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ETHNICITY, PRESTIGE AND THE KASHAYA LANGUAGE

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Kashaya Pomo Language in Culture Project
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Introduction. The following study* of the Kashaya ethnicity, prestige and language was motivated by the author's desire to better understand how the Kashaya students and one non-student Kashaya on the Kashaya Language and Culture Project related their language to ethnicity.

Two students and one non-student member of the traditional Kashaya community were interviewed and the interviews taped. The number of informants was limited to three in order to make the study feasible within a semester's time (Fall, 1974). The Kashaya participants in the study were limited to those who identified themselves as believers in the traditional religion and culture and who were actively involved with the Project at the time the study was conducted.

Two women and one man consented to be interviewed. One man and one woman are students. All three are married; the man and one woman each have children. The participants reside in Santa Rosa, Windsor and Rohnert Park. All three were raised on the Kashaya Rancheria at Stewart's Point. The two student participants are siblings; the non-student is a cousin of theirs' who had a sibling role in their family. The mother of the students is the community's religious and traditional leader.

Each informant was interviewed separately. To the author's knowledge there was no discussion about the topic between informants before an interview; i.e. each informant knew what the subject would be, but did not know what the specific questions would be. Before taping the interviews, there was some casual discussion of what language and ethnicity are. Then, at a signal given by an informant, the tape recorder was turned on.

*This paper is a revised version of a paper submitted as a requirement for American Ethnic Studies 356 (Language and Ethnicity; Dr. Eli Katz, Instructor), California State College, Sonoma.

Kashaya native territory extends some thirty miles along the Sonoma County Coastline, from Black Point to south of Salmon Creek and inland eight miles east of Fort Ross. Approximately half of the Kashaya population have some knowledge of the language.

Kashaya ethnicity is indicative of a biologically self-perpetuating group whose identification lies in 1) sharing of fundamental cultural values and 2) sharing the Kashaya language, a kinetic system, a particular projection of self and group images and a system of social and religious interactions.

As one indicator of Kashayaness, the Kashaya language distinguishes Kashaya from other Pomo, other Indians and non-Indians as well. In this regard all of the informants concur. It seems that all three identify their being Kashaya in that they at least understand their language (One student understands but does not consider herself a fluent speaker of Kashaya); however, none of the informants consider fluent speech a crucial factor or indicator of their Kashaya identity.

Blood relation appears to be the major criterion for Kashaya ethnicity. Individuals who are Kashaya by birth but who do not speak or understand the Kashaya language are considered Kashaya by all of the informants; however, non-Kashaya individuals who speak the language are not considered Kashaya. Ability to speak the language is not, then, the major indicator of Kashaya ethnicity. This is not to say that the ability to speak Kashaya is considered an insignificant factor. All informants express the belief that fluency in Kashaya is a desirable quality. The ability to speak the language as well as understand it is considered among these traditional members of the community as prestigious.

This prestige is manifest in terms of "in-group" as well as "out-group" attitudes. "Ingroup" prestige is granted from Kashaya to Kashaya on the basis of a member's ability to not only understand but speak the language. A higher form of "in-group" prestige is granted those members who understand religious aspects of the language. The most prestigious speakers of Kashaya have the ability to understand and verbalize Kashaya humor, sacred language and Kashaya abstractions; e.g. the third or fourth level of meaning of a myth. (There is a meaning level of a myth that a child understands; one that an adult understands; one understanding that is role defined (e.g. a bead maker understands a myth differently than a shaman does); and the fourth level of understanding is dependent on how involved one is in the religious culture which determines the individual's level of competency in the language; e.g., the "Rock", the dancers, the "waitresses", as well as the shaman (all integral roles in the dance ceremony) speak different levels of the language.)

An ingroup-outgroup boundary is maintained when the Kashaya language is used to transmit "secrets", e.g. parents will discuss things in Kashaya when not wanting the children to understand what is being said, or two Kashaya when wanting to comment about a non-Kashaya who is present, will do so in the Kashaya language.

Out-group prestige is attained in two ways. First, it is prestigious when non-Kashayas (e.g. Central Pomo) recognize that a Kashaya is proficient in his/her language. Second, a Kashaya is also given prestige by non-Indians (e.g. Whites) when he/she speaks his/her language in public. In this respect the language is a boundary marker between the Kashaya and the non-Indian, and is used publicly to exclude non-Kashayas. This exclusion is brought about in

such a way that an out-group person is not aware that any Kashaya present, who doesn't speak or understand the language, is not part of the in-group. In this manner Kashayas put the non-native speaker or non-speaker "in his place" by pointing up his/her lack of Kashayaness.

Non-Indians who speak Kashaya are regarded with humor. This humor is directed to the ability of the speaker rather than to the person of the speaker; that is, it is not a personal assessment of the speaker, but rather an evaluation of, for example, his ability to understand the subtleties of Kashaya humor. All of the informants attest to a belief that a non-Kashaya speaker of Kashaya is unable to understand the more subtle aspects of Kashaya culture, religion and humor.

The Kashaya also grant prestige to non-native English speakers, who speak their own native languages. It was a point well made that two of the informants were amazed by and granted prestige to Russian children they observed at the dedication of Fort Ross who spoke their native Russian.

Because ability to speak Kashaya is considered prestigious, all of the informants expressed a desire to perpetuate their language. The perpetuation of the spoken language and the creation of a written language are primary motivations for the informants' involvement in the Kashaya Pomo Language and Culture Project. Two of the three informants (the two youngest) have, in the recent past, taught the Kashaya language at the Rancheria (Reservation) school. All three express the desire to provide an opportunity for their children to learn the language.

It is essential to note that active use of the language is not equated with being Kashaya. The first language of the community is English. Kashaya is only learned today as a second language. In this respect the determination

of Kashaya ethnicity in terms of the language alone is difficult if possible at all. It is noted by the informants that they were shamed in the home if they spoke English instead of Kashaya. Although English was taught in the home, the children were thought of by their siblings and parents as trying to be White if they did not speak their language. It must be understood that this shaming reasserted the fact that the children were Kashaya. That is, at home, children of pre-school age spoke English but were surrounded by Kashayaness - they were Kashaya. When a child went off to school the school forced the child to use English to enforce the idea of "Whiteness". To counter-balance this and reassert outside the family the fact that the child was Kashaya, the family insisted in the speaking of Kashaya by children to show that they weren't "becoming White".

In this manner, this Kashaya family used the same training technique the school used, i.e. the family insisted the child speak the language of the community with which he/she was supposed to identify. (This was done irregardless of the fact that the children learned English from the parents in the home. It is noted that the family probably did not insist that a child speak the Kashaya language until after speaking English became a threat to Kashaya identity.)

There is no necessary relation between the informants' pride in the language and their fluency. Even when an informant does not speak Kashaya it is felt that the ability to speak is prestigious. All informants take great pride in the fact that Kashaya is a distinct language from other Pomo and other Indian languages.

While the language contributes to the marking of Kashaya uniqueness, it is not a primary factor of group identity. (The informants all recognize

their ability to distinguish another and unfamiliar Kashaya in a crowd. Factors other than language - sense of bearing and other body language, personal appearance, etc. are marks of Kashayaness.) Because of the frequent occurrence of bilingualism in pre-contact California, it is unlikely that the ability to speak Kashaya ever marked a speaker as a Kashaya. Other factors such as subtle points of culture, geographic location, blood relation, and religious observances were thus the major indicators. The fact that the communities of native California were traditionally small, and still are, makes it easy for a community member to know who is and who is not Kashaya.

There are persons who have fluency in the language and knowledge of the old ways and who are regarded as Kashaya because of their blood relation within the community; however, they are not thought of in prestigious terms by members of the traditional sub-community because they do not adhere to the traditional Kashaya religion.

All of the informants consider it important to record as much of their tradition as possible. In order to transmit to their children what may well be a dying language, they are actively engaged in the recording and perpetuation of that language. None of the informants consider themselves "more" Kashaya for being involved in this endeavor. They do not consider the ability to read and write their language an indicator of their ethnicity; rather, speaking, reading and writing Kashaya is thought of as a means (a tool) to preserve those cultural and religious phenomena that are true indicators of Kashayaness.

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