if I had attended Diné College in the fall, I would have had more difficulty in establishing trusting relationships with students in such a short amount of time. Because so few students were on campus during the summer, we became acquainted easily, and this allowed me much greater insight into personal thoughts and beliefs about the Navajo language.

My interview questions, designed to elicit information about peer groups, remained helpful in understanding the way students relate to various student groups. My initial interviews were much more structured than any of the others. This was due to my reliance on the interview schedule. As time went on and I interviewed more students, my questions became less formal and more open ended. I wanted students to tell me as much as they could comfortably discuss about the way they related to the Navajo language as individuals. I was also interested in their perceptions of other students' language choices, so that I could better understand the kinds of pressures that exist to speak or not to speak the Navajo language.

There are several limitations to the approach I have taken in conducting this research. First and foremost, time constraints limited my ability to conduct research beyond the summer session. Being able to live on the Diné College campus during a regular session would have allowed me to observe and interact with many more students in a wider range of contexts. During my discussions and interviews with students, they

mentioned the predominance of spoken Navajo in student club settings, such as the Native American Church club. Observing student interactions in these contexts, which I was unable to do, would have provided a rich source of observational data regarding the contexts of spoken Navajo on campus. Furthermore, during a normal semester, students' daily routines on campus would have been more stable and predictable, allowing a more accurate depiction of student life.

A second weakness in my research relates to methods. I discussed my research topic freely and honestly with students, seeking their input about ways to improve my approach. Students' suggestions were very helpful in locating new venues for discussion in my research. However, this approach may have pushed students to answer my questions in ways that reflected what they thought I wanted to hear, rather than their actual opinions.

The third major limitation relates to selecting interview participants. The majority of the people I interviewed were close friends. They were most comfortable participating in my interviews, and they offered the most in-depth information. However, this came with the risk of disproportionately representing their views, over those of students with whom I never became acquainted. Also, more group interviews would have been helped gain a clearer perspective on students' political views about language. If I could have organized group interviews with students who knew each other well, I believe this could have provided rich information for analysis.

## Data Analysis and Theory

After I returned home from research at Diné College, I began transcribing my interviews. While typing them, I began noticing similarities and differences between students' responses. After the majority of the interviews were transcribed, I had two choices in analyzing my data: sociolinguistic analysis or grounded theory. I had entered the field believing a sociolinguistic analysis would be the most obvious choice. A sociolinguistic analysis tends to structure students' responses around the sociolinguistic concepts they reflect, rather than letting students' responses direct the flow of data presentation. Grounded theory, on the other hand, creates a structure built around the themes students discussed with me in their interviews. Rather than choose between the two approaches, I relied upon Clarke's (2005) approach to grounded theory for the analysis of my interviews, and then I structured the presentation of my data to incorporate useful insights from sociolinguistic literature to name, define and discuss some of the language ideology phenomena observable in students' responses.

### Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is different from more traditional academic approaches to data analysis. Rather than approach the data from the top down, grounded theory approaches the data by coding, categorizing and mapping situations to allow theoretical insights to emerge bottom-up from the data. A major tenet of these approaches is privileging the theory that emerges through this analytic process, over theories external to data. Glaser and Strauss (1967) were the first to lay out a methodology for grounded theory, which

was rooted in the Chicago school's pragmatist and symbolic interaction approaches (Clarke 2005:xxi). Since their seminal work, Glaser and Strauss and many others have elaborated on the approach.

To analyze my data, I have relied on Adele Clarke's (2005) approach to "situational analysis," which builds upon the traditional approach to grounded theory through utilizing similar methodologies (coding, categorizing). It departs from this traditional approach by focusing more on the situation and the relationships between discursive components of the situation. Clarke (2005:xxi-xli) writes about the importance of carrying grounded theory "across the postmodern turn" to move from the modernist emphasis on "universality, generalization, simplification, permanence, stability, wholeness, rationality, regularity, homogeneity, and sufficiency" to capturing the postmodernist emphasis on "partialities, positionalities, complications, tenuousness, instabilities, irregularities, contradictions, heterogeneities, situatedness, and fragmentation—complexities" (Clarke 2005:xxiv).

Keeping these complexities in mind, the initial coding process involves careful analysis of interview data that entails writing a word or phrase by each concept presented in the interview data and answering the question "what is this about?" Strauss and Corbin define coding as "the part of analysis that pertains specifically to the naming and categorizing of phenomena through close examination of data" (Dey 1999:97). After coding interviews, the researcher becomes more familiar with the data and then begins determining categories that best describe the kinds of themes that emerged in the coding process (Dey 1999:98-104). Once the general themes have been established, the

researcher adds the key concepts, or themes under each category, until the category reaches a point of saturation. Saturation is reached when the data no longer offers new conceptual distinctions (Dey 1999:8). After all the themes that emerge from the codes are saturated, the researcher is left to decide which are most relevant in answering the research question (Clarke 2005:83-86).

Situational map making can help with this decision. Creating situational maps involves writing down all the categories that emerged in the data alongside discourses, technologies, and features of the setting that are relevant (Clarke 2005:xxii). These maps offer the advantage of creating a snapshot in time of an otherwise “open, indeterminate, changing, unstable, unfixd, tenuous, and temporary” state (Clarke 2005:296). The researcher then creates situational maps by indicating how the various items on the page are connected to one another and noting the relationship between key connections (Clarke 2005:83-144). Clarke states that creating situational maps should produce a description of the research situation in the same way as Geertzian “thick descriptions” (2005:xxiii). Positional map making, another strategy suggested by Clarke (2005:128), aligns all the perspectives on an  $x$  and  $y$  axis, visually representing the degree of difference between individual positions regarding an issue. This helps visually to display the range of perspectives within a situation.

This is precisely the way in which I analyzed my data. First, I coded my interviews to determine the general categories of information students thought pertinent in answering my questions. Then I created a situational map that visually illustrated how the various themes they discussed were connected. Features of the college setting, such

as the institutional discourse of Diné College and major discourses of the Navajo students, clearly influenced some of the students' responses. This situational map served to structure the presentation of my data (quotes from interviews) and simultaneously present the themes in students' interviews. These were pertinent to understanding both the similarities and differences between individual students' needs to speak the Navajo language.

In writing my observations and compiling quotes that represent the positions students took regarding the Navajo language, I confronted a dilemma about whether to represent students by pseudonyms or their actual names. Many students gave permission to use their names on my consent forms. I wanted to offer students the opportunity to take credit for their statements by giving them the choice to use their real names. After reading my transcripts of students' interviews, however, I realized some students may not have been entirely aware of the social risks involved in negative evaluations of other students' language practices. In order to do my best to protect students' interests, I decided to use pseudonyms for all students in this study.

### Language Ideology and Practice

Sociolinguistic literature about language ideology and practice contributes insight in interpreting students' opinions and practice with regard to speaking Navajo. Many concepts and insights from sociolinguistics show the importance of language ideologies in shaping speakers actual linguistic practices. As mentioned above, Saville-Troike's approach to the ethnography of communication was helpful in garnering an

understanding of situated language practice. Dell Hymes provided the foundation of this approach through pointing to omission of context from most descriptive speech data (Saville-Troike 2003:1-5; Woolard and Schieffelin 1994:59). Realizing the intersection between descriptive speech practice and the socio-cultural context of its occurrence became a foundational tenet of the “Ethnography of Speaking” approach, as it was originally called (Saville-Troike 2003:1). An examination of situated speech practice is helpful in exploring language ideology, in that language use reflects ideological commitments (Gal 1998; Hill 1998; Kroskrity 1998; Saville-Troike 2003; Silverstein, 1998; Simpson, 1993:5; Woolard and Schieffelin 1994). Furthermore, as Marshall McLuhan points out, “the medium is the message.” Stated differently, students use of Navajo (the medium) conveys an interpretable message about when, where, and to whom they want to speak Navajo (McLuhan 2001:129-138). Therefore, speech practice is ideological.

Language ideology theory was also significant in recognizing and interpreting students’ interviews as metalanguage, or language about language. There is a wide variety of definitions of language ideology, most of which are interpreted as either “neutral” or “critical” means of evaluating language (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994:57). Silverstein provides a critical definition of language ideology as “sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994:54). Simpson (1993:5), offering a more critical description of language ideology, states that “an ideology therefore derives

from the taken-for-granted assumptions, beliefs and value systems which are shared collectively by social groups.”

A neutral interpretation of ideology is offered in the ethnography of communication approach. According to Woolard and Schieffelin (1994:59), “the ethnography of speaking has long given attention to ideology as neutral, cultural conceptions of language, primarily through description of vernacular speech taxonomies and metalinguistics.” Although I borrowed the relatively more neutral ethnography of communication approach in eliciting students’ language about language, I take a critical stance. As Simpson (1999:5) points out about language ideology, “what we say and think interacts with society.” The same holds true for Diné College students’ attitudes about other speakers use of the Navajo language.

Gramsci (2001:43-45) writes about the relationship between ideology and structure, which is helpful to further theorize about the ways students’ ideas about language interact with society. In my study I incorporate two of his three assertions about the relationship between ideology and political structure: “1. Ideology is identified as distinct from the structure, and it is asserted that it is not ideology that changes the structures but vice versa. 2. It is asserted that a given political solution is ‘ideological’ – i.e. that it is not sufficient to change the structure, although it thinks that it can do so” (Gramsci 2001:45).

Williams (2001:156-157) offers insight into the way ideologies of the dominant society saturate the consciousness of dominated societies. This is a crucial component of the relationship between colonized peoples and the dominant ideology of the colonizer.

The past and present relationship between colonizers and the colonized around the world has been described in literature by several important postcolonial writers. Loomba's (1998) work defines and distinguishes colonialism from postcolonialism. Thiongo (1986), and Fanon (2001) explain the way hegemonic forces 'colonize the minds' of peoples historically oppressed by colonization. Thiongo (1986) and Lee (2005) each address the process of decolonization, as a means to move toward Nationalism. Lee (2005) focuses specifically on Navajo efforts to move toward nationalism and greater sovereignty. In his approach he discusses the way Navajo language attrition relates to the goal of Nationalism. Deloria (1997) offers a valuable critique of Western scientific discourse, through the oral tradition. These works combined with feminist approaches within and outside anthropology contribute a great deal of insight about the way race and gender intersect in our lives as researchers and in the lives of those with whom we collaborate to produce texts of their experiences (Abu-lughod 1991; hooks 2001:424-438; McClaurin 2001:1-23; Silko 1996; Trihn 1989).

In the four remaining chapters, I present my data and analysis. I try to explain Diné College students' situated language practice and their language ideologies, to shed light on their attitudes toward language shift. In Chapter II, I analyze the history of Diné College and the development of institutional discourse which forms the setting for my study. I explore students' relationship to the college in Chapter III, as well as some of their past experiences speaking Navajo. Chapter IV focuses on patterns of "collective commitment" with regard to speaking the Navajo language (Clarke 2005:110). Students explain the needs they have for speaking the Navajo language, as well as some of the

reasons they refrain from speaking it on campus. I analyze and describe two genres in which students do speak Navajo (greetings and joking). I interpret their language practice as reflecting their commitment to speaking Navajo in certain domains. In Chapter IV, I describe the salient features of two student discourses operating on the campus that appear to affect and pertain to students' language decisions, and their evaluations of other students who speak Navajo. Chapter V concludes by summarizing the themes presented in the preceding chapters. I hope to provide insight into the kinds of situations in which college students feel most comfortable speaking Navajo on campus. The information in Chapter V may offer additional ideas to the Cohort program, which attempts to encourage more students to speak Navajo on campus.

## CHAPTER II

### DINÉ COLLEGE

The unique history of Diné College is significant in framing my investigation about students' language choices on campus. Diné College's institutional goals and objectives with respect to language and culture revitalization, combined with students' past experiences and family history, affect students' choices in their on-campus language practice. This chapter offers a brief history of Diné College focusing on the way in which tribal leaders' lobby for federal support. I describe how their activism intersects movements such as the American Indian Movement and the Tribal Control Movement. The College has had a historical commitment to "decolonizing" students' minds (Thiong'o, 1986). This commitment can be seen even with changes in institutional discourse. I explore these changes through an analysis of past and present College mission statements. Diné philosophy shapes current institutional discourse and is even reflected in the campus architecture. Both institutional discourse and the unique physical setting of the college contribute to the Colleges' institutional goal of reversing the negative psychological effects of colonization.

#### Diné College History and Institutional Framework

In 1957 the Navajo Nation created a scholarship fund to encourage and support Navajos seeking a college education. Many students initially took advantage of the opportunity, yet most of them dropped out after only a few semesters. Unfortunately, the

experience of cultural discontinuity on unfamiliar college campuses was more of a problem for these students than funding (www.dinecollege.edu). Not only did students have difficulty relating to the courses offered in outside institutions, but many could not afford to give up their jobs and homes on the reservation (House 2002:70). Native educators realized that a positive solution to these and other problems might be found through a tribally controlled college education opportunity. This hope was fueled by the success of the Rough Rock Demonstration School, one of the first bilingual and bicultural contract schools on the reservation (Lee 2005). The creation of Diné College in 1968 represented the first tribal control of an adult education program anywhere in the United States.

The experiences of cultural discontinuity and other byproducts of colonization (Aronilth 1988:8) are the greatest challenges for indigenous children in their school experiences, both on and off the reservation. Among Diné parents, educators, and elders there are a wide variety of opinions about how a Navajo institution can successfully respond to these kinds of problems (Deyhle 1981; 1986; House 2002:57-83). The activism of Native leaders and educators fueled the development of the College and shaped the institutional framework through an agenda of decolonization. The following section provides a brief history of the events that led to the creation and functioning of Diné College. The institutional agenda is discussed elsewhere as a process of “Navajo-ization” of Navajo schools (House 2002:57-83). I will expand this notion by examining several changes in the college’s mission statement since 1968. My research can be better understood through this brief history of Diné College and an analysis of its mission

statements, which reflect a significant component of the ideological institutional setting of this research. This chapter concludes with a description of the students who currently attend Diné College, focusing specifically on the students with whom I attended school and conducted fieldwork.

### The Tribal Control Movement, Self-Determination and the History of Diné College

Eighty-two years prior to the 1957 scholarship fund, the Treaty of 1868 guaranteed United States government control of Navajo education. From the onset, Navajos, like other Native American groups, suffered unreliable United States governmental education policies. Vogt and Kluckhohn (1951:149) describe the inconsistency in United States educational policy with respect to Native Americans as analogous to a pendulum swinging between two extremes: strict assimilationist policies designed to eradicate traditional knowledge (from the 1860's to the 1880's, and later in the 1950's); and 'romanticist' policies attempting to 'save' Navajo culture through archiving or preserving what was seen as a 'dying' culture (1930's and 1960's). Many argue that this second trend continues today (Deloria, 1995: 3-10; House, 105-109; Lee, 2005). The policies of the 1970s and 1990s are often considered more tolerant, and had better funding for language and culture preservation. Current educational reform efforts, however, appear to advocate assimilation, as evidenced by the dramatic decrease in funding for 1990s programs established in the 1970s. The impact of governmental programs such as 'No Child Left Behind', and language policies that favor monolingual English speakers are evidence of the pendulum's return swing towards assimilation

(House 2002: 107, Lee 2005:12, Reyhner 1999:2). The current U.S. education policy, signed into effect by President George W. Bush on January 8, 2002, is intended to lessen the achievement gap between minority students and white, middle class students. The method is increased “accountability testing.” The language of the policy, as well as the languages in which the policy is printed, makes clear that the program is directed toward immigrant children, as if they were only non-English speaking children in the U.S. Indigenous languages are completely overlooked in the policy (Grenoble and Whaley 2006:33-34). The swinging pendulum is a useful analogy for understanding inconsistent funding and divergent educational policies. It highlights destabilization as the main problem. While Navajo parents have lost control of their children’s education, mainstream American administrators and politicians have dominated educational policy making for Navajo children.

In the 1970s, the pressure on Congress, through the consciousness raising efforts of the American Indian Movement, gradually effected a change (Lee 2005:19). In 1969, a Senate Subcommittee on Indian Education wrote a report titled “Indian Education: A National Tragedy, A National Challenge,” which documented American Indians’ educational status (Beaulieu 2000:29). The report determined that forced assimilation and the loss of cultural integrity were the main causes of educational failure among American Indians (Beaulier 2000:30). Around the same time, the American Indian Movement (AIM) emphasized tribal control. It is often considered the most important influence on American Indian education. AIM created the unity and momentum needed to finally create and foster stable, self-controlled educational policies. Former Diné

College vice president, John Tippeconnic III, points to tribal control as the necessary ingredient for re-stabilization. Tribal control, he says, is the first of four arenas crucial in the improvement of American Indian education. The remaining three arenas include focusing and prioritizing on language, culture and research. Tribal control allows “the force of unity [that] is critical to the growth and improvement in Indian Education...[including] the positive use of tribal languages and cultures in schools, relevant curriculum, increased parental involvement; and a larger number of Indian teachers, administrators and counselors” (Tippeconnic 2004:40). The need for tribal control of education is also pointed out in the Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous Rights in Education (1999), which reads: “When measured in non-Indigenous terms, the educational outcomes of Indigenous peoples are still far below that of non-Indigenous peoples. This exists not because Indigenous peoples are less intelligent, but because educational theories and practices are developed and controlled by non-Indigenous peoples” (<http://www.ankn.uaf.edu/IKS/cool.html>).

Guy Gorman, Ned Hatathli, Allen Yazzie, Robert A. Roessel, Ruth Roessel, and others believed that the Navajo Nation could support a local community college (Stein 1990:1). According to Stein’s interview with Gorman in 1987, “they believed that the community college designed and founded correctly would be a major part of the answer to breaking the destructive cycle of poverty which had grown up on the Navajo reservation” (Stein 1990:1). The Office of Navajo Economic Opportunity and Arizona State University coordinated a study to determine whether a community college on reservation land, controlled by the Navajo Nation, would be economically feasible. After

petitioning and gaining support from the tribal council, this group traveled to Washington D.C and New York to seek private and public funding and support. Funding was the most immediate problem. In 1968, the Navajo Tribal Council provided \$250,000, which was combined with \$60,000 and later \$100,000, donated by the Donnor Foundation (Stein 1990:1-2).

After solving initial funding problems, a board of regents was appointed by the Navajo Tribal Council in 1968, and this group elected Bob Roessel to be the first president of Diné College. The initial funding provided enough money to open the College, but it would literally take an act of congress to assure future funding. Soon thereafter, U.S. Rep. Wayne Aspinall (D-CO) accepted (after much deliberation) Ruth Roessel's invitation to attend the groundbreaking ceremony for the Tsaille campus. The event had a great deal of impact on Aspinall, who along with others held the *gish* (traditional digging stick) during groundbreaking. After releasing the stick he exclaimed, "I have been to mosques; I have been to synagogues; I've been to churches all over the world. But I felt God when I felt that stick. You will get your college" (Ambler 2002:1). He kept his promise, and the Navajo Community College Act became law in 1971. This Act, for the first time, sent federal funds directly to the tribal council, rather than to the BIA. The Act reads, "It is the purpose of sections 640a to 640c-3 of this title to assist the Navajo Tribe of Indians in providing education to the members of the tribe and other qualified applicants through a community college, established by that tribe, known as the Navajo Community College" (Public Law 92-189).

The first classes were held on January 1969, in Many Farms, AZ. Peter Iverson (1999:3) describes the BIA high school that housed the first Navajo Community College classrooms and dormitories. Bunk beds were stacked three to a room in a single trailer with little ventilation, and the student union building, which came much later, consisted of a trailer with a grill. The faculty and staff were of various ethnicities and cultural backgrounds, and they strove to survive together in the small community, located ninety minutes from Window Rock.

Aside from the physical and geographical differences from today's Diné College, there was a considerable difference in the initial courses offered and policies for determining credit (Iverson, 1999:9-10). Teachers awarded students pass/fail grades, and 'inquiry circles' drove course curriculum. Iverson discusses the concept of inquiry circles, developed by a Navajo Community College administrator from New York. The goal of inquiry circles was to encourage students to form groups to determine the issues they would be interested in studying. Students would then direct their inquiries about a particular subject to the assigned teacher, who in turn was responsible for leading student discussions about the topic. Iverson describes one semester in which, "Navajo students worked through inquiry with me to explore these subjects: the origins and growth of the Navajo reservation, Navajo self-determination, Navajos and Blacks, Navajos and sports, Navajo drinking patterns, Navajo dress through time, sports and society through literature, the Black college athlete, Black power, theory and psychology in coaching, Zuni self-determination, Indian literature, Indian education, Renaissance painting, and American drama" (Iverson 1999:10). Concerns about course transferability eventually

resulted in the concept of inquiry circles and the pass/fail grading system being replaced by traditional models, like those found in mainstream colleges.

Six months after the college in Many Farms opened, Congress enacted the 1971 Navajo Community College Act. This act funded the purchase and construction of the current Tsaile campus, a location which was selected by the board of regents. Ned Hatathli became the first Navajo president of the college. Setting the precedent for future tribal colleges, the founders of Diné College prioritized Diné philosophy in every aspect of the college learning environment. These included the visible layout of the new campus and the heart of its teaching philosophy (see appended photos). House (2002:78) describes the design of the campus as it relates to the “circular, holistic tradition of the Navajo Hogan.” In both the Navajo philosophy and Navajo culture classes, students hear a lecture explaining the significance of campus design. The loving care with which the founders of the College planned the design is emphasized in this lecture. Students leave the class with the sense that their elders’ thoughts went into every aspect of campus planning, marking the campus even more unique than they previously thought. On a couple of different occasions, students proudly explained to me that everything around me had a plan and a purpose, without knowing that I had attended the same classes.

### The SNBH Paradigm

“Diné Philosophy is the natural laws of the twelve Holy People. These laws are seen in our philosophy and its teachings work all the time and every minute of our life, they are in every breath we take, and in the working process we call Sa’ah Naagháí

Bik'eh Hózhóón” (Aronilth 1988:10). The sacredness and power within these words calls for it to be represented by the acronym SNBH, rather than writing or speaking the words repetitively and nonchalantly (House 2002:90). The proposal for the 2005-2009 Diné College mission and philosophy describes SNBH as “the Diné traditional living system, which places human life in harmony with the natural world and the universe. The philosophy provides principles both for protection from the imperfections in life and for the development of well being” ([www.dinecollege.edu/opr/nahata/strategic\\_goals\\_2005\\_2009/index.php](http://www.dinecollege.edu/opr/nahata/strategic_goals_2005_2009/index.php)).

Many *hataalii* (chanters or singers, often considered ‘medicine men’) and researchers have spoken and written about the SNBH paradigm (Aronilth (1994), House (2002), Lee (2005), McNealy (1981). According to Aronilth, “Diné philosophy is about our art work, beliefs, feelings, identity, language, mind, self image, thinking, thoughts, values, moral laws, and our ways and customs, including all other capabilities acquired by our forefathers” (1994:45). Informed by some of the greatest contemporary *hataalii* on the reservation, Griffen-Pierce describes SNBH as “the state of wholeness, or holiness, [which] accompanies completion” (1992:188-189). In turn, the lack of balance, incompleteness, is considered dangerous (Griffen-Pierce 1992:189).

All the formal workings of Diné College are grounded in the framework of this paradigm, not only because it is the main framework for Navajo philosophy in a Navajo college, but because of the nature of the problems confronting contemporary Diné people. In the opening of the classic text, “Diné Bi Bee Óhoo’aah Bá Silá: An Introduction to Navajo Philosophy,” used in the Navajo Philosophy class, Aronilth (1994:8) writes about

the necessity of incorporating the Diné philosophy of learning into the curriculum as a means of addressing the many obstacles facing youth. The problems he specifically mentions include: anxiety and depression, hallucinations and grief reaction, school behavior issues, child neglect and abuse, delusions and spiritual issues, and behavior and personality issues. According to traditional Navajo wisdom, most of these ailments are the result of Navajos not learning or living by Navajo values, both by-products of colonization (Aronilth 1994:9).

The Navajo Indian Studies (NIS) program was designed to address the lack of institutionally supported grounding in traditional culture. This had been neglected in earlier educational programs for Navajo students. The significance of this program to the institution cannot be overstated; it is often referred to in NIS classes as the heart of Diné College. By offering educational grounding within the framework of traditional Navajo philosophy, leaders hoped students would develop a sense of who they are as Diné people. The SNBH paradigm, as it is taught in the NIS classes, offers students a framework for understanding imbalance and instability as manifestations of colonization. Furthermore, these teachings offer a way to restore balance and completeness through ceremonies and critical examination. There are, however, problems in teaching this philosophy. Many students come to the college from non-traditional backgrounds. Some Navajos object to teaching Diné philosophy on grounds that it is religious, and could potentially pull students away from their faith in other religions. Conversely, others believe the teachings are too sacred to be taught in the classroom context (House 2002:91).

In response, only the most basic teachings of the SNBH paradigm are offered in the NIS courses. House (2002:91) describes this basic level as dealing with the “aspects of the natural world we live in [and offering students] a process for living a positive life and a system for relating to others.” Students can and often do decide to learn more through apprenticeship to one of several *hatalii* on campus, by attending ceremonies, or by seeking explanations from elder clan leaders.

### Adjustments to the Mission Statement and Decolonization

Utilizing the flexibility of tribal control of the college, Navajo administrators and teachers have tried to assess students’ success in their programs, and make adjustments accordingly. The students who enrolled at Diné College thirty-nine years ago are much different than those who are enrolling today. Those students were, for the most part, fully fluent in Navajo, and needed English classes to become functionally bilingual. Today, most students’ proficiency in Navajo is questionable. Several current students came to Diné College specifically to learn Navajo through the Navajo Indian Studies program on campus. As an institution, Diné College seems to have met this change by making some adjustments. For example the mission statement has been modified three times since the school opened in 1968. The original mission statement

(<http://www.dinecollege.edu/opr/nitsahakees/mission-philosophy/mission.php>) reads to:

- Provide academic foundations for students who plan to transfer to senior colleges or universities;
- Provide vocational-technical training programs for students;
- Provide adult education courses for individuals who desire further education;

- Provide a program of community service and community development;
- Provide assistance and consultation upon request to public, church and Bureau of Indian Affairs schools and other organizations or institutions in the area which the College serves;
- Foster the development and preservation of a healthy pride among Navajo people in their heritage;
- Serve as a center for development of Indian cultures, with special emphasis on the Navajo;

A proposed draft of the next adjustment is currently available online, waiting for community comments and approval ([www.dinecollege.edu/opr/nitsahakees](http://www.dinecollege.edu/opr/nitsahakees)):

Diné College is a public institution of higher education chartered by the Navajo Nation. Our mission is to apply the Sa'ah Nagháí Bik'e Hozhóón principles to advance quality student learning

- Through Nistahakees, Nahat'a Iiná, Síhasin.
- In study of the Diné language, history and culture.
- In preparation for further studies and employment in a multicultural and technological world
- In fostering social responsibility, community service and scholarly research that contribute to the social, economic and cultural well being of the Navajo Nation.

House interpreted the 1994-1999 version of the mission statement, which is similar to the proposed statement (above), as being exemplary of counterhegemonic discourse (2002:80). Phillips (quoted in House 2002:13) defines hegemony as, “the consent of the governed through ideological persuasion.” Counterhegemonic strategies are those which seek to resist dominant hegemony through opposition to it (House 2002:14). The addition of written Navajo appears in all the versions after the original mission statement. The SNBH paradigm is also incorporated in each revised mission statement, after the first. The current mission statement also includes a new addition of the implementation strategy for the SNBH paradigm, through Nitsahakees (thinking), Nahata (planning), Iina (implementation), Síhasin (thoughtful critique and analysis).

According to Lee (personal communication, Feb. 6, 2006), “Diné College’s discourse is the beginning of what is required to promote Navajo nationhood...decolonization and resistance is connected to nation building however it is an alternative method from the standard route of nation building, through a Euro-American paradigm.”

Aside from being an educational institution specifically designed to meet the needs of Navajo students, Diné College often serves as a bearer of contemporary Navajo thought. The extent to which this is true became clearer to me upon talking to the Dean of Student Services, who explained how KTNN (the Navajo radio station) requests newly constructed Navajo words to describe new technology, such as “wireless internet.” Both the current and original mission statements reflect the College’s commitment to community service. Without community support, the College could not have begun, much less survived. The educational goals of the college appear to have shifted from providing adult educational services and vocational training to a commitment to preparing students for “further studies and employment.”

The original and current statements include a section expressing the importance the College places on language and culture. The difference between the two emerges in the shift from cultural preservation (found in the original statement) to advancing students’ learning through language, culture and history studies. This shift may be related to the difference in incoming students’ proficiency in Navajo language and culture. Initially the school hoped to preserve students’ abilities in Navajo, yet still provide them a solid education in English. Today this goal has shifted to meet the needs of current students with much less proficiency in Navajo.

The expressed need for Navajo researchers to study Navajo issues, found in the current statement is perhaps the most significant difference. The College is now able to produce students equipped with the tools needed to satisfy some of the research needs of the Navajo Nation. Navajos defining their own issues and research agendas is an extremely important step toward decolonizing. Diné College, like many colleges, has had to adjust to the differing needs of students over time. Unlike mainstream colleges, it has had to develop programs focusing on Navajo issues, while at the same time preparing students to compete in mainstream scholarly circles.

Through examining the unique history of Diné College, we begin to realize the extent that tribal and community support and individual activism paved the road for the dream that became Diné College. Much hope has been placed in this institution as a way of offsetting the challenges facing today's Navajo youth. The College's commitment is partially met by recognizing the harmful psychological effects of colonization, and by prioritizing decolonization through traditional discourse embodied in the SNBH paradigm. My investigation is framed both by this discourse and by the physical setting of the College, but also by students themselves.

In the following chapter I will discuss the kinds of students who come to Diné College and the way these students relate to the college setting. This includes examining the different reasons students chose the College, as well as a summary of student diversity. I will incorporate some of the comments students made during interviews, which offer insight into the way they initially related to the College, their experience at

the institution, and some of the changes they went through after becoming a part of the Tsaiile college community.

## CHAPTER III

### DINÉ COLLEGE STUDENTS

Diné College students are an extremely diverse, dynamic group of people. I will approach campus diversity by first describing some of the reasons a few of the students I knew chose to attend Diné College in Tsaile. These examples are not exhaustive, but hopefully offer some insight into the variation in students' reasons for coming to the College. Following this section, I will discuss campus diversity in terms of students' age, ethnicity, and regional origins. Insight into a few individual students' past experiences with language and culture will follow. Lastly, I will describe student life in the dorms, focusing mainly on the situations I observed during the summer session. This will involve describing both the physical and social setting within the dorm context; the dorms form the main backdrop of resident student life.

#### Why Diné College?

Some students live on the reservation with their families and opt to attend Diné College after high school. Among this group, some hope to transfer to one of the four-year universities in Arizona, New Mexico, or Utah, while others hope to obtain their associate's degrees and find a job on the reservation or in one of the towns that border the reservation. The Diné students who did not grow up on the reservation often come specifically for the language and culture classes offered in the NIS department. Some of these students aspire to win the Manuelito scholarship, which requires them to have taken

several Navajo language and literacy classes. Some students only stay at Diné College for a limited time, perhaps one or two semesters, just to take advantage of the NIS courses.

Some of the bilingual and bicultural students specifically mentioned being more interested in learning ‘other’ things, rather than saturating themselves in Navajo language or culture studies. These students seek opportunities to perfect or expand their skills in English. They view Diné College as a comfortable Navajo setting for exploring western academic skills. One such student described English and by extension, western knowledge, as a “bow and arrow, or a weapon” which she seeks by attending the College. In their interviews, four fluent students mentioned taking advantage of the ‘Western’ face of Diné College in one way or another. Three students mentioned their desire to learn or perfect their skills in English. One student explained that she would rather learn about ‘other’ things than Navajo language or culture, as an avenue through which she could gain employment off the reservation.

A few students coming from strong Navajo language and culture backgrounds indicated that they prefer their clan or family teachings to the more standardized version of Navajo teachings offered through the college. In contrast, five students I interviewed who came from strong English speaking backgrounds expressed their desire to learn more about their language and culture through the College. These students took delight in the opportunity to learn teachings they felt had been denied to them by their families. One of the themes that emerged in their discussions with me was that of ‘transformation’. Several students said that after taking language and culture classes, they finally had the

chance to learn ‘who they are and where they come from’, a phrase that is metaphorically and literally significant in several ways. Literally this can refer to students discovering their clans for the first time, through information that students are required to seek when taking Introduction to Navajo Culture (NIS 101). Metaphorically, this phrase refers to the layers of familiarity with Navajo culture teachings. Learning the appropriate way, or Navajo way, to approach a problem (the SNBH paradigm, or through Nisahakee, Nahata, Ina, Sihasin) or how to relate to one’s physical environment is the same as knowing who one is as a Navajo and from where one comes.

### Campus Diversity

Students who come from cities and towns all over the United States are often classified by other students as urban Indians. Not all students who chose to attend Diné College are Navajo or Native American. These non-Native students constitute five percent of the student body ([www.dinecollege.edu](http://www.dinecollege.edu)). Many of these students chose to attend the college because of the low cost, unique classes, or the setting. I knew two students who were not Navajo, rather who were members of other tribes with less intact or available language and culture programs. They hoped to learn more about their own heritage through studying Navajo culture. There are a few Anglo, African-American, Hispanic, and Asian students each semester that, like me, enroll in classes at the College for various reasons, often related to personal enrichment. These students represent a wide variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds and are often well known and remembered long afterwards. Several Navajo students observed that when they first came to Diné

College, faculty and students often thought they were members of a different ethnicity. Two students claimed they were mistakenly identified by others as Japanese, while a third student remarked that others thought he was African-American or Anglo. These students' accounts are a testimony to the ethnic diversity on campus.

Students in the residency program at the College also vary greatly in age. There are a large number of non-traditional students, who decide later in life to begin their college education. Like many non-traditional students, they often have well-thought out plans for the future, which require acquiring a specific type of college degree. Many have considerable work experience both on and off the Reservation, but lack a degree necessary for promotion. Most of these students are fluent in Navajo, having grown up when Navajo was usually the language of the home. These students share the dorms with the younger students.

Perhaps more important than age and ethnic diversity is the stylistic diversity between individuals and among groups of students. Students at Diné College participate in a wide variety of music and entertainment styles. Their choices are often reflected in their physical appearance, such as their clothes and hairstyles. Students who listen to "metal," a contemporary derivation of the "heavy metal" genre of years past, often wear more black clothing and have body piercings. Goth music fans are highly visible because of their long black trench coats, combat boots and spiked black hair. Punkrockers, or 'punks', as they are called by other students, listen to punk music. They wear mostly black, accented by brighter colors on their t-shirts, patches on their backpacks (they always appear to carry backpacks). In some cases they have bright colored tattoos and

hair. These students also may have facial peircings. Students who wear cowboy boots, pearl-snap shirts, and hats often listen to country music, and in some cases are active in rodeo competitions. The hip-hop music style is another kind of style also seen on campus. These students may wear baggier, loose-fitting clothes with large brand labels such as Hilfiger or Sean Jean. Students who participate in this style usually have short hair, if male, and long hair if female. Sexual orientation, or gender, is reflected stylistically as well. Some male students choose to dress in a feminine way and some female students choose to dress butch.

While style can be a way of categorizing students, it does not necessarily reflect their backgrounds and experience. The expression, ‘you can’t judge a book by its cover’ applies to students’ styles. For example, I was very surprised to learn that one of the hip-hoppers I knew was a cowboy on the weekends. He spoke fluent Navajo and was well-grounded in Navajo tradition. This student spoke the hip hop lingo (using words like ‘tight’ ‘crunk’ and ‘yo’), and always wore a baseball cap, slightly tilted. Styles and student identity will be discussed more fully in Section IV, but I believe that the different styles are significant in describing the ‘look’ of Diné College students.

#### Experiences before Coming to College

Students bring their pasts to the college setting. During my interviews I asked some of them to discuss their backgrounds with the Navajo language. Their responses were highly varied, thus shedding light on the complex ways their home experiences with language and culture teachings intersect with the institutional goals and teachings I

discussed earlier. This information is significant in understanding the language choices students make on campus.

As most people now realize, many Navajo parents are choosing not to teach Navajo in the home. This is certainly not universal. Some students do come from strong Navajo language backgrounds. By the time students come to Diné College, they all speak fluent English, and may be bilingual, latent Navajo speakers, or they may lack any familiarity with the Navajo language. The majority appear to fall into either of the first two categories, while the only students who have never been exposed to Navajo are those that come from outside the Reservation. Most students who grow up on the Reservation and come to Diné College seem to have considerable exposure to Navajo. They hear it spoken on KTNN, which is the only radio station that reaches every part of the Reservation. They hear it in grocery stores and from other people's relatives even if none of their own relatives speaks it. This, however, is highly unlikely. Everyone I interviewed has at least one close relative who is fluent in Navajo. In describing their experiences with the Navajo language when they were growing up, two groups of people were most frequently mentioned in our interviews: elders or grandparents and friends from school.

Grandparents and elders are seen by most students as culture bearers. The ability to communicate with their grandparents is the reason most fluent students give for being glad to know the Navajo language. This is also the main reason students give for studying Navajo. Unfortunately, as described in other accounts (House: 2002; Lee: 2005), it is among grandparents and elders that students feel most frustrated with their

inadequate language abilities. Spolsky (2004:44) describes the way older, fluent Māori speakers intimidated younger language learners by their criticism. This was one of three main factors contributing to the younger speakers' anxiety, resulting in their decision to not speak Māori (Spolsky 2004:44-45). Peer groups, rather than family are the leading source of dialect influence on the language of adolescent speakers (Trudgill 1999:227). Many students experienced conflict over the differences in theirs and their elders Navajo dialects. Will, a cultural consultant for this project, explained one aspect of this dilemma as he has witnessed it unfold, "you see them [elders] talking with someone, there are certain words that they [a younger person] can't pronounce, some basic, basic Navajo words they pronounce with a different accent...and they [elders] usually tell that person not to speak it, and then that be the young people." Later in the interview he referred to his own experience, "I start stumbling on words when I start talking with my grandparents, only cause they choke [gasp in shock]." Michael bitterly relates a story of his cousins' experience:

My cousins are half Hopi and half Navajo, and they tried to speak Navajo and my grandma was like, "what the hell are you talking about, what the fuck are you saying." She said it, and that's the way she was, she was kind of harsh like that. It was just harsh teaching. If you said it wrong, she would say, "what the hell are you talking about?" My cousins were kind of like, they took it the wrong way I guess. And to this day they don't like talking Navajo. *Yá'áát'ééh*, you know [with sarcasm]? English has become their universal language, you know?

Other students describe being teased by their friends and siblings for speaking Navajo.

Celeste describes her experience:

[When I was growing up] they teased me because I spoke [Navajo], they didn't know who they are or where they came from, probably because of T.V. Since I've been a child I've always been taught how to be a Diné

person, cause I don't know, it's just like that, like hearing your grandparents tell stories. It's different for me, I actually feel proud, you know?" Michael adds, "It would be like if I were closed minded, they were afraid to [speak it] and then it's just that fear, I mean it's just generation after generation, older brothers tease people if they speak Navajo.

Celeste's statement about being teased by her peers goes to show that there are more than just generational dialectical differences. Not speaking Standard English, and not speaking Standard Navajo, become problematic for many students. According to the students, there appear to be at least two sources of the notion of 'Standard' Navajo: language programs, such as the one at Diné College and Elders. Fluent young speakers' varieties of Navajo are frequently criticized by both, which sends students conflicting messages about their competence in Navajo. Unfortunately, not all students benefit from strong familial support, like Celeste. Milroy and Milroy (1985:1-5) define and discuss prescriptivism, which is "dependent on an ideology concerning language which requires that in language use, as in other matters, things shall be done the 'right' way." These students' accounts offer a great deal of insight into the kinds of dilemmas students face with respect to prescriptivism in both Navajo and English within family and peer group settings outside of the college campus.

#### Determining Fluency in Navajo

Students possess varying degrees of experience with Navajo language and culture. My lack of familiarity with Navajo (although I spent considerable time studying the language in Lubbock, TX) made it quite difficult for me to assess the fluency of other students. I approached the problem of determining students' fluency in Navajo by asking

individuals to rate their own fluency. Later, I would ask other students to evaluate their peers' language proficiency. This strategy produced conflicting messages: some students would deny fluency, but at the same time others would herald them as among the most fluent students. Conversely, several students who claimed to be highly fluent were not considered fluent by everyone else. I observed some of these students speaking Navajo in various situations, and perhaps their self-perception of being fluent gave them more confidence in speaking Navajo. Spolsky (2004:44) discusses the way "perceptions of fluency" often determined whether young Māori speakers in New Zealand chose to speak Māori. Without administering a thorough proficiency test, the actual extent of each student's fluency is a matter of speculation. Furthermore, some have noted that the multiple layers of bilingualism expressed in the adult population complicate an accurate depiction of group language proficiency (Benally and Viri 2005:94). For the sake of clarity, I present both individuals' evaluations of their own fluency and the evaluations of other students. In summary, students' opinions about who can speak Navajo are highly value laden, making any assessment of individual fluency problematic. Examining the process through which students evaluate other's proficiency in Navajo is a topic for future research.

### Dorm Life

Diné College students have the choice of living on campus or commuting to their classes. Classes are held Monday thru Thursday, like many community colleges. Over the course of the past three summers, two dorms with 16 rooms each were enough to

house all the resident students. Students with children or a spouse lived in the family dorm. Single residents occupied the other dorm, where each student has chosen or been assigned a roommate by the Housing Office. After the beginning of the first summer session someone usually drags a picnic table to the outdoor area between the two summer dorms, creating an outdoor common area. Additional dorms are opened for single students during the fall and spring semesters. These dorms form clusters of four, and are connected by a short (approximately 20 feet) sidewalk that leads to the main sidewalk. Because the dorms are located on the western part of the campus, students must walk east, and slightly uphill on the main sidewalk, in order to get to the cafeteria, student union building, library, culture center, and classroom building. It is important that students place their request for a dorm room as early as possible, since the dorms fill quickly.

The dorms at Diné College, much like the cafeteria, library, and Ned Hatathli Culture Center, were designed to resemble a traditional octagonal hoghan. Each dorm room forms a triangular wedge within the octagon-shape of the dorm. There are a total of 16 rooms, each with two beds, two desks, a large window, and a polished wooden ceiling that slants upward toward the door leading to the indoor common area or living room. Pairs of individual dorm rooms are connected by bathrooms, creating suites, which consist of two separate rooms and a bathroom. Each room in the dorm opens out to a large round fire place, with a thick black iron smoke stack. This fire place is the first thing to catch your eye when you enter the dorm from outside. Its symbolic significance cannot be overstated. All hoghans, or traditional Navajo homes, have fire place in the

center of the residence. Aside from providing warmth and heat for cooking, it symbolically represents the presence of the grandmother and grandfather. Fire is sacred and necessary in ceremonies, which are conducted in hoghans. Like the stove in hoghans, the round fire place is positioned directly in the center of the dorm. Comfortable, cushiony chairs and couches are moved around the room depending on which activities are going on. The chairs usually face the medium-sized television, which is mounted to one of the eight thick wooden beams supporting the high (30 feet) wooden ceiling. Occasionally they face the fire place or form a circle around a table where people study or play a domino game called “Bones.” Two additional wedge-shaped rooms are used to house a residence assistant in the dorm, as well as a communal kitchen complete with a microwave and refrigerator.

The housing office allows roommate requests and assigns a roommate to students if they do not submit requests. Most people in the unmarried student dorms have roommates. If a person chooses not to have a roommate, s/he must pay the difference to the housing department. Once students have taken care of reserving a room, many try to come to the college as early as they can in the new semester, in order to claim ‘their’ side of the room. Most students desire the bed and desk closest to the window for obvious reasons.

The weekends are lonely and quiet on campus, compared to the hustle and bustle of the school week. Most of the resident students choose to return to their families off campus on weekends. Those who remain on campus become better friends over time; the weekends seem to drag by slowly with so few people on campus. Most student residents

do not have their own cars; therefore they rely on others for rides to Chinle, Window Rock, Gallup, and Farmington. In exchange for these rides, most students offer to pay for gas, buy food, or compensate the driver in some way. If a student has an emergency or a doctor's appointment, the housing department willingly provides rides.

### Free Time

During the summer sessions campus is quieter with significantly fewer students than during normal semesters. Over the past three summers, the student residents who remained on campus through the weekend usually became so acquainted with one another that they began referring to themselves as 'the weekenders'. The student services department provided some activities for students on the weekends during summer 05; however during summers 03 and 04, students were left to entertain themselves by watching TV, talking on the phone, studying, walking to the store or the lake. The non-school supported dorm activities varied from summer session to summer session, depending on the interests of the student residents. Each summer there was always a group of students willing to risk smuggling alcohol into the dorm rooms, and each summer someone got into trouble or wound up in jail for drunken or disorderly conduct.

The College campus, as well as the Navajo Nation, has strict possession laws regarding alcohol. It is absolutely illegal for students to carry alcohol onto the Reservation or possess alcohol. However, there are several bootleggers around the campus who are willing to sell students alcohol, in case they are unable to smuggle it back from Farmington, Gallup or Sage. Because getting alcohol from off the Reservation

is such an ordeal, and bootlegging it is so expensive (\$5.00 for 40 oz. of malt liquor and \$10.00 for 20 oz. of cheap wine), drinking at the dorm is quite limited. The people who choose to drink don't want to get caught, and so initially great care is taken to ensure that only the residents who are 'cool' know that people are drinking. Students employ a variety of strategies to avoid getting caught possessing alcohol, or being arrested by Officer Burbank, the campus police officer. Some students consume the alcohol as quickly as possible in order to get rid of the evidence--a dangerous practice. Other students take great care to keep the fewest number of students involved so they can drink at their leisure without worrying about others turning them in. A few students drank occasionally, but often refused offers because of bad experiences in the past. On nights where the majority of students drink, it is often the students who don't participate who end up dealing with the consequences of the other students' actions. These students usually get knocks on their door at all hours of the night and are subjected to the parties' noisy behavior.

Movies, either rented or on television, provide evening entertainment. Every night that the TBS series "How the West Was Won" was broadcast, the majority of the dorm students surrounded the television set, scrutinizing the portrayal of American Indians in the film. The most popular programs were pop culture series. Reality shows, Showtime specials, and edgy movies blared loudly each evening. A few students made jokes about how the outcome of a show would have been different if a Navajo person played the key role. The television was rarely turned off, except on occasion at night. It seemed each summer that there was one student who couldn't stand it when the T.V. was

on all night long, and was committed to seeing that it was turned off after everyone went to bed. Some students had enormous collections of movies, mostly DVDs. These students often shared their films with other students, who seldom had their own televisions, and borrowed the DVD player from the housing office so the whole dorm could watch the movie.

During the summer, with so few activities, some students chose to entertain themselves by playing bingo at the bingo hall located behind the recently closed Wilkerson's Trading Post. I had never experienced a bingo game until I lived in Tsailé and a few friends invited me to join them. Most games that summer were sponsored by a family, who ran the game and provided prizes for the players. Each night the bingo hall was packed full, approximately 50 people, mostly women and children. The games go by extremely quickly and I had difficulty keeping up. An eight year old daughter of the host family had to help me locate numbers on the newspaper-thin bingo cards. During the summer of 2006, my roommate from the dorm and her girlfriend invested in the games and hosted several themselves. Their investment proved quite lucrative, and they often returned home with several hundred dollars each night.

The possessions students bring to Diné College vary a great deal. I knew one student who came with nothing more than a few clothes. He borrowed sheets and a pillow from the housing office. His room was completely bare except for a poster of a blond bombshell on the wall. Other students brought so many things with them that it seemed they were planning to reside permanently in the dorm. A few students came equipped with a television, DVD player, a mini-DVD player, a refrigerator, several

bookshelves, and lots of decorations. Most students decorate their rooms in some fashion. The majority bring bright colored wool blankets with elaborate designs. Posters of rock bands, hip-hop stars, and country music singers were among the most popular.

### On-Campus Employment

Students living on campus have the option to work if they qualify. Some jobs are available through tutoring at the TRIO center, especially if the student is enrolled in higher level courses or is literate or fluent in Navajo. Other students are employed at the cafeteria or one of two snack bars on campus. The library, housing department (resident assistantships), and other administrative offices also offer students employment. These jobs allow students to pay their tuition by working for the college. Students who are hired as resident assistants are provided with a free meal plan and housing, as well as extra earnings to pay their tuition and other expenses.

Aside from money, these jobs offer students responsibilities and leadership positions. Student leadership positions on campus prove to have their own set of problems. I knew two resident assistants who deliberately quit their jobs after the semester because of the difficulty associated with being responsible for the dorm students. Being in charge of the dorms often means dealing with a lot of peer pressure to 'look the other way' when students drink. If you get caught allowing students to drink, you are immediately terminated. The meager salaries from these on-campus jobs in some cases coupled with money from students' families, does not allow students to live luxurious lives, but it does enable them pay their tuition, eat in the cafeteria, and afford

snacks. If students are unable to afford a meal plan in the cafeteria, they have the option to work in the cafeteria in exchange for meals. The cafeteria ladies are well known for coming up with odd-jobs so hungry students can eat.

### Conclusion

As a group, it is clear that students at Diné College hold a wide range of values and express dynamic individual styles, contributing to a very diverse campus. Students express a wide range of behaviors that constitute a spectrum of ‘ways’ to be Navajo today. Diverse expressions of individual identity and reasons for coming to the college (Chapter III) interact with institutional discourse to become the stage for this research (Chapter II).

CHAPTER IV  
REASONS STUDENTS VALUE SPEAKING NAVAJO  
AND ON-CAMPUS SPEAKING PRACTICE

When asked about factors that motivate them to learn or speak Navajo, Diné College students described the important functions they believe the Navajo language serves in their lives. Three themes emerge about learning or speaking Navajo: (1) identity expression, (2) participation in Diné traditions, and (3) daily communication with elders. Speakers' beliefs that there are more appropriate settings or situations for a language than others, conform to Silverstein's definition of language ideology: "sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use" (Woolard and Scheffelin 1994: 57). Students' descriptions of how the Navajo language fits in their individual lives offer insight into the way their language abilities intersect with their lifestyle. This chapter focuses on fluent Navajo speaking students' opinions about speaking Navajo on campus. Their comments suggest that their language choices between speaking Navajo or English may evidence domain-functional language use (Tsunoda 2005:66-69). Functional domains for language are the byproduct of two languages coexisting in one location, where the politically dominant language becomes associated with, "modern life, national, 'outside' world, public, outside family, formal, not intimate, for power, for non-secrecy, and secular uses" while the politically subordinate language is associated with, "traditional life, regionality, the community, the domestic and private, inside the family, informal, intimate, for

solidarity, for secrecy, and religion” (Tsunoda 2005:66). At the end, fluent students discuss specific reasons they don’t speak Navajo on campus.

### Reasons to Speak or Learn Navajo

All of the students with whom I spoke agree the Navajo language is important; however, their responses indicate that some believe speaking Navajo is most important in domains that are not available at the College. Speaking Navajo on the College campus is a less significant way for students to convey a sense of personal Navajo identity. Students’ comments suggest this could be related to the setting at Diné College. While there are ceremonies and spiritual outlets available on campus, the spiritual domain is prominent in the homes of most students. Many teachers on campus are capable of speaking Navajo, but most instruction and student interactions occur in English. Students are seldom required to speak Navajo to teachers or other students, except in the Navajo language classes. This section will describe some of the values students place on speaking the Navajo language. Analyzing students’ expressed needs for speaking or learning Navajo, in comparison with the kinds of events in which they actually chose to speak Navajo, shows why students may use the language less on campus than among their families.

### Identity Expression

One of the primary reasons students stated they value speaking or learning to speak the Navajo language was because they think it is crucial to a harmonious personal

identity. As Kroskrity (1998:103-122) found among Tewa speakers, many Diné College students also perceive language as an index of identity. This theme resurfaces throughout my interviews with students. Indexicality is one of three sign relationships, first described by Pierce, and later incorporated into the field of language ideology to describe the way languages can signify social groups to others (Irvine and Gal, 2000:37).

Silverstein (1998:128) explains the relationship between ideology and indexicality:

“Ideology, in other words, is defined only within a discourse of interpretation or construal of inherently dialectic indexical processes, as for example the processes of making or achieving a text (entextualization) by using language and other sign modalities, whether at the denotational plane or the more encompassing plane of interactional textuality.”

Through “interactional textuality” students construct language as an index of identity.

Spolsky’s (2004:44-45) work with Māori speakers in New Zealand reveals a similar connection between speakers’ motivation to speak Māori and identity. The belief of ‘one language for one people’ is rooted in Western Nationalist discourse. The discourse of many minority language survival programs is also rooted in this same ideology, with a strong emphasis on minority languages defining minority identity (House 2002:17; Woolard and Schiefflin 1998:61). Prior to colonization, multilingualism in other indigenous languages was common for indigenous peoples. Possibly conforming to the discourse of these programs, many of the students I interviewed believe an individual’s identity is actively constructed through their language choice. Aside from constructing their personal identity, several students value speaking Navajo because they

believe it is necessary in presenting a coherent tribal identity outwardly, mainly to non-Navajos.

Victoria, a recent graduate of Diné College and current employee of the TRIO on-campus tutor program, relates her ability to speak Navajo to her personal identity: “it is basically who I am. It is a part of me like my limbs.” George, a Navajo language learner who was enrolled in the Introduction to Navajo Language class agrees, “[The Navajo language] is where I’m coming from. It helps me get a better grip on the culture.” Both of these statements reflect students’ perception of the Navajo language as a synecdoche of themselves. Synecdoche describes relationships where the part refers to the whole. These particular students described the Navajo language as a part of who they are, similar to individual body parts.

A student claimed in a discussion with me that her ability to speak Navajo ‘creates balance’ in her life. John, another student secure in his fluency, reflects that “Navajo is really deep rooted [in me], and natural.” Yet another student, Celeste, explains how Navajo relates to her identity by saying that it helps you to know “where you come from.” These students highlighted the way speaking Navajo enables a harmonious identity. Indicating the extent to which she believes the identity of a ‘true’ Navajo person hinges on the language, Celeste said she believes people who intentionally don’t learn Navajo are the same people who move off the Reservation as soon as they can. They belong elsewhere, where English is spoken, and are individuals other than the persons they were “born to be.”

Jackie, self defined as a semi-fluent student, explains the importance of speaking Navajo and maintaining the language in order to project a coherent tribal identity to outsiders:

I think it's very important for the younger generation to try to speak the language because it's who we are. It's what makes us unique. It's what distinguishes us from all other ethnicities, and we are one of the few tribes in this country that still have our language and tradition. Maybe not all of it together, but we still have it, enough to say that we are this tribe, and that's what makes us who we are.

John, like Jackie emphasized that the Navajo language is important and necessary in retaining a strong, collective tribal identity. He adds, "We should be proud [of the Navajo language]...and we have to move forward with it, to stay alive and survive in this whole society. To unite. To have unity. To have a whole nation." Later in John's interview he added, "the language is the culture itself," speaking of how important it is to know the Navajo language in order to understand the culture. Furthermore, it becomes clear through these students statements that they also believe the Navajo language is fundamental in expressing a collective tribal identity.

#### Spirituality and the Sacredness of Diné Bizaad

Several of the students with whom I spoke believed they and others need Navajo for healthy spirituality. Arabic is sacred because it is the language of the Koran. In a similar way, these students experienced the Navajo language within a sacred context. It is necessary to attend ceremonies and understand the symbolic meanings of prayers, and to discuss spiritually significant issues with others. After discussing the relationship of language to culture, John added "it isn't only about language. [It's about] the whole

culture, the ceremonies, songs, everything. That's more important. That's really important. As far as [all of this], that's also language...and all of that put together makes the whole thing up. That's what makes it move. That's what makes it breathe." He continues by explaining the relationship between healthy Navajo spirituality, which necessarily includes language and the land: "There use to be a lot of shit here, there use to be rain here, it use to rain a lot. But today, a lot of the things with the rain, the grasses, it's not as clean as it use to be. The sheep are mostly gone. A lot of the grandmas have passed away. And that's what's sad."

A couple of other students believe Navajo is necessary to discuss philosophy and spirituality. Jackie explained, "If I really want to be straightforward, and to express what I am really thinking, then I will express it in English. But, if it has to do with philosophy or spirituality, then I will express it in Navajo. Michael adds:

When you're talking in Navajo it just can't be translated into English. It's just that certain way that you talk that's different. The crazy thing is that it is a certain way you talk, and if you try to translate it into English, it becomes all cheesy, like 'the Great Spirit', or 'Early Dawn Child', I mean, what the hell? 'Talking God', it makes it sound like Greek mythology.

These students remarks suggest that they code-switch from English to Navajo depending upon the situation. Situational code-switching can occur anytime there is a change in topic or participants (Saville-Troike 2003:49). When I was taking the NIS culture and philosophy classes, I remember a few students walking out of the class stopping to ask whether I could understand the teachings in English. Fluent students would exclaim that they couldn't imagine how the teachings could make sense in English, because the difference was so significant between instructor's Navajo and English.

Nanabah discusses the sacredness of Navajo: “because of working for the tribal college, I learned that my culture and my language is very sacred. And it is important. And it has, like geared me that way so that I can learn more about it. About myself. Who I am. My roots.” From her statements one can see the impact Diné College has had on shaping her perception of the language as sacred. That Navajo teachings, culture and language are sacred are well established components of institutional discourse (House 2002:90-93). Like many other students who come to Diné College without a strong traditional background or upbringing, Nanabah learned these values at the college. In this statement she describes how the teachings about her past shape her future. She learned these values from the College, in the NIS classes, rather than at home.

#### Communication with Family and Elders

Several of the students I interviewed explained that they needed Navajo most for communication with certain people. The people they most wish to communicate with in Navajo are their family and elders, particularly grandparents, rather than other students or friends. Students who are learning Navajo, or wish to further develop their skills, described their frustration in not being able to benefit from their grandparents’ wisdom. Others told heart wrenching stories about their embarrassment when they were the only ones in the family who could not understand certain relatives. One person described the great lengths he has gone to in order to appear more fluent than he actually is at family gatherings. Being teased or made fun of by other fluent relatives is not an uncommon experience for many students.

When I asked students why they believed the Navajo language is important, several students explained they wanted to show respect when communicating with elders. Saville-Troike's (2003:49) describes Navajo teachers situationally code-switching from Navajo to English when joined by non-Navajo speakers in a conversation, and these students also describe feeling compelled to switch from English to Navajo. Erica, a Navajo language learner, explains, "I started really trying to learn [Navajo], especially for when I talk to my grandparents. Because I think it's really important that you talk to them in a language they understand." foregrounding this practice as conventional, June adds, "the idea is, that if a person is Navajo, you are suppose to talk Navajo to them. That's respect." John explains the value of speaking Navajo to elders by describing the value judgments they level at you if you don't speak Navajo. According to John:

The language is really deep rooted. It is really something that, you know, among our elders...how they look at you in that way. [They ask themselves] are you that kind of person, you know? That's how they...see you, who you are, what kind of person you are. If you are a bad person or a good person. In that way language is a lot of things. A culture. A way of life.

The perception that elders frequently look down on members of the younger generation for not speaking Navajo is common. In discussing elders' perceptions of the younger generation, Jackie, who frequently wears a blue Mohawk, described a hypothetical situation where she sits next to a traditionally dressed young lady at a public event, and an elder approaches to ask the young lady a question in Navajo. In this scenario, the young lady only 'looks' as if she can speak Navajo, and Jackie, who dresses very non-traditionally, is the one who is able to answer the elder's question in Navajo. With great

pride Jackie describes the unsuspecting look on the elder's face when she realizes that the mohawk-wearing punk rocker is the fluent one in this situation.

June told me that she considers the college campus and her family separate domains. Each domain is its own level, with its own language. "I speak on the level that I prefer at the time. So, when I go back home I prefer to speak Navajo, you know? And English here at this college. It's like everything is learned in English, so I prefer to speak English." Nanabah describes a scenario where she desperately needed Navajo at home, where her mother's relatives all speak Navajo:

This one time, my grandpa, Sam, he's deaf, and my grandmother [who] only talks Navajo, we all went to town this one time so I was kind of like in the middle, trying to understand. My grandpa, he knows how to write in English, and he interprets into English and then my grandma's like yelling in the background in Navajo. It was so awesome, we were ordering burgers one time and my grandmother was saying burgers in Navajo, and my grandfather was writing burger, and there I was interpreting three other people. We all wanted hamburgers!

Both of these students discussed speaking Navajo with members of their families, rather than on campus. For the majority of students, it is in the family domain that they have the most opportunities to speak Navajo. There wasn't a single student without Navajo-speaking relatives. Nanabah's story is about how 'cool' it was to actually be able to use the Navajo she learned at Diné College in a family situation. In truth, there are not very many other opportunities for Nanabah to practice speaking Navajo, the exception being the situation she described here. In the following sections I will describe students' use of spoken Navajo with teachers and other students.

## Speaking Navajo with Diné College Faculty and Staff

In order to describe the uses of spoken Navajo on campus, I distinguish between pedagogical and non-pedagogical language situations. This distinction is significant in assessing students' comfort level in speaking Navajo in the various situations and settings that are available. Indeed, students' comfort level in these interactions appears to be one of the most significant ways to understand their decision to speak Navajo or English, as indicated by their responses in interviews. First, I describe pedagogical language situations, from my observations in the NIS bilingual courses. Second, I describe students' interactions with cafeteria staff; these interactions, although brief, seem to inspire a greater amount of student participation than do classroom interactions. Following these sections, I describe student-to-student exchanges in Navajo.

### Classroom Interactions in Navajo

The primary setting for pedagogical Navajo language use on campus occurs in the NIS classes. All of the NIS teachers are Navajo, and all are fluent Navajo speakers. Of the five courses in which I participated and observed (Navajo Language for Non-Speakers, Navajo Philosophy, Introduction to Navajo Culture, Holistic Healing, and Navajo History), all are defined as bilingual except the language and history classes. True bilingual classes require all material to be taught in two languages, distributing prestige and significance equally to each language (Reyhner 2002:108-130). Each topic teachers introduced in English or Navajo was followed by a translation into the other language. Signs in the main NIS classroom are in Navajo, with large computer printouts

listing educational values like *t'áá ajíteégo'*, which means 'do it yourself'. On either side of the chalkboard, which is mounted on the wall in front of the classroom, are large drawings depicting a traditionally dressed Navajo woman and man. The back wall of the classroom consists of several drawings of Navajo *Yéí's* or gods, labeled with their names. There are two other drawings visible from inside the classroom that depict the travels of the twin hero warriors: *Naayéé neizghání*, the Monster Slayer and *Na'idígishí*, Child Born for Water.

These courses consist of teachers telling crucial parts of Navajo oral history, accompanied by texts written in English (most Navajo people are not literate in Navajo). Teachers seek students' feedback to the issues brought up in the classes by asking questions in both Navajo and English, after lecture sections. In turn students respond in whichever language they feel most comfortable. Students with low proficiency in Navajo may not understand the question until it is asked in English, while students with greater proficiency may nod their heads and comment in either English or Navajo. Teachers' initial responses to the student are in the language the student spoke, followed by a translation into the other language (particularly if the interaction was in Navajo). During student and teacher interactions, I never witnessed a teacher correcting a student or expressing difficulty in understanding what a student said in Navajo. This may indicate that when students speak Navajo in class they are extremely careful to make sure they are well understood. This also could be interpreted as a result of Navajo etiquette, where it would be considered rude to correct someone.

Students employ a variety of strategies to compensate for their limits in Navajo. The strategies I observed included: (1) borrowing an English loan word for which there is a seldom used or known Navajo equivalent, (2) inserting English words for common Navajo words a student may have forgotten or never learned and (3) code-switching from English to Navajo and back to English. These features of students' communication with teachers are much like Spanglish blends, where speakers mix English and Spanish. Among the students who communicate with instructors in Navajo, not all are fluent. In fact, many students who are fluent rarely speak Navajo to the instructors.

Some students believe teachers prefer students to respond in Navajo. One student in particular emphasized this when she extended the importance of speaking Navajo to elders, to include Navajo teachers. According to June, "they honestly would prefer you to speak Navajo, especially the Navajo language teachers. If you're talking to a Navajo person, if you're Navajo, the perspective is that it's respectful to talk Navajo to them." However, a student's decision to speak Navajo may more accurately reflect the extent to which a student is comfortable speaking Navajo in the classroom setting, rather than a high degree of proficiency. June, a self-professed fluent speaker of Navajo, explained to me that the only time she speaks Navajo in class is when she is 'forced' to by the teacher. She interprets assignments requiring public Navajo speaking as imposed by force, rather than as incentive or encouragement. On the other hand, Elaine welcomes the chance to practice speaking Navajo. In our interview, Elaine described her attitude toward these events: "I just try to get myself into situations where I have to speak it, because I'm learning. In class, like your NIS classes, you have Navajo speakers, and when you take

those courses you are forced to communicate with your instructors in Navajo, and that's cool." Later in my interview with June, she described feeling very uncomfortable speaking Navajo in front of people she did not know. From these interviews I learned public speaking in Navajo is not without risks, and that some students may experience a considerable amount of discomfort when asked to speak Navajo publicly.

### The Cafeteria and Interactions with Staff

Aside from the NIS faculty, I observed students frequently interacting with the cafeteria staff. As in the NIS classrooms, permanent signs in Navajo hang in the cafeteria. These signs label the areas where one collects a tray, gets food, and pays for a meal. Members of the cafeteria staff speak fluent Navajo and are mostly women from one family. When Jane collects students' money, she frequently greets them in Navajo, to which most respond accordingly. The ladies who serve food usually ask each student, in Navajo, what they would like to eat. Their choices include one of two meats and two vegetables. Most students chose to respond to them in Navajo. These interactions are brief and do not require fluency in Navajo for students to participate; rather, a formulaic script guides the exchange. The scripted nature of these exchanges and the fact that the staff is not responsible for assigning grades to students more than likely creates a less stressful environment for speaking Navajo. When I asked Michael whether or not he spoke Navajo to the cafeteria staff he answered, "Yeah! Some people think you get more food if you speak Navajo to them. They prefer it." Even in my own experiences ordering in Navajo, I noticed that the ladies responded kindly to my awkward attempts.

### Students Speaking Navajo to Students

Although English is the primary language for most student interactions on campus, there are also occasions when students speak Navajo to one another. On occasions in which students did speak Navajo, the situation seemed marked, judging by student reactions. Exchanges in Navajo appear to foster a different response from the audience. At the onset of serious conversations in Navajo, gazes shift and feet shuffle. Jokes in Navajo and English are funny, but jokes in Navajo are hilarious, and laughter is harder and louder. When a student speaks Navajo, it is as if the wind suddenly changes directions; everyone appears to notice. Rather than focus my descriptions on uses of English, I instead focus on Navajo language exchanges, and discuss the circumstances that unfold when students speak Navajo. Following each description is a brief discussion of the communicative functions that may be satisfied. Communicative functions relate to each individual's "purposes or needs" when s/he communicates with others (Saville-Troike 2003:12). By exploring these communicative functions, I strive to capture the variation inherent in Diné College students' language practice, and offer insight into some of the reasons students choose to speak Navajo.

To understand Diné College students' practice with regard to Navajo, I analyzed several communicative events that included spoken Navajo. Communicative events include formal and informal interactions that have clear, definable boundaries and may call for different behavioral norms (Saville-Troike 2003:108). A communicative event is "defined by a unified set of components throughout, beginning with the same general purpose of communication, the same general topic, and involving the same participants,

generally using the same language variety maintaining the same tone or key and the same rules for interaction, in the same setting” (Saville-Troike 2003:108). Thus, telling a joke is a communicative event with boundaries defined by ritual language, often beginning with “have you heard the one about...?” and concluding with laughter by the audience. In Western circles, less formal, lighthearted demeanor characterizes behavioral norms during joke telling. Defining the boundaries of formal communicative events is easier than for informal communicative events. Formal communicative events are more likely to be defined by highly specific ritual language rather than topic changes, setting changes, or participant changes. Any of these may mark the boundary for informal communicative events (Saville-Troike 2003: 108-109).

Diné College students incorporate Navajo words and phrases into myriad communicative genres, or categories of communication (Saville-Troike 2003:110). Among these categories of communication, joke telling and greetings in particular foreground the way language practice intersects with ideological language fields. My description of these communicative events includes: (1) *scene* (genre, topic, purpose, and setting), (2) *key* (emotional tone), (3) *participants* present, (4) *message form* (language or variety choice), (5) *message content*, (6) *rules* for interaction, and (7) *norms* for interpretation. Saville-Troike (2003:110) recommends that ethnographers of communication focus on these and other components when describing communicative events. Not included in my analysis, but recommended by Saville-Troike (2003: 110) and others (Hymes 1967) is a description of *act sequence*, “the ordering of communicative/speech acts, including turn-taking and overlap phenomena.” I could not

include this information without digital recordings, which were inappropriate in these settings.

### Greetings between Students

I observed a few students using Navajo greetings and kinship terms on various occasions during the summer session. Greetings between students may occur anywhere students familiar with one another come into contact. I noticed students greet one another in English on campus much more frequently than in Navajo; however some students did use Navajo greetings or components of Navajo greetings with one another. Traditional Navajo greetings between relatives may include some variation of the following formula: “*Yá’áat’ééh*, (kinship term)” *Yá’áat’ééh* translates to mean ‘it is beautiful’ or ‘it is well’, and is used in a similar way as ‘hello’ among English speakers. Kinship terms are used to address members of one’s clan or extended clan relatives. Many students have clan relatives who also attend school at Diné College, but they may not be aware of their relationship. Traditional knowledge requires individual introductions by clan when among strangers. Doing so facilitates mutual acknowledgement of relationship between speakers, and is a strategy to avoid incest. The majority of students do not carry out this practice, unless encouraged by teachers to do so in class. If a person asks someone else to reveal his or her clans, the question implies interest in dating the person. A couple of weeks after the first day of classes, dorm residents usually begin forming small groups, which are reflected in their cafeteria seating choices. Around this time one student may bring up clan affiliations, after which

other students might snicker and provocatively ask, “Why do you want to know?” Students go around in a circle, thinking for a moment and responding with their clans. Immediately thereafter, members of the group begin determining their relationships to one another. However, seldom did any of the students I observed begin referring to each other by kinship terms.

Katy and Curtis proved to be an exception and did refer to each other by kinship terms. Katy was Curtis’s grandmother by clan, even though they were only 10 years apart in age. Although I was not present when they determined their relationship to one another, I know that initially they did not get along well, while living in the same residence hall. Their purpose in using the kinship terms may have been to foster harmony between them, rather than to continue arguing. Their relationship changed over time, and Curtis began treating Katy with a great deal of respect. On one occasion I asked Curtis how long he had known Katy, forgetting they had just met at the beginning of the summer session. He told me they had recently met, but that “she is my grandmother by clan (laughter) and I have to respect her now (laughter).” Most of their interactions consisted of Curtis running up to Katy and jokingly saying, “*Yá’áát’ééh, Shínalí,*” to which Katy replied “Get out of here *Shínalí!*” and both would laugh.

The few other students who used kinship terms with one another did so in a similar way. I should mention that I never noticed female students initiating interaction with male or other female students through kinship terms. However, I am not certain of the extent that this is gendered behavior or simply a lack of time spent observing. The *rules* for using kinship terms of address became clearer to me when I observed a student

breaking the rules. According to Saville-Troike (2003:123), “Rules for interaction are often discoverable in reactions to their violation by others, and feelings that contrary behavior is “impolite” or “odd” in some respect.” Just such an event occurred when Merl hollered out, across the resident hall to Celeste, “Hey, *Shadí*, come here!” Celeste ignored him completely. At the time I was accompanying her while she looked for June. When we walked out, I asked her why she had ignored him, noting that he had called her “my older sister.” She responded by saying exasperatedly, “Whatever! I’m not his older sister, and he doesn’t even know me!” Celeste’s comment highlights one of the rules of kinship usage among students at the College: know the individual to whom you are addressing by a kinship term. Merl had never introduced himself traditionally to Celeste, and certainly did not know her clans. It was just as likely they were related by clan as not. Merl attempted to use the Navajo word for older sister, as he might have used the English word ‘sista’ to refer casually to a female friend.

Individual students never used the traditional greeting (*Yá’áát’ééh*) in my presence, except when students directed the greeting toward me. One such occasion unfolded when a Navajo student and pageant queen at the College approached me in the computer lab. She had never seen me on campus before (it was the beginning of the semester) and thought I was new. As she walked up to me, she extended her hand, smiling, and said “*Yá’áát’ééh*, I’m Sarah!” I responded with the same, inserting my name. She asked if I was from Michigan, thinking I was one of the Upward Bound graduate student instructors. I told her I was from Texas. Immediately she began telling me that her family calls her by a Navajo name, and that she is very traditional and fluent

in the language. Soon thereafter she began explaining to me that, “Navajos have many gods, like the Greeks.” Eventually I was able to tell her that I had been attending the College during the summer for a couple of years. When she found out that I had friends there and was situated, she seemed to lose interest in becoming better friends. A similar situation unfolded when I went to Fort Lewis College to present a research proposal at the Navajo Studies Conference. On separate occasions two different Diné College students introduced themselves to me by extending their hands and greeting me in Navajo. The salient feature of these interactions seems to be the fact the students did not know me, or recognize me. They may have believed, like Sarah, that I was on the Reservation for the first time and did not know anything about Navajo culture. By introducing themselves to me in Navajo they may have been marking difference and claiming ownership of the language.

Diné College students’ decision to use Navajo greetings with one another seems to be predicated by an already established kin relationship with the person they greet. Merl’s breach of this rule resulted in a failure to communicate. It also annoyed Celeste, who thought he was foolish. Katy and Curtis successfully exchanged traditional greetings with one another precisely because they had already discussed doing so. On the other hand, the decision to greet other non-relatives seems to hinge on ethnicity, and on familiarity with the person one wants to greet. As I stated, I never saw any student greet another student in Navajo, but students did greet me and other Anglos they believed to be unfamiliar with the area.

## Joking

Joking as a significant communicative event among the Western Apache communities has been described at length by Keith Basso (1979). My limited proficiency in Navajo and my time constraints prevented me from being able to provide a more thorough analysis of this particular genre. However, in terms of the way Navajo is used in joking, I was able to isolate a few salient features of the language with respect to the *message form*. This is defined by Saville-Troike as the language choice or variety used in the interaction (2003:110). In interviews several students mentioned joking as a genre in which they chose to speak Navajo. In their conversations about jokes, which often unfolded by someone asking if anyone knew a joke, someone often asked, in English “What kind of joke, a Navajo joke?” Because of the frequency of this question I believe students distinguish Navajo jokes as a category separate from jokes in English. My observations of these interactions led me to conclude that the salient features of Navajo jokes are found in the message form (Navajo), content (dirty, bathroom humor), and plays on words. Punning is considered a major feature of the Western Apache joking genre (Basso 1979). Students attested to the importance of punning when they explained that the jokes don’t make sense in English, because of the play on Navajo words. One common joke that involves a play on words is “Belegáana bilisáana bilikan” (White people like to eat apples).

Joking as communicative genre is distinct from the greeting genre in that it is frequently initiated in English, with someone asking, “Does anyone know any jokes?” This may be related to my presence as the observer, and to the polite convention of not

speaking Navajo in the presence of non-speakers. Another explanation may be found in students' general reliance on English rather than Navajo for most student interactions on campus. As I mentioned, students are most likely to speak Navajo to those students they know well, rather than to complete strangers or acquaintances. Joking, however, appears to be more informal, and students may tell jokes in Navajo among groups of acquaintances. These interactions constituted the most extensive use of Navajo I heard in group settings, except for pairs of friends. Even a couple of younger Navajo children, both fluent speakers of Navajo, were encouraged by their mother to tell Navajo jokes to students in the dorm. I never heard the two children speak Navajo in any other circumstance except this one.

Rather than being defined by participants, the genre of joking among college students appeared to hinge on the setting. During frequent power outages, the television was not an entertainment option. Students usually lit a fire and re-positioned the chairs, turning them away from the television and towards the fire. Through combining our food and cooking resources (pots and utensils), we were able to cook over the fire. This was quite a dramatic shift from the normal dorm setting, which included all the amenities of electricity: wireless internet, television, radio, electric lights, and hot water. The constant buzzing from the fire alarm nearly drove everyone mad, until maintenance workers came by and shut it off. We sat around the fire talking to one another on these occasions; frequently students from both dorms would participate, seeking fellowship.

The scenario that unfolds during power outages is in fact highly conducive to joke-telling. Gradually students begin talking more personally to one another. Everyone

seems to realize that no one is going anywhere for a while. As the talk becomes more engaging, without fail someone will either volunteer a joke or ask if anyone else knows any jokes. From there it seemed we all tried to remember a joke. Some would tell a joke in English and eventually others would tell jokes in Navajo. I remember one occasion where Navajo joke telling became competitive, with several students mentioning that their grandmothers had told them the joke. Pointing to their grandmothers as the source for the jokes calls attention to the fact that the grandmother in question is very traditional. As such she doesn't fit the negative, ageist stereotype of White women becoming feeble with 'delicate' sensibilities. Rather, Elders' jokes are perceived by students to be among the dirtiest and cleverest of all Navajo jokes. As students divulged their most provocative Navajo jokes, students who didn't speak the language well could still participate, because translations were provided by others. Furthermore, because all students are required to take Navajo language classes, learners benefited from the experience. The genre of joke telling requires only one teller and an audience that listens and responds with appropriate laughter and shock. Joking allows students with varying proficiency in Navajo to participate fully as an audience. If a student is completely unfamiliar with the language and no translation is provided, his or her lack of fluency is not obvious to others. The scripted nature of the joking genre, which does not rely on improvisation, but can include it, may lessen the intimidation new language learners necessarily feel.

## Student Attitudes about Speaking Navajo on Campus

When asked whether she spoke Navajo to her friends, June responded, “What’s the point? It’s like I want something new, you know? I don’t want to have to think about [speaking Navajo] all the time. It’s like having a gun to your head. I’m OK with the fact that I know it and that I speak it very well. I mean, no one *has* to know that about me, and if my [child] can speak it too, then...” Upon being asked whether they value their friends speaking Navajo, some students surprised me when they explained they did not care, even though they professed the importance of the language in their lives. Reflecting on how speaking Navajo relates to her identity, June expressed her frustration by adding, “I don’t want to always have to *be* Navajo” (my italics, for emphasis).

According to the students, there may be a correlation between fluency in Navajo and willingness to speak it on campus. Fluent students seem more apathetic about an effort by the College to encourage students to speak Navajo. On the contrary, less fluent students responded much more positively to teachers’ efforts to encourage them to learn and speak Navajo. June’s opinions and thoughts about speaking Navajo with other students point to the dilemma she faces in presenting a dynamic identity to other students: she believes they judge her as less unique when they find out she speaks Navajo. During our interview, she explained how she thinks others’ initial perceptions of her are formed through her language choice:

The thing about it is like, uh, is kind of interesting because they do have, I don’t know if it’s racist...[quoting] ‘oh, I wonder what her clans are?’ that’s how they go about it, like, behind a curtain. ‘Oh, I wonder if she speaks Navajo. I wonder who she is, where she comes from.’ And then when you do speak Navajo, then their like, ‘oh, OK, nevermind. So, that’s the way I see a lot of Native Americans. That’s my experience actually.

They're like, 'oh, there is really nothing interesting about you. They wonder about my skin. The thing about it is, they compare themselves to you. Like, 'oh, I'm lighter than you. Oh, you got darker.' And that's the reaction after they find out you speak Navajo. The reaction is kinda like hatred.

The main reason June is not interested in encouraging students to speak Navajo on campus is her perception that most students are highly judgmental about others' language choice. She seems to believe that other students' judgments may create too many risks and too much pressure for her, if she tries to engage them in a Navajo conversation. Others' inquiries about her clan affiliations are interpreted by June as a "sneaky," indirect way of ascertaining the purity of her Navajo ethnicity. It is frequently questioned because of her light complexion. June may feel threatened by other students' frequent evaluations of her "Navajo-ness." She lived several years off the Reservation, and has a markedly different personal style than most other students. Her statement (above) indicates she may feel limited by expressing a Navajo identity that does not include her pasts. When other students dismiss her upon finding out that she speaks and is genetically Navajo, she may question their assumptions about her identity. Earlier in the interview June exclaimed, "I don't want to always *be* Navajo, you know?" June may interpret pressure to speak more Navajo on campus as limiting her and as not conforming to her original in choosing Diné College.

Frank, another fluent student, shares June's apathy about Navajo on campus, but for different reasons. He explained that "I don't care if my friends talk to me in Navajo or English. It doesn't really matter because it seems like it doesn't really matter here [at the College], in a way." For Frank, who says he speaks Navajo at home most of the time,

the College setting is not an environment where he feels compelled to speak Navajo. He elaborates: “So far, around here, I haven’t spoken Navajo to anyone around here. I only speak Navajo around people who are Nali’s [paternal grandparents] or who know Navajo, otherwise I don’t really use it.” One of the primary needs the Navajo language satisfies in Frank’s life is enabling him to communicate with his family. He does not experience this need on campus.

Michael, a fluent speaker who spent much time learning Navajo after he became a teenager, downplays efforts by students and teachers to encourage speaking Navajo on campus: “If you don’t speak it, then be proud to be one. As long as you feel you’re Navajo, you know you’re Navajo, you’re gonna die Navajo, it doesn’t really matter about the language anymore.” He places greater value on students having pride about being Navajo than on proficiency in the language. He seems to perceive the choice about learning Navajo as something best left to individual discretion. Later Michael explains how he perceives the shift from Navajo to English: “Even in the stories, it’s like the world is going to change in an evolving way. That’s what caused the Spanish to speak different than Mexicans; it is all different you know? They have their own ways, you know? And to me, that’s how it is in the Navajo world.” From his statement, we can see why Michael believes pride in being Navajo outweighs proficiency in the language. The fact that the Navajo language is threatened by English is interpreted by Michael as natural and perhaps inevitable.

From these students’ responses, it becomes clear they have a variety of reasons, some more complex than others for not wanting to be pushed toward speaking more

Navajo on campus. For June, speaking Navajo on campus threatens her ability to convey a dynamic personal identity to others. Because she speaks Navajo at home, she does not feel compelled to ‘practice’ speaking it at school. Similarly, Fred’s primary form of communication at home is in Navajo. He defines his decision to speak Navajo or English as related to “need,” rather than to activism on behalf of one language or the other. Michael believes that pride in being Navajo is much more important than ensuring that everyone be fluent in Navajo.

### Conclusion

While many Diné College students do not participate in genres of communication involving Navajo, some do. The majority of student interactions in Navajo appear to take place in a relatively more relaxed setting, where there is more familiarity with one’s interlocutors than in the classroom setting. This observation, based on students’ language practice, is also congruent with the values about speaking Navajo expressed to me during interviews. Some students, June for example, believe that school and home require different languages, and students therefore should not be compelled to speak Navajo on campus. However, informal social settings, such as sitting around the fire in the dorms during power outages, and eating meals in the cafeteria, seem to be more conducive to speaking Navajo. Furthermore, genres of communication that do not require a high degree of fluency in Navajo are more likely to encourage a wider range of student participation. Other genres, including conversation, may make an individual’s inadequacy in Navajo obvious. Speakers who are more familiar with one another are

more likely to speak Navajo with each other than with strangers, with whom they often prefer English. These observations about students' language practice become clearer in the next chapter, where I present students' opinions and beliefs about 'other' Navajo speaking students. Their remarks help define the ideological field within which many students' choices about speaking or practicing the Navajo are made.

## CHAPTER V

### TWO STUDENT DISCOURSES ABOUT “BEING NAVAJO”

According to Gal (1998:320), “different ideologies construct alternate, even opposing realities; they create differing views arising from and often constituting different social positions and subjectivities within a single social formation.” House (2002) makes it clear there are a wide variety of ways to “be Navajo,” arguing that there is no clear consensus among Navajos about which is the best. During my interviews with students, I asked several students if they could tell if another student spoke Navajo, just by looking at him or her. According to Irvine and Gal (2000:35), “the significance of linguistic differentiation is embedded in the politics of a region and its observers.” Students responded in a variety of ways, ranging from there being no way to physically distinguish someone who spoke Navajo, to it being very easy.

In this chapter I focus on the latter, to further explore the way some students conceptualize “being Navajo.” The first section is about shame in being Navajo. I focus on the way students think shame causes others to not speak Navajo publicly. I provide one student’s negative evaluation of other Navajo speakers in order to explore some of the components of this discourse. House (2002:28) borrows Michael Taussig’s (1993) concept of mimesis and alterity to describes adult Navajos attempting to simultaneously position themselves with respect to mainstream America and be different from it, in order to enjoy the benefits of both. She shows that much of their discourse about being Navajo falls between these two extremes, and points out the difficulty in achieving both.

Furthermore, she explains, “My speech data show that many Navajos hold clear-cut language ideologies that assign English a tremendous weight in securing them “success” in profession, educational, and other Western settings” (House 2002:28) Through mimesis, many Navajos try to take advantage of the “benefits of being American” (House 2002:23-31). The negative extreme of students’ discourse about what it means to speak Navajo, conforms to one of House’s observations of adult Navajos; some students, like adults, position themselves toward and evaluate themselves through the hegemonic incorporation of mainstream American ideals. Students’ discourses of pride, on the other hand, do not display the romanticized ‘ideal’ Navajo culture, which House observed among adult Navajos. On the other hand, youth discourses of pride incorporate many aspects of the contemporary struggles of being Navajo: poverty, domestic violence, language shift, and cultural absorption. They then point to Navajo traditional solutions for the problem.

### Hegemonic Discourse and Shame

Shame was the most common reason students gave for their peers choosing not to speak Navajo. Perhaps John explained this best when he said, “A lot of people talk English, Navajo’s just a word in itself that is shameful.” None of the students I interviewed claimed to be ashamed of speaking Navajo; however a few indicated strongly to me that they were ashamed, albeit indirectly. Students explained that others’ shame in speaking Navajo is often connected to their lack of proficiency in the language. One such student explained, “Most everyone can understand [Navajo], but they can’t speak it. I’d

say more than half can speak it, but they're ashamed of it, I think." When I asked why, he elaborated by saying, "I don't know...stupid. Because they can't speak it as good." Several of the students seemed to feel more comfortable discussing negative perceptions of younger Navajo speakers by distancing themselves through an outward interpretative stance, rather than by revealing their own value judgments of Navajo speakers. When I asked students whether they could identify a student who was fluent in Navajo, just by looking at him or her, some said there was no way to discern language ability, while others proceeded to name off characteristics I interpret as related to class and lifestyle. When I asked June why she thought more younger fluent speakers choose not to speak Navajo on campus, she explained,

They want to be different, so much that they want to be another race...I think another [reason] would be that they are ashamed of it, they don't want to be known as the Johned-out kids, and a lot of people think Johned-out is uh, outhouse, like white trash. But, um, they don't want to be labeled that.

According to June, the features of someone 'johned-out' include, "a very dark person...just dark and unkempt. He wears anything, is not with the uh, fad I guess. Now, they don't have all that knowledge [fashion sense], so you can easily tell who they are, but you can't really say that someone wants to dress like that. Like my brother is one of these."

I am not positive about the origins of the word "John," but many have explained to me that it is similar to other derogatory, racist words used historically by whites to label non-white minorities. Interestingly, historic diaries kept by American military soldiers, recording their endeavors to ethnically cleanse the American Southwest of

Native peoples (Preston, 1995) mention ‘Johnny Navajo’ in military songs. After burning their crops, poisoning their streams, and other genocidal practices used in General Kit Carson’s infamous “Scorched Earth Policy,” (Acrey, 2000) his troops marched forward to block each end of Canyon de Chelly, inevitably forcing Navajos to surrender. The troops marched to battle singing:

*Come dress you ranks, my gallant souls, a standing in a row.  
Kit Carson he is waiting to march against the foe;  
At night we march to Moqui, o’er lofty hills of snow,  
To meet and crush the savage foe, bold Johnny Navajo,  
Johnny Navajo! O Johnny Navajo!*

The derogatory term ‘John’ is used in a negative way towards Navajo people by whites living in towns that border the reservation. The Oxford English Dictionary ([www.askoxford.com](http://www.askoxford.com)) defines a ‘John’ first as a toilette and second as a man who receives the services of a prostitute. Analysis of June’s description of someone “Johned-out,” sheds light on the racist and classist assumptions inherent in the word “John.” In order to explain the meaning of the term, June described a ‘Johned-out’ person as having the following properties: (1) outhouse, (2) like white trash, (3) dark skin, (4) unkempt, (5) no fashion sense. The first feature, “outhouse,” is used as a synecdoche for all features of traditional Navajo living. Dark skin, being unkempt, and lacking fashion sense are all visual indicators affected by lifestyle, while ‘outhouses’ refers to a feature of a more traditional Navajo homestead and is directly linked to lifestyle. Being ‘unkempt’ may reflect an individual’s lack of access to daily showers, or dedication to a life of hard work in maintaining a traditional homestead. A lack of fashion sense implies that an individual is out of touch with mainstream fashion norms. The cause for this could be twofold:

people may not be able to afford ‘nice’ clothes, and/or they may not have access to mainstream media (television, magazines, etc). In his classic work, “Black Skin, White Masks,” Franz Fanon theorizes about the personal identity construction of colonized Africans. It is, he argues, a byproduct of people’s ideas about themselves, combined with the ideas racial others project onto them (2001). Through interactions with racial others, mainly white colonizers, dark skinned bodies were interpreted negatively in terms of racist and classist assumptions.

From June’s description of this stereotype we can begin to see a strong perceived relationship between being able to speak Navajo and visual appearance. In this way language becomes an index of lifestyle, much like smoke is an index of fire. In interpreting students’ shame about speaking Navajo and being Navajo, we can invoke Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. Raymond Williams (2001) discusses Marxist cultural theory through an analysis of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. Language as an index of lifestyle is not in itself hegemonic; rather, the negative concepts encompassed in June’s and John’s perception of this indexical relationship (which most students agree exists) can be understood as reflecting a hegemonic situation. According to Williams, ‘ideology’ is a relatively more surface level description of a society’s assumptions, beliefs, ideas, notions, and habits. He continues (Williams 2001:157):

For if ideology were merely some abstract imposed set of notions, if our social and political and cultural ideas and assumptions and habits were merely the result of specific manipulation, of a kind of overt training which might be simply ended or withdrawn, then the society would be very much easier to move and to change than in practice it has ever been or is. This notion of hegemony as deeply saturating the consciousness of a society seems to me to be fundamental. And hegemony has the advantage over general notions of totality, that it at the same time emphasizes the

facts of domination... That is why hegemony is not to be understood at the level of mere opinion or mere manipulation. It is a whole body of practices and expectations; our assignments of energy, our ordinary understanding of the nature of man and of his world. It is a set of meanings and values which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming.

From June's comments we know that the concept of a 'John' still exists in its pejorative sense. Most likely this word was originally used by Anglos to refer to Navajos, but today many Navajos use 'John' to refer to others in the same way June employed the term. Negative evaluations of Navajo language and lifestyle by their peers are still very much a reality for some students at Diné College. The 'saturation' of hegemonic forces described by Williams becomes even more apparent when one considers the extent to which a small number of students go, in order to avoid their skin becoming tanned. June pointed out that among other features of a "John," dark skin is a primary characteristic. The negative stereotypes of Navajos and their lifestyle by Anglos are embodied in June's description of a 'John'. To the extent that 'Navajo-ness' is perceived by students as embodying these negative value judgments, language shift reversal becomes less and less likely. As Williams points out, ideological change is exceptionally slow because of the saturation inherent the hegemonic ideology.

The following section will examine how students actively redefine these negative stereotypes to reflect a more positive outlook about "Navajo-ness," and what it means to live a Navajo lifestyle.

### Discourse of Empowerment and Pride

I also noticed pride in speaking or learning the Navajo language and in *being* Navajo. I include my observations of students actively redefining the negative stereotypes discussed in the previous section. I also give descriptions of visual indicators of student in being Navajo. These include tattoos, graffiti, and t-shirt messages. Navajo Hip Hop music also offers a message of pride in being Navajo. I will describe Navajo Hip Hop as a genre of music defined by the way it empowers younger Navajos. Several of the students with whom I became acquainted participated in the Navajo Hip Hop music scene, making it an important focus of my investigation about student discourses of empowerment.

Students, like Will, express their pride when others speak Navajo by saying, “Pride, man, just pride...anybody who can speak it [Navajo] has got their rez life. Rez life can mean so many different things. It can mean the water, you know? Like that shit in a shit house. It’s cold and going outside in the winter time and getting wood and shit. People whose life is like that is [*sic*] people who can speak Navajo.” Will interprets a person’s ability to speak Navajo as a positive index of lifestyle, compared to the relatively more negative relationship portrayed by June in the section about shame. Of particular interest is the contrast between Will’s and June’s discussion of “rez life.” June accesses some of the same properties of “rez life,” through the stereotype of a ‘Johned-Out’ person. Both June and Will mention outhouses in their description, but June employs the term ‘Johned-out’ to invoke and negatively interpret the visible effects of traditional living. I observed several students assigning a positive meaning to the words

‘John’ and ‘John-out’, ameliorating their original negative connotation. ‘Johned-out Productions’ was written across a hot pink flyer announcing a hip hop concert. Some referred to themselves as “Johns,” simultaneously claiming and redefining the words.

In discussing students’ pride, I include both visual and verbal indicators. I examine statements by other students, such as Will, who interprets the Navajo language as a positive index of lifestyle. The concept of re-appropriation becomes useful in fostering an understanding of how students actively take negative concepts (and stereotypes) and turn them around to become positive statements. I will examine this and other counterhegemonic student strategies through looking at the meanings embodied in Navajo Hip-Hop music, Native Pride brand t-shirts, and individual students’ tattoos.

#### Navajo Language and the Body: Tattoos, Drawings and T-Shirts

During the two summers I attended Diné College, I noticed several students with tattoos in Navajo. Some of these were professionally done, while others were either completed in jail or at home. These tattoos were of the word Diné, and were similar to graffiti, which tags abandoned buildings and faculty hogans on and around campus: Diné Pride. Many students had more than one tattoo, but I will use two students’ tattoos as particular examples. Each had tattoos written in Navajo, and each was fluent in the language. Michael has three tattoos. The most prominent are the large feathers that run the full length of his under forearm. A feather is carefully placed on each arm. He calls himself “Jonny Two-Feathers,” and often signs his emails as such. I regard Michael as a philosopher and poet; however, I am certain that he would consider these descriptions

prideful. The tattoo on his upper left shoulder is the word 'Diné' written in old English script that has become associated with hip-hop music and style. His third tattoo is between his third and fourth finger, written on the inside of his fourth finger. It is a small feather, no more than ¼ of an inch long.

The second student, Will, has his clan, *Kínłichí'íí* (The Redhouse Clan) tattooed across his shoulders in the back. He also has a tattoo on his left shoulder of a photo of a stereotypical, proud-looking Native man, with long hair that contrasts with his own short hair. Both of these students, who are also friends, attend hip-hop concerts and are huge supporters of Navajo rap music. They both speak Navajo fluently and in public. Most of the other students consider these students partiers. On several occasions when we sat outside at the wooden benches, Will etched into the wood an image of a Native American man, or objects that are stereotypically associated with Native Americans (tomahawks and feathers). He took great care to draw a good image, and generally worked in solitude. Students may be marking both places and their own bodies with these images, as a way of defining the identity of both.

### T-Shirts and Identity

Like college students anywhere in the U.S., students at Diné College wear a lot of t-shirts. There are definitely a handful of brands and colors that are trendy, including Sean Jean, Hilfiger, Native Pride, Red Hand, and Diné Pride. Many of these students wear black, tan, dark blue, red and yellow shirts. Not too many pink shirts are seen and when they are, they often include a message like the followings: "All of my black shirts

are dirty.” This makes fun of the popularity of black shirts and the fact that some students are committed to wearing only black ones. I began noticing t-shirts after becoming a Teaching Assistant at Texas Tech University. In large classrooms, I noticed the colors and messages on Tech students’ t-shirts. As a group, Diné College students’ t-shirts struck me as being quite different than those of Tech students. The difference is primarily in brand name and color. Many Diné College students wear t-shirts sold or given away at fundraisers, which often have messages written in Navajo on the shirts.

The Student Activities program decided one day to have a t-shirt making day, which provided students with a colored t-shirt of their choice, as well as with paint. Many students took the opportunity to personalize the t-shirt with messages about their identity. George, a student who is learning Navajo in the introductory class, wrote the names of his clans on the t-shirt. A gay student drew a rainbow on the shirt, a message of gay pride. Because students could personalize the t-shirts in a number of ways, their finished products reflected certain components of the identity they wanted to represent. Many students chose to foreground a ‘Navajo’ identity through this activity, by drawing famous landscapes, such as Shiprock and by writing in Navajo. McLaughlin (1992) describes the ways in which writing in Navajo is a source of empowerment among Navajo students in one community.

### Hip-Hop and Navajo

Some students participate in the ‘underground’ hip-hop music scene on the Reservation. These students go to concerts and get-togethers around the Reservation, and

often perform. Their friends, frequently other students, try very hard to make it to the events, despite not having reliable transportation or much money for gas. Several rappers have become quite well known, as attested by the high number of concert goers. Some of the students I worked with listened to and owned their CDs. The names of the bands often are often based on key features of reservation life, such as Clan Connected and NDN sounds. Other bands do not use a name that would mark their identity as Navajo, but the lyrics of their music certainly does. The band Mystic is one example. Their album is titled "Rezurrection." Some students casually participate in the rap music scene, but never perform on stage. One such student was a small-time rapper, and when songs with long sections that had no lyrics were played, the student would freestyle rap. Usually his rap songs were in English, but on one occasion, and perhaps for my benefit, he rapped his clan introduction to the beat of techno music on his friend's CD. Everyone laughed and applauded, impressed by the creativity of his performance. Apparently it is very difficult to rap in Navajo; many speakers claim the rhythms are too different to easily accomplish "flow."

Nevertheless, some Navajo rappers are committed to offering rap songs in Navajo on their CD's. Clan Connected is one such band. I had the opportunity to meet some of the members of Clan Connected at their booth, which was set up at the flea market outside of Gallup. After purchasing their CD, I asked them about rapping in Navajo. They explained to me that they rap in Navajo because they want to encourage younger Navajos to learn the language from their grandparents. Furthermore, they told me they don't print the lyrics on the CD cover, so that listeners who aren't fluent have to find out

the lyrics' meaning by asking their elders. They think the connection between the younger generation and elders is essential for the culture to survive. The fourth song on their first Clan Connected CD is in Navajo, while the rest are in English. The number four is significant in Navajo tradition, symbolized, for example in the four cardinal directions and the four sacred mountains (House 2002:95).

In an interview on Red Nation.com with Native Music journalists, college-aged Mystic and Shade (brothers and producers of Tribe 2 Entertainment) explain their music: "Everything here at Tribe 2 Entertainment, we incorporate our tribe's language, traditions, and personal beliefs. Each artist brings their own styles to the table. Mystic speaks on issues that surround our people today-poverty, violence, awareness of history, good and bad. Also, [we're] the first to spit flames in our Native language." Mystic and Shade say, "Native Hip Hop today is different from mainstream Hip Hop. You've got your fake ones trying to be down, not knowing anything about what they're rapping. You've got the real ones out there grinding day-in-day-out spreading the truth. I'm not saying names. People who listen know who's real and who's not. But as far from what we've seen, the Mainstream industry is too Pop friendly. Our scene is Underground. We do our own thing-rappin one of the hardest languages to speak."

Several of the students with whom I became acquainted over the past three summers possessed a large number of these local, underground CDs. I purchased several of them, and a student loaned me some of his own to copy onto blank CDs. After listening to them, I had many questions about Navajo hip hop. Will, Michael, Darrel, and Celeste owned some of these CDs and were happy to talk about Navajo Hip Hop.

Michael participates in the Navajo Hip Hop scene as a freestyle rapper. As Mystic and Shade said in their interview, an important feature of ‘good’ hip hop is the rappers’ ability to convey the authenticity of their experience as Native persons.

A couple of students were skeptical about artists’ intentions in using Navajo. This becomes apparent when Celeste explains skepticism about their raps coming from the heart:

Well, they’re just using the language, you know? They’re just doing it to make money, you know? They should be role models if they’re going to fucking use the language for rap, they should do it in a positive way, you know and try to do something to bring back Navajo and stuff, and not be all like, ‘We’re losing the language and stuff.’ But, if they’re fearing that then they should preach it to their kids. I don’t know, not preach it, but just living it everyday.”

Michael adds, “I do it the same way I was raised, I don’t know, that’s the way I see it, if I wanna be fucking Navajo, I’ll rap in Navajo. I talk it everyday, not something I have to look up in a Navajo dictionary to find the words.” Most Navajo Hip Hop songs are in English, although Mystic and Shade are currently producing their first all Navajo CD. This CD will be the first full rap CD in any Native American language (RedNation.com).

The predominate features of Navajo Hip Hop music include pride in being Navajo and the importance of “keepin it real,” that is authentically representing the contemporary Navajo experience. Many rap songs encompass the fears Navajo youth have about losing traditional knowledge, and their need to remember the past. The songs emphasize who they are as a people, and envision a future that includes traditional knowledge, and not absorption into mainstream America. A few of the students I interviewed mentioned the

gap in knowledge between the young generation and their grandparents. Many expressed anguish over the fact that their parents' generation did not pass on their grandparents' teachings. Included in this is the Navajo language. Jackie explains:

I would say there's like a massive gap between this generation of like my grandmother and like, my generation, where it's like our parents don't...realize how important everything that they were taught would ever be. I don't know like, it's like they kind of fucked up really bad. Because my generation, there are some of us who are trying very hard to hold on to everything and are trying our best to learn as much as we can and so we know this, but I don't know, it's kind of strange, because you know some kids don't really care, and our parents, is like this whole missing stage. It seems like one whole massive void, it's insane...It's like they lost a lot, and they never really cared to actually teach anything they learned.

When I asked her what she thought caused the generation gap, she said:

I think that it has a lot to do with Christianity and the BIA boarding schools. And it has to do with what was passed on to them, and for some of them what was passed on to them from their parents. And some of that comes from history, like the Long Walk, but uh, I don't know...it's insane when you really think about it, how there's so much missing in between our elderlies and our generation, and it seems like our parents, and like how they were thinking, that you know, we should learn how to speak English and become completely assimilated is the best way to live and survive, and that my people want to survive and we want to continue being. We have to. We can't forget the past, we have to try very very hard to remember everything we can, because that will help us to co-exist with modernization and that will help us move forward or we won't have a past and we won't have a future. I don't think [our parents] get that, nor the younger generation, they don't get that either. I think some of the older people have lost hope in the younger people because they try to talk to them, but the younger people quit asking questions. They really don't want to share anything, you know...So that's the way I think is how it is. It's the whole language and tradition, we can't move forward without a past. That's why it's very important to us that we remember who we are as a people.

The following is an example of a Hip Hop song, by Btaka, the Pomo/Apache producer of Westside Warrior Productions. It speaks of the angst and confusion many

younger Natives feel about losing their heritage, dealing with the harsh realities of reservation life, experiencing contemporary racism, and feeling anger about the role of colonization in creating these problems. It is a good example of Native Hip Hop, which focuses on the difficulties of reservation life, and prescribes traditional knowledge as the solution to these difficulties.

“Indian Life” by Btaka

- (1) *When I close my eyes*
- (2) *My mind starts wonderin’*
- (3) *Am I going over or am I going under?*
- (4) *Times are rough and times are hard.*
- (5) *Living on the rez and praying to God.*
- (6) *I must remain way above the game*
- (7) *I gotta maintain and I gotta contain*
- (8) *The anger that I have over the past.*
- (9) *Will my race die, or will it last?*
- (10) *Tell me this as I fall to my knees*
- (11) *(indecipherable) won’t you help me please?*
- (12) *My Indian life is full of tears*
- (13) *Gotta be strong, gotta face my fears*
- (14) *Holy ground is the place to pray*
- (15) *Discrimination day after day.*
- (16) *I don’t know why or what to do.*
- (17) *My life’s gone crazy and I’m only 22.*
- (18) *My father saw what was happening to me,*
- (19) *He told me son, “Won’t you listen to me?”*
- (20) *He sat me down and started to say*
- (21) *The words that stay with me day after day.*
- (22) *He said, “Go my son, climb that funky ladder.”*
- (23) *“Go, my son, get an education.”*
- (24) *“Go, my son, make your lyrics phatter.”*
- (25) *“Go, my son, protect your reservation.”*
- (26) *Dis is my life, my Indian Life*
- (27) *My love in harmony will help me survive.*

The artist begins with an introspective moment (1-2), where he closes his eyes and ponders his own ability to deal with some of the anxiety causing themes he will

explore throughout the remainder of the rap. He views his ability to deal positively with these challenges as being able to remain ‘above’, while failing is equivalent to sinking, or ‘going under’ (3). The challenges of which he speaks include: the difficulties that comprise reservation life (4), racism (15), and frustration about the role of colonization and American conquest in creating these problems (8). The speaker asks himself three questions that set the stage for the kinds of problems he refers to in the first part of the text (lines 1-17). In line (18), the text takes a different tone; he shifts his focus from the contemporary problems facing younger Navajos, to looking into the past for solutions. To do this he recalls Chief Manuelito’s words during the Treaty of 1868, “Education is the ladder, my child. Take it.” (Acrey 2000). He brings the famous elder and war chief’s teachings into the present, by symbolically replacing Manuelito with his own father, or through figuratively referring to Manuelito as his father. Manuelito’s words were originally modified by Sharon Birch, a Navajo singer. She changed them from their original form and made more relevant to a younger audience through inserting the adjective ‘funky’ before ‘ladder’. Btaka borrowed Birch’s lyrics and altered them even more. The speaker stops rapping and begins singing, “Go my son, climb that funky ladder. Go my son, get an education” (22,23). The rapper may interpret Maunuelito as supporting his endeavors. He raps to represent ‘rez life’ and its difficulties as well as to remind youth of the relevance of Manuelito’s advice, and the relevance of traditional Beauty Way teachings about maintaining harmony (27).

### “Johnd-out” vs. Traditionalism

This chapter briefly describes some elements of two different discourses in which students participate. The first is exemplified by June’s statements about what it means to be “Johnd-out,” and the second is exemplified by Wes’s statement about taking pride in the same features of a traditional Navajo lifestyle, which includes language. The students offer completely different ways of being Navajo in these discourses. House (2002:23-41) describes two similar extreme and “essentializing” discourses among the adult Navajo population. June’s discourse describing the kinds of people who speak Navajo conforms to House’s focus on all the things “good about being American.” June seems to borrow a racist, Anglo-American discourse to interpret “tanness” and “outhouses,” one that has hegemonic undertones.

The second discourse, to which Navajo Hip Hop contributes, counters the hegemonic one by simultaneously acknowledging the difficulties in Native American youth’s lives, and prescribing a return to traditional teachings as a means to find strength and understanding. Many Navajo Hip Hoppers, including Mystic and Shade, produce music that encourages younger people to follow traditional teachings, attend ceremonies, continue a dialogue with their elders, and learn or speak Navajo. This counterhegemonic discourse is different from the essentializing one House (2002:34-41) discusses, in which people see themselves as different from mainstream Americans and over emphasize the “good things about being Navajo.” Navajo Hip Hop does not deny the difficulties of the current Native American experience. Rather, it becomes a way of creating solidarity through common experience among the youth. Solidarity develops between youth who

listen to and participate in this music style. The students I knew are friends and they speak Navajo to one another on campus more than any other people I observed.

Most students I spoke with did not participate in either of these genres. However, they borrowed themes from both at different times, depending on the situation and the people present. Only a few students participated in Navajo Hip Hop. Some hip hoppers spoke about being Navajo and being proud of it, but also told me they listened to other music. From these explanations, I believe that Navajo Hip Hop reflects the experience and the values of many Navajo students, and simultaneously contributes to shaping those values. Navajo Hip Hop is not the source of students' pride; rather, it reflects key aspects of it.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Students choose to speak Navajo on the Diné College campus for a variety of reasons, although they prefer English to Navajo for the majority of their interactions. From students' accounts in Chapter III, one realizes that students have a variety of reasons for placing a high value on the Navajo language. Some of those reasons, which include the need to express a 'Navajo' identity, participate in ceremonies and prayer, and communicate with family members, are not important in the Diné College setting.

Furthermore, many of the students I spoke with offered stories about being teased for their language choice while growing up (Chapter II). Many students had endured harsh teasing from elders and siblings and/or peers, prior to attending the College. Some who spoke Navajo were made fun of by elders who did not think their variety of Navajo was acceptable. For others, like Michael, being teased about not knowing Navajo offered an incentive for him to learn the language on his own. He spent considerable time practicing and correcting his pronunciation in order to become fairly fluent. Some students, like Celeste, were teased by their peers for speaking English with a strong Navajo accent, which is interpreted by many as a result of having Navajo as a first language. From students' descriptions of their past experiences with Navajo and English, it becomes clear that one's language, whether English or Navajo, is judged in different ways. Language is interpreted by students as an index of identity, and many students feel

pressure in making language decisions. Language also becomes an indicator of one's political values.

Students' negative evaluations of other students, are frequently are based on language choice: clear evidence that hegemonic discourses continue to shape students' language practice. On the other hand, many students do not participate in these negative evaluations. They choose instead to create a positive discourse about being Navajo, including elements of broader Native American youth pride. Navajo Hip Hop embodies many of the elements of this positive discourse. Students' incorporation of various elements from both of these discourses is reflected in their language practice. It is evident in their choice about speaking Navajo on campus, a public place, despite the social risks involved. Furthermore, as more hip hop music in Navajo becomes available, these songs can be incorporated into language teaching programs. Older language programs, including the one in which I participated, offered Navajo music belonging to a genre that may be more appealing to older Navajos. College students might respond better to Navajo hip hop, which portrays their experience in a positive constructive way

From my discussions with students and observations of their language choices, I have identified certain types of situations in which the majority of students find it more comfortable to speak Navajo to other students. Navajo joke telling is a genre with which most students are familiar and enjoy. Since most students seem to be latent speakers of Navajo, joke-telling may serve to bridge the gap between more and less fluent speakers. Such students typically seem to avoid communicating with one another, as fluent students do not want to be rude to less fluent ones by conversing with them in a language they do

not completely understand. Less fluent speakers are intimidated by the prospect of being ridiculed by other, more fluent ones when they speak Navajo. Therefore they do not practice what they learn in the language class outside of class. Creating an event that incorporates joke-telling could take advantage of fluent students' language proficiency, since they would be the joke tellers. The joke telling genre does not require the audience to be extremely fluent, and it could potentially accommodate a wide range of proficiency in Navajo. Joke telling alone is certainly not a complete language learning experience, but it could be a way of encouraging fluent students to interact with less fluent ones. Such practice is already employed successfully during campus concerts. Perhaps smaller and more frequent performances would be helpful.

Identifying on-campus students who are fluent in Navajo, and offering them a positive leadership role in encouraging others to speak Navajo, could be an effective way of reinforcing the positive value of speaking Navajo. None of the fluent students I spoke with were recognized as a valuable asset in reversing language shift. The existence of young speakers of Navajo is the only hope for language shift reversal, and language revitalization. Recognizing these students as an asset and incorporating them in campus efforts to reverse language shift is important.

It became apparent through my fieldwork, that many believe speaking Navajo is highly personal and revealing. Furthermore, in light of the kinds of judgments made about Navajo speakers that surfaced in Chapter IV, students' apprehensiveness about speaking Navajo increases in less familiar company. Privacy, trust, and familiarity are three themes that emerged from my questions about settings where students feel

comfortable speaking Navajo. The only situation in which fluent students said they enjoyed speaking Navajo with strangers, was in telling jokes.

The college may have greater success in taking Navajo out of the classroom in several ways. The first is through incorporating the less intimidating genre of joking into out-of-class language programs and working to increase students comfort and familiarity with one another, before encouraging them to engage with each other in Navajo.

Students' apprehensiveness about speaking Navajo with those they consider strangers is a primary reason they don't speak Navajo on campus. Second, rather than assuming most students do not speak Navajo, the college could take advantage of the rich exposure most students have growing up on the Navajo Nation. It could encourage them to change from language 'listeners' to language producers, simply by facilitating an environment in which they are more comfortable with one another.

I hope that this study benefits the Navajo Nation in its endeavors to revitalize the Navajo language among young Navajos. Through working with late adolescent college students, I offer information that can be used in tailoring a language program to more effectively address this groups experience in speaking and learning Navajo. As language attitude is most crucial in language revitalization efforts, similar studies tailored to understanding younger students' language attitudes could potentially increase the efficacy of these programs.

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