

Theoretical, Descriptive and Practical Applications of Navajo Linguistics

Theodore B. Fernald

(Swarthmore College & Navajo Language Academy/Diné Bizaad Naalkaah)

This talk is about interactions between cultures – Navajo & non-Navajo, scholarly & pedagogical, theoretical & descriptive – in research and applications of linguistics.

I report on work by Navajo linguists and colleagues in the Navajo Language Academy (NLA) /Diné Bizaad Naalkaah. The NLA has held summer workshops on Navajo linguistics every year since 1997. Members of the NLA held similar workshops during the 1970s.

In these workshops, Navajo and non-Navajo linguists and language teachers work together on matters of theoretical analysis and pedagogical application. The workshop is a bridge between linguists and language teachers. Linguists make an effort to relate their often-esoteric work to language teachers, thus developing an immediately practical use for it. At the same time, language teachers are gaining skills in the linguistic analysis of human languages. I discuss some challenges that can arise and ways the NLA has tried to get beyond them.

The work of the NLA also involves cooperation between descriptive and theoretical enterprises in linguistics. As many scholars have found, these enterprises can strengthen each other. Hallmark examples are the fact that negative polarity items can be described with great accuracy in future descriptive grammars. This kind of descriptive work would not have been possible without theoretical research over the past 50 years on negation (see Fernald & Perkins 2007, Hale & Platero 2000). NPIs were nearly unknown before the tradition of generative grammar. While the scientific investigation of language is valuable in its own right and needs no justification, insights from this work are now benefiting descriptive work and leading to better reference materials.

Finally I again raise the question of what counts as adequate description of a language. To the classic triad (grammar, dictionary, texts) we recommend adding a User's Guide, a reference about pragmatics for use of the language in a particular culture. The work of the NLA includes the development of reference works along with support for language teachers and scholars in linguistics.