

Origin and Identity: The Implications of the Rez Accent

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Abstract

The “rez accent” refers to the accent commonly found within Native communities in North America. A few scholars have explored the prosodic elements of the rez accent or theorized about the causes of its development, without taking into account its contemporary implications on the modern Native American identity. This study analyzes interviews with a collection of tribal members in order to dissect the relationship between the rez accent and cultural identity. Results indicate that modern usage of the rez accent reinforces contemporary Native American identity by acting as a new manifestation of a long-held cultural identity—containing elements of the culture, standing as a symbol of home, and refuting common stigma. Findings further implicate that awareness of the rez accent and its relationship with the rez accent vary by generation. These results denote a shift from narratives of loss surrounding Native rhetoric and suggest a collective shift in public stigma. This article concludes by emphasizing the need for greater research on modern Native American topics and greater modern Native American representation.

Introduction

“Why do you talk like that?”

This was something that I asked my dad when I was around five years old. I was born on the Warm Springs reservation in north-central Oregon, but my formative years were spent in a Hispanic community in southern California. I was always at a cultural crux, torn between my Native roots and the normalities of my surrounding community. As I grew older, I developed a balance between these cultures and integrated into both. I eventually grew numb to my dad’s way of speaking, and it became regular, but there was a split second where I experienced the rez accent—the accent commonly recognized in Native American communities in North America (Hilleary, 2022)—just like everyone else.

Native American tribes have faced generations of cultural demolition and reconstruction within the United States and Canada. As a result, the languages used by these peoples have also undergone generations of demolition and subsequent reconstruction. While tribal nations were forced to adopt English as their primary language by means such as the Native American residential schools, where Native American youth were sent for cultural eradication (Armstrong, 2020, p. 320), English on the reservation developed very differently than it did off the reservation. Communities on reservations developed their own distinctive accents, as well as their own vernacular. The rez accent is exaggerated and stereotyped throughout film and television, where syllables are drawn out and given a “sing song” rhythm (Devlin, 2024), although some pieces of media, such as the 2021 award-winning television series *Reservation Dogs* (Zemler, 2023), do an exceptional job at capturing the reality of these tonal shifts, as well as characteristic remarks or slang, adding in the occasional “Aho!” or “Stoodis!” (Centeno, 2023). The rez accent is incredibly common throughout modern indigenous communities in the United States and has become such a staple of Native American culture, that these deviations from standard English, despite colonial pressures, beg the question: What role does the

reservation accent play in contemporary Native American cultural identity?

Scholars have long considered language to hold a powerful role in shaping identity (Bucholtz, 2005). Linguistic patterns, such as accents, hold potent social implications, signifying membership to an in-group or an out-group, or providing clues as to one's background (Lippi-Green, 2012). The rez accent holds a unique position in linguistic studies, having been shaped by a struggle between forces of colonial erasure and community efforts to maintain Native American cultures.

Exceptionally few scholars have studied the rez accent. Existing literature on the rez accent primarily considers potential factors that may have influenced its development, without taking into account its contemporary implications on the development or maintenance of a "modern Native American identity." In order to contextualize and define the rez accent, I will first use a historical and linguistic lens to consider research that examines the properties of the rez accent, as well as current working theories on how and why the rez accent developed. This will yield pertinent information on the sociolinguistic qualities that underlie the rez accent. Then I will discuss interviews conducted with a collection of tribal members of two key age ranges in order to highlight my own primary research. Lastly, I will analyze responses from these interviews in order to dissect the rez accent's intersection with personal and cultural identity. In this paper, I argue that modern usage of the rez accent reinforces contemporary Native American identity by acting as a new manifestation of a long-held cultural identity—containing elements of the culture, standing as a symbol of home and community, and refuting common stigma. My research further finds that awareness of the rez accent and its relationship with the rez accent vary by generation, suggesting a collective shift in public stigma.

Consistent Development of the Rez Accent

Recognizing the modern implications of the rez accent is impossible without first considering its linguistic origins. The United States comprises hundreds of federally recognized Native American tribes resting on approximately 326 federal Indian reservations (U.S. Department of the Interior Indian Affairs). Although each tribe's culture varies immensely, especially by collective region, the prosodic features—or linguistic elements—of the many tribal nations boast remarkable similarities. A study that compared the accents of a broad range of Native participants throughout North America found a shared "(i) contoured pitch-accent, (ii) high-falling, mid, or high-rising syllable in intonation-unit-final position, (iii) lengthened intonation-unit-final syllables, and (iv) syllable timing" (Newmark, 2016, p. 646). Native American accents across the United States and Canada developed in parallel, regardless of the great distance between tribes. This is indicative of some level of a shared systemic cultural overlap and points us toward the question of: How has the rez accent developed consistently across such vast regions?

Several theories exist which address this concern. One frame of thought posed by May Bernhardt, professor in the School of Audiology and Speech Sciences at the University of British Columbia, asserts that dialects often developed from pidgins, elementary forms of a language used to communicate across language barriers. She postulates that Native American dialects likely developed from English pidgins and evolved over time (2008, p. 573). If these pidgins developed around the same time or in close regions, they may have garnered some prosodic similarities.

Others consider that linguistic tradition may have played a larger role in the evolution of Native American English accents. Given that, "Often, when someone transitions from a tonal

language to a non-tonal one, the speech will still be affected" (Devlin, 2024), tonal aspects may have simply been carried from one language to another. Similarities in prosodic deviation from standard English may merely denote a greater widespread transition from primarily tonal indigenous languages to non-tonal English.

A final theory speculates that the rez accent developed as a result of "inter-tribal contact," especially due to the aforementioned Native American residential boarding school system, or through the Indian Relocation Act of 1956, (Newmark, 2016, p. 650) a Bureau of Indian Affairs initiative which encouraged Natives to relocate from reservations to urban centers by offering education, professional training, and job opportunities within large cities (Burt, 1986, p. 85). If Natives from varied tribal backgrounds learned English together or relocated to the same region, that intermingling may have facilitated the development of a new way of speaking, cultivating the rez accent.

Although the rez accent was recognized across Native nations in North America, use of the rez accent has shown to be somewhat conditional. Intense code-switching has also been observed among Native populations. In research settings, Native individuals placed in professional interview environments restrained from exhibiting "rez accent qualities" in their speech, yet possessed those same qualities in more casual settings with other Natives (Newmark, 2016, p. 643). This suggests that Native populations feel social pressures to conform to non-Native standards in non-Native social settings. A study that interviewed Native American actors noted that some participants felt "shame" for holding a rez accent, as well as that "internalized bias within Indigenous communities held that a rez accent equates to a lack of education" (Armstrong, 2020, p. 311). Both stand as viable reasons for the aforementioned code-switching, but lead to other questions concerning how the rez accent might relate to identity, such as: Does the rez accent work to preserve cultural identity, or do the stereotypes surrounding the rez accent pose a cultural detriment?

Case Study: Interviews with Tribal Members

I conducted a series of miniature individual interviews over Zoom with a select group of participants: 4 between the ages of 18 and 22, and 2 between the ages of 50 and 55. Each of the participants was enrolled tribal members from various tribes and regions. Participants were asked the following questions pertaining to personal perceptions of the rez accent, public perceptions of the rez accent, personal identification with the rez accent, and cultural identification with the rez accent:

1. How would you define a rez accent?
2. Do you identify with a rez accent? How would you describe your own personal accent?
3. Do you feel your accent has changed over time?
4. Do you feel your accent changes in different spaces? a. If yes: When do you use a rez accent?
5. What misconceptions do you think exist surrounding the rez accent?
6. How does the rez accent relate to your personal and cultural identity?

Additional information was gathered on each participant's tribal affiliation and the amount of life spent living on or off of their tribe's reservation.

This method posed a few limitations. As the interview pool was incredibly limited, it is impossible for these results to be generalized to an entire Native population, more so acting as a snapshot of potential trends pertaining to the rez accent's relation to cultural identity. The pool

also contains a consistent “type” of interviewee. The participants between the ages of 18 and 22 are all university students at Stanford University. For this reason, it is reasonable to assume that their answers may reflect scholarly ideas or language learned at the university, not necessarily present in the communities that they are intended to reflect. Similarly, the participants between the ages of 45 and 55 are successful professionals with long careers in tribal leadership and tribal gaming. For this reason, it is reasonable to assume that their answers might reflect views central to Native American culture as a collective whole, rather than that of their specific tribe which their answers may be intended to represent.

The interviews yielded ideological overlap among all groups, as well as nuanced differences across age groups. The following analysis is 3-fold, highlighting similarities in three themes that constantly reappeared: elements of the rez accent, home and community, and stigma.

Elements of the Rez Accent

Similarities were found pertaining to how interviewees described specific elements of the rez accent. When asked how they would define a rez accent, several of the interviewees described only the base-level prosodic elements of the accent such as “dragging things out” and placing emphasis, falling in line with previous research which highlighted the “sing-song” stereotype. One interviewee noted the “slow and intentional” nature of the accent, altogether denoting a cultural tradition of deliberate, well-thought-out speaking. A Diné student focused on how the accent was physically spoken. Navajo is spoken primarily in the back of the throat, while English is spoken in the front, directly exhibiting the aforementioned shift from a Native language to English, and supporting the idea that qualities of Native languages undoubtedly influenced the qualities of the rez accent.

TABLE 1: Interviewees’ Descriptions of Rez Accent Prosodic Elements.

Hoopa (19)	“...dragging things out” “... emphasizing certain things”
Warm Springs (51)	“...higher pitches and tones” “... slow and intentional ”
Diné (20)	“...the Navajo language [has] different tonals or you speak using different parts of your mouth- Especially in the back of your mouth... English, it's more in the front of the mouth.”

Three of the six conducted interviews strongly introduced humor as a key quality of the accent. One Warm Springs interviewee mentioned “chuckling around” in all descriptions of interactions with other tribal members throughout the interview. A Diné student explicitly mentioned how the rez accent holds a humorous tone, and another Warm Springs Native stated, “It falls into the humor of the accent and the culture as well.” Having faced many generations of hardship, Native American communities have developed a distinct sense of humor as a sort of “coping mechanism” (Jacobs, 2021). This humor is passed throughout Native American communities as a shared value. The interviewees’ descriptions correlate directly with this developed humor and allow the rez accent to stand as a direct proponent of this tradition.

TABLE 2: Interviewees’ Descriptions of Humor Within the Rez Accent.

Warm Springs (52)	“... chuckling around”
Diné (20)	“...there’s kind of a humor tone to it”
Warm Springs (51)	“It also kind of falls into the humor of the accent and the culture as well.”

Home and Community

Most interviewees also found the rez accent to relate to the concept of “home.” This “home” was found to signify both a geographical location, as well as the interviewee’s Native American community. One Warm Springs tribal member noted directly that the rez accent induces a “feeling of home.” He then proceeded to share a personal story of a time when he ran into a member of his tribe in a city two hours away from the reservation. Through “chuckling around”—speaking comfortably in the rez accent—the interviewee mentioned that regardless of being far from home, he felt as if he were back home. This type of story reinforces tribal identity by tying the rez accent back both to a specific geographical location and a specific community. This interviewee considers the rez accent to remind him of a physical home—the reservation—because that is where most of his interactions with the rez accent occur. However, it is found to similarly reference his specific Native community, as usage of the rez can induce a feeling of home, regardless of location, if used in conversation with another Native. Several interviewees also mentioned that the rez accent reminded them of specific family members, standing as a reflection of tribal lineage and tradition. This exhibits a level of cultural ownership of the rez accent as more than just an accent, but as a potential marker of safety, belonging, “in-group,” and “out-group” among tribal communities.

TABLE 3: Interviewees’ Descriptions of Rez Accent Ties to Home.

Warm Springs (51)	“It helps me to feel closer to my culta (grandma)” “... connecting more to my people”
Warm Springs (52)	“I ran into one of our cousins [in a city off the reservation]. We chuckled and joked...we’re a long ways away from home and we’re in the middle of a city, but it’s like we’re home ” “It’s a feeling of home ”
Hoopa (19)	“Growing up, my grandpa always had a strong rez accent” “I love talking to my grandparents...because I feel like I don’t have to like explain my identity or the way I’m talking to anyone”

Each of the interviewees further remarked that they utilized a rez accent around members of their Native “in-group,” such as friends and family, yet restrained from using it around members of the non-Native “out-group,” indicating code-switching and tribalism. Further, the younger interviewees addressed using the rez accent within the specific context of undergraduate studies at Stanford University. Each of the younger participants who identified with a rez accent discussed how altered their way of speaking upon coming to Stanford to purposely hide rez accent qualities in their speech. The Hoopa student described inhibiting her rez accent in non-Native classes in order to appear more “academic,” while the Diné student described inhibiting her rez accent in non-Native classes in order to appear more “professional.” Concealing one’s rez accent in order to appear more “proper” is consistent with prior research which suggests that members of Native communities find their own accents to be lacking, or unideal for being perceived as capable individuals. In this way, Native code-switching denotes a pressure for Native students to conform to non-Native linguistic standards in order to hold agency as both professional and intellectual individuals.

TABLE 4: Interviewees’ Descriptions of Rez Accent Usage.

Warm Springs (51)	“When I’m amongst other Natives ”
Hoopa (19)	“[My accent has] gotten more white [because I] want to sound academic ... I’m more of a chameleon , thinking about the space I’m in. If I’m at the NACC, I’ll act rez and talk in my rez accent”
Salish (21)	“...when I’m truly comfortable ...I revert back to my natural self ” “...away from home, I think I tone it down a lot more”

Diné (20)	<p>“...I noticed that not a lot of people who are in my classes would understand my rez accent or where it comes from... or how to interpret those tonal differences”</p> <p>“...I change how I project my voice in different settings. Like right now I’m using my professional voice”</p> <p>“Normally when I’m doing interviews, I try to become like approach it more professionally [and] use clear tonal changes in my voice... making sure that I speak out the letters and all the consonants clearly like how you would hear it in a normal English accent”</p>
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However, the Diné student also mentioned that her shift away from using the rez accent at Stanford was part of a strategic effort in order to enhance her communication with classmates. She acknowledged that the rez accent would be foreign to the majority of her peers, so she altered her tone and enunciation in order to communicate more effectively with her peers. This suggests a broader understanding within Native American communities that the rez accent is widely underrepresented and widely unknown.

Each of the younger participants who identified with the rez accent additionally consistently identified their rez accent as their more “natural” cadence, representative of their more “natural” self. This paints the process of code-switching away from rez accent qualities as a form of fronting, not only hiding one’s way of speaking but also their personal and cultural identity.

While conducting this research, I found myself reflecting on my own accent and linguistic tendencies. When I lived in Oregon or Southern California, I never once considered my accent or how I speak. I speak like my people and I speak like where I am from. When I began my studies at Stanford University, I was immersed in entirely new demographics and environments that were so unlike the world in which I grew up, that I noticed changes in myself. I became more articulate and concerned with not only my choice of words but also with the subject matter discussed in casual conversation. I became self-conscious of my slang-oriented speech, as well as the cadence with which they were spoken. I developed a “valley girl” accent and grimaced at every sentence that left my mouth. Though I never fully identified with the rez accent before, having relocated to Southern California, it now sits as a cornerstone of my identity. In more home-like settings, with other Natives or with my close friends and family, I retain qualities of the rez accent and find comfort and belonging in those moments.

Stigma

Public stigma proved to also heavily influence how each participant viewed the rez accent. Participants in the 45-55-year-old age group discussed growing in and out of the rez accent in their childhood and teenage years as a result of negative public stigma. They similarly developed an awareness of the rez accent at a young age, coupled with feelings of shame. Each of the adults however reclaimed their use of the rez accent in adulthood. Participants of the older generation found their use of the rez accent highly susceptible to negative public image, yet regained their use of the rez accent by either personal development—reestablishing pride and appreciation for their culture—or societal development—acting in accordance with a public shift in the stigma surrounding Native American topics.

TABLE 5: Interviewees’ Descriptions of Rez Accent Stigma and Awareness.

Warm Springs (51)	“When I’m amongst other Natives ”
Diné (20)	<p>“...when I’m truly comfortable...I revert back to my natural self”</p> <p>“...away from home, I think I tone it down a lot more”</p>
Hoopa (19)	“...I noticed that not a lot of people who are in my classes would understand my rez accent”

	<p>or where it comes from... or how to interpret those tonal differences”</p> <p>“...I change how I project my voice in different settings. Like right now I’m using my professional voice”</p> <p>“Normally when I’m doing interviews, I try to become like approach it more professionally [and] use clear tonal changes in my voice... making sure that I speak out the letters and all the consonants clearly like how you would hear it in a normal English accent”</p>
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Interestingly, the participants of the 18-22 age range exhibited significantly less of an awareness of the rez accent while growing up and did not mention experiencing shame. They experienced a more accepting relationship with the rez accent, indicating a potential public shift in stigma. The younger participants who identified with a rez accent also exhibited a blindness to their own accents, stating that it was their classmates at Stanford who pointed out their unique linguistic habits. This difference in awareness between the older and younger participants suggests that the older participants grew up in a time where a rez accent posed many more barriers to one’s achievement—where possessing a rez accent proved a hindrance to success and noticing one’s own rez accent was essential for survival. Thereby, it also suggests that the younger participants grew up in an environment where a rez accent dictated much less of their lives. This shift in stigma and awareness among tribal members reflects a potential shift toward public acceptance of the rez accent and directly reflects how contemporary Native American communities have regained agency as well as cultural pride.

The negative public stigma which led to both a negative relationship with the rez accent and strong awareness of one’s personal rez accent can be attributed to a multitude of misconceptions. The interviewees agreed most prominently that those who use the rez accent are seen by the public as “ignorant.” A Warm Springs tribal member mentioned how these misconceptions were fueled by old Hollywood portrayals of Native Americans, forming the stereotypes that defined Native communities for generations. Developments in Native American representation on television, such as those exhibited in *Reservation Dogs* perhaps partially explain this public shift in perception.

Implications

This research points to important findings regarding the intersection of the rez accent and cultural identity, adding to this conversation in two key ways. First, these findings underscore the implications of Native American code-switching. Extensive literature exists on code-switching for other racial demographics, yet hardly any scholarly pieces exist on code-switching in Native American communities. My research brings this research inequity to light and calls for further focus on contemporary Native American code-switching.

Perhaps more fundamentally, my findings bring nuance to narratives of loss. Native American scholars like Jenny Davis have long examined how discussions of Native American rhetoric are historically framed around loss (2017, p. 53), whether that pertains to the loss of native tongue or the loss of native speakers. This research offers the opportunity to approach Native rhetoric from a shifted perspective—the rez accent is no longer a byproduct of loss, but the accumulation of generations of creation—a new way for Native American culture and heritage to be carried forward. The rez accent serves to preserve contemporary Native American cultural identity, standing not only as an artifact of cultural history but as a living and growing testament of cultural potential for the future.

Sociolinguists consistently find that accents hold deep ties to cultural identity. Linguist Lippi-Green (2012) argues that accents stand as social markers, while also painting targets for

discrimination. This allows deviations from standard English, like the rez accent, and those who speak it to retain a host of negative associations. Native communities, however, reframe the rez accent in a positive light, associating it with cultural authenticity and shared experience.

Native Americans stand as one of the most underrepresented groups in the modern-day United States. As a result, Native individuals are raised in a society where they must grapple with the implications of their race—combatting strong negative stigma and stereotypes, conforming to non-Native standards in order to earn acceptance, and experiencing widespread disconnect from their culture. Progress is found in representation. As long as research on the rez accent consists merely of theories regarding its origin, misunderstandings of the rez accent will persist. Similarly, as long as television and media stringently avoid Native American topics, awareness of the rez accent and Native American culture will remain insufficient. In order to heal the relationship between the United States and Native American communities, it is essential that Native American representation be amplified, not only in research, media, and education, but in all spaces.

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