

The Role of Ofelia Zepeda in the Tohono O'odham Language and Cultural Revitalization

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Abstract

Tohono O'odham (formerly Papago), a Native American language spoken in southern Arizona and northern Mexico, has been frequently reported as endangered. The article aims to present efforts to revitalize and stabilize the language (and its culture), particularly the activities of Ofelia Zepeda, who is a member of the Tohono O'odham Indian Nation. Zepeda is a professor of linguistics at the University of Arizona in Tucson and has been contributing to the revival of her mother tongue, primarily as a linguist, language educator and activist. She is also known for her creative writing and incorporates Tohono O'odham into her poems.

Key words

Tohono O'odham, endangered languages, revitalization, Ofelia Zepeda, eco-poetry

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Wa nt o m-ñe'i g ju:ki ñe'i.
Wa nt o ñ-keihi m-we:hejed.

I would sing for you rain songs.
I would dance for you rain dances.

Ofelia Zepeda

Introduction

As has been widely acknowledged, the demise of language (and cultural) diversity is one of the greatest challenges and perhaps the most pressing issue in both linguistics and anthropology of the 21st century. Language endangerment is without doubt a world-wide problem and ultimately results in the death of languages. There is strong evidence that minority native tongues are being abandoned in favor of dominant languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, etc.) in all parts of the globe (see Hirsh 2013) and also that this unprecedented language shift goes hand in hand with cultural erosion and cultural change.

The most general factors contributing to the process of language and cultural change are also known. As Hill (2011: ix) remarks, the list of relevant danger factors includes:

“the spread of evangelical religions mediated through world languages, the penetration of national institutions with no place for local languages except as remedies for ‘problems’ (primary education and court interpretation for local-language-dominant citizens, for instance), the aspirations for ways of life dependent on participation in global markets conducted in national and world languages – aspirations that were hardly irrational, given that those very markets were destroying all other possibilities”.

These factors rarely work in isolation and the complexity of their effect usually varies in different localities and language communities.

The American Southwest has been recognized as a language critical hotspot (see Harrison 2010: 87–118). Although the degree of language endangerment in the states of Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada and Utah is not as severe as in California or in the American Northeast and Southeast, for example, there are still many indigenous tongues that are exposed to the threat of erosion or even on the brink of extinction. One of the local languages and/or dialects that has been categorized as endangered is (To-

hono) O'odham. After presenting an overview of the history and culture of Tohono O'odham and related linguistic issues, this paper will focus on the role of Ofelia Zepeda in the process of the revival of the Tohono O'odham language and cultural revitalization and stabilization.

Tohono O'odham history and culture

The Tohono O'odham people, formerly known as the Papago, have for centuries occupied vast and arid areas of the Sonoran Desert in what is today the American Southwest. As a result of harsh historical events following the Spanish (later Mexican) and American expansion, the traditional territory of the Tohono O'odham was seized and broken into three main reservations. The largest reservation, with the tribal agency in the town of Sells, is the Tohono O'odham Nation Reservation, which is the second largest Indian reservation in the Southwest after the Navajo Nation. The other two much smaller reservation territories are San Xavier and the Gila Bend Indian Reservations. Since the original Tohono O'odham lands also covered localities in today's northwestern Mexico, there are Tohono O'odham people living not just in the United States, but also in Mexico.

In the pre-contact era, the *Papaguería* was the home of three distinct Tohono O'odham groups: *Hia C'ed O'odham* (the so-called Sand People), *Tohono O'odham proper* (the Desert People), and the *Sobaipuri*. Each group inhabited a different biotic part of the Sonoran Desert and adapted to its specific environment (cf., Nabhan 2002).

The Hia C'ed O'odham exploited the western, most barren, part of the desert, and since the local arid environment did not support the farming of crops, they lived as nomadic hunter-gatherers. By contrast, the Sobaipuri settled the higher and cooler elevations in the east, and “*lived in more permanent villages with flood-plain and river-irrigated fields, venturing out to hunt and gather in the surrounding area*” (Lewis 1994: 123). The central region of the Papaguería, with Baboquivari Peak at its heart, was occupied by the so-called Desert People. Their subsistence and residential system was a combination of both flood-plain farming and hunting and gathering. They established summer and winter villages and migrated between them. During the wet season “*in late July, August, and early September, thunderstorms bring rain, and the traditional O'odham directed water coming from the mountains so that it would spread across the broad fields*” (Erickson 1994: 8). During autumn, when winter was approaching,

“the O'odham moved to the mountains, where there were wells, springs, or pools of water in natural catch basins. They called these

areas the well villages. Although the need for water was the main reason the O'odham moved to the mountains, hunting was a major source of food and another important reason to travel there for the winter months" (Erickson 1994: 10).

The Tohono O'odham people planted corn, beans, squash, and pumpkins. Women harvested saguaro fruits, cholla buds, and a variety of roots and seeds. Despite the arid conditions, the Sonoran Desert supported a diverse fauna. Men usually hunted for deer, but other creatures were also considered important game, especially antelope, mountain sheep, peccary, and rabbit. When there was a lack of food, Tohono O'odham people collected small mammals, insect larvae, and caterpillars. The Hia C'ed O'odham, who lived among the sand dunes on the coast of the Gulf of California supplemented their diet with reptiles and fish.¹

The Tohono O'odham subsistence activities were interconnected with their spiritual belief and ritual life:

"In July [...] they held their Náwai't ceremony. As they listened to ritual Mocking Bird speeches and songs taught them by I'toi to 'bring clouds down', they drank tiswin to signify the saturation of the earth with rain. The consumption of large quantities of tiswin caused vomiting, a ceremonial feature called 'throwing up the clouds'. After the rains, ritual speeches² to ensure plant growth preceded and accompanied planting. Villagers placed fetishes and effigies of desired crops in their fields, sang to encourage their growth [...], or held Green Corn ceremonies and prayer stick ceremonies in August." (Lewis 1994: 128)

The post-contact events brought tremendous changes to the lives of the Tohono O'odham. Euro-American civilization disturbed their fragile subsistence system connected to the desert land by forcing them into smaller reservations and opening up their homeland to white settlers. Although they have managed to preserve some aspects of their traditional culture, including their ancestral language, ecological modifications have forced the Tohono O'odham to adapt their life to new socio-economic situations. Having been exposed to frequent environmental problems, "resulting from

1 For more information on the material culture of the Tohono O'odham, see Underhill (2005).

2 For more information on the song magic and oratory of the Tohono O'odham, see Underhill (1993), with a foreword by Ofelia Zepeda. Tohono O'odham oratory is also great inspiration for Zepeda's poetry.

cyclical drought, overgrazing, erosion, and competition for precious ground water" (Lewis 1994: 167), they have shifted from being flood-field farmers and hunter-gatherers to cotton-field farmers (such as Zepeda's parents), ranchers and wage earners, such as miners and railroad workers.

Moreover, more recently, many Tohono O'odham people have taken up jobs across the social spectrum. They have become politicians (e.g., Ponka-We Victors), artists (e.g., Terrol Dew Johnson), musicians (e.g., Gerti Lopez), basketball coaches (e.g., Raul Mendoza), and, as in the case of Ofelia Zepeda, linguists and educators. Members of the Tohono O'odham Nation are modern people who run restaurants, hotels, and casinos (e.g., the Desert Diamond Casino on San Xavier Reservation).

Although the Tohono O'odham still perform some of their traditional ceremonies, they have embraced Catholicism. The fusion of their indigenous spirituality and Catholic Christianity resulted in a syncretic religion called Sonoran Catholicism (Griffith 1992).

Tohono O'odham language

Tohono O'odham Indians speak a language which is usually referred to as O'odham. The same language, but a different dialect, is spoken by the neighboring Akimel O'odham tribe.³ While the total population of the Tohono and the Akimel O'odham numbers around 40,000 (20,000 in each tribe: see the United State Census 2010), the number of fluent speakers of the O'odham language is significantly lower. While more than two thirds of the population spoke the language fluently in the early 1980s (Zepeda 1983: xiv), recent data indicates that there are only 14,000–15,000 speakers, including children (Mithun 2001: 546). The *UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* classifies O'odham as definitely endangered.

The causes behind the decline in the language are complex, "*including contact by dominant groups and similar historical events, institutionalized religions, and educational systems generally but particularly boarding schools*" (Zepeda 2019: x). The language shift to English (or to Spanish in Mexico) has been accelerated by new social media and economic opportunities.

However, O'odham is among the strongest Native American languages in the United States. It is the tenth most-spoken indigenous language (Eberhard – Simmons – Fennig 2022) and, according to the 2000 Census,

3 The Akimel O'odham (who live along the Gila River), along with the Tohono O'odham (who inhabit the southernmost areas of Arizona), used to be referred to by the Spanish (and later Mexicans) as Upper Pimans. Both nations are very likely descendants of the ancient Hohokam culture (Salzmann and Salzmann 2018: 63–64). For more, see Ortiz (1983).

there are even some monolingual O'odham speakers, that is, people with no knowledge of English or Spanish. The explanation could be that there are many tribal members still living in isolated or semi-isolated villages scattered across the Tohono O'odham Nation reservations who do not have close interaction with the majority population.

Genetically speaking, O'odham is a Uto-Aztecan language. The Uto-Aztecan language family is “*one of the largest in terms of number of languages and speakers, and geographical extent (from Oregon to Panama). It is also one of the oldest families that is clearly established without dispute*” (Campbell 1997: 133). The family comprises almost thirty languages, some of which are dormant, and it can be further divided into Northern Uto-Aztecan, including Numic languages (e.g., Shoshone and Ute), and Southern Uto-Aztecan, with three main subfamilies: Pimic, Taracahitic (e.g., Tarahumara), and Corachol-Aztecan (e.g., Nahuatl). The first two subfamilies are sometimes called Sonoran. O'odham belongs to the Pimic family, together with Pima Bajo, Northern Tepehuan, Southern Tepehuan, and Tepecano.

Both dialectal varieties of O'odham (Tohono and Akimel) “*are well documented, with published dictionaries and grammars. A practical writing system is well established and some literary works have been published*” (Moseley 2007: 89). Apart from Zepeda's *A Tohono O'odham Grammar* (1983), there is the *Papago/Pima – English, English – Papago/Pima Dictionary* (1983) by Dean Saxton, Lucille Saxton, and Susie Enos.

Even though O'odham is one of the strongest Native American languages in the United States, it does not mean that its future is secure. As the statistics show (see above), the O'odham language shift to English (and to Spanish in Mexico) may well be slower than in other Native American language communities, but it is still an everyday reality. Without properly targeted and long-term maintenance activities, the number of fluent (Tohono) O'odham speakers would soon be significantly lower. Without the aid of exceptional personalities who have devoted their lives to safeguarding vanishing languages and their cultures, O'odham and many other native languages would quickly decline.

Ofelia Zepeda

Ofelia Zepeda (*1952) is a member of the Tohono O'odham Nation and is one of the most eminent personalities working for the benefit of indigenous ethnic groups in the American Southwest. She has been contributing to the Tohono O'odham language and cultural revitalization and actively participating in the revival programs of many other American Indian nations for around four decades. She has this to say about her early life:

"I am the daughter of farm workers and grew up in the small cotton-growing town of Stanfield, Arizona. A lot of O'odham lived there and they were usually related. In that way it was sort of like an O'odham village. We were required to work on weekends and all through the summer to have money to buy our school clothes and stuff like that... I hated manual labor because it's hard, hard work. I figured if I went to summer school I wouldn't have to work. [...] I enjoyed books and reading and pencils and all the accoutrements of school." (Zepeda 1997b: 447)

In later years, Zepeda's love of books and written words turned into more serious, professional interests and took her to the University of Arizona in Tucson, where she gained a master's degree and a doctorate in linguistics. After graduation, she became a faculty member at her *alma mater*, and she has taught there ever since, especially courses on the O'odham language, Native American linguistics, Native language education, indigenous literacies, and creative writing for native speakers of Southwest Indian languages. Currently she holds the chair of Regents' Professor of Linguistics and American Indian Studies. In 1999, Zepeda received the MacArthur Fellowship in recognition of her lifetime achievements in American Indian language education, maintenance, and renewal (see, for example, Granda-dillo – Orcutt-Gachiri 2011: 224).

Ofelia Zepeda's contribution to Native American languages and cultural renewal, that of the Tohono O'odham in particular, can be divided into four categories: (1) linguistic work, (2) pedagogy and activism, (3) poetry and creative writing, and (4) editorial activities. These activities should not be viewed as separate, as they overlap and complement each other. For instance, language revival is hardly possible without language-oriented activism. It can be also argued that the first category can be further subdivided into more subtle classifications such as language documentation, language policy, and so on. Nevertheless, in my opinion, the selected categories present Zepeda's accomplishments in a lucid and intelligible manner.

Linguistic work

Ofelia Zepeda's linguistic research work is in the form of language documentation and language revival theory and practice. In 1983, she published the first pedagogical grammar of the O'odham language, *A Tohono O'odham Grammar* (originally *A Papago Grammar*), in which the issues of the morphological and syntactic structures of Tohono O'odham are presented in the format of an accessible student-friendly textbook. The book material

“has been tested and refined in actual classroom application and has gone through a number of revisions in form and content based on this practical experience” (Zepeda 1983: xiv).

Furthermore, Zepeda’s “scholarship includes numerous published articles on the status of Native American languages, language policy and planning, and Native American linguistics and education” (in Zepeda 2008: 75), such as American Indian Language Policy (Zepeda 1990), School-Community-University Collaborations (McCarty – Yamamoto – Zepeda 1997), Indigenous Educators as Change Agents (McCarty – Yamamoto – Zepeda 2008), Indigenous Youth as Language Policy Makers (McCarty – Warhol – Zepeda 2009), The Condition of Native American Languages in the U.S. (Zepeda – Hill 1991) and Collaborative Sociolinguistic Research among the Tohono O’odham (Zepeda – Hill 1998). In collaboration with McCarty, Zepeda edited a special volume of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 132 (1998) entitled Indigenous Language Use and Change in the Americas.

Together with other specialists, including Matthias Brenzinger, Arienne Dwyer, Tjeerd de Graaf, Colette Grinevald, Michael E. Krauss, Osahito Miyaoka, Nicholas Ostler, Osamu Sakiyama, María Villalón, and Akira Yamamoto, she has been part of a UNESCO team of experts which prepares official methodological guidelines for mapping the language vitality of endangered languages. The results of related language vitality research by scholars from across the globe are continuously published in updated editions of the *UNESCO Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger*.

Pedagogy and activism

Since the beginning of her academic career, Zepeda has been active in transforming acquired linguistic expertise and research experience into pedagogical and revitalization-oriented tasks. Apart from teaching at the Department of Linguistics and the Department of American Indian Studies at the University of Arizona, she co-founded (and is now a director of) the American Indian Language Development Institute (AILDI). Over the years, AILDI has grown into an important and well-received organizing body for future educators of Native American languages, particularly from the American Southwest region.⁴ Participants in the summer workshops organized by the Institute often attend not only the language courses in the

4 Regarding the support of Native American languages from the American Southwest, it is also worth mentioning that Zepeda contributes to a radio program for native communities, which is entitled Desert Voices and broadcast by KUAT radio station (Tucson, University of Arizona). The program is produced in English and Tohono O’odham.

respective languages but they are also instructed in didactics (cf., Hinton 2008: 368).⁵

According to Ofelia Zepeda, three teaching and learning methods should be viewed as 'best practices' for successful language revitalization, namely, (1) the master-apprentice approach, (2) language and culture camps, and (3) immersion programs (Thomason 2015: 164). Although the number of methods is fewer than those proposed by Grenoble and Whaley (2006) or Hinton (2002), Zepeda agrees that the teaching should be primarily community-based and that languages should be learned within the proper cultural context. Luckily, the legal right of the Tohono O'odham and all American Indian nations to practice their traditional languages has been secured by the Native American Languages Act of 1990. Few people know that as an activist Zepeda played an important role in its enactment. This event took place only "a year after Congress established the National Museum of the American Indian" (see Haworth 2017: 31), where Zepeda is an Executive Board member.

Poetry and creative writing

When Ofelia Zepeda started to teach Tohono O'odham language courses, she soon learnt that what she and other teachers truly lacked was O'odham written language material. Since O'odham was typically a spoken language and O'odham speakers illiterate, in order to promote literacy she had to create her own body of literature. Some texts Zepeda came up with were mere transcriptions of interviews with O'odham elders and traditional O'odham songs. However, at the same time, she began to her write own creative verses.

Zepeda has authored three collections of poems to date: *Ocean Power* (1995), *Jewed'l-hoi / Earth Movements* (1997a), and *Where Clouds Are Formed* (2008). In all three books we find verses in English and in O'odham. Some poems are written only in English, other poems only in the O'odham language. Frequently, and in the case of *Jewed'l-hoi / Earth Movements*, in all instances readers are exposed to bilingual poetry, combining both languages. Sometimes the English text is just a poetic translation of the O'odham original (as in *Earth Movements*). Sometimes it functions on its own and has an independent role in the semantic structure of the poem (as in O'odham Dances).

5 AILDI has recently offered the following courses: Linguistics for Native American Communities, Master Apprentice Immersion Methods, and Writing about Our Language Work (taught by Ofelia Zepeda).

Formally speaking, Zepeda's poetry is inspired by traditional Tohono O'odham oratory songs (see *Pulling Down the Clouds*) and mythology (e.g., Wind). It is interesting that there is no word for poetry in Tohono O'odham. If a text is in the form of a poem, it is called *ha-cegi'todag*, literally "thoughts" (cf., Zepeda 2019: 8). Zepeda's shorter poems do indeed resemble thoughts, as can be illustrated by the lines from the poems *One-Sided Conversation* (1) and *Mornings Air* (2), both from *Ocean Power* (1995: 53, 65):

(1)
*He is hard of hearing,
 and so am I.
 He only hears part of what I say,
 and I miss half of what he says.
 So we overcompensate and talk twice as much,
 with the hope that we may capture the whole.*

(2)
*The early morning air,
 enveloped in heavy moisture.
 I go outside and it lays on my shoulders.
 I go about my business,
 carrying the morning air
 for the rest of the day.*

On the other hand, Zepeda is well acquainted with contemporary poetry and many of her poems are modern, both formally and thematically. A large number can be found in Zepeda's most recent book of poetry *Where Clouds Are Formed* (2008), in the final section of the collection entitled *How to End a Season*.

In my view, the most significant aspect of Zepeda's poetry is its environmental dimension. It contains verses about the Tohono O'odham land, the Sonoran Desert, the sacred mountains and saguaro cactuses, the seasonal rains and floods, and the ocean somewhere in the distance. The poems narrate stories of the intimate relationship between people and the natural environment they were destined to call home. The author even portrays the topics of environmental and social injustice the Tohono O'odham and other indigenous inhabitants of the American Southwest have been exposed to, such as the loss of water resources due to increasing water consumption in Tucson area and the fact that the ancestral O'odham territory was broken into two (Mexican and Arizonian) halves, which, among other things, prevents O'odham people from visiting their relatives living across the border.

Zepeda's creative writing has also appeared in various anthologies and journals, such as *Returning the Gift* (1994), *Poetry of the West* (1996), *Fever Dreams* (1997), *Reinventing the Enemy's Language* (1997), and *A Narrative Compass* (2009). Furthermore, her poems can be also found in two publications released by Heard Museum in Phoenix, namely, *Rain* (2000) and *Home* (2005), both edited by Ann Marshall.

Editorial work

As previously mentioned, from the very beginning Zepeda recognized the significance of “*creative writing to the goals toward which she and other Native American linguists are striving. If literacy is essential in the effort to define a central and persisting educational role for a language, then creative writing is also an essential ingredient*” (Hale 2019: 79). It is for this reason that she has collaborated on various projects aimed at enlarging the body of contemporary O'odham written texts.

One of the greatest successes in this field was the publication of Tohono O'odham and Akimel O'odham poetry in the collection entitled *When It Rains / Mat Hekid O Ju*. The verses in the book were written by the participants of the AILDI Summer Workshop of 1980 held in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The collection of 32 bilingual poems (O'odham / English) was edited by Ofelia Zepeda and released two years later. To inform the public about the new publication, AILDI organized a poetry reading on the Tohono O'odham Indian Nation reservation. “*The event was the first poetry reading of contemporary O'odham and English poetry on the reservation*” (Zepeda 2019: 97) and was a significant moment in the history of promoting and revitalizing the O'odham language and culture. In 2019, the anthology was republished, which bears testimony to the fact that its importance has not diminished.

Another important project, which is still in progress and helps to promote Southwestern and other native languages, is the Sun Tracks Native American Book Series issued by the University of Arizona. Zepeda is the series chief editor and as such she has contributed to the publication of many outstanding works of literature, both fiction and non-fiction. The series often publishes bilingual texts as can be seen in the collection *Home Places* (1995). This book was prepared as a celebration of 20 years of the Sun Tracks series, of which Zepeda was an editor.

Conclusion

As the famous linguist Ken Hale once noted: “*Linguistic and cultural pluralism is essential to ensuring the fullest possible expression of the human intellectual capac-*

ity” (Hale 2019: 77). Ofelia Zepeda, one of the most acclaimed of Ken Hale’s students, has been contributing to the protection and cultivation of linguistic and cultural diversity of North America in many important ways. For more than forty years, she has studied Tohono O’odham and has searched for the most effective forms of teaching the language. Working with O’odham speakers across generations, she has been motivating them not only to use their ancestral tongue orally in both traditional and modern cultural contexts, but in writing as well.

Interestingly, Zepeda has herself gradually become one of the greatest native writers of her generation, with three unique books of verses to her credit. Zepeda’s first collection of poems, *Ocean Power*, was translated into the Czech language in 2019 (under the title *Síla oceánu*), which has given the Czech audience an exceptional opportunity to read modern American Indian poetry. The book was translated by Ivana Klima (1946) and Daniela Simon (1946), two Czech-born emigrants to the United States, who learned about Ofelia Zepeda and her creative writing as part of their interest in Native Americans.

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