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The Impact of Colonialism on Indigenous Languages

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ABSTRACT

Language is a structured system of communication used by humans, including speech and gesture, sign, and often writing. It is a means by which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, express themselves. Language is the only key to our growth, development and connection of our species. Language is the biggest proof of how everything we do, say and think is intertwined. There is no doubt that language plays an important role in culture and society, both, on an individual and global scale. Through the means of this research paper, attention has been drawn to the ways in which the native language of Navajo and Scottish Gaelic is intimately related to the rest of one's life in a community, how it leads to the spread of culture, its relation with the spread of knowledge, its cultural and social significance as well as the impact of colonialism which falls on the society when a language slowly starts to die. This study will stress on an urgent need to focus on these situations and also find ways to prevent the total loss of these languages. This research aims to answer important questions: What are the causes of language decline? How has Colonisation impacted lingual loss? How does language loss affect cultural identity in these environments? And most importantly, what can be done to prevent or reverse this situation? By answering these questions, this study aims to contribute and preserve endangered languages, and therefore the very type of culture and life they represent.

Keywords: Indigenous Languages, Scottish Gaelic, Navajo, Culture, Colonialism

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Introduction

The decline and continuous extinction of indigenous languages such as Navajo and Old Scottish-Gaelic are not just linguistic concerns but are also considered as cultural emergencies. These languages reflect and pass down thousands of years of cultural knowledge, spiritual beliefs,

practices, rituals and even worldviews. Each word, phrase, and grammatical structure captures the lived experiences of entire communities. This language erosion is also connected with the erosion of identity and history, which forms the cultural fabric that binds all these communities together. The research problem that this study will analyse is the observation of global impact along with political and economic pressures which are causing these indigenous languages to disappear. In the case of Navajo, despite efforts to preserve the language within the Navajo Nation, the dominance of English through education, media, and the government has reduced its use among younger generations. Similarly, Old Scottish Gaelic, which was once the heart of Highland culture, has also seen a significant decline in the number of speakers hence, leaving only a small proportion of the older population which is fluent in the language. These languages carry within them the essence of their respective communities' histories, traditions, and worldviews. As these languages fade, so too do the unique perspectives they offer. These situations are not mutually exclusive in nature. They reflect a global pattern and show us how indigenous languages are imitated and ignored and how the ever-changing world is often in favor of more dominant languages.

Several scholars, including David Harrison, David Crystal, Malcolm Benally, and Nancy Dorian, have extensively examined language death and revitalisation, particularly in indigenous and minority communities. Their work underscores the cultural, historical, and social consequences of language loss while advocating for preservation efforts. David Harrison's work *When Languages Die*, emphasises that languages are more than communication tools—they hold irreplaceable ecological, spiritual, and cultural knowledge. He argues that losing a language erases unique worldviews, particularly in indigenous communities like the Navajo. Similarly, David Crystal's *Language Death* explores socio-political causes of language decline, such as colonisation and globalisation. He warns that language shift, where communities abandon their mother tongue for economic advantages, leads to cultural homogenisation, reducing global linguistic diversity. Malcolm Benally's *Bitter Water* provides first-hand accounts of how English-only boarding schools disrupted Navajo language transmission, severing cultural identity and ancestral wisdom. He calls for grassroots revitalisation to restore community ties

and heal historical wounds. Nancy Dorian, in her research on Scottish Gaelic, traces its decline due to forced displacement, economic pressures, and the stigma of being labeled a "rural" language. However, she highlights successful revitalisation efforts, including Gaelic-medium education and government policies like the Gaelic Language Act.

These scholars stress that language preservation is vital for maintaining cultural identity and diversity. They argue that successful revitalisation requires community engagement, institutional support, and recognition of each language's unique cultural and intellectual wealth. The cases of Navajo and Scottish Gaelic illustrate the urgent need to address historical oppression and ensure these languages—and the traditions they embody—survive.

This research paper will help readers to understand the loss of the Navajo and Old Scottish Gaelic language, especially due to colonisation and how it is further linked to loss of cultural identity, lifestyle, traditional knowledge, ethical and religious views and also the emotional well-being of that community.

Meaning, Significance and Origin of Language

A language is a system of communication which consists of a set of sounds and written symbols which are used by the people of a particular country or region for talking or writing. It is a system of conventional spoken, manual (signed), or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, express themselves. The functions of language include communication, the expression of identity, play, imaginative expression, and emotional release and much more. Many definitions of language have been proposed. In addition, language is a system of symbols, with several levels of organisation, at least phonetics (the sounds), syntax (the grammar), and semantics (the meanings). Defined by Henry Sweet, Language is the expression of ideas by means of speech-sounds combined into words. Words are combined into sentences, this combination answering that of ideas into thoughts. The origin of language (spoken and signed, as well as language related technological systems such as writing), its relationship with human evolution, and its consequences, have been centuries-long subjects of study for the human race with far little data or evidence. The fundamental support to

the idea of language coming from culture arises from the very nature of language- it is a socio-cultural element and an important one at that. Theorists belonging to this school of thought believe that cultural understanding is all there is to language, with no biological impetus. We cannot separate the cultural aspect from language, it is more like a foundation stone and an integral part of a country or state. It is one of the most significant conditions of its existence. Various aspects of cultures, such as mentality, lifestyle, beliefs and values, play a huge role in the field of intercultural communication. Socio-cultural competence is a complex notion when we take it in terms of language. It gives you a sense of belonging to your culture and society and minimises the possibility of making cultural mistakes. This cultural and societal aspect includes many factors like language, customs, values, norms, mores, rules, tools, technologies, products, organisations, and institutions.

It has been seen that language is much more than external expression and communication. Although the faculty of language acquisition and language use is innate and inherited, and there is legitimate debate over the extent of this innateness, every individual's language is "acquired by man as a member of society," along with and at the same time as other aspects of that society's culture in which people are brought up. Language can have developed only in a social setting; however this may have been structured throughout the passage of time as human cultures are as divergent as are human languages over the world, and they can and do change all the time, sometimes with great speed. If culture is a consequence of the interactions of humans, then we can say that the acts of communication are their cultural manifestations. People and communities need to feel like they are contributing something to the society and do so through interactions. The ever-evolving human language allows humans to be cumulative and allows culture to develop as people proceed to move beyond their immediate experiences. We pass knowledge, ideas, emotions, stories etc. through the medium of language as mentioned above for generations and hence, if there were no relationship between the two, the world we are living in today would be very different. Culture unifies a community as well as diversifies it. Furthermore, language is created and shaped by the needs of a culture as it changes with time. This means that language and culture are fluid and go hand in hand whilst shifting to reflect one another in the changing landscape of the world.

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Introduction to Indigenous Languages – Navajo and Scottish Gaelic.

Indigenous languages, which are the very symbol of different cultures, histories, and identities all over the world, have their own uniqueness. Two representatives that are particular to this case are Navajo, which is the main language spoken by the Navajo people in Arizona, the United States, and Scottish Gaelic, which is a language native to the Highlands and Islands of Scotland Despite their vast geographical and cultural diversities, both languages have an identical issue of struggle for survival in the face of linguistic and cultural assimilation. Exploring the roots and trajectories of indigenous languages gives us a glimpse of their durability and layered beauty which is of great value. Navajo, next to the prominent Diné Bizard, is one of the Athabaskan languages, which is spoken by different native groups in North America. The beginnings of this ways be stood for the trip of the Navajo tribe from the North to the American Southwest circa 1400. Nonetheless, the Navajo Tribe got used to dry and flat terrains of northern Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico, creating a unique language that was parallel to their exceptional closeness to nature and spirituality. Thus, the language gives different forms of verbs so as to show who is doing the action, who is receipt the action, and even what is the direction of the action. The intricate grammar is a metaphor that depicts a view which is based on the idea that all the things in the world are related. However, the number of Navajo speakers is gradually decreasing as the younger generation does not tend to learn the language due to English being the preferred language in education and media and also coupled with the historical moment when the United States tried to overcome it by the public policies. Scottish Gaelic besides, Gàidhlig is one of the Celtic language family and shares strong links with Irish and Manx Gaelic. The genealogy of this tradition can be traced back to the centuries of the Common Era which were marked by the Gaels' journey from Ireland to land that we today refer to as Scotland. Over the period, Scottish Gaelic was spreading successfully in many parts of the Highlands and islands with the Gaelic having evolved till it became the predominant clan language and the cultural soul in Scotland. The language alone can be called a symphony of song or the depth of poetry, music, and narratives handed down through genealogy, which serve a close link to place and self to those who speak it. The 17th century was when Scottish Gaelic began to decline because of the growing English political and cultural influence in Scotland.

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Language Death: Analysis of the factors contributing to the decline of these languages.

Language death is said to be the situation in which there are no longer native speakers of a particular language, and the language can no longer be used in daily conversations. In that sense, it can be said that the language becomes virtually out of use in spoken communication. When the language disappears, it is not only the words and grammar that disappear; one also loses a whole mindset, a certain view of life, and much cultural wisdom. Languages wonderfully capture the distinctive experiences of distinct groups. They provide rich pictures of the local settings, customs, and pragmatic answers to daily problems. The fine-grained cultural nuances often are lost forever with the disappearance of languages. Language collapse can happen gradually or very quickly, typically when the members of a community begin to favor a more dominant language for their everyday communication requirements instead of the native tongue. Language, like most other things in society, is multifaceted; it is personal, public, political and artistic at the same time. Hence, it is only natural that its changing form reflects the temperament of the fluctuations in its environment. However, these changes have not been as natural as one would prefer them to be, and language has not merely been adapting to the linear progression of time. Today, the world is recorded in an inexplicably small minority of languages that not only disregards the presence and legacy of a large part of the world's lingual treasure but also constrains its existence. Hence, if language dies with a people, the people too, die with language. This process, which is alarmingly common, showcases a very quintessential idea; that the decay and eventual death of a language is directly and immediately linked to its speakers. Surprisingly, this fact is often overlooked as colloquial understanding can be tempted to focus on the socio economic and neo-colonist horror that is reflected in language shift in the past centuries. However, a more significant question to ask, the answer to which is usually considered as commonly understood, and thus left rather understudied, is "what is lost when a language is lost?" It is not a question foreign or novel to the arena of linguistic studies; in fact, it is so consistently asked that it now emanates an anesthetic imprecision. But it very rarely delves into the more personal, more philosophical destruction that pours upon an individual, and thus a culture, when a language is lost; the intimate loss that is experienced covertly by the speaker.

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This loss has to do with emotion and knowledge, two entities largely perceived as mutually exclusive.

However, they are not so. In fact, language is the biggest proof that these two are naturally intertwined, for knowledge is stored in language, and language always holds emotional implications, be it positive, negative, or disengaged. Hence, when language is lost, this link disappears, and knowledge and emotion embedded in that language also perishes.

Impact of Colonisation on Language Death and Decline

Colonisation is one of the significant contributors to language decline, as it usually works on strategies that are implemented to eradicate the lingua franca of an indigenous people. Many colonies around the world enforced their tongues on the natives, which thus forced native languages into informal or even proscribed status. As a result, many native languages have become extinct or survive only as fragments due to the long reach of colonisation.

The Navajo language was systematically colonised through coercive US government assimilation policies in the 19th and 20th centuries. Following the takeover of Navajo lands, these policies aimed to "civilise" Native peoples by erasing their cultural identity, with a strong focus on language suppression. Central to this effort were government-run boarding schools, where Navajo children were forcibly separated from their families and forbidden from speaking their native language. These schools instilled a sense of shame around their heritage, conditioning them to see English as superior. Over time, the prohibition of Navajo in educational and social settings, coupled with emotional and cultural disconnection from their families, severely disrupted intergenerational language transmission. As a result, the Navajo language declined, becoming increasingly endangered as fewer children grew up speaking it fluently.

The decline of Scottish Gaelic was driven by British political and cultural dominance, beginning in the 16th and 17th centuries and intensifying after the 1707 Act of Union, which merged Scotland and England under one government. Gaelic, primarily spoken in the Highlands and islands, was regarded as archaic and actively suppressed. The Highland Clearances further devastated Gaelic-speaking communities, as large populations were forcibly removed at

gunpoint to make way for sheep farming, leading to widespread dislocation and cultural disruption. Meanwhile, English gained prominence as the language of education, trade, and governance, marginalising Gaelic in public life. Over time, younger generations, seeking better economic and social opportunities, increasingly shifted to English. The gradual erosion of Gaelic as an everyday language, combined with policies discouraging its use, led to a severe decline in native speakers, endangering the language's survival.

The loss and disappearance of native languages like Navajo and Scottish Gaelic are often accompanied by cultural stigmatising, alienation, and exclusion of communities that speak them. The decrease in usage of both these languages equally illustrates a broader pattern of suppressing the use of indigenous languages in the colonial age. In terms of neo-colonialism, languages like Navajo and Scottish Gaelic are sometimes considered obstacles to "modernisation" or "progress." Within this construct, native languages become outdated and prevent speakers from participating in global economic and technological development. Government policies have also stated in the past that it is "very essential for winning success" to have English, which degrades the value notion of such indigenous languages.

Thus, among the Navajos, English emerged as the dominant language in education and economics, while for Scots, they acquired English and British cultural standards as a means of ascension towards modernity. In both cases, indigenous languages have come to represent the past and economic hardship, which has seen interest in the languages among the younger age group dwindle. The aftermath of this outcome was the falling of linguistic identity and change in adopting only the dominant colonial language.

Similarly, the decline of Scottish Gaelic was driven by British political and cultural dominance, beginning in the 16th and 17th centuries and intensifying after the 1707 Act of Union, which merged Scotland and England under one government. Gaelic, primarily spoken in the Highlands and islands, was regarded as archaic and actively suppressed. The Highland Clearances further devastated Gaelic-speaking communities, as large populations were forcibly removed at gunpoint to make way for sheep farming, leading to widespread dislocation and cultural disruption. Meanwhile, English gained prominence as the language of education, trade, and

governance, marginalising Gaelic in public life. Over time, younger generations, seeking better economic and social opportunities, increasingly shifted to English. The gradual erosion of Gaelic as an everyday language, combined with policies discouraging its use, led to a severe decline in native speakers, endangering the language's survival. For this reason, the native speakers have internalised shame or embarrassment towards their language as it reiterates the larger societal perceptions that put its cultural importance in low esteem. Such communities' youngsters are likely to feel less motivated to use or learn their language since they feel that such a thing is standing in their way toward all the success within broader society, which, over time, may result in detachment from one's roots and traditions.

Consequences of Language Death and Efforts for Preservation and Revitalisation.

The extinction of an indigenous language is often inextricably tied to the disappearance of the cultural traditions, perspectives, and societal customs that were uniquely associated with it. In lands where a language loses vitality, much of the cultural knowledge that is hidden in the language lies out of reach for future generations. It encompasses not only folklore and rituals and traditional ecological knowledge but also how language frames the relationship between the people and the environment. Crucially relevant to note is an already existing deep bond between language, spiritual understanding, and ecological awareness that stands at risk of erosion as younger generations stop using it.

These combined factors make it increasingly difficult for communities to maintain contact with their culture, thus making it hard to keep track of their cultural nuances, resulting in frustration and powerlessness. This is what revitalisation efforts of the indigenous languages work to reverse, specifically by reasserting importance to the indigenous language and empowering the speakers to protect their cultural legacy for posterity. Although the preservation and revitalisation efforts like educational programmes, community centers, media, music, theatre etc. are as significant, the Navajo and Scottish Gaelic languages face pivotal challenges. The issue of the day focuses on English's continued prominence in education, business, and other forms of mass communication. More importantly, because the numbers of both fluent speakers from both societies are waning, it is crucial for revitalisation projects that language education not only

concentrate on teaching the language but also activate elders in passing on their knowledge and expertise. There is much hope that both Navajo and Scottish Gaelic will prosper based on active community support and involvement, continued governmental aid, and societal changes. Language revitalisation transcends word-teaching and rule-giving. It demands an all-inclusive society that makes sure the language is there, meaningful, and applicable to everything in life. It demands the inclusion of these languages in all media of the community and their participation in the arts and technology. It demands sufficient space for the usage where its usage is a matter of pride, not exclusion from another culture. If the people could work on it over time, perhaps the two languages will soon have prospects of a future where they would be spoken, loved, and woven into the fabric of community life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the death of a language is imminent in the modern era which can be backtracked for psychological, cultural and political reasons. From the age of British colonialism, when this plan of educating countries in English, to the pressing needs of a global economy and the deliberate destruction of a native languages like Navajo and Scottish Gaelic has been a disaster in the making for centuries now. It will take a long time to reverse the damage done, however, it is never too late. It is a must to preserve and recover endangered such indigenous languages due to the imperative to maintain cultural diversity, identity, and intergenerational wisdom. The phenomenon of language death, or language disappearance symbolises a deep loss in unique perspectives and cultural traditions within communities. This paper stresses on the fact that language goes beyond mere communication; it becomes a treasure chest of values, knowledge, strength and identity in a community. This loss due to colonisation and other factors emphasises the need for comprehensive revitalisation initiatives that would tackle both dimensions involved linguistically and socio-culturally. In the end, all these efforts of preservation and revival of Navajo and Scottish Gaelic point out to the potential for language revitalisation if seriously taken, among a people, in an institution, and through cultural perceptions that emphasise the importance of the language. Furthermore, language revitalisation is not solely the responsibility

of indigenous communities but a collective global effort. Governments, institutions, and individuals must recognise the value of linguistic diversity and take active steps to support endangered languages through education, media representation, and policy advocacy. Encouraging bilingualism, creating spaces for indigenous languages in mainstream discourse, and incorporating them into digital platforms can help bridge the gap between tradition and modernity. Ultimately, safeguarding linguistic heritage is a testament to humanity's respect for cultural diversity, ensuring that future generations inherit the richness of languages that have shaped human civilisation for centuries.

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