

Reviewed by Idalia Nunez

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“Native peoples have never been passive recipients of oppressive federal policies” (McCarty, p. 44); this quotation resonates throughout Teresa L. McCarty’s work, *Language Planning and Policy in Native America: History, Theory, Praxis*. The book provides an assessment of the social, historical and political contexts that have been negotiated and contested as Native American communities have worked to revitalize their languages and reaffirm their culture and identity. A testimonial of the struggles of Native communities, McCarty’s work highlights on the

role of tribal sovereignty in pursuit of recovery and decolonization.

McCarty uses ethnographic methods with a sociohistorical and cultural lens to show how language planning and policies cannot be separated from either established societal power structures or their impact on Native American communities. In addition, she explains her positionality in this process, conscious of her privileged position as an educated White woman with 30 years of experience in the field of American Indian education as a curriculum developer, teacher, and program coordinator. To support her claims, McCarty draws from interview data, observations, formal documents, photographs, legislative cases, previously conducted case studies, and other extensive data sources. In addition, she includes the collaboration of Daryl Baldwin, George Ironstrack and Julie Olds whose perspectives and experiences as Myaamia (Miami) language revitalizers provide insight into the multiple, strategic ways that they approached language regeneration and recovery within their own families and communities. However, what makes McCarty’s work even more unique is that she provides a space and a voice to individuals from Indigenous communities that have traditionally been silenced and oppressed. The oral accounts shared by young adults from Indigenous communities provide evidence and offer a rich in-depth description of the self-determination and empowerment they embody in hopes of reclaiming their culture.

Language Planning and Policy is divided into seven chapters that investigate language planning and policy, education policies, and social practices from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. McCarty begins by providing descriptive statistics to illustrate the declining number of languages and language speakers, a threat to Native communities. However, while she indicates the focus of the book is on the United States and to a lesser extent the Canadian context, the book does not address other regions populated by Indigenous communities. A broader, global view of language policies could provide the reader with a better understanding of how they shape the social practices elsewhere.
From the demographic portrait of Indigenous language communities in the U.S., McCarty then illustrates how, historically, language policies have produced social and educational inequities and have caused the endangerment of Native American languages in the U.S. McCarty then describes ethnographic methodology and introduces *The Safety Zone* theory to illustrate the sociopolitical and historical efforts of language policies that situate Native American cultures and beliefs as either deviant or acceptable to the norm. She uses *The Safety Zone* theory to effectively frame the remaining chapters, portraying the dynamic relationship between the language policies’ aims and the resistant efforts by Indigenous communities.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6, are the core and essence of this book; McCarty focuses on individual, family, and community desires, as well as grass-roots efforts to reclaim, regenerate, and revitalize Indigenous languages, cultures, and identities within the sociolinguistic contexts of daily life. She does this by sharing the space with language revitalizers and by enabling the voices of the youth and young adults from Indigenous communities be heard. However, this section would have benefitted from a wider representation of Indigenous communities; oral accounts drew primarily from the Navajo community, and the youngest members at that. Relatively few elders, school administrators, and board members are included, and these individuals play important roles in the implementation of language policies and implementation. In the final chapter, McCarty addresses current education policies and their ongoing impact on Indigenous communities and their languages, illustrating her argument with findings from her work.

Throughout *Language Planning and Policy*, McCarty argues that “language policies are neither historically or socially neutral” (p.40), they cannot be separated from the sociopolitical and historical context much less the impact they have had on Native communities. Even though *Language Planning & Policy* lacks broad Indigenous representation, McCarty effectively argues that Indigenous people and communities have challenged and will continue to challenge the societal inequities through driving “grass-roots” efforts to revitalize and regenerate their language, culture and identity, at both the individual and collective levels. However, one of the most important findings is that
the spaces for agency Native communities create facilitate the implementation of strong, additive bilingual-bicultural programs, curricula, and schools. These programs and processes ultimately increase academic and individual success, bolstering findings from prior studies that show gains for minority groups in bilingual, bicultural, or biliteracy additive programs (Bialystock, 2007; Reyes, 2012; De la luz Reyes, 2012; Gort, 2008; Hu, Xiaoming, & Xiuping, 2012).

In *Language Planning and Policy*, McCarty contributes to the growing field of language policy and planning and sociolinguistics focusing attention on the linguistic trajectories of Native communities, which have often been overlooked in the research community. McCarty advocates for language policies that will support Native communities in their language revitalization and maintenance efforts, and she shows how language policies have impacted and shaped social practices while also challenging perceptions of the current youth generation as disinterested in cultural continuance. *Language Planning and Policy* gives space to first-hand accounts of language revitalizers and a voice to the current generation of Indigenous youth who hope to be agents of change for their communities. More importantly, she proposes a new theory to explain how language shift operates in a political environment that implicitly and explicitly distinguishes between the Native practices and beliefs that are considered “safe” and tolerable by the dominant society, and those that are considered sufficiently “different” to be marked as dangerous and thus prohibited. *The Safety Zone* serves as both a metaphor and a theoretical framing throughout the book. This intriguing theory needs to be used, tested and applied in other research to validate its applicability to the field of language planning and policy.

Ultimately, *Language Planning and Policy* will serve as a valuable resource for scholars interested in establishing research agendas in language policy and planning, education policy, or work with Indigenous communities. McCarty’s theoretical framework provides a resource for understanding how language policy shapes and is shaped by Indigenous communities. *Language Planning and Policy* will be useful for policymakers, language planners and school administrators who develop and implement legislation and educational policies in support of Native
communities’ language revitalization and reclamation efforts, if not tribal sovereignty. McCarty’s work is also applicable for activists and educators, as language arbiters and implementers, interested in advocating for Indigenous students, and in understanding the complexities of language, culture, and identity in Native communities. Teresa L. McCarty, as a professor and researcher, successfully presents her argument in an attempt to better understand the inequities facing Native communities. McCarty (2013) proves that language policies are not neutral. More importantly, in our English-only society, Language Planning and Policy in Native America: History, Theory, Praxis is an important reminder of the need for social justice.

References


About the Reviewer

Idalia Nunez was born in Mexico, but raised most of her life in a small, border-town in the Rio Grande Valley, Roma, TX. She began her college education at the University of Texas Pan American, where she earned a Bachelors Degree in Interdisciplinary Studies with a specialization in Bilingual Education. In San Antonio, Texas, she worked as an elementary bilingual educator for three years and at the same time earned her Masters degree in Reading and Literacy at the University of Texas San
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