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Linguistic Naturalism and Language Activism

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Linguistic naturalism is an ideology where real or authentic language is understood as a natural behaviour, as something that native speakers acquire in early childhood and use without artifice. (see Eckert 2003) In this talk, I will examine linguistic naturalism as it is expressed in discourses around the revival of Scottish Gaelic. I will propose that language revival is best theorized as a project that succeeds or fails primarily as a social movement, as a collective project prosecuted by self-aware actors that is entirely artifice. As such, ideologies of linguistic naturalism may lead language activists to misunderstand the ideological work required to alter language behaviour, to set inappropriate goals for the revival movement, and to fetishize some speakers as they delegitimize others, all potentially limiting the impact of the revival on the continuing vitality of their language.

It is an honour and also a pleasure to speak at this conference today in Dublin. Dublin city played an important role in my history with the Gaelic language. I first visited Dublin in 1989 over the January break while I was in university, and it was in Dublin that I first encountered active Irish speakers, which was one of the things that first sparked my interest in Scottish Gaelic. In the intervening years, I have returned to Dublin often, both as a tourist and as a researcher. I have always loved being in this city and so I am particularly happy to be coming back to Dublin and to have the chance to give this talk today ... and I would like to thank Noel Ó Murchadha and the rest of the conference committee for the opportunity.

In my talk today, I am going to return to some of the original questions that motivated me to pursue a career in sociolinguistics, and specifically, to research language revival in this field. In 2002, I enrolled as a mature student on the undergraduate program at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the Scottish-Gaelic college on the Isle of Skye, and while I was studying there, I was often frustrated by the practical problems of establishing and defending Gaelic language use at the college. For those of you who are not familiar with Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the college is a unique educational institution, in the UK certainly, and possibly in the world, in that it is a college that not only teaches undergraduate and graduate degree courses through the medium of a very threatened language like Gaelic, but also, it is a college that endeavours to function as a thoroughly Gaelic-language organization, both as a business that operates through the medium of Gaelic, and also as a scholarly community that uses Gaelic as its normal means of communication between academics, researchers and students both formally and socially around campus.

These are unprecedented and ambitious language-policy aspirations, particularly in the Gaelic context, and not surprisingly, we do not always succeed. As an undergraduate, I was often frustrated that Gaelic was not used on the campus as intended in our Gaelic policy. I spent a lot of my time thinking about this problem and discussing it with fellow students and staff: how *do* you establish norms of minority-language use in an organization like Sabhal Mòr Ostaig? Practically, how *do* you effect the sort of ideological clarification in a group that would lead members chose to use a subaltern language like Gaelic, rather than use a hegemonic language, like English, a language that, realistically, all members of the group would speak with greater ease, particularly in an academic setting? In my studies, I turned to the scholarly literature on language revitalization, but I found that it was largely silent on

these practical questions, questions that for students and staff at the college, as language activists on the ground, were quite pressing.

So after I graduated from the undergraduate program at the college, I pursued a PhD at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, and my research for my thesis directly attempted to address these questions. And then, in my subsequent research as an employee at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, both as a lecturer, and until recently, as a Soillse research fellow, I continued to explore questions of norms and ideology, broadening my research to include the negotiation of new norms of language use in the family, in networks of traditional speakers and new speakers, and in the Gaelic revival movement as a whole. My research in these various contexts has led me to the conclusion that language revival is best theorized as a social movement, where language activists, very broadly defined, selfconsciously work to advance new ideologies about the value and use of their threatened language, and selfconsciously work to establish new norms of language use in sites that in turn serve as nodes in networks of speakers, strengthening those networks and restructuring society from the bottom-up in support of the use of the threatened language.

From this social-movement vantage, one would study language ideology, not solely in a descriptive way, but also with respect to congruencies or mismatches with the language-movement's aims, however those aims are defined by activists on the ground. At Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, I had seen how different beliefs about the value and proper use of Gaelic and English had either helped or hindered Gaelic use in our small academic community. From this social-movement perspective, ideologies are not conceived *a priori* as false consciousness, but are understood as guides to action (Armstrong 2012; Simons & Ingram 1997) that can have a direct impact on the course of the revival movement, either positive or negative. From the start, in my research both in Ireland and in Scotland, I repeatedly encountered a particular constellation of widely-held beliefs, enunciated both by activists involved in language revival as well as by politicians, media commentators and academics engaging with wider public discourse, an ideology about what constitutes authentic language use, and an ideology that could potentially militate against language revival goals: linguistic naturalism. In my talk today, I would like to examine this particular language ideology, how it manifests in the Scottish Gaelic context specifically, and then discuss how these beliefs may present difficulties for activists involved in the Gaelic revival, here conceived as a bottom-up social movement.

Language shift and language revitalization have been studied from a wide range of perspectives, and different approaches from sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, political theory and applied linguistics all add to our understanding of these complex phenomena. I am not making a reductionist argument here, that there is only one correct way to understand language revival – that would be foolish indeed. However, it is safe to say that up until now language shift and revitalization have principally been theorized from a language-policy perspective, from policy at the state or supra-state level, down to language policy at the micro level: in communities, in schools, and even in the families. Unquestionably, this research has been very productive, but it comes with an inherent bias. Policy is typically understood as a top-down phenomenon, as something that flows from those with power at the top of a group down to members of the group without power.

However, in practice, patterns of language choice can prove remarkably resistant to technocratic, top-down management. In practice, how we chose to use our languages can be remarkably 'democratic' in a sense. Language choice often takes place in informal life and outside of the formal structures of social control, depending more on what Bernard Spolsky calls "the consensual ideology of language beliefs" (Spolsky 2004, 222) than it does on state policy. Indeed, this resistance to top-down management can be particularly frustrating to

those language planners who are working to promote threatened languages, as Alexandra Jaffe here observes:

“For the sociolinguists, the collectivity is the only legitimate or practical source of linguistic authority; for language planning to be successful, it must work from the bottom-up [...] the ‘bottom up’ approach is difficult to reconcile with language planners’ desire to rejuvenate an interest in minority languages that is not necessarily shared by the majority of the minority population.”

Jaffe, Alexandra (1999) *Ideologies in action: Language politics on Corsica*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 155–6.

In my talk today, I will be focusing on the day-to-day, interpersonal politics of language use, but also at a political process level, we could ask whether real social change of the kind imagined by language activists and language planners is ever initiated from the top down. Would the state ever willingly grant rights or resources to speakers of a subaltern language in the absence of organized bottom-up political demand? As the American political theorist Fredrick Douglass observed, “power concedes nothing without demand” (1857, 22), and from this premise, I would argue that, in the absence grass-roots activist work in the community to organize demand for language revival, it is very unlikely that the state will ever step in and provide *substantive* support for a threatened language.

So both in terms of the day-to-day politics of the negotiation of language use and in terms of the political process of securing resources and rights for minority-language speakers, the success of the revitalization of a language is dependent on a grass-roots social movement in support of that language. Coming back to the questions at the beginning of my talk, I am particularly interested in the day-to-day politics of language choice, because, in my experience, this is where most of the work is done to change patterns of language use, but it is work that is not yet well understood in the academic literature about language revitalization. What is the nature of this task? Practically, how do activists work to advance new ideologies about the value and use of a threatened language and how do they establish and defend new norms of language use in different key sites: in communities, in businesses, in classrooms, in the home, and so on?

To aid my discussion of these questions, I am going to draw on data from three different research projects that I pursued as a Soillse research fellow: narrative research on the experiences of heritage language learners of Scottish Gaelic; similar research on the experiences of mothers learning Gaelic to support their children in Gaelic-medium education; and more recently, a social history of the campaign to establish a stand-alone Gaelic school in Edinburgh. These first two projects focus on learners of Gaelic who are to some extent already imbedded in Gaelic-language networks, and examines their understanding of the nature of Gaelic language communities in the 21st century and their efforts to actively use Gaelic with family, friends and co-workers. While these first two projects are complete, I am still working on the last project, the social history of the Edinburgh Gaelic school campaign, and as one aspect of my research, I have been collecting data from newspapers, blogs, policy statements, public consultations and other documents in the public sphere concerning Gaelic development and Gaelic activism in Edinburgh. Together, I will use these data to discuss the nature of the task of establishing new norms of Gaelic use in networks, groups and families, and then I will show how pervasive ideologies of linguistic naturalism may confound language activism at this level.

The signature feature of the Gaelic language in the 21st century is that Gaelic is becoming a language that is spoken principally in sites and situations deliberately established

through grass-roots language activism. All recent demographic evidence supports the conclusion that it is unlikely that Gaelic is still used as a taken-for-granted vernacular in any community in the Western Isles, particularly among young adults, teenagers and school-aged children. However, Gaelic remains a spoken language in dense networks of speakers in various communities in the Highlands and Islands, as well as in more disparate networks of Gaelic speakers the cities of the Lowlands, and sites that support these networks, principally in education, but also in some sectors of the Gaelic media and in other Gaelic-language businesses and organizations. To borrow a phrase used by informants in Tadhg Ó hIfearnáin's research (2013, 356), we are facing a future in Scotland where there will be no "accidental" speakers of Gaelic, and where all Gaelic use will involve deliberate political agency. As one of the heritage learners I interviewed suggests, particularly for younger speakers, we may be past this point already:

[... speaking English] is the path of least resistance [...] it's easier for most people to speak in English, because most people have better command [of English]. I mean, I think there are very few people alive today that have a better command of Gaelic than they do of English. There may be some people few and far between that have an equal command of both languages, but I don't think – I think they are very, very much in the minority. So people have to make a political choice to use Gaelic [...]

This interviewee grew up in the Lowlands, but at the time of this interview, he was living in a core Gaelic community in the Western Isles and was working in Gaelic media. He particularly draws attention to the proficiency issues that can make using Gaelic difficult for younger bilinguals. Other heritage learners mentioned psychological and demographic issues that compounded these difficulties, and described integration into Gaelic language networks as a process of deliberate and sometimes contentious negotiation. Here is another heritage learner explaining how she understands the connection between the vitality of the language and the self-conscious effort required to use the language with her family and friends:

In the end, well, I think the speaking's important [for the vitality of the language]. I mean, I think that is still the black hole in the middle, you know, the speaking in the community. That, I think, is still a problem. I mean, I look around me. You've still to make an effort. You know, the people I know [that] have Gaelic, they'll start off in English unless I firmly say "Hello" in Gaelic.

This interviewee explains that her Gaelic speaking partners will default to English unless she makes it discursively clear that she would prefer to speak in Gaelic, and she further explained that as she was learning, she took the lead in actively integrating herself into Gaelic networks around her in her life:

So you've got to establish some credibility, I think, even within the family. You've really got to sort of make them feel that it's worth doing it. So it's quite interesting. I mean, in a sense, they take their lead from you. And particularly when you're not wholly fluent, it's very easy to be lazy. And I indeed, I have been myself in the past, as everybody is, you know. And of course you only see these people infrequently, and you want to exchange news and this, that and the other. And if you're not totally fluent, it's a bit more difficult to do it in Gaelic. So you've got to take the time.

(Smith-Christmas & Armstrong 2014: 318, and unpublished data)

Establishing new norms of Gaelic use involves ideological work to normalize Gaelic in relationships or in particular sites, and several of the mothers I interviewed who were learning Gaelic to support their bilingual children explained how challenging it is to establish norms of Gaelic use in their families, particularly when their ideological work is undermined in other key sites of language use in their children's lives:

Whereas I have to work at making [Gaelic] a social language, if what in their head, they're learning day to day in school is: Gaelic in the class; English in the playground, I've then got an added level of difficulty when they come home.

(Armstrong 2014: 577)

This mother explains that the social use of Gaelic in her home doesn't just happen spontaneously, but rather, is deliberately established, and she also provides an example of the circulation of ideology at the micro level, how norms of Gaelic use in one site (the school), impact ideological work in another site (the home). This mother is a new speaker of Gaelic, but given Gaelic's status in Scotland in the 21st century, even in the rare case where all adult care-givers in a particular home are native Gaelic-speakers, it is unlikely that children would continue to use Gaelic as their home language throughout their school years in the absence deliberate family language planning and ideological work.

Speakers of a threatened, network language like Gaelic cannot assume that Gaelic use will simply happen in their lives naturally or unselfconsciously. Both to use Gaelic and to revitalize Gaelic, speakers must perform ideological work. This ideological work is political and deliberate, and yet, in my interviews with new speakers of Gaelic, and in my data drawn from discourse in the public sphere about Gaelic development, I consistently encountered ideologies of linguistic naturalism, ideologies privileging language use that is understood to be unselfconscious or unaffected. For instance, here is a heritage learner explaining to me why he turned his back on Gaelic as a teenager:

[...] because there wasn't a context... there wasn't a context to be speaking it in, a natural context to be speaking it in. And so it somehow seemed a bit unnatural and, yes, something to be left behind.

This heritage learner grew up on an island in the Inner Hebrides, with Gaelic-speaking adults in his immediate and extended family, and with access to some Gaelic provision in his local school, but he explains that Gaelic no longer functioned as a 'natural' language in his community when he was a teenager, and as such, he took little interest in Gaelic until he learned it as a heritage language as an adult. This interviewee believes that these disparaging attitudes to Gaelic were common in his cohort at his local high school. Based on my data from all my recent research projects, I believe that ideologies of linguistic naturalism are common anywhere that Gaelic's status as a living language is contested. As an example from debates in the public sphere in Scotland, and at the other end of the country, we can see a similar equivalence between naturalness, community language use, and vitality expressed in the following extract from a letter to the editor of the Scotland on Sunday newspaper, published shortly after the end of the Edinburgh school campaign.

I would not impose Gaelic on the Lowlands. But as Dr Allan says, if our Gaelic language is to have a future, surely it is more likely to be in its traditional heartland, where it still survives as a natural means of communication, rather than in those areas of Scotland where it is little more than a school subject.

Richard A A Deveria, Gaelic historian

(Scotland on Sunday, 22 July, 2012)

Here, Richard Deveria, a historian with an interest in Gaelic, is responding to an article by the Gaelic-speaking MSP for Na h-Eileanan an Iar, Dr Alasdair Allan, and Deveria is arguing that Gaelic in the Lowlands of Scotland is an imposition, that Gaelic belongs in the Highlands and Islands where he contends it is naturally spoken as a community language. Interestingly, this definition of a natural and vital language community is very similar to Reg Hindley's definition in *The Death of the Irish Language*:

[... Irish as] the normal habitual medium of everyday life for all generations,
transmitted from one generation to the next because that is the natural thing to do [...]
Hindley (1990: 130)

Common in scholarly discourse and in the general public sphere, this idealized equivalence of naturalness, territorial speech communities, and vitality, contrasts sharply with the experience of using and promoting Gaelic as a networked language. There is a contradiction between the yearning for natural language use on the one hand and the political agency required to speak and promote Gaelic on the other. Nonetheless, these two themes — yearning for naturalness versus selfconscious agency — were raised in the interviews I conducted, sometimes directly juxtaposed with each other. Here is a mother explaining her aims for her Gaelic use with her son:

Interviewee: [...] So I suppose that's my attitude is that it's just a normal, natural part of our lives. That's the way I want it to be. I don't want it to feel like an extra special super-duper project, even though it is in a way, but I want it to feel, yes, natural.

TCA: Did that change over time? Did that evolve?

Interviewee: Yes, because it didn't feel natural at all first, at all, because it wouldn't. It just felt, it felt weird to be speaking Gaelic with my son all of a sudden after spending all his baby days speaking in English, and all of a sudden I'm trying to speak this other language with him. It felt weird.

(Armstrong 2014: 577, and unpublished data)

This is one of my favourite quotes because the interviewee very honestly explains this contradiction, and acknowledges, I think, that the reality of establishing Gaelic as a home language did not match an ideal of natural parent-child interactions, of communicating unselfconsciously in a 'mother tongue', particularly at first. Authentic language use is typically understood as language use that is unreflective and natural, but although authenticity has been the subject of much critical analysis in the sociolinguistic literature over the last fifteen years, I agree with Kathryn Woolard's (2013) assessment that it is actually naturalism, rather than authenticity *per se*, that is the real problem, particularly for sociolinguists studying language endangerment, as well as for language activists involved in language revival. Authenticity can be defined in any number of different ways, but if authentic language use is defined as natural language use, authenticity by these standards may

not be possible for a threatened, networked language like Gaelic. Here is an assessment of the authenticity of the Gaelic revival by one of the heritage learners I interviewed:

[...] perhaps the crux of it really is that with Gaelic development, you are putting something fake in place of something authentic – we've no choice in that any longer.

Successful language revival may necessarily involve redefining what is considered authentic language use and who is considered an authentic speaker to match the actual speaker communities on the ground, rather than connecting authenticity to an ideal of a language that is spoken apparently naturally in a discrete territorial language community. As this heritage learner suggests, in the case of the Gaelic revival, we may no longer have any choice in the matter. I would contend that the success of the Gaelic revival may require advancing a new, activist definition of an authentic Gaelic speaker (or *sàr Ghàidheal*), one based on active use and promotion of Gaelic rather than on ancestry or origin.

In my talk today, in addition to discussing linguistic naturalism in the Scottish Gaelic context, I hope I have also made an effective case for the value of analysing language revitalization from a social movement perspective. From my own experience as at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig working to promote Gaelic use at the college, I believe that approaching the college *itself* as an activist project and focusing on ideological clarification in the organization has led to concrete improvements in the enthusiasm of students and staff for learning and using the language on campus. For language planners and language activists, I believe that there may be real benefits in approaching language revitalization broadly as a social movement with a critical bottom-up activist component, rather than principally as an instance of top-down language management.

But also, I believe social-movement theory can provide a valuable analytical frame for sociolinguists who are trying to understand why some revival movements make progress and others do not. In the conclusion of my talk, I would like to propose three things: one research question, one hypothesis and one research focus, all with respect to language revival as a social movement. I am not suggesting that these are the most important subjects for study, but I do believe that research around these three subjects could significantly advance our understanding of the dynamics of organizing for the revival of a threatened language.

At the last Soillse conference in Glasgow this June, Jordan Lachler [LATCH ler] from the University of Alberta suggested an interesting question. Starting from a demographic perspective, sociolinguists researching language revitalization typically ask, what is the most sustainable way to create new generations of speakers to maintain the demographic density of a threatened language community in a particular situation? Do we create them in the family through intergenerational transmission, in the schools through immersion education, through adult education, or some combination of these three routes? But in contrast, Lachler proposed a *different* question that he felt was more relevant to the post-vernacular language communities that he works with on the Northwest Pacific coast. He suggested that it would be more appropriate to ask, how do you sustain the struggle of language activists over generations to maintain communities of practice that are promoting a threatened language? I would like to second his question and also extend it. I would propose that if we understand language revival as principally a social movement, then the long-term vitality of *all* threatened languages may depend on the answer to this question: how do you sustainably create new generations of language activists who will carry a language revival movement forward into the future? If a natural, unselfconscious, and self-perpetuating territorial community is not a possibility for Gaelic in the 21st century, if Gaelic will only be spoken to the extent that grass-roots activists continuously organize to establish new norms of Gaelic

use and to advance new ideologies of the value of Gaelic, how then do you sustainably create networks of activist Gaelic speakers from generation to generation?

This question is then linked to the hypothesis I would like to highlight. This hypothesis concerns the impact of identity on language revival movements. Identity is not immutable. The link between identity and language can be reimagined in language revival movements, for instance, in the case of the Basque language revival, where language activists in second half of the twentieth century engaged in sustained ideological work to link the Basque identity more tightly with the Basque language itself, rather than to race or to ancestry. (see Urla 1988) If language activists, to use John Edwards' phrase, "go to the barricades" (2009: 247) in support of their languages principally for reasons of identity, and if a strong activist base is critical for the success of language revival movements, then the degree that important, affective identities are tied into speaking a threatened language should be strongly correlated to the success of the revival movements in support of that language. Based on an understanding of language revival as a social movement, this is a very plausible hypothesis, but I don't think it has been definitively demonstrated yet. There has been, of course, much qualitative and quantitative research on language and identity, and there has even been some research conducted on identity in language revival movements specifically (e.g.: Tejerina 1999), but to my knowledge, nothing like the comparative, quantitative research that could demonstrate a clear relationship between the strength of language revival movements and the strength of language-identity links.

And finally, I would like to propose a research focus, in this case, a focus for qualitative research on threatened languages. Throughout this talk, I have been discussing language activism as something prosecuted largely through ideological work. I have argued that in the future Gaelic will be spoken in Scotland to the extent that speakers act as *ad hoc* activists and perform ideological work to support Gaelic use in their daily lives, but I haven't really described today with much specificity what this ideological work might look like. In my research, I have collected narrative accounts of Gaelic speakers engaged in ideological work, and some of these accounts have been fairly detailed, but in general, there is little descriptive, qualitative research published on the nature of ideological work in support of threatened languages, and as I explained at the beginning of my talk, for language activists, this is an important, practical subject. Much of this type of ideological work takes place in the private sphere, in families and among friends, or in what we might call the semi-public sphere, in the workplace or in educational institutions, and it is therefore difficult to observe directly. If the vitality of a threatened language like Gaelic depends on grass-roots activism on its behalf, then understanding how activists engage in ideological work in their day-to-day lives is critical to understanding language vitality in general, and I believe that as a research focus, ideological work may be particularly amenable to narrative and ethnographic methods and would be a productive theme for future qualitative research.

Before I close, I would like to take a minute to acknowledge my colleagues who worked with me on research projects as a Soillse fellow. I do not want to implicate them in my conclusions in any way, but in my talk today, I did draw on analysis and data from several collaborative projects, and one of the great things about the Soillse initiative was that it provided me with opportunities to work with lots of talented people. In the first instance, I would like to acknowledge Iain Mac an Tàilleir and Gillian Munro at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. I did not have time today to discuss the demographic data behind my assertions about the current status of Gaelic-speaking communities, but I have relied heavily on Gillian Munro's research in the Shawbost township in Lewis as well as Iain Mac an Tàilleir's fine-grained analysis of the most recent census data. My analysis was also informed by research with Sìleas NicLeòid at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig and Fiona O'Hanlon at the University of Edinburgh on the language

ideologies of teachers in Gaelic-medium education. And finally, I had the pleasure of working on both heritage learners and family language policy with Cassie Smith-Christmas, now at the University of Limerick, and our discussions shaped much of my thinking on these subjects.

Thank you very much.

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Possible Answers to Questions

How I understand social movement theory

Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Mary Bernstein (2008) "Culture, Power, and Institutions: A Multi-Institutional Politics Approach to Social Movements." *Sociological Theory* 26(1), 74-99.

"[...] the political process model assumed that domination was organized by and around one source of power, that political and economic structures of society were primary and determining, and that culture was separate from structure and secondary in importance. [...] The alternative that we present views domination as organized around multiple sources of power, each of which is simultaneously material and symbolic." (74-75)

Identity and Language Activism

Tejerina, Benjamín (1999) El poder de los símbolos: Identidad colectiva y movimiento etnolingüístico en el País Vasco. *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas* 88, 75-105.

The idea that I would argue is that any attempt to explain of what is happening today in the Basque Country with the recovery process of the language can only be understood if related to the process of construction of Basque collective identity. In the crystallization of this growing relationship between language and identity, the ethnolinguistic movement has played a central role, although alongside other social actors and social agents that have intervened. (my translation, 76)

Demographic Data

2001: 3,510 Gaelic speakers in communities returning 75% Gaelic speakers, out of 58,652 or 6%. (Mac an Tàilleir 2010)

2011: 364 Gaelic speakers in communities returning 75% Gaelic speakers, 0.63%. (Mac an Tàilleir 2014)

Can network languages persist?

Ruth Singer and Salome Harris (2016) "What practices and ideologies support small-scale multilingualism? A case study of Waruwi Community, northern Australia." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 241, 163–208.

Waruwi [WA roo wee] communities in Australia, maintain 8 languages (250 – 5 speakers) through 'receptive multilingualism'. Individuals speak/understand 3–8 languages, and speak their preferred language, as others reply in other languages.

Or Paul Kroskrity's [CRAW skrity] work on Arizona Tewa, living amongst the Hopi. The conservatism of kiva language then extends to conservatism of Tewa. 300 years living with the Hopi and widespread multilingualism, but little linguistic impact on Tewa.