This paper is an informal attempt to make some sense of anecdotal material collected mainly last winter in northern Ontario but from other sources as well. In 1979 John Nichols, Kelleen Toohey and I were contracted by the Ontario Regional Office of the Department of Indian Affairs, the Ontario Ministry of Education and three large Native organizations to study the ways in which English and the Native languages were being used and taught in northern schools in Ontario and to make recommendations on educational policies and programs regarding language. The study was called the Northern Native Language Project. The area under study consisted of the three Indian Affairs districts of Sioux Lookout, Nakina and James Bay. Together or separately the contract researchers on the project were able to visit seventeen of the communities in the study area. Our job was to collect information and opinions, not only on school programs and personnel but also on the roles played by English and the Native languages in the community.

The final report of the project focussed on pedagogical issues concerning school programs and personnel. What I want to discuss in this paper are wider questions of language proficiency and use in the communities and districts with the role of the school seen as only part of the social whole. Since our community visits were brief and the information we collected was very informal, no conclusions can be drawn at this stage. This paper, then, is an outline of areas in which further research would appear to be interesting and fruitful.

In order to see the study area in the perspective of language use by Native people across the entire province, we can begin by using that blunt instrument, census figures. In 1971 Canadians were asked to report their ethnic group (decided patrilineally), their mother tongue, the language most used in their home, and whether they could speak English, French, both or neither. Examining the language information about people who reported themselves to be ethnically "Indian", one can get a general picture of the patterns of language for the Native population. On the basis of trends in the data I have divided the province into three areas mainly by grouping several Indian Affairs administrative districts together for each area. The southern area includes the Brantford, London and Peterborough Districts, and the mid-north includes the Sudbury and Fort Francis Districts. For the northern area I had to include the Lakehead and Kenora Districts with the three districts in the study area, Sioux Lookout, Nakina and James Bay, because of the way in which the census districts were set up.

Whatever concerns one has about the reliability of census data, one cannot deny the strength of the trends shown in the
figures on language. The data on the Native population indicates that Native language use is waning under English pressure. Not only do fewer than half of Ontario’s Native people speak a Native language as their mother tongue but many of those who can speak a Native language use English as the major language in their homes. Virtually all (97.2%) who speak English as a mother tongue also speak it as their home language. But only 70.6% of Native mother tongue speakers still use the Native language as their home language. English has become the home language of the rest. This trend holds true when the school aged and older populations were considered separately. And English is more predominant among young people.

When we look at the north, mid-north and southern areas separately, the trend to less Native language use and more English use observed for the whole province was confirmed for each area. However, the extent of the change varied considerably in different areas. In the south of the province, Brantford, London and Peterborough showed only 12.5% to 17.7% of the population with a Native language as their mother tongue. Among children up to the age of 14, only 6.4% to 15.4% speak a Native language as a mother tongue. Also, the percentage of people who report their mother tongue to be a Native language but their home language to be English is between 57.7 and 93.5. There is no reciprocal trend to Native language home used by English mother tongue speakers.

In the Sudbury and Fort Francis Districts however, the trend toward English is not as advanced. About half the population speaks a Native language as mother tongue. Between 38.4% and 50% of the children learn a Native language as their mother tongue. Between 25.6% and 39.7% of those who speak a Native language as a mother tongue use English as their home language. Compared with the southern districts described above, the Native language situation in these mid-northern districts seems somewhat more stable, perhaps with active bilingualism in English and the Native languages as a major factor. It is difficult to assess the role of the Native language in the repertoire of the mother tongue Native speakers who also speak English.

In the North District, 79.2% of Native people report that a Native language is their mother tongue. Almost as many children as adults report the Native language as their mother tongue. Only 14.9% of Native mother tongue speakers report English as their home language. English in the north has yet to gain a real foothold. But where it is used, as in the mid-north or the south, English is being taken up as an alternative or a replacement for the Native languages. (See Burnaby 1980 for further details).

It is evident that the study area for the Northern Native Language Project, the Sioux Lookout, Nakina and James Bay Districts, is at the leading edge of a trend toward the replacement of the Native languages by English. There is no reason to assume that the shift from the Native languages to English will necessarily occur in the study area as it has further south in the province. Other possibilities may be
that the Native languages will maintain their hold as the only language of the majority, or various forms of stable bilingualism may occur. From an academic point of view, now would be a good time to document information about language use and community factors which might influence it in order to gain some insight into the phenomena of language shift, or bilingualism or minority language maintenance. Whatever happens, the information would be useful in our understanding of how and why certain school language programs succeed or fail and would also be valuable in language planning.

The most intuitively obvious hypothesis about change in language patterns is that sheer volume of contact with the second language is enough to explain increases in use of English. The study area is distinctive in relation to the rest of the province in that almost all of the Native communities in the area are not connected with the "outside world" by road. It is certainly the case that communities which have road links and have had them for some time, such as Long Lac and Constance Lake in the south of the Nakina District, have shifted to English much more than fly-in communities. However, isolation is certainly not the only factor. Constance Lake has much more Native language use than Long Lac, for example. Among the fly-in communities, a few have almost as much English language use - indeed shift entirely to English among many children - as does Constance Lake. Fort Hope in the Nakina District is an example.

The role of broadcast media in language change deserves study in this area as well. Until a few years ago regular radio and television broadcasts could not be received in the study area. Now the placement of satelites has permitted good reception in some communities. In Fort Albany, where public television and radio has been available for two years the children were prepared to talk in English to outsiders such as myself mainly about what they had seen on television. In communities which have their own radio stations the languages used in the broadcasts seem to reflect the language patterns of the communities and do not seem to be an agent for language change. Many Native people interested in Native language maintenance mentioned to us that they regret or fear the advent of public media in the community. So little has been documented on the language effects of the introduction of broadcast media in Native communities that generalizations at this stage would be worthless. The superficial information we have here suggests that simple volume of contact with English language use is not a subtle enough factor to predict patterns of changes in language use in the study area. Time and specific study on language use are needed before the effects of this factor can be clearly understood.

My next hypothesis concerns the instrumental value of being able to speak English. Surely people learn to speak another language at least partly because it is useful to them. In certain communities in which the Native language is used for almost every function in the community, such as Kingfisher Lake or Webequie, it appears that only certain
individuals become bilingual and that their bilingualism is related to the fact that they need to use English for their jobs - teacher aide, band manager, airport manager and so on. My hypothesis is that the bilingualism of these individuals was not motivated by the economic advantages of English proficiency but rather that they got the jobs because they already knew some English. They may now be better English speakers than other individuals because they have had more chance to practise, but that factor came after economic considerations not before. Also there are often a number of hidden bilinguals in Native speaking communities who can speak English but who rarely use it. Some of these bilinguals learned English when they left the community to work elsewhere, have returned to the community and now rarely use the language. But there are many other hidden bilinguals who learned English during protracted stays in hospitals or other non-economically motivated sojourns away from the community. Parents, school committee members and the National Indian Brotherhood (1972) uniformly voice the opinion that children should learn English in school in order to get good jobs. I suggest that this economic motivation probably has little effect on the learning of English whether by children or adults. Let me give another example on this topic. The Constance Lake Reserve is in a French-speaking area. Although there is a fair amount of employment at the reserve-owned sawmill, a good number of people from the reserve have been employed for many years in off reserve industry. The language medium in these industries is French. I asked several people on the reserve and at the schools attended by the children if there was an interest in or pressure for the Native children to learn French in school in order that they might get better jobs. The replies were unanimous that the Native employees always learned enough French on the job to manage and that there was no need for them to study French before or during their employment. French is not used for any type of communication on the reserve. It should also be noted that there did not seem to be any impediment in that area to Native employees rising to positions such as foreman or above if their French was adequate. In other words, it appears that Native people in the study area are prepared to learn a second language for instrumental purposes, but that they are not motivated to learn the language in anticipation of need and use of the second language under such conditions does not spread from the instrumental use into other aspects of their lives.

In order to learn what does motivate Native people to begin to learn English and to increase their use of English to the point of excluding the Native language, we need to have more information about community patterns of language use. In Native communities all across the continent it does not seem to be the case that some individuals become bilingual with the numbers of bilinguals steadily increasing over time until the balance of language use tips over to the English side and the Native language gradually fades away. The common pattern, instead, seems to be that the shift to English occurs in one generation and that almost all members of that generation in the community are involved. It seems that, at some point, all the young parents begin to
speak English as the main home language and the children grow up speaking only English. The parents seem to speak less and less Native language to the point where they no longer feel comfortable speaking it, and the children can not communicate with grandparents and other older adults. The community of Fort Hope seems to be in the middle of such a transition. Communities such as Long Lac and many others further south have almost completed the shift.

As a hypothesis to explain such a radical change in a community, the only factor I can suggest that might be powerful enough is the need for young people to express their identity through language. I am drawn to this factor by evidence from other language and cultural groups. The first example is from Labov on the subject of the failure of Black urban children to learn to read. He says (1973):

"Some writers seem to believe that the major problem causing reading failure [among Black youth] is structural interference between [Black English Vernacular and Standard English]. Our research points in the opposite direction... The number of structures unique to BEV are small, and it seems unlikely that they could be responsible for the disastrous record of reading failure in the inner city schools. (p. 241)

...The conclusion from our research was that the major cause of reading failure is cultural and political conflict in the classroom." (p. 243)

...We usually find that the most consistent vernacular is spoken by those between the ages of 9 and 18. It is well known that in most cities peer-group membership reaches a peak at the ages of 15 to 16 (Wilmott 1966); as the young adult is detached from the teenage hang-out group he inevitably acquires a greater ability to shift towards the standard language and more occasions to do so." (p. 257)

Labov is arguing in his study that schools with the middle class majority culture orientation are powerless to influence the language habits of adolescents whose main motivation is minority peer group identification.

The second piece of information is evidence from the Canadian majority culture. Many English speaking children in Canada get French immersion schooling, that is, schooling through the medium of French, in order to teach them French as a second language. They succeed remarkably well in learning French - particularly in pronunciation. However, it has been observed that many of them, at the age of about ten, lose their excellent French accents and begin to use a markedly Anglophone accent. It is speculated that this change occurs because of the children's developing need to identify themselves as basically Anglophone.

To investigate the validity of such a hypothesis, one would need a great deal of information on cultural change -
information which I do not have. From the point of view of language use, though, there are aspects to the language phenomena that we observed which suggest that people in Native speaking communities are attracted to English for local social purposes rather than for any instrumental usefulness. The attractiveness of English medium "pop" culture is evident. Children who would not venture a word in English in school will nonetheless talk to the teacher in the playground about bionic dogs and such. Almost all young people know a number of country and western songs by heart and use phrases from them appropriately in conversation. Adults who would have all their business correspondence, government papers and catalogue orders translated for them (literacy, I realize, is an additional factor here) are still often skilled in joking in English using word play such as puns as well as jokes of content. The draw to English must be strong for people to learn these skills in English when the Native languages in that area are rich in fantastic images and joking styles.

It must also take strong social pressure for a group to develop a language variety which has marked variations from the original model. We received many reports from elderly and parent aged Native speakers who were quick to point out that the Native language gap between generations was very great. Some pointed to vocabulary deficiencies, but others also mentioned major syntactic and phonological changes. This kind of observation always raises several different issues. One is the amount and type of language change that can be considered to be normal language evolution or that must be described as language deterioration. Another issue, linked to the first, is what types of social changes in the community are linked to or might even be the cause of certain language changes.

As far as English is concerned, I would like to underline the need for study of the characteristics and persistence of "Indian English" as a dialect. We could not tell from our observations whether the non-standard forms we heard marked a transitional stage in second language learners' development or whether they were persistent features. Also we do not know how far certain non-standard features extend among English speakers in different Native communities. If it were found that certain features were persistent, it would be tempting to speculate on the role these markers play in setting Native English speakers apart from other speakers of English.

Finally I would like to leave you with one interesting report of code switching we heard of. I talked to a school committee chairman in a community in which I found the school to be almost completely silent during school hours. He told me that the teachers had continually complained that it was almost impossible to get the children to speak any more than the barest minimum of English in class. The parents, on the other hand, had been complaining to him that the children would speak only in English to them at home and often refused to speak Ojibwa. The parents in that community are mainly Ojibwa speakers. The children in this and other communities, it appeared to me, persevered with their
learning of reading and writing because such activities meant that they could avoid oral communication with the teachers. The teachers seemed to accept this at least partly because it was almost impossible to promote any development of oral exchanges. The fact that apparently similar tactics are employed to avoid communication with parents suggests a much more dangerous development. Further study into this sort of situation would be valuable not only for our knowledge about language, but as a point of entry into what may be a critical social problem.

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