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Ethnographic Moment: Navajo Nation Changing Racial Terminology in Response to Black Lives Matter Protests

Dani M. Austin

Given Navajo Nation debates about changing racial terminology in response to Black Lives Matter protests, I will argue that modification of Diné Bizaad¹ is a progressive and positive shift. Language is constantly changing across social groups and time. From generation to generation, words take on different meanings. Words are invented and acquired from a variety of sources. Furthermore, unused words can expire from everyday usage. How do shifts in language occur? In some cases they occur rapidly due to socio-political pressure. Recently since the wrongful death of George Floyd and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, changes to social structures is drastically underway. A tribe within the United States, Navajo Nation has announced its transition from outdated racial terminology in favor of inclusive, kinship terms. Critics of Diné Bizaad believe outdated Diné² words can promote racism. This change has sparked debate among tribal members. Traditionalist say the change is unnecessary and further erodes indigenous integrity at the hands of colonizers. Progressive members see the change as an advancement that promotes positive cross-cultural interaction. In a conversation with my brother Jae we represent opposing sides of the debate within our tribe. I believe the renaming of outdated terms is a step in the right direction and modification of racial descriptors is imperative. I argue for the progression of language and see change as a necessity in transitioning to a diverse world. However, my brother Jay believes it erodes Diné k'ehji³, he views the change as another form of modern-day colonialism. It was this conversation with my brother Jae that sparked my interest in exploring how language can shape perception and analyze the dynamic nature of Diné Bizaad.

The verbal exchange with my brother Jae took place shortly after the Black Lives Matters protests in Minneapolis, early 2020. Normally, I call him with questions regarding news about our tribe, Navajo Nation. We both speak Diné Bizaad, which was taught to us by our father's side of the family. He is the older brother and I go to him when I need further understanding on Diné topics. He speaks the language better than I and is more in touch with our traditional practices. I call to share with him the news about Navajo Nation making changes to traditional words in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter movement. At the time, I recently discovered our word for Black Americans "Naakaii Łizhinii," literally translated as Black Skin People would be permanently changed to "Na'ahilii" translated meaning "Na'a"—Those who have come across, "hil—persevered, and "ii" kinship term typically used to denote oneness within the tribe. His reaction was not what I expected. He said, "Navajo people have given these names to outsiders because it is their descriptors and traditional words should not be changed." I was perplexed because I thought he would be happy to hear Navajo Nation is supporting such an important movement. My reply, "What is traditional anyway? These words are not old because they've been created relatively recently. The very nature of Diné Bizaad is impermanence, we have to accept change." My brother's explanation at this point becomes accusatory by stating: "You are not seeing it from Diné k'ehji, your western mind clouds your judgment." He goes

¹ *Diné Bizaad* means Navajo Language

² *Diné* means Navajo people

³ *Diné k'ehji* means Navajo perspective or Navajo way of life

onto say, “white people have been racist, our people have not. We do not have this type of negative affiliation among races of people. Our culture is observatory of actions made toward us since contact. Traditional Diné do not see racial superiority based on skin color. Words in Navajo should not be changed just because a few people tell us that we should change them.” After he finished making his argument; I am left intrigued by the intersection of concepts this debate has provoked. That being said, I completely disagree with Jae and plan to analyze both sides of the argument which will further support my stance.

When explaining the debate around Diné Bizaad racial terminology, my argument is from an emic perspective. I will analyze the conversation through the lens of an anthropologist in addition to my enculturation and relationship with my brother Jae. I am an enrolled member of Navajo Nation and speak the language. The counter argument is represented by my older brother Jae, who is also a tribal member. He speaks Diné Bizaad with a higher degree of fluency because he lives in Arizona and works for Navajo Nation. Jae is only mildly aware of Black Lives Matter and doesn't not engage in activism. My familiarity with Navajo politics comes from growing up on the reservation, with grandparents who only speak Diné Bizaad, and a father who worked for Navajo Nation for 30 years. My experience with Black Lives Matter is witnessing the events that took place in early 2020 while living in Minneapolis. My devotion to racial injustice is rooted in the racist experiences my people were forced to endure. My social position stems from an intersubjective approach through my relationship with Jae, Navajo upbringing, and my political activism through the direct involvement with the Black Lives Matter movement. I am seeking to bridge the gap between traditional⁴ teachings and political social progress by dismantling ethnocentric ideologies. In analyzing Diné Bizaad racial terminology it's important to consider the factors involved: my emic perspective, cultural duality, and political proximity to the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. The various factors are equally important therefore it will only serve to strengthen my argument for the positive advancement of Diné Bizaad.

In the conversation with my brother Jae, we discussed Navajo Nation's proposal to change racial terminology in our language. The change came as a result of the Black Lives Matter movement. Navajo Nation has come to identify with the struggle of Black Americans as we suffer the oppressive nature of colonialism. The Black Lives Matter movement is a reminder to Diné to stand against racial injustice considering the same atrocities occur on indigenous homelands. “The deaths at the hands of law enforcement serve as a horrifying reminder of the ghosts of colonization's past, present, and future” (Thomas 2016, 82). Colonialism demonstrates how language can be used to shape ideas about race moreover how we perceive the worthiness of indigenous languages. English not only dominates public spaces and broadcasts but was forced on indigenous people throughout the United States. To this day, Diné Bizaad is the most widely spoken Native American language. Generally, what Navajo Nation implements as a sovereign nation has an influence on other tribes.

Navajo Nation made headlines by standing in solidarity with Black Lives Matter by renouncing usage of a dated term for Black Americans. “Naakaii Łizhini” which translates to black skin Mexican people will be dissuaded from use. This word is not inherently racist however it is inaccurate in a modern context. Navajo Nation announced the introduction of a new word for

⁴ Traditional in a Navajo perspective refers to a non-western worldview associated with practices and customs.

Black Americans, Na'ahilii: “those who have come across and persevered.” This word was offered by former Miss Navajo Nation, Radmilla Cody who identifies as half Diné and half Na'ahilii. She describes when growing up on Navajo Nation she was called “zhinii” which is a slang term, similar to “blacky” in English. She remarks (Jacobsen-Bia 2014, 392) the “term has brought a lot of hurt over the years, always singling her out and making her feel less Diné and, ultimately, less human.” The shortened form “zhinii” is a pejorative in Diné Bizaad, it is associated to color only. Traditional Diné people wouldn't think of using this word because its negative connotation and non-Diné origins. Historically, Diné did not identify people by color but action and merit. This word usage represents a western influence on Diné Bizaad. Historically, Diné we're not in direct contact with Black Americans so the word was borrowed from English which is in reference to the color of their skin. Today, as indigenous people we are more aware of racial diversity therefore it would make sense to evolve language. As Diné Bizaad progresses into the 21st century, our cultural naming practice must maintain the relevance of actions and merit when describing people.

Language is stable yet dynamic. Language continues to evolve over time as a result of social, political, and cross-cultural influences. Diné Bizaad has changed profoundly since colonialism. An effect of colonialism is the integration of new concepts that has a direct impact on perception of acceptable behavior. Along with this cross-cultural influence is the impact on language and the words we use to describe new ideologies. In this situation, I explain how language is constantly changing due to socio-political reasons but also western influence on Diné Bizaad. It's important to understand how we perceive and interpret language because to some degree it influences behavior. Sapir-Whorf hypothesized: linguistic relativity is the idea that people speaking different languages experience the world in accordance with specific grammatical categories. “Whorf argued that a linguistically grounded habit of thinking might play a causal role in nonlinguistic behavior” (Enfield 2015, 209). The Diné way of referring to others is always in reference to one's self and their relation to the speaker. In Diné Bizaad there is no gender pronouns. The lack of gender pronouns in language creates an open concept of gender variation; Diné recognizes 5 genders. The recognition of 5 genders is an example of how language can influence our perception of gender and how it is a concept that can't be predetermined. This type of linguistic relativity emphasizes kinship and the detailed description of others based on merit or actions. Whether Sapir-Whorf's hypothesize is correct or not, the guiding principle is how language leads speakers to see the world in certain ways but does not mean language is static.

From an anthropological perspective it's essential to recognize that although Diné Bizaad contains words in its language that from a western perspective be perceived as a pejorative; these words if anything are dated descriptors. To define context to which language is used will help to understand why it's necessary to progress linguistically with changing times. Language does not equally imply a constant worldview for the mere fact that language itself is ever changing. In a traditional Diné context, it is common for one's name to change throughout their lifetime and for each individual to be given a name by the community. This naming process is a detailed descriptor of merit-based action or by clan relations and can be subject to change. Diné embraces change, so why is the debate over the progression of language any different?

Diné Bizaad is not exempt from change nor is it a language that translates derogatory undertones. An effect of colonialism is the negative influences in how we refer to groups of people. Historically, the marginalization of indigenous people has caused a distrust of outsiders and is echoed in Diné Bizaad. Linguistic relativity is evident in how Diné denotes kinship not by individual members naming each other but how the community names the individual. Navajo society is shaped by this concept, the tribe values action and are willing to change when circumstances call for it. All languages are dynamic because language mirrors our social interactions and time does not allow for stagnation. Diné Bizaad embraces impermanence and should be reflective of the contemporary world. When a language such as Diné Bizaad relies on outdated descriptors it is up to the people to update the language in accordance with present circumstances. To speak Diné Bizaad in the modern world, coexistence through forming and maintaining relationships is a necessity. Language has the ability to divide us but also bring us together. Navajo Nation is doing its part by renaming outdated racial descriptors. Descriptors that have transformed just like the Diné relationship with Na'ahilii (Black Americans) whom Navajo Nation has come to respect. This change does mean the definition of Diné integrity is deteriorating, it means Diné are becoming inclusive by advancing the language to accommodate a diverse world. Navajo Nation debating racial terminology as a result of the Black Lives Matter movement is a reminder to remember the past but also make room for change. In exploring my conversation with my brother Jae I was able to conclude the modification of Diné Bizaad is a progressive and positive in the right direction.

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