Signed Languages of American Indian Communities: Considerations for Interpreting Work and Research

Jeffrey Davis and Melanie McKay-Cody

This chapter explores the roles of signed language interpreters working in American Indian and Alaskan Native (AI/AN) settings.[1] The findings reported here are based on the authors' ethnographic fieldwork and observations from over two decades of combined experiences—collaborating, interpreting, and participating in North American Indian communities. The central focus of our collaborative research (1990–present) has been the study of traditional and contemporary varieties of indigenous sign language used among North American Indian communities. From 1995 to 2000 we also served as consultants for the National Multicultural Interpreting Project (NMIP). This chapter features the combined results of our research studies and reexamines the major objectives and outcomes of the NMIP, in order to suggest strategies, best practices, and links to resources for signed language interpreters working in these contexts.

Sign language interpreters are called to work in a variety of AI/AN (Native) settings and there is great linguistic and cultural diversity among Native individuals and groups. Though approximately 200 American Indian languages are spoken in the United States and Canada today, the majority of these are endangered, with about one-third of these languages

1. American Indian and Alaskan Native is the convention recommended by the National Congress of American Indians (http://www.ncai.org/). Native is the more commonly used shorter term. Depending on the reference cited and context, the terms AI/AN and Native are used alternately. While labeling conventions are sometimes necessary in written language, it is extremely important to recognize that Native individuals and communities, both Deaf and hearing, are heterogeneous populations with diverse languages and cultures.

being nearly extinct (c.f., Mithun, 1999). Currently, there is an extreme urgency to maintain and revitalize Native languages.[2]

The rapid decline of Native languages in past years has been due to many historical, social, cultural, and educational factors, which are being called to attention in this chapter. One of the main outcomes of intensive language and cultural contact has been a shift towards English as the dominant or primary language of most Native individuals. These matters are tightly intertwined, and rendered more complex considering the variety of signed and spoken languages used among American cultural groups (e.g., Deaf, American Indian, and Deaf Native)

DEAF NATIVE VOICES

In the literature (Dively, 2001; Goff-Paris & Wood, 2002; McKay-Cody, 1997, 1998, 1999; Miller, 2004; NMIP, 2000) the shorter term *Deaf Native* is generally used instead longer official designations such as *Deaf American Indian/Alaska Native* or *Deaf First Nations of Canada*. The label *Deaf Native* reflects that cultural identities are predicated on a complex array of factors and choices—for example, degree of assimilation or membership and multiple cultural backgrounds. Deaf Natives often walk in *three worlds* and three distinct cultural experiences—Deaf American, American Indian, and Deaf Native. The notion of interpreting between multiple thought worlds and cultural identities is a unifying theme of the chapters in this section of the volume.

As mentioned above, a major consequence of intensive language and cultural contact has been a shift towards English as the dominant or primary language of most individuals from AI/AN backgrounds. Likewise, Deaf Natives of the United States and Canada generally attend schools for the deaf and are predominately learning American Sign Language

2. Language revitalization involves Native individuals and communities in language documentation (e.g., story-telling narratives and the oral histories of elders) and linguistic description (e.g., the lexicon and grammar); and uses modern technologies to develop sustainable resources for the language to be studied.

(ASL) instead of the traditional varieties of North American Indian Sign Language (NAISL).[3]

American Sign Language is the predominant sign language of most Deaf Natives in the United States and Canada. At the same time, sign language interpreters working in Native contexts may come into contact with NAISL varieties. Depending on language group, cultural affiliation, and geographic location, interpreters may also encounter one or more of the spoken American Indian languages. Interpreters cannot generally be expected to be proficient in the multiple signed and spoken indigenous languages they might potentially encounter in AI/AN contexts. However, later in this chapter, we will be considering certain interpretation/translation techniques and multicultural interpreting approaches designed to enhance comprehension and increase awareness about interpreting in Native settings.

This chapter is the first to bring together our linguistic research about North American Indian Sign Language (NAISL) and ethnographic fieldwork about the experiences of Deaf Natives in the United States and Canada. We have struggled to do justice to topics as vast and multifaceted as Native languages and cultures. Signed language interpreters are called to work in a broad range of settings involving Native individuals from diverse backgrounds. With this in mind, we have referenced other major works containing a cornucopia of information about Native histories, languages, and cultures as well as web-based resources for interpreters and others interested in studying these subjects. Again, it is important to recognize that Native individuals and communities, either Deaf or hearing, are heterogeneous populations representing diverse languages and cultural backgrounds. The purpose of the categorizations and macrodescriptions of multicultural groups and multiple languages presented here are to broadly frame the places, participants, and practices common between Deaf Native (AI/AN) contexts.

3. The varieties of indigenous signed language used among North America Indian groups are collectively referred to as North American Indian Sign Language (Davis, 2007; Wurtzburg & Campbell, 1995; McKay-Cody, 1997, 1998, 1999)

REVIEW OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The co-authors' (Davis and McKay-Cody) linguistic research and ethnographic fieldwork have focused on the indigenous signed language varieties of North American Indians.[4] Historically, the extreme linguistic and cultural diversity of North America led to frequent contact between Native groups speaking mutually unintelligible languages. It has been well documented in the research literature that a highly conventionalized and linguistically enriched signed language emerged as a means of communication between various American Indian language groups—a signed *lingua franca* of sorts (Campbell, 2000; Davis, 2005, 2006, 2007; McKay-Cody, 1997, 1998; Mithun, 1999; Taylor, 1978, 1997). The focus of our linguistic research has been cases of indigenous sign language being used and transmitted across generations among North American Indians.

Indigenous Sign Language Studies

Though the use of sign language is generally associated with individuals who are Deaf, several types of indigenous signing communities have also emerged globally. Both historically and contemporarily, conventionalized signed languages have developed among some hearing indigenous communities *as an alternative to spoken languages*, in addition to being the primary languages of Deaf communities.

Our previous studies compared the use of indigenous sign language between Deaf communities and predominately hearing communities. Two broad categories of signed language have been suggested, each containing several other types of sign language (ibid). Though further elaboration about each of these types is beyond the present focus, these broad categories help frame our references to signed language being used in Native settings. At the same time, these categories are not mutually exclusive—there is interaction between primary and

4. Different varieties of indigenous sign language have been identified among American Indian groups (e.g., Eskimo Inuit-Inupiaq, Keresan Pueblo, Navajo/Diné, among others). Plains Indian Sign Language (PISL) has been the most well documented and described variety of American Indian signed language (cf. Davis, 2007; Taylor, 1978, 1997; West, 1960). These varieties of American Indian signed language are broadly categorized as NAISL.

alternate types of signed language and historical language contact among these signing communities.

Primary signed languages have evolved within specific historical, social, and cultural contexts and have been transmitted and acquired natively from one generation to the next—such as ASL, Mexican Sign Language (LSM), or New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL). Signed language has also emerged within some communities that were predominately hearing, but with a high incidence of genetic deafness—such as the historical case of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts (Groce, 1985) or the present day occurrence of Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language (Sandler, Meir, Padden & Aronoff, 2005).

Alternate signed languages have been developed and used by individuals who are already competent in spoken language. Well documented with some indigenous communities around the world: South America (Umiker-Sebeok & Sebeok, 1978) and Central Australia (Kendon, 1988).

McKay-Cody (1997) went further than earlier studies and described what happened when the alternate signed language of North American Indian cultural groups was acquired as a primary sign language by members of the group who are deaf. The deaf members of these Native groups demonstrated a higher level of sign language proficiency when compared to hearing members of these groups. These findings suggested that the alternate sign language becomes linguistically enriched when learned as a primary language by members of these Native communities who are deaf.

In short, the sociolinguistic evidence suggests that alternate signs are used to varying degrees of proficiency, ranging from signs that accompany speech, to signing without speech, to signing that functions similarly to a primary sign language. In other words, these forms of signing are best considered along a communication continuum (Davis, 2007).

As mentioned earlier, due to sociocultural and historical factors, fewer AI/AN individuals are learning Native languages—signed or spoken. Few Deaf Natives have been learning traditional Native ways of signing for two main reasons. First, Deaf Natives are predominately using ASL and no longer learning NAISL. Second, signed language has been replaced by English as the lingua franca among North American Indian nations. The fact that NAISL has survived and continues to be used is remarkable, especially considering the pressures for linguistic and cultural assimilation historically imposed on indigenous peoples.

Although NAISL is considered endangered, and the extant number of varieties and users is unknown, it has not vanished. It is still used within

some Native groups in traditional storytelling, rituals, legends, prayers, conversational narratives, and still being learned by a few Deaf Natives. Thus, in some AI/AN contexts, interpreters may encounter varieties of indigenous signed language, as in formal ceremonies, making introductions, showing name signs for tribes, or signing traditional cultural narratives.

Revitalization of NAISL

Today, most indigenous languages around the world are endangered (Crystal, 2000). Language documentation and description for the purpose of revitalizing an endangered language are enormous undertakings. Native leaders and other community members have generally recognized and even embraced the need to record and preserve their languages, traditions, and cultural practices for this and future generations—as long as the documentary materials are treated with respect when made available outside of American Indian communities. As interpreters and researchers we must be aware and sensitive about story-telling traditions—e.g., some signed or spoken narratives are intended for sacred purposes, and some stories should be shared only in the winter season or at night. For the work of language revitalization to be successful it is essential to involve native users of the endangered language. Interpreters/translators, ethnographers, and linguistic researchers are potentially Native community allies in these efforts.

For nearly two decades, we have been developing a corpus of NAISL documentary materials in the form of written texts, lexical descriptions, illustrations, and films critical to language preservation, scholarship, and revitalization. This includes descriptions, illustrations, and films showing Indian lexical signs spanning more than two hundred years (1800–present). To allow readers to view examples of NAISL, we have established a research website featuring a language corpus of historical documentary materials from written, illustrated, and filmed sources (http://sunsite.utk.edu/plainssignlanguage/).[5]

5. We have also collected films of North American Indians signing from the 1950s up until the present time. Though these are central to our studies (reported below) the website presently features only the historical NAISL data. Our documentation and description of these signed language varieties is ongoing.

Looking to the Horizon

The authors have been encouraged by American Indian individuals, groups, and communities to continue our research of sign language in native communities. During our fieldwork we have frequently encountered Deaf Natives who are keenly interested in participating in their Native communities and learning as much as possible about their cultural heritage. We are strongly committed to working with Native communities where indigenous signed language continues to be learned today. While the study of indigenous signed language is a major focus of our collaborative research, this work has also been informed by our years of experience in the field of sign language interpretation and education.

In sum, interpreters working in Native communities are likely to encounter a variety of signed *and* spoken indigenous languages. We now shift our attention to the array of AI/AN multicultural domains, in which interpreters are called to work. The chief aim is to examine ways that interpreters can work more effectively in Native contexts through increasing awareness, developing alliances, and forming interpreting in teams with individuals from Native backgrounds. While the following principles and practices are particularly critical to interpreting in AI/AN multicultural and multilingual contexts, they are also broadly applicable and inform many areas of general interpretation/translation work.

THE NATIONAL MULTICULTURAL INTERPRETING PROJECT (NMIP)

Nearly one decade has passed since the results of the NMIP were published (2000), and we reexamine the major objectives and recommendations most relevant to interpreting in AI/AN communities. The NMIP (1996–2000) was funded by the U.S. Department of Education to assist interpreter preparation programs with curriculum reform to address the interpreting needs of individuals who are D/deaf and Deaf-blind from diverse cultures. The project implemented a national multicultural interpreter consortium, published the results of the project's collaborative research findings, provided assistance to federally supported regional interpreter training projects, developed and disseminated four curriculum packages (*American Indian/Alaskan Native*, *African American, Asian American*, and *Hispanic American*), and provided training that

focused on increasing awareness of cultural and linguistic diversity among practitioners, educators, students, and consumers of interpretation (see Mooney, 2006).

The following sections highlight some of the main tenets of the NMIP's (2000) *American Indian/Alaskan Native Curriculum Modules* (*AI/AN Curriculum* for short).[6]

AI/AN Interpreting Objectives

The NMIP involved extensive collaboration among numerous AI/AN community members, consultants, and interpreter practitioners (including the author's of this chapter). These collective efforts spanned the five-year period of the project (1996–2000) and resulted in the development of the *AI/AN Curriculum* comprised of several modules, position papers, and films. These modules contain an abundance of cultural information and numerous activities designed to enhance interpreter preparation and practice in AI/AN contexts.

One of the overarching themes of the *AI/AN Curriculum* is the importance of interpreters recognizing the diversity of American Indians/Alaskan Natives. The senior editor of the *AI/AN Curriculum* (2000), Howard Busby (Mississippi Choctaw/Eastern Cherokee), described that the chief defining objective was: "*Inclusion*—the experience of full participation in this project was the driving force, yet there was an urgent need to capture these words, thoughts, concepts, or descriptions that could convey a sense of the culture we were attempting to describe without falling into stereotype" (p. 1). Busby also writes that:

Our aim is not to get the student [of interpretation] to understand everything Indian, but simply to help them become aware that there are perhaps more differences among tribes than they had previously thought. As the student starts to become more comfortable with the various signs, concepts, and cultural positions of interpreting with and for American Indians and Alaskan Natives, it is hoped that further study and awareness of particular groups or tribes would ensue.

This reflects *an* overarching principle of multicultural interpreting work. That is, interpreters can cultivate greater awareness of racial,

6. The NMIP curriculum is available online through The National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers (NCIEC) http://www.asl.neu.edu/TIEM.online/curriculum_nmip.html.

ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity through the formation of intercultural alliances and participation in multicultural activities—e.g., community-based learning, interpreting teams, and mentorship. Simply stated, the chief objective is that interpreters become more aware of their own cultural heritages and increase their knowledge about other cultures.

Respect for Native Nomenclature

Recognizing that AI/AN communities are highly diverse linguistically and culturally; the first learning objective highlighted in the AI/AN curriculum (p. 2) is to "*identify and explore the diversity of labels and cultural communities encompassed by the term American Indian/Alaskan Native.*" Awareness of various naming practices, preferences, and meanings of some common cultural terms are especially critical to interpretation and translation. Fundamentally, there are multiple ways of describing self and others—such as, terms used within the cultural group and with outsiders, to describe animate and inanimate entities, traditional and contemporary usage, and so forth.

Evan Pritchard (descendent of the Micmac people of the Algonquin Nations) and author of *Native New Yorkers: The Legacy of the Algonquin People of New York*, has written: "By naming something, we take possession of it; by losing that name, we lose possession of it" (2002, p. 15). It is essential to keep in mind that naming is the province of the native groups themselves. At the same time, individuals from various native communities do have different naming practices and preferences. If this were not complicated enough, we find different terminology and labeling conventions, often specific to each group, professional/academic discipline, or government.

Some terms (e.g., *Aboriginal* or *Native American*) have been coined by Europeans or Euro-Americans and/or for governmental purposes (e.g., in the United States, Canada, or Australia). Although the term *Native American* has been widely used and considered "politically correct," it is also a non-specific term.[7] Generally, members of these cultural groups refer to themselves as *Indians* (Karttunen, 1994). However, the term *American Indian* is sometimes needed to distinguish individuals from the country of

7. The term Native American was coined by the Department of the Interior to classify together all of the Indigenous Peoples of the United States, and its trust territories—including native Hawaiians, American Samoans, Alaskan Natives, and the Indigenous People of Puerto Rico.

India, and *North American Indian* distinguishes the indigenous peoples of North America from those of Central and South America.

Ideally, specific tribal affiliation or cultural-linguistic groups are acknowledged whenever possible, for example, Assiniboine, Blackfoot, Eastern Cherokee, Inuit, Lakota, Northern Cheyenne. Whenever possible, we have used the newer self-designations of AI/AN groups; though these terms are used interchangeably depending on the historical contexts and individual sources being cited. Interpreters can expect to encounter a great deal of diversity in terms of naming preferences and practices and it is generally best to ask the individuals themselves of their naming preferences, and to respect the traditional practices of native groups. For example, Melanie McKay-Cody (co-author of this chapter) identifies herself as Cherokee-Choctaw; and she also has been adopted by the Okemsis Band of the Willow Cree First Nation.

Recognizing Indian Nations and Tribes

Waldman (2000, p. vii) writes that "many contemporary Native Americans prefer the term *nation* rather than *tribe*, because it implies the concept of political sovereignty, indicating that their people have goals and rights like other nations." According to the *AI/AN Curriculum* (2000, p. 2), "Nations are divided into tribes, bands, and clans. In Alaska, a nation may be composed of many villages and corporations." A clan is defined as "a family-based infrastructure, including extended family members, and adopted members, who share common ancestors." Thus, nations may be comprised of several tribes, which may encompass several clans.

Culturally specific terms and references to tribal affiliations are also commonly used in Native contexts. For example, Busby (2000) writes:

> *Mi takuye oyasin!* These Lakota words perhaps capture the essence and the spirit of the American Indians and Alaskan Natives. The closest English translation of these words would be; "all my relations." To the Lakota and most other tribes or nations in North America, the concept behind these words goes beyond human description, beyond human relations, and indeed beyond the ability of any language to do them justice. When these words are uttered by American Indians, there is no conscious effort at description or explanation. It is just simply a thought process that includes every animate and inanimate object on earth, in the sky, and below the ground. It involves a consciousness carried through seven generations and to be passed on to the next seven generations. It encompasses the four sacred directions, mother earth, grandfather sky,

and the ground upon which one stands. It is part of their belief system, yet is more than simple spiritual experience. (p. 1)

This passage exemplifies that in AI/AN contexts even the cardinal directions have multiple meanings based upon cultural and spiritual nuances.

The People

In the preface of the *AI/AN Curriculum* (2000), Howard Busby writes:

> All tribes view themselves as 'the people,' as can be seen in their names for themselves, but this does not mean that they see other tribes as different, alien or less than themselves. The names they have for themselves: Lakota, Cheyenne, Muskogee, Cherokee, Choctaw, Mohawk, and numerous others are really identities of pride to which the tribal member can point as his or her source of being. In other words, American Indians do not identify themselves in isolation from their tribe or nation. (p. 1)

Traditionally, some native groups have called themselves "The Principle People," or "Keepers of the Fire." For example, Melanie sometimes identifies herself as being from "The Thunderbolt People." Signs from NAISL are typically used to convey these affiliations depending on individual nomenclature.

Sovereign Rights

The terms *nation* and *culture* are generally preferred over *tribe*, which more accurately refers to a non-state group of genetically related people. The justification for sovereign American Indian groups to be considered nations has been maintained into the twenty-first century by leaders and members of these communities. Stuart (1987, p. 3) has described that "American Indian communities have a unique political relationship to the United States, enjoying what has come to be called a 'government to government' relationship." As sovereign entities (i.e., distinct culturally, politically, and nationally), the First Nations/American Indians of the United States and Canada could be considered *nations within nations*. The Canadian government uses the term *First Nations* to respect the rights of indigenous people to describe themselves.[8]

8. First Nation is not an official designation in the United States, and the term is also not without controversy. Collectively, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples constitute Canada's indigenous peoples; suggesting that these people are the sole original occupiers of the land that is now Canada. However, the Inuit are also ancient inhabitants, but not included in the term First Nations.

Demographic and Geographic Considerations

Knowledge about the histories, politics, traditions, and languages of the community are essential elements of interpreting work. In addition to stressing the importance of naming practices, the AI/AN curriculum (2000) aims to help interpreters better understand "the implications and impacts of demographics and geographic locations of American Indian and Alaskan Natives in general and what is known regarding the percentage of D/deaf, Hard of Hearing, and Deaf-Blind in those communities" (p. 1). This goal addresses the varying demand for interpreting services in AI/AN communities depending on geographic locations ranging from reservation to urban.

The 2000 Census reported that the U.S. population was 281.4 million (304 million and growing based on 2008 estimates).[9] The Census counted individuals who reported "American Indian and Alaska Native" as their principal or enrolled tribe—that is, people having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America), and who maintain tribal affiliation or community attachment.[10] In the 2000 Census, 4.1 million (1.5%) individuals identified themselves as AI/AN. This number included 2.5 million people who reported only American Indian and Alaska Native in addition to 1.6 million people who reported American Indian and Alaska Native as well as one or more other races.

Number of AI/AN Individuals Who Are Deaf

The exact number of AI/AN individuals who are deaf, deaf-blind, or hard of hearing is indeterminate, as the U.S. Census does not collect population data about individual disabilities. This makes it necessary to estimate the number of individuals with a hearing loss based on other criteria. Miller (2004, p. 4) draws from prevailing statistical estimates that 9% of the U.S. population have some degree of hearing loss, including 2% who are generally identified as deaf and hard of hearing. Based on several prevalence studies indicating that hearing loss among American Indians

9. Retrieved June 11, 2008 from http://www.census.gov/population/www/popclockus.html.

10. The U.S. Census requires only that ethnic or racial identity be self-proclaimed, and no documentary proof is required.

and Alaska Natives to be higher than that of the general population, Miller (ibid.) estimated that 4% of the AI/AN population are deaf or hard of hearing (i.e., individuals with a significant to profound hearing loss). Applying Miller's 4% estimate to the 2000 U.S .Census's roughly 4.5 million AI/AN residents gives us 180,000 AI/AN individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing in the United States. These figures are only estimates, and do not suggest that all of the American Indians/Alaska Natives who have a severe to profound hearing loss are culturally Deaf, or that they would be exposed to sign language or the services of a sign language interpreter.

Deaf Natives

Deaf Native is commonly used instead of the longer designations of "Deaf American Indian/Alaska Native" and "Deaf First Nations of Canada" (Dively, 2001; Goff-Paris & Wood, 2002; McKay-Cody, 1997, 1998, 1999; Miller, 2004). Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that the term *Native* is not exclusive to any one indigenous language or cultural group and is somewhat comparable to other generic reference terms for multicultural/multinational groups (e.g., African, Asian, Australian, European, etc.) or multiethnic groups (e.g., Anglo, Black, Hispanic, etc.). Cultural identities are predicated on a complex array of factors and choices like degree of assimilation and multiple cultural backgrounds. To help illustrate this, Christensen (2000, p. 267) uses this example: "a Deaf man, born and raised in the Navajo nation, might choose to identify himself as Deaf Navajo, Navajo Deaf, Deaf Native American Indian, American Indian Deaf, or one of another set of descriptors which he feels best communicate the way in which he chooses to identify himself." Again, finding a common reference term for populations as diverse as American Indians proves challenging.

Based on our years of fieldwork in these communities (1990–present), we have preliminarily identified approximately one thousand Deaf Native individuals. Thus far our studies have focused mainly on American Indian groups in the United States. These findings suggest that the Navajo and Cherokee are two American Indian groups with the largest number of deaf members, which is not surprising given that these are the largest nations today. At the same time, many Deaf Natives have been identified within most of the other AI/AN groups of the United States and Canada. Further research surveys and fieldwork are currently underway (McKay-Cody, Davis, and collaborators)

Tribes and Nations

The NMIP's theme of diversity among AI/AN groups is borne out by the large number of extant tribes. According to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) there are 561 federal recognized tribal governments in the United States. The 2001 Canada Census recognizes 123 First Nations communities (i.e., reserves); 53 Inuit Communities in Arctic regions; and 38 communities with high concentrations of Métis people, or a large number of Indigenous people. In the United States there are approximately 245 "federally non-recognized" tribes. However, many of these are in the process of making proposals to become federally recognized. Most of the federally non-recognized tribes are already recognized by the states in which they are located, but not yet at the federal level. For example, the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina is the largest non-federally recognized American Indian Tribe in the United States. California also has a large number of federally non-recognized tribes.[11]

To outsiders, these determinations may at first glance seem trivial. However, they are often high-stakes, potentially impacting land rights, entitlements, and tribal membership. Signed language interpretation is critical to Deaf Natives' inclusion and participation.

Full-blooded Indian (FBI) or Mixed-blood Indian (MBI)

AI/AN population descriptions are elusive because of the reliance on self-identification, blood quantum, varying terms and definitions. Miller (2004) writes that:

> This is due in part to the difference between the official federal definition of blood quantum and tribal definitions based on membership and birth. An additional factor is the perception of the individual regarding his or her heritage. For example, one may be self-identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native, yet not officially listed on tribal rolls or federal registers such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). Even public and tribal schools have differing identity criteria that may not be based in the same demographic descriptors. (p. 3)

To identify the degree of one's Indian ancestry or genetic background (e.g., blood quantum), members of AI/AN communities sometimes use

11. An extensive proposal process is required to be recognized at the federal level, which is also administered through the BIA.

the terms *Full-blooded Indian* (FBI) and *Mixed-blood Indian* (MBI). These acronyms are commonly used among Deaf Natives—especially among the members and participants of the Intertribal Deaf Council (IDC). Within most AI/AN groups there are often serious discussions regarding the imposition of blood quantum to determine membership, levels of participation, and benefits that may accrue from being recognized as an Indian.

For example, Phil Fontaine, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations (see footnote 1), and others have argued that a citizenship-based membership for each First Nation is needed, instead of memberships based predominately on bloodlines, race theories, and records of ancestry. In addition to blood quantum, membership could be based on other factors, such as loyalty to one's community and familial ties and knowledge about the histories, politics, traditions, and languages of one's community.

Urbanization

Further complicating cultural membership is the trend towards urbanization, the movement of American Indians and Alaskan Natives to cities and towns from reservations, ancestral Indian lands, Indian towns, or Indian country, and the cultural shift that accompanies this geographic shift. Today, the majority of Native Americans/Alaskan Natives (more than 60%) live outside the reservations (AI/AN 2000, p. 11). Also, the 2000 U.S. Census reported that 43.3% of the AI/AN population were living in 15 major U.S. cities. They attended public schools or in some cases attended Indian Schools located in or near some cities. Almost one half (49%) of the Canadian AI/AN population lived in urban areas.[12]

Reservations

The reservation is commonly called the "rez" and often fingerspelled R-E-Z in ASL (by Deaf Natives), even for land that has been divided into allotments and has lost reservation status (AI/AN 2000, p. 3). Individuals who grew up on the reservation (U.S.) or reserve (Canada) generally have very different cultural experiences and views from those who grew up in urban areas. Moving away from the reservation can lead to individuals

12. Information retrieved June 12, 2008 from http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census06/data/topics/.

being isolated from tribal affiliations and extended family. Today there are 304 reservations and trust lands in the United States and 123 reserves in Canada. In the United States, the largest reservation and trust land populations are Navajo, Pine Ridge (Oglala Sioux), Fort Apache, Gila River, Papago (Tohono O'odham), Rosebud (Rosebud Sioux a.k.a. Sicangu Oyate), Hopi, San Carlos (Apache), Zuni Pueblo, and Blackfeet.[13]

In the United States, Indian reservations are mainly spread across the southwestern and northwestern states, and mostly in remote locations from which one must drive many hours to reach a major urban center. For example, the Navajo reservation, the nation's largest, straddles four states (hence the "Four Corners") but lies several hours' drive from any city. Likewise, many Deaf Natives live in remote areas—in an "invisible country" of sorts. Melanie McKay-Cody (1999, p. 49) reports that many Deaf Americans have often asked: "Where are the Deaf Indians?" McKay-Cody has studied, written, and presented extensively about the "well-hidden people," (i.e., Deaf Natives) who often straddle multiple cultures—that is "a group within the Deaf and Native Communities."

EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF DEAF NATIVES

One of the major contemporary issues identified in the *AI/AN Curriculum* (2000) concerned "raising Indian children and maintaining the traditional cultural linkages with family and community" (p. 37). Many common experiences were reported among Deaf Native participants. In most cases, Deaf Natives attended residential schools for the deaf instead of living and attending school on the reservation. This often leads to very different cultural views and preferences compared with individuals who grew up on the reservation. Many Deaf Natives who attended state residential schools for the deaf acquired ASL and Deaf culture. They usually did not have the same access or opportunities as their hearing family members did to acquire Indian cultural ways and languages.

In the past, many Deaf Natives were stripped of their native culture. While attending residential schools for the deaf, they were often told not to follow Native cultural traits or ways of the tribe, clan, or family.

13. Information retrieved June 12, 2008 from http://www.nps.gov/history/nagpra/DOCUMENTS/ResMapIndex.htm.

Consequently, this has led to artificial and stereotypical labels and misconceptions of what American Indians should look like in the eyes of the dominant or majority culture. For example, Deaf Native individuals who have attended IDC conferences (1994 to present) "often have shared experiences of having a lack of cultural support during their school years; having a lack of Indian Deaf role models or staff; remembering the curriculum as Euro-centric [e.g., Columbus discovered America]; remembering prejudicial treatment such as being 'deloused' or having one's hair cut without parental permission" (AI/AN 2000, p. 37).

While the experiences of Deaf Natives have been highlighted in the *AI/AN Curriculum* and described in the literature (Dively, 2001; Goff-Paris & Wood, 2002; McKay-Cody, 1997, 1998. 1999; Miller, 2004) additional ethnographic studies about the unique enculturation experiences of AI/AN children who are deaf are needed. In short, geographical, historical, social, cultural, and educational threads are tightly interwoven in Native contexts. These form the fabric of the Deaf Native experience.

Between Worlds

Deaf Native identity is predicated on a complex array of social, cultural, and educational factors and choices, which impacts individual cultural affiliation and degree of assimilation. The *AI/AN Curriculum* (p. 37) reported a variety of individual Deaf Native experiences—ranging from limited or no cultural assimilation to greater acculturation; for example, "individuals who due to the early influences of Indian Sign Language had direct access to the cultural knowledge and teachings of their nations." Though some educational and enculturation experiences "resulted in a disconnection or dissonance from community life and language; and a lack of recognition of cultural values and languages that the individual possessed," the AI/AN curriculum also reminds us that "each individual experience is unique based on all of the factors of deafness such as age of onset, degree of loss and in addition the cultural acculturation and assimilation influences experienced by other Indian peoples. "Deaf Natives often walk in three worlds and three distinct cultural experiences." Likewise, the notion of interpreting between multiple *thought worlds* and cultures is a unifying theme across the chapters of this volume.

In the course of our fieldwork, we have met hundreds of Deaf Native adults who managed to learn about their tribal culture in adulthood in the face of the complexities and challenges described above. Often times

their experience would be shared and acquired through inter-tribal learning, rather than learned directly from their own tribes or clans. Moreover, during gatherings where sign language interpreters are available or provided, some Deaf Natives are exposed to and learn about tribal and cultural traditions. While sign language interpretation serves a major function in these and other contexts, this does not suggest it replaces the vital role of direct linguistic and cultural transmission.[14] Furthermore, we have observed that Deaf Natives who are exposed to and have access to tribe's cultural teaching and learning often serve as mentors to the Deaf Natives who have little or no experience in their tribal traditions.

In summary, the *AI/AN Curriculum Modules* (NMIP 2000) identified a range of assimilation and enculturation factors common among the reported experiences of Deaf Natives—such as "reservation versus urban up-bringing, distance or closeness to extended family;" "educational experiences including state school and mainstream experiences;" and "religious affiliations - traditional spirituality versus other religious influences" (p. 24). Deaf members of other minority or ethnic groups—such as Hispanic, Asian, or African American—reported similar enculturation challenges. And according to the NMIP (2000), Deaf individuals from minority or ethnic backgrounds can easily encounter "double discrimination." As members of hearing cultural groups, deaf people generally do not have the same access to spoken language, which is a major vehicle for cultural transmission. Thus, deaf people often share different experiences (e.g., educational placements and Deaf culture) than the hearing members of the same ethnic group. See Christensen (2000), McKee and Awheto (this volume), Ramsey and Peña (this volume) for additional descriptions about the enculturation experiences of deaf individuals from minority and ethnic backgrounds.

SPOKEN LANGUAGE INTERPRETATION IN AI/AN COMMUNITIES

The NMIP (2000) made historical reference to native peoples' distrust of interpreters, who were sometimes seen as being aligned with dominant European-American cultural forces. In reviewing the literature, we

14. This is also borne out in other studies of sign language interpretation in educational settings (Marschark, Peterson, & Winston, 2005).

find a dearth of research about signed or spoken language interpretation in AI/AN communities. In the United States, the only American Indian language that has a formal interpretation certification process is Navajo. Navajo interpreters are used mainly in Arizona and New Mexico in legal and medical settings, generally involving Navajo speakers with limited English proficiency.[15]

Recent studies conducted by a cohort of medical doctors and practitioners (McCabe, Morgan, Curley, Begay, & Gohdes, 2005) described some of the problems that Navajo interpreters encounter in medical settings, especially translating medical terminology and disease pathologies to Navajo patients. The researchers collaborated with Navajo interpreters and conducted comparative assessments of the initial translations, with back translations and final translations of medical terms, forms, and interviews. Although translation and interpretation operate under different time constraints (consecutive vs. simultaneous), these findings are significant nonetheless. The researchers found that back translation of key medical concepts was the best way to determine accuracy and consistency of the translations among Navajo interpreters, and that bringing the interpreters together to discuss translation choices greatly enhanced their ability to interpret key concepts accurately.

McCabe et al. (2005) identified issues that are similar to those encountered by interpreters of other minority languages. For example, they found that the translations of body organs or diseases ranged from literal word for word renditions to translations deemed more culturally and linguistically enriched. The case studies of Navajo interpreters working in medical contexts also demonstrated that fluency in Navajo alone is not adequate to ensure accurate and acceptable interpretation or translation. McCabe et al. (p. 304) concluded "that attention not only to language translation but also to cultural and geographic factors is vital to obtain an accurate and meaningful translation and will be widely applicable in many situations." Additional comparative case studies such as these would further illuminate the complexities of multicultural interpreting.

15. The Navajo Interpreter Project/Certification Examination is administered through the National Center for Interpretation Testing, Research and Policy at The University of Arizona (http://nci.arizona.edu/) and is designed to identify competent Navajo/English interpreters to work mainly in New Mexico and Arizona State Courts.

Sociolinguistic Studies of Navajo Interpretation

The only major sociolinguistic study that we are aware of about interpreters in AI/AN contexts is Alice Neundorf's (1987) unpublished doctoral dissertation, *Bilingualism: A Bridge to Power for Interpreters and Leaders in the Navajo Tribal Council*. In her ethnographic study, Neundorf (a Navajo native) focused on interpretation in the domains of the Navajo Council. She reported that most participants in the Council gatherings could comprehend English (Navajo monolinguals being rare). Nevertheless, for a variety of social, political, and cultural reasons the Council meetings were conducted mainly in Navajo, so interpreting occurred predominately from Navajo into English, and much less so from English into Navajo.

Neundorf's findings emphasized the importance of interpreting being "carried out at the level of ideas and concepts, rather than at the level of word-for-word or 'literal' interpreting" (p. vi). Her ethnography showed that "the Navajo Tribal Council is created in an ongoing way by bilingual Navajo leaders, and constitutes a Navajo and Anglo-American cultural hybrid with its own language, values, behavior patterns, and ethics" (p. vii). Historically, the Navajo nation has been multilingual, widely using Navajo, Spanish, English, and other Indian languages. Throughout the documented history of the Navajo, "interpreters performed functions essential to the leaders with whom they worked, and . . . they often assumed leadership roles themselves" (p. 182).

Neundorf (1987) concluded that among the Navajo, interpreters have shared several commonalities:

> First, they were all at least bilingual; second, they were more thoroughly bicultural than their contemporaries; third, they were men; fourth, they were highly intelligent; fifth, they were mobile, because they had to travel where they were most needed; sixth, they were drawn close to power by the nature of the work; seventh, with few exceptions, they became powerful themselves, and took on leadership roles; and last, some of the interpreters became wealthy by the standards of the periods in which they lived. (p. 183)

Neundorf posits that in today's Navajo society, "the power belongs to those who are fully coordinate [balanced] bilingually and biculturally." She also writes that: "Speaking in Navajo is based on not only how well one speaks but one's powers of persuasion. Naat'aanii means one who is a leader by virtue of being an orator, not by forcing people to follow [and] this is probably the biggest difference in leadership qualities between the Navajo and Anglo cultures" (p. 183)

Overarching Themes

The central finding of the studies reported above is that quality interpretation and translation requires considerations of cultural contexts in addition to linguistic fluency. We can also recognize several recurring themes, which are common to other multicultural interpreting context, for example, cultural alignment, assimilation, and nativization.

The multicultural and multilingual issues identified thus far—ranging from educational placements to enculturation patterns—remained beyond the scope of the NMIP. Nevertheless, the project raised awareness in the field and issued an urgent call to the interpreting profession (e.g., Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf and Conference of Interpreter Trainers) to provide American Indian and Alaska Native (as well as African American, Asian American, and Hispanic American), hearing and Deaf individuals opportunities to become professional interpreters.

The NMIP called attention to the issue that the majority of sign language interpreters are not from ethnically diverse backgrounds, and few interpreters from AI/AN cultural backgrounds were identified. Thus, the centrality of involving members of AI/AN communities in the process of recruiting, training, and mentoring prospective interpreters from native backgrounds.[16]

A major hallmark of the NMIP was to encourage authentic team building among interpreter practitioners, educators, and various stakeholders with a range of multicultural backgrounds. Mindful of the diversity of AI/AN individuals and communities, its overarching principle was that interpreters develop stronger AI/AN backgrounds through ongoing exposure, specialized training, mentorship, and participation in multicultural interpreting teams—involving hearing and Deaf AI/AN community members as well as hearing and Deaf interpreters from AI/AN and non-AI/AN backgrounds.[17]

16. Based on RID/NMIP data collected in 2000 (reported in Mooney, 2006); 52 members selected AI/AN as their ethnic background (0.7 percent of the total RID membership of 7,063).

17. See Roth, Mooney, Nishimura, Aramburo, Davis, Dunbar, Hopkins, Bruce, & Zavala, (2000) for additional best practices along these lines and more extensive descriptions about developing interpreting teams to work in multicultural contexts.

Developing Interpreting Teams With Deaf Natives

Hearing and Deaf team interpretation and translation are central to the co-authors' work.[18] Based on our interpreting and ethnographic field experiences, we see the need to explore and expand the professional roles of Deaf Natives as interpreters, translators, cultural mediators, and indigenous signed language specialists (e.g., as members of language revitalization teams). The centrality of Deaf Natives as collaborators and members of interpreting teams is highlighted here. Based on our participation as members of interpreting teams in AI/AN contexts, we have observed the interpretation work and cultural mediation of Deaf Native in several ways ranging from interpreting for Native deaf-blind participants to relay interpreting between ASL and Indian Sign Language varieties.

For example, Intertribal Deaf Council (IDC) gatherings are generally held on AI/AN ancestral lands or reservations and hearing family members of Deaf Natives are among the participants. There are usually several Native Deaf-blind participants, and Native Deaf interpreters have served a major role providing tactile, close-vision, tracking, and visual support interpreting. The central role of Deaf Natives also extends to other types of interpreting and translation work (e.g., linguistic descriptions and revitalization work). In short, AI/AN activities span different environments and encompass a broad spectrum of Native educational, cultural, and spiritual events.

Code-switching typically occurs between varieties of ASL, NAISL, English, and one or more AI/AN spoken language—that is, these types of gatherings generally involve at least three languages, and oftentimes four. Collaborations that involve Deaf Natives and qualified Deaf interpreters who have knowledge of NAISL varieties and backgrounds in AI/AN settings potentially contributes to more culturally and linguistically accurate interpretations and translations. Thus, establishing qualified interpreting teams comprised of hearing and Deaf members with strong linguistic and

18. Historically and contemporarily, Deaf individuals have commonly served as interpreters in their own communities. Internationally, there is a trend for Deaf interpreters (previously known as intermediary or relay interpreters) to be involved in more interpreting work. See Boudreault (2007) for an extensive review of Deaf interpreter roles, models, approaches, and ethical considerations; and Fayd'herb & Teuma (this volume) for descriptions of the critical role of Deaf interpreters in other contexts.

cultural backgrounds, and prior experience and/or training to work in AI/AN contexts is essential.

INTERPRETERS IN AI/AN CONTEXTS

AI/AN cultural background and knowledge varies among signed language interpreters, and these distinctions inform best practices for interpreter placement, preparation, team development, and mentorship. Table 1 illustrates the range of AI/AN cultural knowledge among hearing and Deaf sign language interpreters from diverse backgrounds.

Description of Categories

Table 1 includes categories of interpreters along a continuum ranging from minimal to strong AI/AN cultural background and knowledge. These categories are not definitive; rather, they are intended to highlight the importance of AI/AN cultural background and knowledge in interpreter preparation, placement, and the formation of interpreting teams in AI/AN settings, and to serve as a jumping-off point for forming inclusive, heterogeneous, authentic interpreting teams.

Interpreters of AI/AN Descent

Category 1: Interpreters of AI/AN descent with a strong cultural background, knowledge, and involvement with Native communities. They are experienced and skilled at interpreting culturally and linguistically appropriate information.

Category 2: Interpreters of AI/AN descent, but with minimal or partial knowledge about their own or other Native cultures, languages, or traditions. They have not been acculturated in their own Native culture or language, nor have they received adequate exposure or preparation to interpret in Native settings.

Category 3: Native Interpreters who are Deaf and have been acculturated into both AI/AN culture and American Deaf culture (i.e., dual-exposure to Native and Deaf cultures). These interpreters have AI/AN knowledge comparable to the Native interpreters in category one; however, dual-exposure to Native and Deaf cultures gives them a unique position among the other categories of interpreters described here. In other

TABLE 1. *AI/AN Background and Knowledge Among Sign Language Interpreters*

Ethnicity	Native				Non-Native			
Auditory Status	hearing		Deaf		hearing		Deaf	
AI/AN Knowledge	strong	minimal	strong	minimal	strong	minimal	strong	minimal
Category	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

words, Deaf Native interpreters in this category are important members of teams comprised of interpreters from the other groups described here.

Category 4: Deaf Native interpreters with minimal AI/AN cultural knowledge. That is they have not been acculturated to their own Native cultural group, nor have they received special training to work in AI/AN contexts (comparable to interpreters in category two)

Interpreters of Non-AI/AN Descent

Category 5: Interpreters representing a variety of ethnic backgrounds other than American Indian (e.g., African American, Asian American, and European American). However, they have been involved in AI/AN communities: participation in AI/AN cultural gatherings, NMIP specialized training, or similar cultural enrichment programs. In other words, these interpreters have been involved with Native cultural groups and received specialized training to work with individuals from culturally and linguistic diverse backgrounds.

Category 6: Hearing interpreters with minimal AI/AN cultural knowledge and no specialized training to work in AI/AN contexts.

Category 7: Deaf interpreters with strong AI/AN knowledge, exposure, and training comparable to category five.

Category 8: Deaf interpreters with minimal AI/AN knowledge or specialized training, comparable to category 6.

Summary

Both hearing and Deaf interpreters may be called upon to work in AI/AN contexts. Some interpreters of AI/AN ancestry may or may not be acculturated in both American Indian culture and American Deaf culture, and some non-AI/AN interpreters may develop strong backgrounds in AI/AN languages and cultures. Essentially, interpreters working in these and other multicultural settings need to develop a high level of familiarity and comfort with racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity to provide high-quality interpretation. Such qualities may be acquired natively and/or enhanced through practices and principles of multicultural interpreting: specialized training, team building, and mentoring.

INTERPRETING FACTORS SPECIFIC TO AI/AN CONTEXTS

Another major tenet of multicultural interpreting work is that quality interpretation and translation requires careful consideration of cultural context in addition to linguistic fluency. With this in mind, the following suggestions for interpreting in specific AI/AN settings are intended to raise awareness and lay the groundwork for better interpreter preparation and placement.

Use of Space

The interpreter should be well aware of special linguistic and cultural considerations, as well as the logistics specific to American Indian settings—that is, not making uninformed assumptions or simply following interpreter practices as usual. This is particularly true of ceremonial gatherings. In these contexts, it is best practice to first seek the advice of Indian leaders or elders about where the interpreter could be positioned. However, one cannot assume that all Deaf Natives have this information. The Indian leaders or elders (hearing or Deaf) are the best sources to give the interpreter permission and guidance about where to stand or sit.

During some events, it may be appropriate to sit or stand near the stage or platform (such as when using a microphone for voice interpreting), but not within the sacred space or circle (that is generally forbidden for outsiders to enter). During a pow-wow (gathering), for example, rather than standing in the middle of the circle, it is generally advisable that the interpreter stands or sits near the Deaf individual(s) outside the sacred circle or place where they are allowed to interpret.

Gender-Related Issues

Traditionally, in AI/AN communities, women and men have or hold certain stories, which typically do not cross gender lines. In respect to Indian cultural traditions, there are times when women or men may or may not be allowed to interpret the stories of the opposite gender. Likewise, some ceremonies or practices may be gender segregated. For example, at one Intertribal Deaf Council gathering, we observed a female who was very eager to interpret at a sweat lodge; however, the male Indian leader insisted that the female interpreter not enter the sweat lodge. Without

the proper cultural background and preparation, such incidents could be taken badly. Furthermore, during "Moon Time" (when women are menstruating) they are prohibited to go into the circle, sweat lodges, and other sacred spaces.

Clothing

There are times when the interpreter should not wear black, but there are times that it is permissible. At a pow-wow, blue jeans are generally recommended. Formal attire is best suited for conferences—such as the National Indian Education Conference or National Congress of American Indians. Casual attire is appropriate for most gatherings; however, in some instances there may be other considerations. In general, it is always best to consult with AI/AN community leaders, organizers, or Deaf Natives before each assignment.

Use of Native Cultural Terms

Many Native gatherings involve singing, chanting, storytelling, culturally laden terms, and metaphorical language (e.g., *Medicine, The Circle, Four Directions, etc.*) As well described in the *AI/AN Curriculum* (2000, p. 27), "medicine is an array of spiritual practices, ideas, and concepts rather than only remedies and treatments as in *western medicine*" (emphasis in the original). Furthermore, "medicine men and women are viewed as the spiritual healers and leaders of the community. They have the role not only as a *doctor*, but they can be the diviner, rain-maker, prophet, priest, or chief" (p. 27, emphasis in the original). *Medicine* in Native terms is anything that brings one closer to the Great Spirit, to the Divine. In this tradition, all space is sacred space. Every place on the planet holds a specific energy connection to some living creature and is to be honored for that reason.

In short, based on traditional Native values and beliefs, interpreting for Indian elders would be equivalent to interpreting for someone with a Ph.D., and the interpreter must be aware of the status and roles of Native participants. Likewise, interpreting for an Indian healer, spiritual leader, or medicine woman/man is equivalent to interpreting for a medical doctor, minister, or priest. Great awareness, respectfulness, and community engagement are needed to be well prepared to interpret in these settings.

Discussion

The strong AI/AN background knowledge and specialized skills described above sometimes make it difficult to find the best suited interpreter. This in turn has consequences for Deaf Natives' level of participation in AI/AN cultural activities. If an interpreter does not have the training, knowledge, and exposure to Native cultures, or if they are not comfortable accommodating certain cultural practices, then it is recommended that they not accept such assignments. It is also suggested that interpreters and interpreter coordinators become more aware of the multicultural factors and protocols for each assignment. As is true for most interpreting work, being flexible and open-minded to the dynamics and diversity of settings is essential. Again, the AI/AN curriculum modules contain excellent recommendations for interpreters to become more knowledgeable and better prepared to interpret in Native contexts.

Though well established in the AI/AN curriculum, there continues to be a need to develop special training opportunities and to encourage the formation of alliances between interpreter practitioners and members of AI/AN communities, thus enhancing the skills of interpreters and broadening the participation of Deaf Natives these settings.

INDIGENOUS SIGN LANGUAGE STUDIES

Thus far, the focus of this chapter has been multicultural considerations for sign language interpreters working in AI/AN settings. However, as stated in the introduction, some AI/AN contexts involve participants who know more than one spoken and/or signed language. Similar to other bilingual or multilingual communities, more than one language is used depending on numerous factors—such as the background of participants, types of settings, topics being covered, discourse purposes and functions. While describing more fully the outcomes of multilingualism or the linguistic features of the multiple languages involved is beyond the scope of this chapter, here are some highlights of our research findings about Plains Indian Sign Language (PISL).[19]

19. As described earlier, PISL functioned as a signed lingua franca among American Indian nations of the Great Plains cultural area and between native groups in contact with the Plains Indians. While its role as a lingua franca has

Today, PISL is still being learned and used to varying degrees by some American Indians in the United States and Canada among the following cultural and linguistic groups: Algonquian (Blackfoot, Piegan, Chippewa, Northern Cheyenne, Plains Cree); Sahaptian (Nez Perce); Salishan (Spokane, Kalispel); Siouan (Assiniboine, Crow, Hidasta, Gros Ventre, Sioux, Lak(h)ota, Dakota, Nakota); and Uto-Aztecan (Bannock, Shoshoni, Ute).

Distinct varieties of indigenous sign language have also been identified among other AI/AN cultural groups, such as the Eskimo Inuit-Inupiaq, Keresan Pueblo, and Navajo. We are still investigating and documenting these and other cases. As stated earlier, North American Indian signed language varieties are broadly categorized as NAISL (see footnote 4).

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

Previously (Davis, 2007), we compared the descriptions and illustrations of American Indian signs gathered during several historical time periods (the early 1800s, late 1800s, 1930s, and 2002). Taking into account language change and variation, we have found that 80-90% of the signs from the early 1800 descriptions were identical or similar (i.e., differing in only a single parameter—handshape, movement, location, orientation) to the signs used by subsequent generations of American Indian signers. While our research is ongoing, these preliminary findings suggest that PISL varieties have existed for many generations.

Davis (2007) also conducted research to determine if there was historical language contact between early ASL and PISL. In these studies (ibid.) a range of 50% lexical similarity was identified between historical varieties of ASL and PISL. These findings suggest that ASL and PISL are separate languages—that is, they are unlikely to be genetically related, or to have a common language ancestor. Nonetheless, this is a relatively high range of lexical similarity and indicates possible lexical borrowing between the languages. In short, we have identified a significant number of cognates between PISL and ASL. Based on these findings (ibid.), lexical borrowing likely occurred as a consequence of language contact between

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diminished from previous times, it is still used today within some native groups in traditional storytelling, rituals, legends, prayers, conversational narratives, and by Deaf Natives (Davis 2007, 2009; McKay-Cody 1997, 1998, 1999).

American Indians and individuals who were deaf. Our studies of other sociolinguistic and historical linguistic evidence related to American Indian sign language varieties are ongoing.

Questions of Historical Sign Language Contact

What types of sign language contact occurred between American Indian groups and early Deaf communities? Were Indian signs ever used to teach deaf students attending schools for the deaf? When did Indian children who were deaf begin attending deaf schools? Although these long standing questions warrant further research, our preliminary findings are summarized here:

- There has been historical contact between American Indians and Deaf Americans from 17th-century colonization until today.

American Indians inhabited the areas being colonized by the first European immigrants—including Martha's Vineyard. Contact between Deaf Americans and Indians, as early as the 17th century, likely occurred. Historical records indicate that frequent contact took place between American Indians who signed and students and faculty at schools for the deaf (Mallery, 1881)

- The establishment of the first American Schools for the Deaf and dissemination of the published descriptions of American Indian signs to educators at these schools (1850–1890)

The historical evidence suggests that sign language contact could have occurred in several ways, for example, the historical proximity of the first American deaf schools having been established in the early 1800s and American Indians having commonly used sign language. Furthermore, between 1847 and 1890, early publications prominently featured lexical descriptions of Indian Sign Language, and these publications were widely distributed to educators and deaf schools through the periodical *American Annals for the Deaf and Dumb* (Gallaudet 1848, 1852). Thus, it is plausible that during this historical period American Indian signs were introduced to deaf students.[20]

20. Thomas H. Gallaudet, cofounder of the first school for deaf students in the United States in 1817, used the Dunbar (1801) and Long (1823)

- Deaf children from American Indian backgrounds attended educational programs and schools for the deaf.

Additional contact between the American Indians and deaf people was also likely to have occurred. For example, the New Mexico School for the Deaf and the School for Indians were constructed next to each other in Santa Fe in the late 19th century. Indian children who were deaf also began attending some state residential schools for the deaf around the United States during the historical period that sign language was commonly used among Indian groups. Furthermore, it has been documented and reported that some deaf children from Indian families *first acquired the alternate signed language as a primary language* before attending schools for the deaf and learning ASL as a second language (see Davis & Supalla, 1995; McKay-Cody 1997, 1998).

TRADITIONAL INDIAN SIGN LANGUAGE

Although greatly diminished from its widespread use in previous times, we have found that NAISL varieties are still being used today within some American Indian groups in storytelling, rituals, legends, and prayers. As discussed above, sign language has been used among Native groups as an alternative to spoken language, and some deaf members of Native communities learned NAISL as a first language. Previously, our research (Davis, 2005, 2006; McKay-Cody 1997, 1998) identified the following ways that North American Indian Sign Language was used traditionally.

Intertribal Communication

There were many different spoken languages and sign language was used to make communication possible between different Indian nations. It was often considered the language reserved for diplomatic relations, especially among chiefs, elders, and medicine women/men.

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descriptions which were titled the "Indian Language of Signs," to strengthen the case that "the natural language of signs" was essential to teaching and communicating with deaf (see Davis, 2007).

Storytelling

Traditionally, storytelling was practiced from the first to last frost/snow of the year, but not all year round. During other times of the year other activities were more common—planting in the spring, hunting in the summer, harvesting in the fall. In other words, activities were seasonal, and during the winter months stories helped pass the time. Stories remained the same over time, similar to frozen texts. The tradition of storytelling from first to last snow is still practiced by some tribal groups today. This is comparable to the tradition of Christmas stories that are very specific to the December holidays in some Western cultures. Similarly there are cultural norms and rules related to traditional Indian stories.

Rituals

During certain rituals speech was not permitted and silence observed. However, signing was permitted in some rituals. In Native spiritual practices, there are certain signs that are considered restricted, or the domain of spiritual communication—that is, not to be used in everyday conversation.

Distance Communication

Sign language was also a useful way to communicate across distances (such as between mountain ranges and across the distant plains). This was a much more effective way to communicate than shouting back and forth.

During Raids, War, and Hunting Parties

Sign language served a role in making and sharing battle plans secretly. Animals—such as deer—have a keen sense of hearing and signing was a way for hunters to communicate and alert each other in silence and not scare away the animals.

Deaf Family Members

When there were deaf members of tribal groups, sign language was a way to communicate with them and over time the sign language was expanded and handed down from one generation to the next—thus, it

was linguistically enriched. In sum, Indian sign language served both intertribal and intratribal communication purposes. In the former case, individuals spoke different languages, but shared a common sign language; in the latter case, sign language was used within Native communities for seasonal stories, sacred rituals, or when certain members of the tribe were deaf.

NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN SIGN LANGUAGE TODAY

Compared to the traditional ways of signing described above, we find the following uses of sign language today.

Storytelling

Storytelling still plays a central role in the culture and cultural rules and norms are still followed. Today, a combination of ASL and Indian storytelling traditions has emerged; however modern times due to the influences of Hollywood movies and television, traditional storytelling is not as common as in previous times.

Christian Religious Texts

American Indians were often placed in special Indian schools and trained not to follow their Indian cultural ways—including Indian signed language. Although sign language as a natural form of discourse or for traditional storytelling was generally discouraged at Indian Schools, the "Lord's Prayer" and other religious songs or frozen texts were sometimes signed. Paradoxically, this was one way that signing continued to be transmitted to the next generations.

Native American Church (NAC)

Nowadays, NAISL is used in Native churches, although the emphasis is first on using and learning the Indian spoken language. Sometimes signed language is used as an alternate to spoken language, or to translate spoken language passages—that is, if members of the congregation know sign language.

Hollywood Depictions

Hollywood movies sometimes depict Indians signing in various ways (e.g. *Dances With Wolves* or *Bury My Heat at Wounded Knee*). Although a vast improvement from earlier films (produced in the Cowboy and Indian genre and John Wayne era), modern films still offer a limited portrayal of the ways American Indians actually signed. In most instances, only a few NAISL signs are featured. Typically these signs are not shown in complete sentences, or without a full body view of the signer.

Deaf Family Members

Similar to the historical cases described above, Deaf Natives have played an active role in maintaining and expanding the use of indigenous signed language up until today. Thus, we still find contact signing between varieties of NAISL and ASL, including lexical borrowing, code-mixing, and code-switching. While including additional linguistic descriptions about distinct Native signed language varieties was beyond the scope of the present chapter, further research findings along these lines can be found in our previous published work (Davis, 2005, 2006; McKay-Cody 1997, 1998)

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter brought together our collaborative research and fieldwork about the traditional varieties of sign language used among North American Indians. We aimed to bridge some of the gaps in the literature about this subject. Our collaborative fieldwork and research is ongoing. It is informed by interpreting practices and multicultural work in general, and we hope this inspires further scholarship across multiple disciplines—especially Sign Language Linguistics, Interpretation/Translation Preparation, and Deaf Studies.

This chapter concentrated mainly on multicultural interpreting in AI/AN settings. This embraced Deaf Native perspectives and encompassed NAISL studies. Though our geographic focus has been Native North America, common themes have emerged globally among indigenous groups—such as the need to sustain cultural traditions and indigenous languages. In North America, for example, one outcome of intensive

language and cultural contact has been a shift towards English as the dominant or primary language of most American Indians.

An alarming number of the languages of the world's indigenous cultural groups are currently endangered (Crystal, 2000; Nettle & Romaine, 2000). This all too common pattern of language endangerment also impacts indigenous signed languages (Davis, in press). Recognition of the rapid decline and loss of many indigenous languages globally has led to urgent calls for revitalization of endangered languages.[21] These matters are tightly intertwined, and rendered more complex taking into account the signed and spoken languages among American cultural groups (e.g., Deaf, American Indian, and Native Deaf).

Language revitalization is an ongoing and rigorous process based on discovering common ground among various stakeholders. Native community members, interpreters/translators, and linguists are among the key participants and allies in the arena of maintaining and revitalizing endangered indigenous languages and cultures.

The practices highlighted throughout this chapter are particularly critical to interpreting in multicultural and multilingual AI/AN settings. At the same time, they inform a wide range of interpreting work, which is inherently intercultural, that is, involving at least two languages and two cultures. Nearly one decade has passed since the conclusion of the NMIP, but its contributions remain highly germane to the work of interpreters today and in the future, both nationally and internationally. Fundamentally, the NMIP showed how interpreters can maintain and develop greater awareness and stronger multicultural backgrounds. To increase awareness about one's own cultural heritage is the first cornerstone. The formation of interpreting teams, mentorship, and alliances involving individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds and Native communities represent the other cornerstones. Thus, multicultural interpreting practitioners, educators, and other stakeholders, converge on the common ground of educational, cultural, social, historical, and linguistic domains.

21. In the United States, federal legislation (e.g., Bilingual Education Act), educational curriculum reform projects (e.g., NMIP), and research initiatives (e.g., National Science Foundation) have been mandated to prevent the further loss of native languages and to support the maintenance of bilingualism and multilingualism among American cultural groups.

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