

**INTERGENERATIONAL DISJUNCTURES IN THE DENE THA FIRST
NATION OF NORTHERN ALBERTA: ADULTS' NOSTALGIA AND
YOUTHS' 'COUNTER-NARRATIVES' ON LANGUAGE
REVITALIZATION**

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes generational differences that create social and linguistic ‘disjunctures’ (Meek 2010) influencing revitalization ideologies among members of the Dene Tha First Nation of northern Alberta. Unlike many First Nations people in Canada, most Dene Tha adults still speak their language, Dene Dháh, the Dene language, fluently. Individual fluency among younger generations, however, varies as language shift to English has begun to affect the extent to which children learn and use Dene Dháh. Dene adults and Elders observe increasing disinterest among younger people in maintaining their heritage language and culture, and they often contrast these observations with their own experiences of learning about traditional customs and values. Nostalgia for the past, and romanticizing a “proper” Dene way of living and behaviour, is commonplace among older generations of the Dene Tha. I argue that, although young people are criticized for their disinterest in the Dene language and culture, their narratives, which I describe as ‘counter-narratives’ following McCarty et al. (2006), suggest deeply felt concerns about the future of their language and culture. In particular, youth are developing eclectic ways of blending traditional culture and contemporary practices that may not necessarily fit with “proper” Dene ways, as understood by Elders. Their ‘counter-narratives’ instead reveal youths’ interest in maintaining and ‘modernizing’ their own language and culture.

PREFACE

This research was approved by the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board. The number of the ethics certificate is H10-00758. The principal investigator is Dr. Patrick Moore and the co-investigator is Daria Boltokova. None of the parts of this MA thesis have been previously published.

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DEDICATION

Таптыыр, саныыр, ахтар эбээм сырдык кэриэһигэр аныыбын.

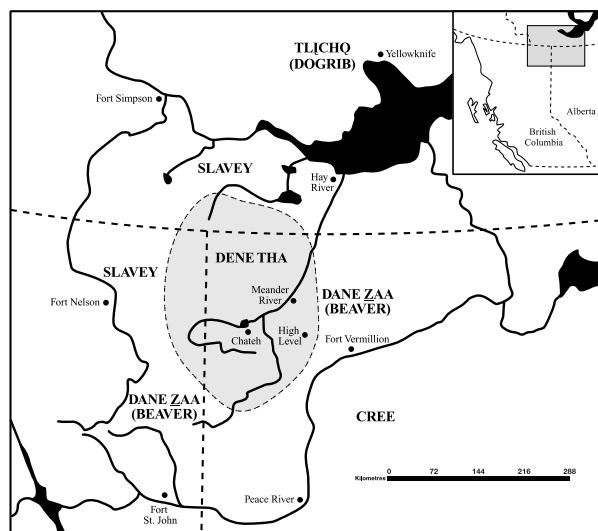
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Language shift and language loss are key concerns for linguists and for indigenous communities whose heritage languages are endangered. In many indigenous communities the numbers of fluent speakers are rapidly declining (Field and Kroskrity 2009). Macro-sociopolitical changes including urbanization, migration, and integration with the contemporary market economy have been identified as major factors that have facilitated language shift in many speech communities (Edwards 1992, Hale and Hinton 2001, Zepeda and Hill 1991). Later research however, has insisted on the importance of internal factors, such as beliefs and attitudes towards one's language, as major factors effecting language shift (Kroskrity 1998, Silverstein 1979, Woolard 1998). Researchers argue that it is only through these "interpretive beliefs" that macro-sociopolitical changes have an effect on language shift and maintenance (Woolard 1998: 16). Such beliefs described in terms of language ideology are thus crucial components of any complete analysis of language revitalization efforts (Field and Kroskrity 2009).

Since language ideology is an inherently plural concept and varies among (and within) different indigenous communities, it is important to examine language ideologies individually in each community to achieve successful language revitalization. In my thesis I will explore differing language ideologies in the Dene Tha First Nation¹ of northern Alberta, Canada. In particular, I will focus on generational sociolinguistic differentiations that lead to a 'disjuncture' (Meek 2010) or a discontinuity of linguistic knowledge. I argue that, although young people are criticized for their disinterest in the Dene language and culture, they show emerging concerns about the future of their heritage language. In particular, youth are developing eclectic ways of blending traditional culture and contemporary linguistic practices that may not necessarily fit with "proper" Dene ways, as understood by adults and Elders. The language ideologies of Dene Tha youth ultimately reveal their interest in maintaining and modernizing their own language and culture.

In the following sections I will first identify language shift and loss as a sociolinguistic problem (Gal 1995), and engage with a wider scholarly debate about language ideology focusing on dominant and contested language ideologies and their effect on language shift. Then I will discuss the concepts of ‘counterdiscourses’ (Hill 1998), ‘counter-narratives’ (McCarty et al. 2006), and ‘sociolinguistic disjunctures’ (Meek 2010) and use them in my own analysis. My data are primarily drawn from research conducted in June, 2010 and December 2011 in Chateh, Alberta, one of the three Dene Tha reserves. I also make use of my fieldnotes which I conducted during my long term interactions as a co-investigator for the “Dene Tha Language and Culture Project” with Dene adults who worked as language consultants for the project and who also participated in the Dene language class that was facilitated via video-conferencing by my supervisor Dr. Patrick Moore at the University of British Columbia. Ultimately, I hope that my research will contribute to the growing ethnographically based literature on language ideology and language revitalization.

Figure 1. Location of the Dene Tha homeland



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CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Language Shift and Loss: Sociolinguistic vs. Biological Models

The phenomenon of language shift refers to “a situation in which a community of speakers effectively abandons one language by “shifting” to another (not necessarily by conscious choice)” (Garrett 2004:63). It is often difficult to trace the process of language shift since it is a slow cumulative process that occurs over many years. According to Joshua A. Fishman, one has to spend several years collecting linguistic analysis in order to accurately determine how language shift occurs (Fishman 1991:40).

It is similarly difficult to determine the causes of language shift. Nancy Dorian points out that while we may understand the motivating macro-sociopolitical factors of language shift we cannot “understand the psychological underpinnings of long-sustained language maintenance” (Dorian 1998:17). It is inaccurate to assume that there is a direct causal relationship between macro-sociopolitical factors and language shift without considering psychological factors expressed in individual agency and the lived experiences of speakers. The complexity of the situation where language shift occurs needs to be analyzed taking into consideration both the social milieu of the language (or its ‘ecology’) and psychological as well as cultural factors (Haarmann quoted in Diarmait Mac Giolla, 2003: 46).

Finally, ‘before and after’ points of language shift (or when language started and finished shifting to another language) are also problematic since the phenomenon of language shift is a slow process without a rigidly defined time frame (Fishman 1991: 40). According to Don Kulick, however, “languages cannot be said to be shifting until it can be established that children are no longer learning them” (Kulick 1997:12). In his detailed documentation of the process of language shift in Gapun, a small Papua New Guinean village, Kulick focuses on the socialization of the first generation of nonvernacular speaking children and the interactional patterns between parents and children. He argues that the speakers’ interpretations of their social world and their

understanding of the self, children, and language play a decisive role in determining why speakers shift from one language to another. Instead of habitually referring to macro-sociopolitical factors as the main causes of language shift, Kulick focuses his research on intergenerational interactions between parents and children.

Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine (2007) consider intergenerational discontinuity of language in more critical terms: they see it as one of the main ‘reasons’ of language death. They argue that “[language] death occurs when one language replaces another over its entire functional range, and parents no longer transmit the language to their children” (Nettle and Romaine 2000:7). Language shifts often, but not always entail “the attrition or decline of the language away from which speakers are shifting” (Dorian 1989 in Garrett 2004:64). Unlike language shift, which denotes the process of language displacement by another (often dominant) language (Nicholls 2005, 166 in McCarty and Zepeda, 2006 32), language loss “refers to the attrition of specific language skills such as knowledge of grammar and vocabulary or more general “frustration with the language” which in some cases results in language ‘death’” (Kouritzen 1999, 18 in McCarty and Zepeda, 2006 32). Language shift and language loss are thus closely related but not interchangeable.

‘Language death’, ‘language suicide’, ‘language genocide’ and ‘language extinction’ are a few terms that are used to describe language loss in the literature (Nettle and Romaine 2000:7). In “*Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World’s Languages*” Nettle and Romaine argue that biological metaphors such as ‘death’ and ‘extinction’ are appropriate because “languages are ultimately connected with humans, [their] cultures, and [their] environment” (Nettle and Romaine 2000:6). They argue that using metaphors based on the way biologists describe species makes sense because languages are not abstract entities and cannot be self-sustained without humans (Nettle and Romaine 2000:6).

Other linguists and linguistic anthropologists have also compared loss of linguistic

diversity with the loss of biological or zoological diversity and urged communities and other interested groups to ‘save’ the endangered languages from their ultimate ‘death’ (Hale 1992, Krauss 1992, Kymlicka and Patten 2003). Like Nettle and Romaine, linguist Ken Hale argued that “the process (of loss of cultural and intellectual diversity) is not unrelated to the simultaneous loss of diversity in the zoological and botanical worlds” and suggested that the “ecological analogy is not altogether inappropriate” (Hale 1992:1). With a similar analogy in mind, Michael Krauss provocatively asked why “we mourn the loss of Eyak or Ubykh [Native Alaskan languages] any less than the loss of the panda or California condor” (Krauss 1992:8). Krauss’s intention in his article “*The World’s Languages in Crisis*” was to urge linguists to be as alarmed about endangered languages as biologists are about endangered species. Krauss asserted that languages that are no longer learned by children are “doomed to extinction, like species lacking reproductive capacity” (Krauss 1992:4). Using terms applied to biological extinction, languages have also been categorized as “threatened”, “moribund”, “obsolescent”, or “extinct” (Krauss 1992, Florey 2009).

While such dramatic analogies served to make the issue public and attract support, they did not help to encourage people to learn and speak their heritage languages. Moreover, they create unnecessary stereotypes about perceived weakness of the language, which diminishes its prestige among speakers. As argued by Jane H. Hill in her essay “‘Expert Rhetorics’ in *Advocacy for Endangered Languages: Who Is Listening, and What Do They Hear?*” (2002), advocates for endangered languages should direct their concerns at exploring “the human specifics of endangered-language communities” instead of creating ‘dramatic’ themes in scholarly debates. Research on language shift should also necessarily include multiple voices of “community language workers, speakers and other members of local groups who are both participants and overhearers in a global conversation about language endangerment” (Hill 2002:129).

The juxtaposition of the endangerment of linguistic diversity with the endangerment of biological or zoological diversity also downplays the very core of the problem of language shift and loss. As Susan Gal argues “language loss is a sociolinguistic, cultural and political economic process of some complexity, it is historically variable and its mechanisms bear little relation to those of biological extinction” (Gal 1995:132). To attempt to reverse language shift (RLS, Fishman 1991), one needs to know the socio-political and cultural context of language shift and what people think about their heritage language (more specifically, how language ideologies affect their linguistic practices). In the following two sections I will first explore the growing literature on language ideology and then identify the theories that I will use to frame my analysis of the experiences of the Dene Tha people in northern Alberta.

2.2 Language Ideology

Because of the importance of language ideology for language shift, it is essential to consider the way this concept has been used and its relation to other concepts in linguistic anthropology. According to linguistic anthropologist Kathryn Woolard, one significant theoretically coherent body of work that deals with the issue of language ideology originates in Michael Silverstein’s idea of metapragmatics. She explains that it “encompasses implicit and explicit commentary on and signaling about language-in-use” (Woolard 1998:4). More specifically, it concentrates on the relation of linguistic ideology to linguistic structures and describes strategies of language use. In *Language Structure and Linguistic Ideology* (1979) Silverstein defined language ideology as “any sets of beliefs about language articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (Silverstein 1979:193). According to this definition, language ideologies are conceived as ‘dictating’ or shaping (in a less deterministic way) strategies of language use, and influence speakers’ decisions (whether conscious or unconscious) about what language to choose in order to

converse in both public and private domains.

The genealogy of the concept of language ideology stretches far beyond Silverstein's definition (quoted in virtually every scholarly work on language ideology). Benjamin Whorf's principles of linguistic relativity² dealt with the same dialectic of ideology and structure in the realm of language (1956). In particular, Whorf's hypothesis of linguistic relativity suggests that linguistic structures shape the way speakers perceive or classify the experienced world and influence the individual actions of people in daily life. As argued by Silverstein, the most valuable insight in Whorf's work in relation to a structure-ideology dialectical process is its proposal of a principled relationship between language grammatical structure and "an ideology of reference, [that is], an understanding at the conceptual level of how...language represents 'nature'" (Silverstein 1979:202). In addition to its referential functions however, Silverstein argues, that language also has creative or "performative" functions, which enable speakers not only to refer to the reality 'out there' or speak about it but also "presuppose (or reflect) and create (or fashion) a good deal of social reality by the very activity of using the language" (Silverstein 1979:194). In other words Silverstein broadened Whorf's principle of linguistic relativity by extending the referential value of grammatical categories to their indexical pragmatic qualities. By "indexical quality of speech forms", Silverstein means a "functional" quality of language to distribute particular forms in certain contexts of use where these forms serve as "specifically linguistic indicators (or indices) differentially pointing to (or indexing) configurations of contextual features" (Silverstein 1979:206). For example, Silverstein argues that any occurrence of speech indexes (or identifies) an individual as a speaker, confirming that "any linguistic configuration is potentially indexical" (Silverstein 1979:206). Along with the indexical quality of speech Silverstein also identifies "pragmatics", the ways that context, including knowledge of the world, contributes to meaning, as being an important "analytic domain of language," (Silverstein 1979:207). It is in this domain that language connects with

“other systems that form the universe of social praxis” (Silverstein 1979:207). Utterances that describe the pragmatic functions of language Silverstein calls “metapragmatic”.

This distinction of two notions of “function”, the indexical functions of language, and the related pragmatic functions, ultimately brings Silverstein to consider the “native pragmatic ideology, expressed in metapragmatic theories or ethno-metapragmatics” (Silverstein 1979:207). By this he means the rationalizations of ‘the natives’ about their language use and structure. Unlike Franz Boas who privileged abstract (scholarly) linguistic categories and structures over “secondary explanations” or native rationalizations about language use (Handler 1990:257), Silverstein argues that native rationalizations expressed in language ideologies matter and what’s more, influence existing practices of language use and structure.³

Silverstein’s understanding of ideology resembles Pierre Bourdieu’s explication of *doxa*, that is, a self-evident view taken for granted and used as a justification or rationalization of existing practices (Bourdieu 1977:164). Bourdieu uses the term *doxa* to refer to the experience that makes natural and social world appear as self-evident (Bourdieu 1977:164). According to Bourdieu, in the doxic “natural world” which is taken for granted, established cosmological and political order is not perceived as arbitrary and is hardly ever challenged (Bourdieu 1977:166).

Likewise, language ideology once established among speakers is rarely disputed because it becomes internalized in agents’ dispositions. They become doxic internal bodily dispositions which are then involved in “the production of a common sense world” (Bourdieu 1977:80). This common sense world is ‘possible’ because it makes linguistic practices “without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be nonetheless “sensible” and “reasonable”; it is where everybody thinks they know what they are doing but what they are doing has more meaning than they know (Bourdieu 1977:79).

In his analysis of Arizona Tewa kiva speech Kroskrity subtly demonstrates this similarity between Bourdieu’s *doxa* and Silverstein’s definition of language ideology. He argues that the

role of Arizona Tewa kiva speech as a “‘prestige model’ for everyday verbal conduct is not publicly challenged and seldom enters members’ discursive consciousness” because it is successfully “naturalized” in beliefs and practices of the Arizona Tewa (Kroskrity 1998:117). According to Kroskrity, it is this “taken for grantedness” of kiva speech, which is “the speech performed in religious chambers when sacred ceremonial altars are erected,” that forms the basis of the dominant language ideology of the Arizona Tewa (Kroskrity 1998:105). Aligning himself with the Arizona Tewa and their worldview, Kroskrity suggests that for Tewa speakers not all language ideologies are debatable or subject to discussion. As much as it sounds theoretically sophisticated to claim that all language ideologies must be contending, Kroskrity argues, researchers must be vigilant to members’ awareness about their language and discursive practices and not rely exclusively on their expert knowledge (Kroskrity 1998:118).

By privileging dominant language ideologies, Kroskrity enters into an ongoing scholarly debate that explores the unresolved tension between dominant and contested language ideologies. As noted by Kathryn A. Woolard, the core of this tension stems from the scholars’ disagreement on “alternate sitings of ideology”: “between subjectively explicit and constructively implicit (immanent) versions” (Woolard 1998:9). To put it simply, the question is whether language ideologies are unconsciously reproduced or consciously constructed. If the former, they are likely dominant, if the latter then they are likely contested. Charles L. Briggs, in particular, opposes Kroskrity’s idea of truly dominant language ideologies and asserts that “beliefs about language are multiple, competing, contradictory and contested” (Briggs 1992:398-400 quoted by Kroskrity). Contrasting Warao women’s wailing with an exchange of gossip between two Warao men, Briggs highlights the importance of age, gender, and social status in shaping the way that linguistic ideologies are constructed. Briggs argues that language ideologies “are contested within the social formations and sites in which people produce and receive discourse” (Briggs 1998:230). Observing one particular instance of discursive interaction – a

gossip exchange between two older Warao male curers – Briggs is able to reveal the extent to which competing ideologies are delegitimized through speakers’ discursive practices. In contrast with Kroskrity, who assumes that naturalized dominant language ideologies are often immune to the “discursive consciousness” of a speaker group (Kroskrity 1998:117), Briggs asserts that “contestation is a crucial facet of how particular ideologies and practices come to be dominant” (Briggs 1998:249).

To further assert his point Briggs argues that it is nearly impossible for the indigenous communities that have undergone major social changes in a relatively short period of time to avoid the complex and contested array of ideologies imposed by outside agencies such as missionaries, schoolteachers, bureaucrats and politicians (Briggs 1998:248). In other words, only through such ideological contestations can dominant ideologies become established in speakers’ dispositions and take an ‘active’ role in reproduction of a “common sense world” (Bourdieu 1977:80). In *New Technologies and Contested Ideologies: The Tagish FirstVoices Project* Patrick Moore and Kate Hennessy (2006) documented the conceptualization of “an Indigenous language ideology” in the development of the Tagish website. They observed how the Tagish FirstVoices team of Elders and young community members challenged the assumed central roles of outside agencies, such as the Yukon Native Language Centre, in the revitalization of the Tagish language by implementing their own language ideologies. Using digital technologies the Tagish website team was able to gain control over the representation of their language (and culture) and construct ideologies that were used to restore and repatriate their linguistic and cultural heritage. This process of conscious construction of language ideologies in the Tagish First Voices Project (described by some as a “manipulation of language ideologies” (Loether 2009:239)) suggests new unconventional ways to support locally based language revitalization efforts.

In sum, although Kroskrity, Briggs, and Moore and Hennessy have different approaches to analyzing the ‘nature’ of language ideologies – whether it is dominant or contested (conscious or unconscious), they are all ultimately concerned with how ideologies affect language maintenance and shift in a speaker community. While Kroskrity believes that there are dominant language ideologies widely shared by a community, Briggs argues that language ideologies are contentious and complex. Moore and Hennessy on the other hand, building on the discussion between Kroskrity and Briggs, argue that local control facilitates conceptualization of an Indigenous language ideology that is positively (and consciously) used in language revitalization.

In particular, the disagreement between Kroskrity and Briggs lies in that Kroskrity deals with already established language ideology, that is, ritualized Tewa kiva speech, while Briggs focuses on the process of how different language ideologies become dominant through contestation and negotiation. Taken together, these scholars reveal that language ideologies are exceedingly intricate constructs that are, on the one hand, consciously created by the speakers as a rationalization or justification of their perceived language use and structure and, on the other hand, unconsciously reproduced by the same speakers once contestation over the delegitimization of a dominant ideology is established.

Overall, language studies confirm the extent to which language ideologies affect peoples’ everyday lives, including such crucial decisions as their choice of languages. Understanding how language ideologies operate in speech communities is important in determining the causes of language shift and advancing efforts to reverse it. The literature on language ideology is useful for my research for understanding how the competing ideologies and practices of the Dene Tha First Nation affect language shift in the community. I focus on emerging discourses of young Dene Tha to reveal how they challenge the dominant language ideologies of older generations to reassert their interest in the future of their heritage language. In particular, I use the concepts of

‘counterdiscourses’ (Hill 1998) and ‘counternarratives’ (McCarty and Zepeda 2006) as well as ‘sociolinguistic disjunctures’ (Meek 2010) to develop my argument as discussed below.

2.3 ‘Counterdiscourses,’ ‘Counter-Narratives’ and ‘Sociolinguistic Disjunctures’

Where there is power, there is resistance
Michel Foucault (1990:95)

The concepts of ‘counterdiscourses,’ ‘counter-narratives’ and ‘sociolinguistic disjunctures’ represent interruptions or contradictions that create challenges to “shared bodies of commonsense notions about the nature of language in the world” (Rumsey 1990:346 in Woolard 1998:4). In practice, they have an important role to play in language maintenance and revitalization efforts, as they influence power dynamics in a speaker community and have a potential to transform dominant language ideologies they question. In the following, I first explore the concepts of ‘counterdiscourses’ and ‘counter-narratives’ and their relation to my research, then proceed to the discussion of ‘sociolinguistic disjunctures’ which I will use to describe the multiplicity of language ideologies in the Dene Tha community (Meek 2010).

According to Jane Hill, ‘counterdiscourses’ or oppositional discourses, “undermine the terms of the linguistic ideology, constituting an interruption of the idea that particular forms of language are inextricably linked to particular forms of social order” (Hill 1998:69). In the Mexicano community of the Malinche Volcano region, such counterdiscourses emerged as interruptions to the discourse of nostalgia that linked the Mexicano language to social forms of the past, especially for respect, while Spanish was linked to disrespect. Hill observes that the discourse of nostalgia was a dominant language ideology that was “universally interpretable” in the Mexicano communities (Hill 1998:69). Central to this discourse of nostalgia is a belief that *in achto* or in the past “language was unmixed; no one knew, or needed to know, *castilla* ‘Spanish’

but instead spoke *puro mexicano*” (Hill 1998:68). “Today there is no respect” (*āxān āmo cah respēto*) is a usual complaint that the Mexicano make.

While this complaint was widely known in the Mexicano communities, not everybody produced it. Hill argues that it was primarily produced by relatively successful men in the local hierarchy but not a single woman was nostalgic about the past. Hill explains this divide among speakers of Mexicano in terms of political ideology since “‘linguistic ideology’ is obviously part of a ‘political ideology’” and cannot be taken separately from the ‘politics’ that exists in the community (Hill 1998:83). To be specific, the discourse of nostalgia was primarily produced by “high-status men” because they saw some benefits in the type of social affairs that the discourse of nostalgia invoked. While women and “low-status men” contested the discourse of nostalgia because they noticed positive improvements in their lives ‘today’ and argued that ‘old days’ were a lot harder.

Articulating these counterdiscourses both women and “low-status men” challenged the dominant ideology of nostalgia produced by “high-status men.” They were interrupting a continuous regularity of the dominant language ideology while existing within its linguistic-ideological matrix where the discourse of nostalgia was recognized and “universally interpreted” by everyone. For the Mexicano language, the discourse of nostalgia that linked Mexicano to respect and Spanish to disrespect had an undesirable effect. It discouraged the potential speakers of Mexicano who were mostly women and “low-status men” from speaking the language since *legítimo mexicano* (Mexicano without Spanish loan words) became an important metonym of the order of “respect” in the discourse of nostalgia which they rejected (Hill 1998:83).

Counterdiscourses in such situations aim to challenge (whether explicitly or implicitly) dominant linguistic ideology in language contact outcomes. In particular, counterdiscourses problematize the semiotic process of *iconization* in which linguistic features become essentialized as iconic representations of the identities of a speech community (Irvine and Gal

2000:403). As discussed above, in the Mexicano community counterdiscourses undermined the discourse of nostalgia, which iconically connected the Mexicano language to respect while Spanish was associated with disrespect.

Iconization is one of the three semiotic processes that Judith T Irvine and Susan Gal use to describe how people construct ideological representations of linguistic differences.⁴ According to Irvine and Gal, both outsiders and insiders have a tendency to refer to linguistic features as a social group's inherent nature or essence (Irvine and Gal 2000:403). For example, Margaret Field observes the tendency to reduce 'Navajo-ness' both by Navajo and non-Navajo to something homogenous and simplistic while it is "inherently multiple, emergent and contentious" (Field 2009:40). In my own research with the Dene Tha, *iconization* is commonly conveyed by Dene Tha adults. They argue that youth nowadays are not interested in learning and speaking the Dene language and interpret this as an inherent characteristic of most young people. Often they contrast youth's behaviour with their own behaviour in the past when they all spoke Dene Dháh (Dene language) and practiced traditional ways of living. Nostalgia for the past and certain ideological underpinnings associated with the past are common in such discourses. Youth's narratives, however, reveal that they are genuinely concerned with the future of the Dene language and express their interest in learning it.

In *Reclaiming the Gift: Indigenous Youth Counter-Narratives on Native Language Loss and Revitalization* Teresa L. McCarty, Mary Eunice Romero and Ofelia Zepeda observe similar counterdiscourses expressed by the Navajo youth. Instead of using the term 'counterdiscourses' however, they identify them as 'counter-narratives.' Counter-narratives, according to McCarty et al. "challenge the dominant culture, language, and ideology [and] reassert cultural ties" (Gilmore and Smith in McCarty et al 2006:31). Like counterdiscourses, counter narratives "resist or counter ...taken-for-granted assumptions" about language and question ideological assessments of youth by Navajo adults and Elders (McCarty et al. 2006:31). As in the Dene Tha community,

Navajo adults, teachers at Beautiful Mountain High School in particular, underestimate youth's knowledge of and interest in the Navajo language. They think students do not care about the Navajo language or disrespect it. Young Navajo say, "Elders say we're lost youth" because they assume that youth are not interested in traditional Navajo practices (Jonathan, interview, May 2004 McCarty et al. 2006:39, 42).

McCarty et al. however, argue that these iconic representations of youth by Navajo adults need a "more nuanced and complex interpretation" (McCarty et al. 2006:39). Scholars note that contrary to adults' assessment, "most youth in [their] study indicated that they value the Native language, view it as central to their identities, want and expect parents to teach it to them" (McCarty et al. 2006:43). During the interviews youth at Beautiful Mountain High School said that the presence of caring adults who would be willing to teach Navajo language and culture was critical for the intergenerational transmission and revitalization of the Navajo language.

McCarty et al. suggest that Navajo youth testimony (or their counter-narratives) should not be reduced to "illustrations of simple intergenerational misunderstanding or, more simplistically, to conventionally renderings of adolescent rebellion or 'problem behaviour'" (McCarty et al. 2006:31). Instead, they argue, it reflects "evolving *contemporary* causes of language loss among the young and the role of Indigenous languages within their lives and aspirations, and their senses of self" (McCarty et al. 2006:31). Youth counter-narratives reveal complex issues such as the politics of shame and caring, and the hegemony of English that are at the core of language ideologies and choices. In particular, the counter-narratives "problematize a monolingual English status quo, serving a "strategic political function of splintering and disturbing grand stories" that privilege English and marginalize Native languages" (Peters and Lankshear 1996:2 in McCarty et al. 2006:43). Youth recognize the hegemony of English and are aware of negative images that describe Native languages as "dirty," "backward," or "the way of the devil" but they also strongly consider "the ability to speak the Navajo language [as] essential

to the self identity of a Navajo child and to understanding the Navajo way of life” (Michael Fillerup, qtd in Hinton 2002:152 in McCarty et al. 2006:39).

Youths’ conflicting attitudes towards English and Navajo confirm that language shift and loss are complex sociolinguistic phenomena. This also shows the extent to which they are intimately connected to parent-child (or adult-youth) relationships. Parents’ roles in reclaiming indigenous languages (more specifically, their caring attitudes towards youth and their language learning) can be crucial in creating “new fields of adult-youth dialogue and interaction in the Native language – that can serve as a counter-force to linguistic assimilation” (McCarty et al. 2006:43). Margaret Field, who also did her research with the speakers of Navajo, argues that in addition to caring parents, tolerant attitudes towards language change (in terms of its structure and use) may have positive implications for the Navajo language maintenance. She argues that ‘linguistic purism’ or ‘elders purism’ “may be deadly to endangered languages” and a certain tolerance of codeswitching and codemixing that are inevitable outcomes of almost every bilingual community can only encourage new and imperfect young speakers to learn and speak the language (Field 2009:45).

Barbra Meek ‘s recent book on Kaska language shift and language revitalization efforts “*We Are Our Language: an Ethnography of Language Revitalization in a Northern Athabaskan Community*” (2010) also focuses on processes of intergenerational language interaction (or socialization) and problematizes Elders’ role in language revitalization. In particular, her work examines “different interactional moments and linguistic experiences that ...lead to disjuncture” (Meek 2010:xxiii). According to Meek, *disjunctures* are daily disruptions or discontinuities that can appear between ideas and practices shared by a speaker group. Like counterdiscourses or counternarratives, disjunctures “emerge at the intersection of fundamentally different, though rhetorically similar, ideologies about language and the process of language revitalization” (Meek 2010:153). They create interruptions or contradictions in the situations of language

endangerment and revitalization revealing contemporary sociolinguistic complexities that “impinge on or alter practices of language development and socialization, practices that are integral to the maintenance and survival of any language” (Meek 2010:52).

In her work with the Liard First Nation of the Yukon she identifies two main disjunctures, social and generational, that influence Kaska language shift to English. According to Meek, employment of Elders as the principal language experts of language revitalization programmes is one dimension that facilitated the emergence of these disjunctures. It created a new social hierarchy that institutionalized the Kaska language as the language of Elders. Kaska became a form of specialized knowledge in the “new linguistic regime,” which excluded younger generations of potential speakers of Kaska (Kroskrity 2000 in Meek 2010:30). Meek argues that “contemporary Kaska language use [became indexical] of positions of authority (and knowledgeability) held by Elders, reinforcing Elders’ use of Kaska while at the same time limiting community-wide use” (Meek 2001:196).

In addition to this hierarchization of the Kaska language as the language of Elders, socializing narratives of Elders in both the private and public spheres further strengthened their authority over linguistic knowledge. Central to their narratives was the concept of *á’i*. *Á’i*, according to Meek, is “an expression understood on the one hand as taboo, and the other as respect” (Meek 2010:30). It also determined what appropriate behaviour means, especially around Elders. The concept of *á’i* was prominent in almost every conversation involving Kaska linguistic and cultural practices and implicitly “underscored elders’ authoritative role within the community” (Meek 2010:39). Ultimately, both the hierarchization of Kaska language knowledge and reinforcement of the concept of *á’i* in Elders’ socializing narratives facilitated intergenerational discontinuity of linguistic knowledge in the Kaska community. Kaska, once the language of everyday communication, is now associated with authority and respect, which constrains children and young adults from conversing in their heritage language.

Meek's study demonstrates that a high status or prestige of the language does not always help to maintain its vitality. The prestige of the Kaska language as specialized knowledge distances younger generations of potential Kaska speakers from the language, limiting its use in their day-to-day socialization. Her study also urges us to pay close attention to linguistic practices among the young and stresses the importance of resolving the gap between adult language use and youth language acquisition.

Language revitalization efforts in the last few decades have focused on the documentation and analysis of endangered languages, often with older speakers of the language. The aim of such linguistic work was "to provide a comprehensive record of the linguistic practices characteristic of a given speech community," and to preserve the recorded language for future generations (Himmelman 1998: 166). Since elders were often the only competent speakers of endangered languages they were conceived as the main contributors to language documentation. Far less attention was given to youth in language revitalization projects. This contradicts the inherent principle of language revitalization, which is, to re-establish an endangered language as the language of communication in all spheres of life and on all generational levels (Hale and Hinton 2001: 5). For critically endangered languages, documentation of elders' linguistic knowledge is often essential; however, when the language shift is a recent occurrence and the language is still spoken by both youth and adults, as it is in the Dene Tha First Nation communities, an exclusive focus on Elders may undermine the involvement of youth in language revitalization (Meek 2001). Intergenerational continuity of linguistic knowledge is possible only when the language is spoken by all generations, especially youth, and when youth are engaged in language revitalization activities.

To sum up, language revitalization efforts need to work on reversing (or deconstructing) the disjunctures that privileges particular speakers of the language and focus on "the sociolinguistic dimensionality of endangered languages" rather than its linguistic structure alone

(Meek 2010:153). It is also crucial for language revitalization planning to be aware of the forms of resistance, such as counterdiscourses and counter-narratives, that resist the established and ‘taken for granted’ order of sociolinguistic affairs and problematize the orthodoxies of dominant ideologies. Both counterdiscourses and counter-narratives reveal contemporary sociolinguistic complexities that affect language shift and loss in a speaker community and should be considered as an important aspect of any comprehensive analysis of language revitalization efforts. As Meek argues, language shift in the community is not just a result of colonial legacies or assimilationist tactics but is “an effect of contemporary sociolinguistic practices, ideologies and disjunctures” (Meek 2010:40). In the final section of my thesis, using Meek’s concept of disjunctures, I examine generational sociolinguistic differentiations that create ‘disjunctures’ influencing language and culture revitalization ideologies among members of the Dene Tha First Nation of northern Alberta.

CHAPTER 3: ANALYSIS

3.1 Background

The Dene Thas ('The Ordinary People' or 'Regular People') are an Athabaskan-speaking group living in three reserve communities in northwestern Alberta: Bushe River, Meander River and Chateh. Today approximately 1800 people live on the three reserves and 600 additional band members are residing off the reserves in major cities like Calgary and Edmonton and in the small nearby industrial town of High Level. Historically, however, the Dene Tha maintained a nomadic and subsistence lifestyle. They lived in small family groups and moved across northwestern Alberta, northeastern British Columbia, and the southern Northwest Territories. Seasonal hunting, trapping and harvesting were the basis of Dene Tha traditional 'bush' economy before they became integrated into the Euro-Canadian socio-economic system. The Dene Tha still practice subsistence activities, although former settlements and camps at Duck House, Zama Lake, Bistcho Lake, Habay, Rabbit River, Amber River, and Rainbow Lake are now abandoned (Moore and Wheelock 1990: xii).

In 1900 the Dene Tha signed Treaty 8 and "unknowingly became subject to the Indian Act and to the Department of Indian Affairs" (Goulet 1998: xix). As Jean-Guy Goulet argues, the Dene Tha understanding of the Treaty and land ownership and the understanding of the Canadian government differed drastically. For the Dene Tha signing the treaty was a matter of establishing a "kin-like alliance" between themselves and the Canadian government, but for the Canadian government the Treaty signified an exclusive ownership of Dene Tha traditional territories (Goulet 1998: xix). In the words of Chief James Ahnassay,

"the Dene Tha leadership in the year 1900 A.D., agreed to enter into a Treaty of co-existence with Her Majesty the Queen in Right of the Dominion of Canada and her peoples to share the lands in peace. The true spirit and intent of the Treaty as understood and told by the Elders has yet to be implemented by Canada to this day. The Elders maintain that none of our traditional lands

have ever been given up and will never be given up” (DTFN 1997:4 in Dickerson et al. 2002:375).”

Land claims are still an unresolved issue for most Aboriginal people in Canada, including the Dene Tha, and the Canadian government needs to rectify this pressing issue in order to re-establish a relationship of trust and mutual respect.

The scale and complexity of aboriginal land claims in Canada reflects the diversity of colonial histories and socio-economic development patterns over several centuries. For example, initial contact with many indigenous groups residing in the northern parts of Canada was less devastating than for groups residing along the east coast of Canada, which was the main entry point for the European settlers. Barbra Meek, who worked with the Kaska of the Yukon Territory, suggests that the extent to which culture and language have been preserved in the north reflects this difference (Meek 2010:8). She finds that Kaskas emphasize the need to revitalize and preserve language and cultural practices instead of re-create them since most Kaska adults still speak their heritage language and maintain traditional practices (Meek 2010:8).

Like Kaska people, the Dene Tha also continue to maintain many traditional practices, including subsistence activities. For most families, moose meat and other game, such as rabbit, beaver, and duck, are an important part of their diet. Most Dene Tha adults are also still fluent in Dene Dháh (the Dene language) although language shift is taking place among younger generations. According to Patrick Moore who lived and worked in the community for several years, language shift has emerged only in the last generation as the local community has been integrated into wider Euro-Canadian social and economic systems. The generation which reached adulthood before the residential school was primarily monolingual in Dene Dháh, except two women who attended the Catholic residential school in Fort Vermillion and two Metis families (Moore 2010). In fact, it was necessary to become fluent in Dene Dháh to fully function in the society, and hence the language was highly valued. For example, Philomene Beaulieu,

whom I met while on my first field trip to Assumption, grew up speaking Cree in Habay (the settlement beside Hay Lake where people used to live before they relocated to Assumption) and was educated in French at the residential school in Fort Vermilion. When Philomene married Charlie Ahnassay, a Dene Tha man, and moved to Assumption she had to learn Dene Dháh because otherwise she would not have been able to function in the Dene society. Before the establishment of the residential school, all social activities were exclusively in Dene Dháh and the language was highly valued by its speakers.

The interaction of the Dene Tha with English and French speaking fur traders during the fur trade period in the latter part of the nineteenth century did not have a significant impact on the vitality of the Dene language mainly because the extent of interaction was fairly limited. The indigenous inhabitants and traders lived quite separate existences. Their interactions mainly focused on bartering furs and food in exchange for manufactured goods. Many manufactured goods were not locally produced, so the Dene Tha eventually became dependent on their trading partners. For example, steel tools and guns replaced locally used stone knives, stone axes, and bows and arrows. Guns became particularly important, both for subsistence hunting and because they were needed for defense from Cree and other groups that had acquired guns. Even though both fur traders and the Dene Tha needed some basic knowledge of each others languages to engage in trade, their interactions did not require extensive use of English loanwords. The Dene Tha extended the meanings of Dene terms to describe new items or created new Dene terms instead of adopting English words as loanwords. For example, Dene Dháh *beeh* originally referred to a stone knife, but was extended to the steel knives introduced by traders, and the Dene word *tééht'o* 'gun' was created as a new Dene word by combining *t'ééh* 'charcoal' (in reference to the black powder used in early rifles) and *eht'o* 'arrow, projectile'.⁵

The creation of the residential school in Chateh/Assumption in February 1951 dramatically increased the influence of English speakers. As Goulet (1998) has documented,

there were 74 children (28 boys and 46 girls) when the school was first opened by the missionaries (Goulet 1998:xxi). Even though children were not punished for speaking their heritage language in this residential school, as they were in many other schools, all interactions with instructors were in English, and children were encouraged to speak in the language of the instructors. English language at the Assumption residential school became associated with power holders, including instructors and other workers at the school, who were serving the assimilationist interests of the Euro-Canadian state. Under the veil of education, the English language was imposed as ‘superior’ to the Dene language, which was considered by school staff as the language of ‘uneducated’, ‘backward people.’ In order to ‘succeed’ at school children used English in class, complying with the rules set by the instructors. Since education was associated with prosperity and economic success, switching to English became normal (or even perceived as necessary). It was “self-evident” why children should learn to speak in English instead of their heritage language (Bourdieu 1977). This was when the currency or symbolic capital of the English language began to gain strength, and slowly English started to displace the Dene language. While externally imposed, the language of the colonial power was eventually perceived as superior by the local community. External intrusion became a “natural” or “self-evident” reality, and a language ideology that favoured English was increasingly adopted by Dene Tha.

The assimilationist strategies of the residential school however, did not immediately lead to widespread language shift in the Dene Tha community. The Dene Dháh-English language shift only began to affect children and young adults in the last 20 years. Despite being encouraged to speak in English at school, the generation of children who attended the residential school in Assumption remained bilingual because they continued to use Dene Dháh with other students and with their families when they were not at school. As mentioned above, unlike many First Nations people in Canada, most Dene Tha adults still speak Dene Dháh fluently. The

marginalization of the Dene Tha in the resource extraction industry in their traditional territory in the 1970s also helped to maintain the use of Dene Dháh in Assumption because most Dene adults did not have to switch to English to converse with English-speaking co-workers since they were largely excluded from the oil and gas industry. Now, however, individual fluency among younger generations varies, as language shift to English has begun to affect the extent to which children learn and use Dene Dháh. A linguistic assessment done by Moore in 2008 revealed that approximately 25 percent of school children ages 5-16 in Assumption are unable to answer simple questions in the language. Even among the 75 percent of students who are able to respond to simple questions in their heritage language, many preferred to use English in most contexts (Moore 2008).

Dene adults also observe this Dene Dháh-English language shift among young people. They say that the dominant society, especially media, including the Internet and TV, is inevitably influencing youth's linguistic choices. More and more young people spend their free time watching TV and browsing in the Internet where English is the *lingua franca*. "You can't go anywhere without English" says Dene Tha artist Josh Kolay, highlighting the omnipotent presence of the English language. Dene adults notice that youth are increasingly becoming disinterested in learning and practicing the Dene language and culture, following the norms of mainstream society, as evident in media, as well as institutions like school, where all classes except the Dene language class are taught in English. They complain that youth lack patience and "want to have immediate action," which seldom happens in language learning. Often adults fail to acknowledge that language shift is also occurring because many of them switched to using English to talk to their children even though they are fluent in Dene Dháh. Understandably, for most Dene parents using English with their children was a strategic decision aimed at protecting their children from linguistic discrimination that could come from poor knowledge of the English language.

Dene adults often contrast youths' behaviour with their own experiences of learning about the proper use of traditional customs and values when knowledge was passed from Elders to the young through storytelling and such practices as puberty seclusion for girls and hunting and fishing instructions for boys. They notice that nowadays these traditional cultural values and the intimate intergenerational connection between Elders and youth are slowly breaking down. Practices like *emots'ededli* 'teachings through storytelling and counseling' once prevalent among the Dene Tha are being diminished or replaced by the mainstream Euro-Canadian culture. As Moore notes, "Today, as fewer young people live in the bush, they are losing contact with the lifestyle and beliefs of their parents and grandparents, and the Dene Tha oral tradition is waning" (Moore and Wheelock 1990:xiv).

One of the usual complaints that Dene adults express is that young people do not listen to them when they are trying to teach them "the Dene way". They also acknowledge that respect for Elders is not as strong as it was in the past. Nostalgia for the past, and romanticizing a "proper" Dene way of living and behaviour, is commonplace among Dene adults. The discourse of nostalgia produced by the Dene Tha tends to link the Dene language to a "proper" Dene way of living that existed before the Europeans' arrival in their traditional territories. Since Dene Dháh has become an iconic representation of Dene Tha culture, decline of interest in learning the language by youth is also perceived as a lack of interest in maintaining traditional cultural practices.

The discourse of nostalgia and idealization of authentic 'Indianness' (Lawrence: 2009) and conventional notions of 'nativeness' (which also speak to the notions of 'language purism') can be distressing for youth who have their own ways of expressing concerns over endangerment of their heritage language and culture. Dene youth, who participated in my research, highlight the importance of the language to their senses of identity and culture. Some who did not have fluent knowledge of the Dene language expressed their interest in learning it and passing it on to

their future children. Leonie Seniantha, one of the interviewed Dene girls, who is not fluent in the Dene language but tries to speak it, said that it is very encouraging when her father and grandparents talk to her in Dene Dháh despite the fact that she makes mistakes and does not understand the language completely. As mentioned above, Margaret Field, in her study of the Navajo youth language ideologies, argues that tolerant attitudes towards codeswitching and codemixing may encourage young generations, who are often imperfect speakers, to speak their heritage language. She argues that “linguistic purism on the part of elders may trigger linguistic insecurity on the part of younger, imperfect speakers, which may lead to younger speakers’ refusal to speak the language and intensify language shift” (Field 2009:47). To prove this point, McCarty et al., who also worked with Navajo youth, recorded youths’ counter-narratives in which they said that the presence of caring adults who would teach Navajo to them, was essential for the intergenerational continuity of the language. For second language-learners, especially learners of endangered languages, parental support is essential because the few hours each week dedicated to Native language learning in most community schools are not enough to learn the language. To make matters worse, there are not as many language-learning resources for self-study as there are for internationally important languages such as French or Spanish, so speaking it at home is often the only way to practice indigenous languages.

It is also important to be aware of language ideologies that link Native languages to Elders because hierarchization of Native languages, which grants linguistic authority to Elders, can only discourage potential young learners from speaking it. Meek argues that the iconic representation of Kaska as the language of Elders creates “specialized roles marked by linguistic expertise” which discourages young people from getting involved in language revitalization efforts and prevents them from learning their heritage language (Meek 2010:134). Meek explains this discontinuity in terms of disjuncture, which she defines as “points of discontinuity or contradiction, moments where practices and ideas about language diverge” (Meek 2010:50). In

particular, she argues that while Elders' roles in language documentation are essential for the revitalization of the Kaska language, they also alienate youth from speaking the language because youth perceive it as 'Elders' language.' Such sociolinguistic disjunctures are common in language revitalization and "illustrate that the forces of language shift are not located in the past [alone]" (Meek 2010:54). Meek argues that attention to contemporary narratives about language, especially those of younger generations is important for successful language revitalization.

As in the Kaska community in the Yukon, there are clear generational sociolinguistic disjunctures in the Dene Tha community. In the following section of my paper I examine the differing language ideologies of Dene Tha youth and adults that lead to the emergence of disjunctures. Recognizing such disjunctures could ultimately assist efforts to reverse language shift to English. I assert that essentializing particular contexts of traditional language and culture prevents successful revitalization of the Dene language and restricts the possibilities for alternate linguistic and cultural expressions by youth.

3.2 Dene Youth Counter-Narratives: Sociolinguistic Disjunctures in Dene Tha Community

If I talk Dene Dháh I sound like a good Dene Tha
Hanna Martel

Using Meek's concept of disjunctures, in this section I explore generational sociolinguistic differentiations that create disjunctures influencing language and culture revitalization ideologies. My arguments are primarily based on interviews conducted during two fieldwork sessions (May 2010 and December 2011) in Chateh (or Assumption), Alberta, one of the three reserves where the Dene Tha live. I also rely on my fieldnotes based on my long-term conversations with Dene adults Tyler Metchooyeah, Shane Providence, and Janice Dahdona as well as fieldnotes recorded with community members Josephine Natannah, Gena Kolay and Josh Kolay, and Dene Tha Elder Mary Jane Bassa. I was introduced to the participants of this research

by my supervisor Dr. Patrick Moore who worked on revitalization of the Dene language since 1976. Shane and Tyler took the Dene class, which Dr. Moore organized at the University of British Columbia during Term 2 in 2011. Together with Janice Dahdona they also worked as language consultants for the “Dene Tha Language and Culture Project” (the Dene Project) to create language-learning materials for the Dene Tha Community School and document Dene Dháh (Dene language). Their contribution to the development of the Dene language materials including Dene alphabet and phrase books, both in print and digital versions, was crucial. Throughout the two-year Dene project, as a co-investigator I was able to interact with Shane, Tyler, and Janice who all speak Dene Dháh fluently. Since Shane and Tyler work as language teachers at the Community School, their insights on the questions regarding revitalization of Dene Dháh among young Dene Tha were valuable. I did not interview Josephine, Gena, and Josh, however I was still able to write extensive fieldnotes based on our discussions about the future of the language and their cultural heritage during my fieldwork in Chateh in May 2010 and December 2011. Josephine helped us to write down the interview questions for the Elder Mary Jane Bassa whom Dr. Patrick Moore and I interviewed in December 2011.

Having adults’ perspectives on language revitalization in the community provided only a one-sided picture of language ideologies that are necessarily multiple and vary across different social and age groups. Since we were creating language-learning materials primarily for young Dene language learners at school and since we had only adults’ insights, it was necessary to understand youths’ perspective on their heritage language and culture to create culturally appropriate language learning materials. We were curious to know what they already knew about the Dene language and culture as well as their means and ways for learning the language and learning about their cultural heritage. It was also intriguing to juxtapose youths’ perspectives with adults’ assumptions on youths’ attitudes towards the Dene language and culture.

During my last fieldwork in December I conducted extensive individual interviews with

four ninth-grade girls at the Dene Tha Community School: Jewel Samantha, 13 years old, Lakeisha Natannah, 15 years old, Leonie Seniantha, 18 years old, and Hanna Martel, 18 years old. Two girls who were in class did not volunteer to be interviewed. The girls were each asked a set of similar open-ended questions about Dene language and culture, the role of their parents in language acquisition, traditional activities and culture camps. Following McCarty et al. (2006), their responses can be described as counter-narratives, and reflect contemporary sociolinguistic disjunctures maintained in the community.

One of the central themes that all the girls expressed was their belief that Dene Dháh is still widely spoken by the younger generation. Contrary to adults' perceptions of the limited fluency of young generations, Hanna, who grew up in one of the most traditionally-orientated Dene families, and whose first language is Dene Dháh, thinks that "a lot of people" her age speak Dene language fluently. She thinks that even younger children (she referred to her uncle's children) speak only Dene Dháh. Another interviewee, Jewel, who did not grow up speaking Dene Dháh and whose first language is English, also does not think that the use of Dene Dháh is declining. As an example Jewel mentioned her friend who speaks only Dene Dháh, especially with her grandmother. Leonie too challenged adults' assumptions that fewer and fewer young Dene speak or want to speak their language. She said "people are still speaking it, even younger than me are speaking." Leonie was referring to her cousins who speak "really good" Dene Dháh. Finally, Lakeisha's reply was also positive. Although she only understands Dene Dháh and does not speak it, she still thinks that Dene language is popular among her peers. Lakeisha said that two of her best friends speak Dene Dháh most of the time so she also tries to speak the language with them. All the interviewed schoolgirls challenged adults' perceptions about declining use of the Dene language among youth and said that Dene Dháh is still widely spoken by their age group. Even those girls who do not speak the language, Jewel, Leonie and Lakeisha, were certain that the Dene language is popular among their peers.

They were also very enthusiastic about learning their heritage language since the symbolic capital of Dene Dháh appears to be strong despite influences from the mainstream culture. The strong connection between language and culture was identified as one of the main reasons why they wanted to learn Dene Dháh. Lakeisha said “it’s important for Dene youth to learn Dene Dháh because of the culture.” She said it helps them “not to forget the culture and what [they] learnt from Elders.” Others said that “it is cool” or “it sounds fun” to speak Dene Dháh and expressed their willingness to learn the language in order to be able to converse with friends or relatives who speak mainly in the Dene language. Leonie said that it is really hard for her to socialize with her cousins who speak Dene Dháh most of the time because she does not have a good command of the Dene language yet.

Most girls said that they try to speak Dene Dháh to their grandparents or friends who know the language fluently to get some practice besides attending Dene classes at school. Their willingness to learn is also expressed in their unconventional ways of incorporating language in their daily life. Some of them found ways to integrate technology and media in their language learning. For example, Jewel often listens on her iPod to the community radio, which broadcasts mostly in Dene Dháh, to practice her language skills. She said that it helps her to learn new words and phrases, which she then discusses with her grandfather. She was also very keen to learn about the FirstVoices mobile applications launched in 2010 for the Halq’eméylem and Senécoten languages in British Columbia, which allow users to create their own dictionaries and phrase books with images and audio-video recordings. Other girls too were curious to know about different possibilities of learning the language outside the classroom. They also expressed interest in getting involved in language revitalization projects that require knowledge of new technology and digital media. It is important to note that new technologies such as the iPod and iPad have the potential to facilitate language learning in innovative and more individualized ways. Such tools also raise the prestige of the language by using devices that are ‘modern’ and

familiar to youth for learning Native languages. Encouraging use of such innovative resources without questioning their authenticity (or advocating only ‘proper’ traditional ways of knowing and learning) can be crucial for the survival of endangered languages.

In particular, parents’ guidance and support for youth as they explore new ways of learning the language can be critical for the vitality of the Dene language. An attentive approach to their aspirations and ideas can be helpful as the community decides on how language and culture revitalization can successfully proceed. Tolerance of imperfect speakers as well as encouragement of their innovative ways of pursuing the knowledge can only create a positive language learning environment and persuade more young people to speak the Dene language in both public and private spheres. Like the Navajo youth at the Beautiful Mountain High School, quoted by McCarty et al. (2006), the Dene girls said that the presence of caring adults who would be willing to talk to them in their heritage language is crucial for their learning. They are intuitively aware that language shift within their generation is happening because they were not taught to speak Dene Dháh when growing up. Leonie said that her cousins speak “really good” Dene Dháh because “their parents spoke to them [in Dene Dháh] while they were growing up.” She grew up listening to the language on a daily basis, but her father, aunt, and grandparents, although fluent in Dene Dháh, switched to English while speaking to her. Lakeisha and Jewel also learned English as a first language and started learning Dene Dháh only when they went to school. Meek rightly notes that “while historically American Indian languages were acquired in the home, and dominant languages were learned at school, today in situations of language revitalization, with minor exceptions, the reverse is true; dominant languages are being acquired at home, and endangered languages are being learned at school” (Meek 2010:41). The situation in the Dene Tha community is not much different than the one Meek describes for Kaskas. More and more children are learning to speak English as their first language at home and Dene Dháh is usually acquired at school. Wong argues that such a shift in language learning also involve major

shifts in the dynamics of family relationships. She says that loss of language and traditional knowledge results in a loss of intimacy in the families that “comes from shared beliefs and understanding” (Wong 1991:343). Major socioeconomic changes in Native communities ultimately damaged the holistic social fabric of these communities. First and foremost they undermined the intimate connection between parents and children. For some children, traditional knowledge is no longer passed from parents to children; instead they are required to follow institutionalized educational conventions at school to learn both their heritage language and culture.

Heritage language has become a subject at school, and even traditional practices are being ‘taught’ at culture camps, also known as survival camps. One of the main intentions of the Dene Tha Community school’s culture camps, which are held three times a year, during fall, winter, and spring, is to transmit cultural and linguistic knowledge to younger generations by involving them in activities that closely resemble the traditional camping and subsistence activities practiced by their grandparents and great grandparents. The camps were first organized by Dene language teacher Robert Metchooyeah and are carried out by the school language instructors and other teachers each year. For each camp, a group of upper elementary or junior high school students are taken to the bush for several days and one or more Elders from the community are invited to accompany the students and their teachers. The Elders teach about traditional subsistence activities and provide guidance during the camps.

Gender segregation is an important aspect of the winter culture camps because the tasks they are doing are quite different. In the boys’ winter survival camp they learn how to set a fishnet, make rabbit snares, hunt moose, cut and cook moose meat, start a fire and other activities related to hunting and fishing. Girls also get involved in subsistence activities such as snaring rabbits and fishing with a hook and line. They also learn how to cut and dry moose meat. Ultimately, both boys and girls are encouraged to participate in subsistence activities in the bush

and at camp.

Although participation in culture camps is strongly encouraged, Tyler Metchooyeah and Shane Providence, who teach the Dene language at the school and lead culture camps every year, noticed that high school girls are losing interest in culture camps. They complained that girls are not as eager as boys to go to culture camps and learn about traditional activities. In particular, last year the winter culture camp for the girls had to be cancelled because the girls did not come prepared for it. Instead of being prepared to go to the bush they came dressed up, put on a lot of make up and did not get their permission slips signed. Teachers explained the girls' behaviour in terms of declining interest in traditional activities and culture among girls. It was also essentialized as a gendered disparity because Tyler and Shane argued that the boys were keen to attend all the culture camps organized by school.

This particular instance of girls' resistance to culture camps is open to many different interpretations including the one offered by their teachers that suggests their overall disinterest in traditional activities and heritage culture. There is a danger, however, in reducing their behaviour to adolescent rebellion against school or simply interpreting it in terms of intergenerational misunderstandings. The girls' own responses suggest a more nuanced interpretation. Discussions with Dene girls reveal that although none of them attended culture camps they all had quite an extensive knowledge of traditional practices including subsistence activities, vision quests, storytelling and Tea Dances (*Dahots'ethe*), which are a "deeply religious ceremony" led by spiritual leaders of the community in order to "ask for a successful hunting season or good weather" (Dene Tha First Nation website). For example, Lakeisha's grandmother Josephine Natannah used to lead a dance group so Lakeisha had many occasions to participate in Tea Dances and could explain the ceremony in detail. She was also able to retell two different stories that she heard from her grandmother. Likewise, Jewel went camping in the bush with her grandparents and was familiar with many traditional practices, including ice-fishing, and Tea

Dances, and she knew how Dene Tha prophets got their visions in the past, which is characteristic of her detailed knowledge of historic Dene Tha cultural practices. Both Lakeisha and Jewel often went camping in the bush with their grandparents but never went camping on school fieldtrips or with their parents. Grandparents were the primary teachers who introduced them to cultural practices (especially those related to living in the bush), which they had learned from their own parents and grandparents when they were young.

The dynamics of intergenerational knowledge transmission however, differ significantly between Dene girls' families. For example, Hanna's family is one of the most linguistically and culturally conservative families in the community so naturally from a very early age Hanna was involved in traditional practices with both of her parents and her grandparents. For her, the activities that were carried out during school culture camps were redundant because of her rich cultural experiences growing up. She is in fact, the epitome of the "good Dene Tha" as it was described by most Dene adults because she speaks Dene Dháh fluently and was raised in an 'authentic' Dene Tha way. Hanna's disinterest in culture camps therefore, may not necessarily mean that she was disinterested in traditional practices all together since she was maintaining most of them at home with her family. A distinction needs to be made between practices that are learned at culture camps and those that are taught by parents or grandparents. While culture camps reinforce language and traditional Dene Tha practices, they cannot substitute for learning that takes place within the families, such as Hanna enjoyed, where learning is part of lived experience instead of "scripted educational routines" (Meek 2010:58).

Culture camps also may not appeal to girls as much as they do to boys simply because of the physical conditions that are experienced at the camps. Leonie, who attended winter culture camp only once, said that overall, it was "pretty fun." She remembered fondly how they learned to cut moose meat, which is her favourite dish, learned how to skin a rabbit and listened to stories told by Helen Metchooyeah, who is also a teacher at the Community School. While she

liked most of the activities that they were doing at culture camps, she did not want to go there again. She said, “I did [attend culture camp] one year but didn’t like it. I didn’t mind hunting or camping just the weather got me and I didn’t like it.” Her main reason for not going to culture camp again was not her disinterest in traditional activities but her dislike of cold weather, which can reach as low as -45 C during winter. Leonie’s response once again shows that there could be more than one reason why Dene girls did not attend culture camps. It also suggests that attributing girls’ resistance to culture camps only to their disinterest in traditional knowledge and practices is an over simplification.

Girls’ counter-narratives reveal sociolinguistic disjunctures that are emerging in the relationships, practices, and discourses of Dene Tha adults, including parents and schoolteachers, as well as among youth. They show the complexity of the language shift situation and help to locate where and how the chain of intergenerational transmission of linguistic and cultural knowledge has been interrupted. As discussed above, language ideologies expressed by adults and girls concerning the prestige of the Dene language among youth are conflicting. While Dene Tha adults underestimate the value of Dene Dháh among youth and think that youth are not interested in learning their heritage language, the responses of the Dene girls I interviewed suggest the contrary. Even though Hanna is the only fluent speaker among the girls interviewed, they all think that Dene Dháh is widely spoken among their peers. They were quite assertive about the overall strong symbolic capital of the Dene language because they thought it was spoken on all generational levels including younger children. Lakeisha, Jewel, and Leonie are also enthusiastic about learning their heritage language and seek to find innovative ways to implement their ideas and practices into language learning. Adults’ roles, especially support from parents in their journey to reclaim their ancestral language, were identified as crucial.

In order to successfully counter linguistic and cultural assimilation, a dialogue between two generations, especially between parents and children is necessary. Points of discontinuity

and contradiction in ideas and practices need to be recognized and addressed. In particular, language and culture revitalization efforts carried out at school should involve a careful assessment of the language ideologies reflected in youth's narratives. In particular, the institution of school culture camps as the best way of teaching cultural practices needs further analysis. Despite the well-intended efforts of schoolteachers to encourage students to get involved in traditional practices, culture camps do not have the anticipated appeal for young girls. The culture camps are symbolically important and serve to introduce traditional knowledge, but they have only a limited capacity to reinforce cultural practices among girls.

There is a risk in underestimating girls' interest in their heritage based on their apparent disinterest in culture camps. Such generalizations can create negative gendered stereotypes and facilitate ideological sociolinguistic disparities that undermine efforts aimed at stabilizing the vitality of the Dene language. Instead of criticizing youth for their lack of interest in heritage language and culture or having rigid expectations that youth will learn in an "authentic" Dene Tha way, it may be necessary to recognize the existence of a multiplicity of language ideologies between different social and linguistic groups. More importantly, we should ask why grandparents, while keen on teaching their own grandchildren traditional practices, did not speak Dene Dháh while talking to youth, preferring to switch to English or codeswitching between English and Dene Dháh. Why do Dene Tha grandparents differentiate language and culture when passing their knowledge to their grandchildren? How do they decide to teach cultural practices using English when the link between culture and language is widely conceptualized as inextricable? Finally, why and how does the connection between grandparents and grandchildren still persist when it comes to the transmission of cultural knowledge while it is not as persistent between parents and children? The dynamics of language and culture shift are not easy to interpret and there are often more questions than answers, but recognizing the existence of

sociolinguistic disjunctures between different generational groups is a first step in understanding this complex phenomena.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUDING REMARKS

Language shift never occurs suddenly. It is rather the result of a long and usually complex process that is inevitably influenced by major socioeconomic changes that have swept Native communities since the contact period. It usually arises as a form of symbolic violence, which Bourdieu describes as “the gentle, invisible form of violence, which is never recognized as such” (Bourdieu 1977:192). Speakers may be aware that their heritage language is being diminished but often it does not stop them from using the “more prestigious” language at the expense of their heritage language. Thus language shift happens quite invisibly, violently silencing the language, which cannot resist the power of the dominant language.

Since language shift is a complex sociolinguistic process, foregrounding the beliefs, perceptions, and values attached to language and understanding how language ideologies form and operate in speech communities is crucial in determining the causes of language shift and in advancing efforts to reverse it or at least maintain symbolically important uses of the local language. In this paper I examined language ideologies that are manifested in Dene Tha girls’ counter-narratives and argued that adults’ perceptions that undermine youth’s knowledge of heritage language and culture need to be reconsidered. I suggest that youth are interested in learning and maintaining the Dene language as well as traditional practices and need more support and understanding from their parents and teachers. For successful transmission of cultural and linguistic knowledge therefore, intergenerational collaboration and action to reduce sociolinguistic disjunctures are essential.

Further research, however, is necessary to test the findings of this paper. In particular, inclusion of more Dene youth, adults, and Elders, including both women and men, is necessary to solidify the above findings. Analysis of language socialization as well as cultural practices that trace day-to-day interactions in the family, is also necessary to illuminate how the knowledge is passed between different generations. Finally, it is important to understand how

language and culture are conceptualized and ideologized among youth, adults, and Elders to initiate successful language revitalization programmes.

¹ Dene Tha is the accepted self-designation used by the First Nation. In the local writing system for the language this self-designation would be written as Dene Dháa ‘people regular/ordinary,’ since dh is used to represent [ð] in contrast to th, which represents [θ].

² Silverstein proposes to transform the term ‘linguistic relativity,’ and coins a new term ‘linguistic uncertainty’ (Silverstein 1979:194). However, according to Martin Putz and Marjolyn Verspoor, Silverstein’s transformation of Whorf’s ‘linguistic relativity’ into ‘linguistic uncertainty’ leaves an “unnecessary hiatus in the literature” because it fails to explain what is problematic with Whorf’s original definition (Putz and Verspoor 2000:46).

³ The T/V pronoun alternation in European languages (for example, French *tu* vs. *vous* or Russian ‘*ty*’(*ты*) vs. ‘*vy*’(*вы*)) is one outcome of a structure-ideology dialectical process that Silverstein explores (Silverstein 1979:227).

⁴ There are also *fractal recursivity* and *erasure*. See Irvine and Gal 2000 for more details.

⁵ The writing system for Dene Dháh (Alberta Slavey), the language spoken in Chateh, is the same as the system used for South Slavey in the Northwest Territories (Rice 1989) except that *n* following a vowel is used to indicate nasalization and *ee* represents /e/ which contrasts with /ɛ/, written *e* in this dialect.

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