The Power of Language: 
Indexicality and the Sociocultural Environment

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The Salish-Pend d’Oreille live in a multiethnic and multilingual environment, which greatly influences the belonging and intersubjectivities of its’ community members. The Salish-Pend d’Oreille of western Montana are a minority population on their own reservation, comprising of roughly 5,100 members of the 28,359 total population (Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes 2013a; U.S. Census Bureau 2010). The dominant non-Native population has significantly influenced historical and current sociolinguistic practices of the Native community. The traditional language of the Salish-Pend d’Oreille community is extremely endangered, with fewer than 50 fluent speakers remaining. Despite the predominate shift to English; the Salish language continues to embody and perpetuate important cultural practices and beliefs of the group. To understand the factors motivating the continued use of Salish and to explain the power dynamics on the reservation, I utilize the theoretical framework of indexicality.

Examining language shift in contexts of cultural contact necessarily involves some investigation of the power dynamics of the social relationships (Garrett 2006, 2012; Makihara & Schieffelin 2007; Philips 2001), as “language shift occurs in stark inequality,” (Garrett 2012:515). The data for this study was drawn from ethnographic research conducted with the Salish-Pend d’Oreille tribe between 2011 and 2013. Semi-formal interviews focused primarily on documenting and understanding the language and sociocultural ideological factors that contribute to the continued shift from Salish language to English. I observed and compared mundane, private interactions within the home to those broader interactions in the community, including formal education settings, traditional practices, and elders meetings. I chose these contexts to examine and link micro-level socialization practices to the macro-level practices of the larger community (Schieffelin & Ochs 1996).

This paper examines the broader social relationships and statuses, primarily power and authority, indexed through Salish language use. I propose Salish language use or nonuse index the power relations of the sociocultural environment, determined by the domains or the identity of the speaker. Despite the sovereignty held by the Salish-Pend d’Oreille, in many social situations, the power is controlled by the non-Native population, which allows them to dictate English. The use of English by Salish-Pend d’Oreille individuals in positions of power, particularly in contexts that can accommodate the traditional language, can also index the ideological (non-) valuing of the language and further contribute to the shift away from the Salish language. The public domain and private domains also index the authority and gender roles of speakers/hearers. In addition to the domain, Salish language use indexes speaker characteristics, and more specifically, their cultural identity and cultural capital. By possessing cultural capital or specific knowledge related to cultural events and practices, these individuals hold prestige in traditional contexts. While there is continued pressure from the dominant society, language use by individuals with power and cultural capital within the Native community can unconsciously undermine the value and use of the Salish language. However, those individuals that possess cultural capital could also index their commitment to the revitalization of the language and culture through Salish language use.