

## BOOK REVIEWS

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MINDY J. MORGAN, *The bearer of this letter: Language ideologies, literacy practices, and the Fort Belknap Indian community*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010. Pp. xvii, 344. Hb. \$50.

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With this book Morgan contextualizes the community reception of a Nakota (Assinibois) literacy program with which she was involved within a history of literacy practices on the Fort Belknap reservation. Implementation of the program was complicated by the fact that Nakota was represented by many Assinibois as an inherently oral language as opposed to English, which was more strongly associated with literacy. To understand why this distinction had come to be a prevalent reservation language ideology, Morgan does three things. First she asks why, unlike other Native communities in the area, Fort Belknap did not develop an indigenous language literacy tradition. Second, she traces the history of official and documented uses of English language literacy at Fort Belknap from the inception of the reservation to the present. Third, she connects these historical developments to contemporary community language ideologies concerning English, Nakota, and the suitability attributed to each for oral vs. written transmission.

The book is presented as an ethnohistory motivated by contemporary language maintenance concerns. As such, Morgan establishes an analytic model that could be applied to reservation records elsewhere. She analyzes colonial documents as reflections of social changes undergone by indigenous communities, and as instruments constitutive of those changes. She demonstrates how documents were used to regulate reservation life and enforce new terms of social relationship. She also examines these documents for what they reveal about how their authors utilized and thought about writing vs. spoken language. Morgan brings her ethnohistorical analysis into the service of contemporary language concerns by tracing the legacy of the transformations she chronicles in current reservation language ideology concerning English and indigenous vernaculars, which include Nakota and Gros Ventre, on the Fort Belknap reservation.

Morgan's careful ethnohistorical account of language shift at Fort Belknap is also useful for the manner in which it complicates popular narratives of indigenous language endangerment. Ch. 1, which treats the pre-reservation speech community, challenges the simple formula that language endangerment consists in a shift from an indigenous vernacular to English. Morgan establishes that the mere presence of a new language was in no way threatening to an indigenous status quo that was already characterized by multilingualism, including multi-media (widespread use of sign language) forms of communication.

In Ch. 2 Morgan chronicles the transformative power not of English but of English language documents to establish the terms of the new regime that encompassed the lives of Assinibois in the early reservation period. The book's title is drawn from the travel passes that tribal members were obliged to carry in order to venture off their appointed reservation. And while for the most part documents served to constrain indigenous movements, eventually Assinibois and Gros Ventre persons began to utilize written forms, such as petitions and letters, to advocate for their interests in ways that circumvented the power of the reservation agent. Identifying English language writing as an instrument of power that was utilized to impose and negotiate the terms of early reservation life helps to define social processes underlying language shift in terms more precise than popular "killer language" formulations.

In chapter 3 Morgan answers the question of why, in contrast with other Native groups in the surrounding region, no indigenous vernacular literacy tradition developed on the Fort Belknap reservation. Most indigenous literacy traditions in the surrounding reservation communities arose in the early 1800s out of mission translation efforts. By contrast, Fort Belknap did not receive significant mission activity until the late 1800s, at which time federal reservation schooling policies were informed by Quaker and allied Protestant reform organizations, whose rhetoric was increasingly hostile to multilingualism, especially that of Catholic priests and indigenous peoples. Also during this time, writing did not play the authorizing role among indigenous leadership on the reservation that it would in later decades. The rising hostility to multilingualism in federal policy and the secondary role assigned to literacy within indigenous leadership circles combined to discourage any fledgling indigenous literacy traditions at Fort Belknap.

In Ch. 4 Morgan discusses a different attempt at reform: the Indian Reorganization Act of the New Deal Era. Morgan notes that this attempt to afford reservation communities a degree of autonomy and self-governance had the effect of accelerating shifts from indigenous vernaculars to English. In part this is because Fort Belknap is shared by Assinibois and Gros Ventre, which represent two different ethnic identities and two very different languages. In common with many post-colonial multi-lingual communities around the world, the language of the colonial government here served dual purposes: as the medium of communication with wider polities, and as neutral ground between contending local languages and identities. So, the Roosevelt-Collier regime, while inviting reservation residents to play

more active roles in defining (within limits) their participation in nation political life, also resulted in expanded uses of English language literacy among indigenous leadership.

Morgan's work historicizing processes of language shift in relation to changes in communicative regime usefully complicates popular language-endangerment narratives. But a weakness of the book is Morgan's failure to give the same reflexive scrutiny to her current project of maintaining the Assinibois language by utilizing a literacy-based school curriculum. Here her authorial purpose shifts from analysis of a social process to devising a strategy in the service of purported necessities. The question becomes how to take the complexities of the local community into account in order to implement the project successfully through the schools. Unfortunately, it is difficult to do both of these at the same time. Her primary argument for the book, that Nakota is associated with oral transmission and English with written, does not do justice to the complexities of the political relationships involved. Her discussion of controversies concerning control of the circulation and transmission of culturally valued forms like prayers, songs, and oratory is more promising, but these problems and tensions are recast as factors in community reception rather than analyzed as part of ongoing language ideological struggles. Consequently, the rhetorical thrust of Ch. 5 (on bilingual-education efforts of the 1970s and 1980s) and Ch. 6 (on the contemporary collaboration between Fort Belknap Community College and Indiana University) is product-driven, with tensions implicitly resolved by the need to avoid allowing social problems to overwhelm maintenance efforts.

It is perhaps a cost of the broad historical scope of her work that Morgan's treatment of language ideologies and literacy practices is ethnographically thin. She treats language ideologies not as elaborated discourses, but as paired down oral-language vs. written-language binaries. And while the book's title promises a treatment of literacy practices, this is limited to letters and petitions written to government officials and to comments the author encountered while working in reservation classrooms. Literacy practices outside federal, school, or mission settings are given scant treatment, effectively excluding significant "everyday practice" domains of literacy. And, while Morgan makes some reference to other works that elaborate the ideological diversity and dynamism of the Fort Belknap community—most importantly Loretta Fowler's *Shared symbols, contested meanings: Gros Ventre culture and history 1778–1984*—this does not bear upon her treatment of community language ideology through time, which she treats as if it were a more or less unified whole in response to federal language policies.

One final critique is that the primary historical argument of the book is missing an important component. Part of the contemporary relevance of her analysis is rooted in its correspondence to what she suggests is local consciousness of history. For example, she writes, "While college is a symbol of community autonomy and self-determination, its position as an educational institution contains resonances of the historical legacy of schooling" (228). However, the content of that

consciousness is asserted by Morgan rather than investigated ethnographically. As a result, the terms in which history and memory of schooling and literacy are articulated in the voices of her Assinibois and Gros Ventre consultants are missing from the account.

That said, this book nonetheless represents a substantial contribution to the ethnohistorical and language-maintenance literature and deserves a wide readership. Morgan provides the most complete and accessible treatment of the history of United States policies and reform efforts as they affect indigenous-language education that I have come across. It is a valuable addition to research and teaching efforts that otherwise address indigenous language issues, Native American history, or the history of language policy in the United States. Reading this alongside a work of comparable scope but more aggressively framed in social theoretical terms, like James Collins' *Understanding Tolowa histories: Western hegemonies and Native American responses*, would be profitable in any class linking indigenous language issues to socio-historical processes. As an example of linguistic anthropology, Morgan provides clear definitions of foundational concepts, making this suitable for undergraduate classes in linguistic disciplines and for advanced undergraduate and graduate classes in disciplines otherwise not familiar with linguistic jargon.

## REFERENCES

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*The Routledge pragmatics encyclopedia* covers the history and present situation of pragmatics and also provides guidance for its future development. There are over 200 entries written by more than 130 leading academics from around the world. For example, the entry for “anaphor, pragmatics of” is compiled by Yan Huang, “Internet language” by David Crystal, and “Semiotics and pragmatics interface” by Kasia M. Jaszczolt. This reference book is authoritative and will be helpful