

Book Review: Lessons from Fort Apache

Pamela Innes

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Lessons from Fort Apache: Beyond Language Endangerment and Maintenance by M. Eleanor Nevins
Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. 280 pp

In *Lessons from Fort Apache*, Eleanor Nevins sets out to contribute “a precedent and a set of interpretive tools that facilitate recognition of differences in orientation between the ostensibly cooperative, but sometimes clashing, parties to ‘saving’ a language”(p.3). From several years’ experience assisting language programs run by the White Mountain Apache, including a three-year stretch of intensive ethnographic field-work, she illustrates where and how differences in orientation can occur. The examples presented show there is good reason for linguists to be aware of alternative orientations to language endangerment, but the author does not always remain focused on language revitalization efforts.

The first two chapters introduce readers to the political, linguistic, and social environment of the Fort Apache Reservation. Nevins then compares expectations and ideological foundations that she has identified among its residents with those held by academic linguists. She contends that while linguists and residents of Fort Apache use the same vocabulary when speaking of the language as endangered, the semantic content of the terms differs between the two groups. She demonstrates how the use of endangerment and preservation rhetoric preserves and maintains power imbalances between linguists and the Native communities whose languages they are documenting and revitalizing.

Nevins moves on to show why a tribally directed language program developing interactive computer materials intended to be made available to the reservation’s schools was canceled. She attributes cancellation in part to concern about the change from interactional teaching strategies to computer-based methods. She relates this to community apprehension about the diminution of family-based teaching of language and interactional standards. While her arguments are persuasive, she never speaks to the fact that the program with which she was affiliated appeared to involve a very select few of the teachers who had developed language programs in the many schools on the reservation. One is left to wonder whether greater communication and cooperation with several families and schools might have altered the outcome, but this is never addressed.

Chapter 4 presents an article published in 2008, analyzing how references taken primarily from popular media and branded products become names for new neighborhoods in a manner consistent with place-naming conventions described by Keith Basso (1992, 1996). Nevins shows that this practice masks the distance between the Apache and their neighbors because the seemingly shared names are understood and interpreted very differently by the two communities. Exactly how this relates to issues of language endangerment remains unexplained. Certainly, linguists may miss transfers of practice like this, but, because this involves manipulation of English forms, one

wonders what a person concerned about Apache language maintenance is supposed to conclude from the inclusion of this chapter.

Nevins then introduces readers to Apache orthographic and rhetorical strategies she identifies as means of validating Apache culture. The orthographic system developed by Silas John is presented as a means of presenting the validity and power of his religious visions on a level equal to that occupied by Christian teachings. Speakers use the rhetorical features discussed in the second section of the chapter to present positive evaluative stances toward Apache culture that counter less positive stance positions in preceding narrative. Again, while Nevins makes a convincing argument for finding these to signal resistance to the roles and characterizations often applied to the Apache, their applicability for linguists working to help maintain the language is not made clear.

Nevins returns to her stated goal in the next two chapters, focusing again on topics directly applicable to language programs: reasons why religious content (ch. 7) and certain genres of stories (ch. 6) may not be deemed appropriate for inclusion in school-based programs. In both chapters, she demonstrates that excluding this content from school programs reinforces the community's ideology about the power of both realms. Respecting community desires to keep these elements out of language pedagogy symbolizes an understanding that these are potent areas of knowledge.

The concluding chapter would have been a perfect place to offer readers some ideas of how Nevins would have modified the programs with which she was involved so as to better serve the community, demonstrate respect for intergenerational means of teaching, and, perhaps, mitigate criticism from the Fort Apache population. Instead, readers are left with the observations that linguists should attend to community concerns, should consider both oblique and direct critiques of programs as indicating areas for improvement, and should allow that perspectives on what it means to call a language "endangered" may differ. All are worthwhile suggestions, but reflections on how she thinks the situation at Fort Apache may have been altered if she had applied these ideas would have made this a more satisfying and helpful book.

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