A Study of Indian Language Policies Under Self-Determination

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Indian language policies of America have experienced repeated changes from English-only education to the revival of Indians’ tribal languages. Under the influence of Assimilation Policy, English was the only language taught in schools and Indian tribal languages were influenced deeply, but since the implementation of Self-Determination Policy from the 1960s, American federal government has issued many policies to protect and revive Indian tribal languages.

Keywords: Indian language policy, bilingual, self-determination

Introduction

Language is a carrier that transports the culture of a people. For American Indians, it conveys the values and beliefs of nearly 600 Indian tribal nations through about 100 native languages currently used. Initially, there were about 300 indigenous languages, divided into eight language families: Algonquian, Athapaskan, Caddoan, Iroquoian, Muskogean, Penutian, Siouan, and Uto-Aztecan. In a way, language is the culture of the people because it expresses how indigenous people view things and how they feel. Depending on non-written languages for most of the first half of the 20th century, the spoken word is singular means for communication. At present, there are about 250 known surviving Indian tribal languages in the United States. Perhaps as many as a third of Americans Indians still speak their own languages. Navajo, Iroquois, Pima, Apache, Inuit (Eskimo), Tohono O’odham, and Lakota have the largest number of native speakers.

As we all know, the United States is a multi-ethnic country and has always been known as the “racial melting pot”. In addition to the whites, there are many ethnic groups in America, such as African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Americans Indians. Among all ethnic groups, Americans Indians are the earliest residents of the American continent and the earliest victims of the unequal racial policy of the United States. Since European colonists set foot on the American continent, the relationship between the whites and Americans Indians has plagued the American federal government for a long time. In order to solve the problem of Americans Indians, the American government has implemented different policies in different historical periods based on different backgrounds and reasons. American federal government’s language policies towards Americans Indians have also changed a lot, which have experienced the repeated changes from English-only education to the revival of Indians’ tribal languages. Under the guidance of Self-Determination Policy, American federal government implemented Bilingual Education Act, Native American Languages Act,
and other policies on Americans Indians, which effectively promoted the protection and revival of Indians’ tribal languages. China and the United States are both multi-ethnic and multilingual countries, and the language ecology of both of these two countries has many similarities. To learn from the language policies of the United States is of great practical significance for China to formulate its own language policy in line with China’s national conditions.

The History of Indian Language Policies of America

American federal government’s Indian language policies have experienced several stages: English-only education, bilingual education, the protection and revival of Indian tribal languages.

Influenced by Anglo-Saxon culture, all non-English languages, including Indian tribal languages, were regarded as stupid languages. After the founding of the United States, the American government implemented the concept of language consistency and required all non-English ethnic groups to learn English. White Americans regarded American Indians as barbarians and Indian tribal languages as barbarous. It was believed that teaching an Indian youth in his own barbarous dialect was a positive detriment to him. Thus, the first step to be taken toward civilization, toward teaching the Indians the mischief and folly of continuing in their barbarous practices, was to teach them the English language. As a result, English-only education was the language policy implemented by American federal government at that time.

English-only education refers to the implementation of English education in schools, which required that all school-age children could only receive English education. Schools could only teach in English and the students were only permitted to speak English in schools and in their daily lives, which resulted in the extinction of several Indian tribal languages. However, the purpose of English-only education is to confirm the core language status of English, strengthen English education, disintegrate the traditional culture of American Indians, completely smash Indian tribal languages, and compel American Indians to accept Anglo-Saxon culture and the main stream’s civilization, so as to realize assimilation. Due to the implementation of English-only education, the government invested more than 200 million US dollars, but the results were not satisfactory. Indian tribal languages were the direct victims of English-only education, facing the situation of overall decline, while American Indian students were full of resistance and resentment against boarding schools and English learning. Cherokee, one of the most powerful and vital language among the American Indian tribal languages, had a language population 27,856 in 1950, but it had a very dim future. More and more children could no longer learn Cherokee language in school, but only English. If this gap could not be mended in time, the perish of Cherokee language was only a matter of time. Even a language as powerful as Cherokee would perish in the future, so it could be seen that the decline of American Indian tribal languages faced an extremely severe situation.

At the same time, with the rise of Multiculturalism in 1960s, more and more Americans advocated that while accepting the mainstream culture, people should respect the culture and language of ethnic minorities. Bilingual Education Act of 1968 included American Indians bilingual education into the scope of government funding, and stipulated that Indian students also had the right to enjoy the funding of the education project established by the act, which made American Indians’ bilingual education vibrant and prosperous for the first time.
Indian Language Policies Under Self-Determination

With each generation, American Indians exhibited a desire to learn more about the ways of the mainstream and knowledge about the rest of the world. To be educated in another culture results in indigenous cultures being lost. Theoretically, one culture replaces another, but American Indians have learned to use the English language and earned degrees in the mainstream educational system to perpetuate Indian tribal ways.

Since the 1960s, American federal government has adopted a policy of Indian self-determination. This policy was applied in a new legislative framework for Indian education built by Congress since the 1970s (Indian Education Act of 1972, Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975, and American Indian and Alaska Native Education of 1998 et c.). As for language education, under the policy of Indian, great changes also happened. Bilingual Education Act of 1968, Native American Languages Act of 1990 and Grant Program to Ensure Survival and Continuing Vitality of Native American Language of 1992 marked a turning point in Indian language policy.

With the implementation of Bilingual Education Act in 1968, a number of Indian schools run by Indian tribal governments were established. The federal government helped these schools implement bilingual education and curriculum reform. Students receive bilingual education while Indian tribal languages are the dominant language and English is taught as the second language in these schools. By 1979, the number of tribal nations receiving government funding had increased to 16, the number of schools had increased to 55, and the number of Indian tribal languages benefited had increased to 30.

On October 26, 1990, President Bush signed Native American Languages Act. This legislative act amended Native American Programs Act of 1974 for the Secretary of Interior to award a grant to any agency or organization that is to assist Americans Indians in ensuring the survival and continuing vitality of American Indian languages. The act clearly recognizes that the culture and languages of American Indians enjoy a special status, and U.S. federal government has the obligation to protect these languages and cultures. At the same time, it recognizes the right of Indian tribes to use Indian tribal languages in tribal schools. This act is the first one specifically focusing on Indian language promulgated by the U.S. government, which is of far-reaching significance in the history of Indian language policy. The act has at least three meanings. First, this is the continuation of American federal government’s policy of Indian self-determination since the 1960s. Secondly, this is the correction of the policy of assimilation, excluding and cracking down on Indian tribal languages in Indian boarding schools established by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and other Indian schools since the founding of the United States. Thirdly, this is the federal government’s amendment to English-only education that has resulted in the extinct of several Indian tribal languages.

In 2000, 2001, 2003, and 2006, the U.S. Senate considered the amendment to the American Indigenous Language Act many times, and finally accepted to support Indian tribal languages education in Indian tribal schools. The American educational policy towards Indian tribal languages in the era of globalization can be said to be an unprecedented “kindness” in American history. Therefore, many Americans do not like to use the “melting pot” theory to explain American language and cultural policy, but prefer to use the “salad bowl” theory to explain American language and cultural policy.

On October 31, 2013, President Obama issued a declaration for the fifth time in “National Tradition Month of American Indians”, recognizing that the original assimilation policy has caused serious losses to
American Indians in many aspects such as politics, society, culture, and language, and promising that the federal government will abolish the destructive Indian policy.

The efforts of American federal government have achieved certain results. For example, in 1984, the Navajo Tribal Council adopted the Navajo Tribal Education policies, which stipulates that Navajo education must be provided to Navajo people in all grades in all local schools, and schools are allowed to educate the younger generation of Navajo people in Navajo tribal language. The policy requires schools to teach the history and culture of the Navajo tribe in Navajo tribal language. The policy also supports tribal self-governance and parental involvement in schools, and gives priority to indigenous languages when working as domestic servants. One year later, the Northern Ute Tribal Business Committee Act was also adopted, which declared that Ute language is the official language of the Northern Ute people, which can be used in all government affairs—legislation, law enforcement and justice. The Northern Ute national school will provide teaching in Ute language from kindergarten to grade 12 (K-12).

**Influence and Enlightenment**

Under self-determination, it is encouraged for tribal government agencies to use tribal Indian languages. At the same time, American federal government emphasizes the protection and revival of Indian tribal languages, which helps to improve the academic performance and school enrolment of indigenous children, gives full play to their potential, achieves success, and makes them useful American citizens. Though some people believe that it is because American Indian tribal languages have actually perished and pose no danger to any place and anyone that the whites are willing to give Indians and their languages power and status, more and more American Indian children have the opportunity to learn their own tribal languages. Indian tribes and Indian language experts have compiled systematic textbooks to teach their tribal languages. The scale of folk academic and research groups engaged in the protection and revival of Indian tribal languages is becoming larger and larger, and Indian tribal languages have been revived to a certain extent.

But all these efforts are a bit too late. Many Indian tribal languages have become irreparable. In the 1990s, among 150 surviving Indian tribal languages at that time, nearly 60 languages are still in practical use, and only a few years old people can speak them. The decline of Indian tribal language has become irreversible. Even though the US federal government has clearly changed its policy and attitude towards Indian tribal languages since the 1960s, Indians are still abandoning their mother tongue and advocating English. Indian tribal languages are still disappearing at an alarming rate. In the next 60 years, more Native American languages will no longer be used.

The formulation, revision, and improvement of the language policy of Americans Indians can be used for reference to formulate the language policy and foreign language education in China. From the evolution of American Indian language policy, we can see that whether a multicultural society or a single cultural society is implemented, the language policy implemented by a country will inevitably affect the language development of the whole country. China is a multi-ethnic, multi population, and multilingual country. There are also many minority languages in addition to Mandarin Chinese. Facing the globalized world, foreign language education is also an aspect that we cannot ignore. Therefore, it is very important for our country to formulate reasonable language policies and balance the relationship between Mandarin Chinese and minority languages, between Chinese and English, and between English and other foreign languages. We can draw lessons from the formulation and evolution of American Indian language policy and constantly improve our own language policy.
References


