Linguistics and Indigenous Populations in a Time of Pandemic

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Abstract
Our research over the indigenous populations in North America provides an in-depth look at linguistic diversity and the posed threats to the languages and cultures of indigenous populations. We will analyze the disproportionate lack of education about, resources for, and ongoing consequences of Covid-19 on indigenous populations.

This poster will provide a linguistic analysis of the treatment of indigenous populations in North America as well as the effect of Covid-19 on native languages. We propose a method to respectfully conserve indigenous languages and provide accessible resources for older generations for the purpose of preserving language and culture.

This student presentation is available at ScholarWorks: https://scholarworks.boisestate.edu/under_showcase_2021/
Why are Indigenous languages at high risk for extinction, and how can they be sustained in the time of pandemic?

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous languages are at a higher risk of dormancy due to the Covid-19 pandemic making older population extremely vulnerable. Because these elders typically are the ones responsible for educating the next generation on their language and culture, it is imperative to refocus systems of resource distribution, communication and education, and language revitalization efforts both inside and outside of reservations in order to keep these cultures and languages alive and thriving.

Research Plan/Methodology

To better inform ourselves on the extent our educated community is aware of indigenous populations, languages, and pandemic experiences, we formed a survey and distributed it amongst our fellow students.

We have also studied and analyzed peer-reviewed, academic articles to create a more comprehensive understanding of local indigenous communities and preferences.

LINGUISTICS

What is Language Dormancy?

Language dormancy occurs when a language no longer has any native speakers left, severely hindering the ability for the language to be passed on to the next generation. Traditionally, this process was referred to as extinction, but the push towards renaming hopes to both improve overall morale surrounding language revitalization efforts, and serve as a reminder that it is never too late to start.

Prior to European contact, there were around 300 different indigenous languages spoken in the modern day United States. Currently There are 167. By 2050, this number is estimated to drop to 20.

LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION

Language Revitalization refers to the active effort by a person or community to prevent a language from reaching dormancy. This takes many forms, such as linguistic fieldwork-- where interviews and recordings are conducted to document a language--to creating education programs, apps, or combating social stigma inside and outside a particular community. As many native speakers of endangered languages are elderly, the COVID-19 pandemic makes active revitalization work difficult, and more pressing.

It is vital to understand that due to a complex history of language and power, and the intimacy of language and culture to its speakers, language revitalization must be desired by its community.

SURVEY / DATA

We asked students to reflect on how much education on indigenous peoples they have received prior to entering college. The results demonstrate our lack of education and awareness of indigenous communities, with the majority of people saying they have received little education.

Data analysis results.

- The majority of answers demonstrated a lack of education over indigenous communities, lands, languages, and cultures.
- Many agreed that funding for resources and language revitalization should come from the State and Federal government.
- People seemed intrigued to learn more about indigenous communities and efforts towards equity.

COVID-19

- Indigenous populations’ health is compromised by epigenetic stressors of generational and systemic violence and oppression, making them more susceptible to serious complications from Covid-19 infections.

- Citing a recent CDC study, the American Lung Association reports that indigenous populations have a disproportionately high risk for severe Covid-19 complications due to high tobacco use, hypertension, heart disease, and diabetes.

- The U.S. government’s failure to honor treaties with sovereign indigenous tribes through underfunding, usurpation of authority, and neglect has left those indigenous populations bereft of critical resources, exacerbating the health effects of Covid-19 on an already systemically-compromised population.

CONCLUSION

The historical use of colonialism and dehumanization has influenced how Americans view indigenous communities. Consequently, resources are allocated differently to indigenous communities than white communities, especially during this pandemic. This has continued to cause loss of Indigenous life, culture, and language. Moreover, the need for language revitalization is needed now more than ever in addition to proper education of Indigenous history and culture for ill-advised education contributes to the loss and suffering of Indigenous communities and languages.

Q7 - On a scale of 1-5, how familiar are you with the ways in which COVID-19 has impacted indigenous communities in North America?

- At the height of the pandemic, non-residents have been passing into indigenous territories outside of essential travel to socialize and partake in recreational activities on indigenous-managed land. These activities have posed huge threats to the safety of indigenous communities with members who are at high risk for COVID-19 contraction.

- COVID-19 poses insurmountable threats of mortality to Indigenous communities and cultures. Elders are the cornerstone of intergenerational knowledge and its loss is being exacerbated by this pandemic. With an aging population of language speakers, indigenous languages already face extreme challenges, and COVID-19 is causing additional consequences to the safety of these indigenous language keepers.