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## THE CONTINUUM OF LITERACY IN AMERICAN INDIAN COMMUNITIES

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### **Abstract**

Based on research among the Tohono O'odham of southern Arizona, this paper first describes spoken O'odham and oral narrative, relating this to the development of O'odham children's English literacy. Oral tradition constitutes one aspect of a "literacy continuum" grounded in familial and community relationships. "School literacy" often constitutes an opposite end of that continuum; historically this form of literacy has remained isolated from and in conflict with literacy rooted in the family/community context. The discussion here shows how the two types of literacy are connected in children's writing, and provides recommendations for educators to tap indigenous students' linguistic and cultural resources to promote literacy in a second language.

### **Throwing Words**

"Throwing words into the air" — this is what O'odham say about talking, storytelling, praying, singing — all of which make up the genre of oral tradition. The words are thrown into the air in the form of spoken word, song, oration or invocation. Words, like other things that can be carried by the air, are at the mercy of the winds. The listener who happens to be on the receiving end of these words is also at the mercy of the winds. In O'odham, other than the give-and-take of everyday conversation, protocol does not allow the listener the luxury of asking the speaker to repeat the

words. Instead, one is often left with question and discomfort in not catching the words as they were thrown.

Some words that are thrown into the air are everyday words, while others are words that are meant to invoke, to heal, to harm. But everyday words, like the words that are meant to have power, also are embedded with their own strength. This is the reason why so many believe in the power of words (e.g., Momaday, 1975, 1991) and why the speakers must be careful and responsible for what they speak.

In this article I will make a few observations about O'odham speakers and their views about spoken O'odham. I will then discuss the written English of young O'odham writers, and the connections between their English literacy and O'odham oral tradition. Much of the discussion here is based, on my long-term research on Tohono O'odham linguistics and regional dialects (Zepeda, 1983; Zepeda & Hill, 1986), and on recent work by Goodman and Wilde (1992) with young O'odham writers. These data are presented to suggest the strong connections *within children's lived experiences*, of the spoken and written word — and by extension, to suggest implications for policy and practice in indigenous language education.

### **The People**

O'odham, *The People*, refers to those who share a common language, culture and history of indigenous occupation in what is now southern Arizona and northern Sonora. In 1986, the Tribal Council officially changed the name from *Papago*, a designation imposed by the Spanish, to the indigenous term Tohono O'odham (*Desert People*). Tohono O'odham, a Uto-Aztecan language, today has approximately 10,000 speakers, most of whom reside in southern Arizona and northern Sonora (Arizona Department of Education, 1986).

There are four Tohono O'odham reservations in Arizona. This study focuses on what has come to be called the "main" reservation

— the largest in both size and population, where some 15,000 tribal members reside. The southern reservation boundary is coterminous with the Arizona-Sonora boundary. The reservation covers some 2,500 square miles, reaching into the most diverse parts of the Arizona Sonoran Desert, where elevation ranges from sea level to desert peaks of over 6,000 feet.

### **Spoken O'odham**

Speakers of O'odham demonstrate great interest in their language, and there are certainly highly salient features of the language for many speakers (Zepeda & Hill, 1986). Spoken O'odham has long been a consciously important part of O'odham identity; in fact, regional dialect groups are an important social unit of the O'odham. In a current project on regional dialects in O'odham, Jane Hill and I note that ethnohistoric accounts indicate that these dialect groups formed the basis for the eleven defense villages in which the O'odham lived during the nineteenth century, and continue as the basis for the nine districts of the modern Tohono O'odham Reservation (Zepeda & Hill, 1986). The salience of dialect-group membership was and is still expressed in joking, teasing, and competition among dialect groups.

Other observations about attitudes and practices with regard to spoken O'odham are anecdotal. For instance, it is common for older speakers to be wary of younger members of the community who want to mechanically record their speech, even with pencil and paper. They chastise the young listener for being lazy, for not knowing how to listen in the way *they* had to listen. The older speakers often retort, "If it is something important, you will remember it."

Still other speakers talk about the genre called "song," and comment about songs as "flowers for the ears." Songs are stimulating and enjoyable in the oral medium in the same way that objects and experiences are stimulating to other human senses. Others speak of language as a commodity to be sold. O'odham

speakers say, "Sell my speech for me," when they require translation into English or Spanish.

And finally, speakers are acutely aware of the psychological power words can have. This power is different from that which is held by a select, trained few. The former refers to the power ordinary people can exercise with words. There is the healing and nurturing power of words, but there is also the destructiveness. O'odham speakers know the hurt they can impose on one another simply by an utterance or by a denial of words to others. One anthropologist (Matson, personal communication), has observed that the cruelest punishment an O'odham speaker can impose is denying acknowledgement of another by not speaking to him or her. This is a way of saying the person no longer exists, certainly an unusual punishment. And it is for this primary purpose that speakers must keep constant check on what they say, again being sensitive to the responsibility one must have with words.

These are but a few examples of the growing knowledge about spoken O'odham. In contrast, attitudes and practices concerning both written O'odham and written English among O'odham speakers have evolved and been observed only very recently.

### **O'odham Orthography**

The Tohono O'odham language has had a practical orthography for approximately 20 years. The orthography was developed by an O'odham linguist, Albert Alvarez, and a non-O'odham linguist, Kenneth Hale of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Within the past 10 years there has emerged a small but growing body of literature written in the O'odham language (e.g. Evers & Zepeda, 1983). Furthering the potential for development of written O'odham, the Tohono O'odham Nation now has in place a language policy designating O'odham as the official language of the reservation, and education standards calling for the meaningful incorporation of O'odham language and culture in reservation school curricula (Zepeda, 1990).

Before their contact with Europeans, the O'odham did have ways to "write down" certain ideas such as petroglyphs and other forms of rock writing. Another example of such symbolic representations are the O'odham calendar sticks. These mnemonic devices are carved from pine or other wood to record events. The distance between carved notches on the stick represents intervals of time, typically from one saguaro cactus harvest to the next. The notches and cuts record various happenings which only the owner can interpret. It is not known how long calendar sticks have been in use, but evidence for their use dates back at least to encounters with the Spanish in the 17th century. Moreover, it is clear the interpreters or "literate people" of these writings were but a select few. Scholars and indigenous language speakers agree that O'odham is an oral language, only recently acquiring a written tradition.

### **Written Language**

Virtually all schools on the main Tohono O'odham Reservation today have bilingual programs which include both spoken and written O'odham. Nonetheless, given the limited number of O'odham bilingual/biliterate teachers and materials, O'odham students spend the majority of their school day involved in English-medium instruction. My focus here, then, is on these students and their written English.

The students whose writing I will discuss are young O'odham writers to whose work I was exposed through the generosity of their teachers, and O'odham primary students who participated in an extended study on the writing process carried out from 1984 to 1989 by Yetta Goodman of the University of Arizona (Goodman & Wilde, 1992). For the purposes of this discussion, three observations on Goodman et al.'s data are important. First, while many of the students spoke O'odham with varying degrees of proficiency, the children in the study did indeed learn how to carry out the task of English writing. Second, the children began to

develop attitudes and habits about writing, most of which were influenced by their role models and peers. Third, probably not as obviously, the children brought themselves and their world into their writing, making an extension into what I call the *continuum of literacy*. Here the students meshed the oral and written tradition into one.

The writing activities as introduced by classroom teachers were such that the students learned certain skills and applied them in their various writing assignments. Some students of course applied these skills more adeptly than others, thus marking their individuality as practitioners of writing in English.

The students, by responding to their teachers—their primary role model—began to develop attitudes and habits about writing. Eventually these are the attitudes that will be reflected in their future writing experiences. The importance of the two points raised above is that the O'odham students in Goodman et al.'s study learned in much the same way as other, non-O'odham students. The fact that they are O'odham made little or no difference in learning writing skills *per se*, and in applying those skills.

However, what is unique about this population is what they chose to write about and how. These students' writing gives the reader a small window into their world, the world of growing up in a special place, whether a village at the foot of a sacred mountain or a place where the whole village is the extended family.

It is at this level of the students' writing that the continuum of literacy extends into a different realm. In much of the students' writing, they employ many of the traits of "storytelling." They may write about a specific topic as assigned, but at the same time they gather insights from their own experience, their community, home and family to write what they feel makes a good story. Also, as with the oral tradition, the writer is playing and in some cases experimenting with the power of words. In much of the students' writing they tantalize the reader in the same way the storyteller holds the audience in an oral performance.

Consider this story, by then second-grader Clinton Antone. He developed it during an imaginative writing workshop sponsored by ArtsReach, a Tucson-based organization that conducts writing workshops with O'odham and other American Indian children:

*The Deer Family* by Clinton Antone

I saw about four deer running by a stream and a big waterfall.

When I looked at their faces, they had my dad's, mom's, and sisters' faces.

Some hunters came. I heard shots. The deer fell over.

I woke up this morning and my heart was beating fast.  
(Artsreach, 1991, p. 11)

In the continuum of literacy, the young writer reaches deep into a past, a past he or she shares with a community — a past thousands of years old. This is similar to what Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday describes of other Native American children's writing and its connection to oral tradition:

Directly behind these writings is an oral tradition that is extremely rich and highly developed. . while they [the children's writings] appear to be like the verses we encounter in the pages of books, [they] are descended from truly ancient songs and prayers and spells and charms. Their context is magic, a profound belief in the efficacy of language, the sacred. (Momaday, 1991, p. 5)

In the O'odham students' writing, we find that he or she pulls words, fragments or events and related language, from the space that is between the generations, that place where oral content is passed from one to another. The children pull also from the pieces of stories that are held only the memory of the people, stories that are urged from memory by occasional tellings. These young writers "urge things up" from the oral tradition-thoughts or ideas that they sometimes do not fully understand. In doing this, these writers are inspired by the formulas of stories which lead them to create specific scenes and events also found in the oral tradition.

One example of this is the common series of events where the hero or the heroine of the story must go through some magnificent metamorphosis if they are to succeed in some adventure, dilemma, or journey. This type of story can be found in an autobiographical poem by a young O'odham writer. In this poem he talks of his sorrow for the recent loss of his grandfather, and in so doing the writer describes a scene of himself sitting outside, singing a song using the gourd rattle his grandfather left to him. As he continues to sing he slowly begins to change his physical shape. He eventually is transformed into a great eagle. The young writer continues his poem, describing in detail the view he has as he flies in the air as the eagle. Poignantly, the story ends with the eagle being shot out of the sky and killed by someone tending a field the eagle was going to molest. The boy in death returns to his human form and joins his grandfather. The reader assumes both are happy.

This example of metamorphosis or transcending the mythical realm is relatively common in American Indian traditional literature. The young writer described here employs it well and uses it effectively in telling his story. He has done the same thing that other more skilled, trained writers such as Momaday or Leslie Marmon Silko do in their creative work. A Silko character, for example, can be placed somewhere in the New Mexican desert or on some isolated highway; as he steps into the cab of his pickup truck and drives, he drives his truck off the edge of the space in



which he began and continues driving into another realm of "unreal" or "mythical" time and place (Silko, 1987). In this place the adventure or journey continues, giving the character more insight into his world and himself.

This continued metamorphosis makes a multidimensional character capable of the "unreal" and the "mythical," all of which may be good, bad, or some balance in between. Typically, at the conclusion of the adventure or journey into this realm the hero overcomes some great tragedy, and the story concludes with the standard "good" overcoming "evil," or happiness subsuming sorrow. In some instances there is no clear conclusion, but a continuation of the adventure or journey in another time and place. This is also what orality in indigenous narrative texts allows.

The freedom that occurs in oral tellings is skillfully employed in the written texts of the young writers described here. This is the skill that demonstrates the movement from oral to written, making that seamless continuum.

Perhaps for some readers such writing may simply be interpreted as that which is patterned after modern science fiction texts, or from "too much television viewing," or from simply the fantastic imagination of a child. I don't doubt these also are influences. However, in many instances it is the case that the young writer is gathering from his storytelling knowledge another source — this being his tribal community. Often this continuum from the oral to the written manifests itself in other ways, including repetition of text, the text structure itself, and in formulaic beginnings and endings. These distinctive representations are ones that television and science fiction do not often employ.

### **Implications for Schooling**

It is critical for educators and promoters of literacy among young American Indian writers to be aware of the cultural and linguistic resources these writers employ. It is clear from the study by Goodman et al. that Native American children do learn skills

and methods of writing, but they also bring with them something their teachers cannot teach the traditional knowledge of storytelling, the rhythm of traditional narratives, the oral structures of those narratives and the importance of this type of literature in the local community. These are resources and strengths that can and should be tapped in promoting American Indian and Alaska Native children's second-language literacy.

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