Learning Navajo

Navajo, or Diné Bizaad, has the most speakers of any indigenous language north of Mexico. Most of the 100,000 plus speakers are older, and Navajo language use and fluency are declining rapidly among the youth. It is spoken primarily within the Navajo Nation, which has its capital in Window Rock, Arizona, and spans Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. Navajo was one of several Native American languages used as a military code during WWII, and played a large role in the Allied victory at Iwo Jima.

The Navajo Rosetta Stone® software was developed with the assistance of a Rosetta Stone Endangered Language Program grant to Navajo Language Renaissance, a nonprofit organization consisting of Navajo educators whose intention is to make the software available within all Navajo Nation schools with the support of the Department of Diné Education. Navajo language experts have used Young & Morgan’s The Navajo Language: A Grammar and Colloquial Dictionary (1980) as the standard for this project.

Writing System

Modified Roman alphabet

Language Family

Southern Athabaskan

Language Tips

- Navajo spelling is mostly phonetic. A letter is almost always pronounced the same way each time it is used.
- Navajo is a tonal language, meaning that a difference in tone often makes the difference between words.
  - doo ‘not’
  - nilji ‘he/she is’
  - dóó ‘and’
  - nilji ‘you are’
- Vowels in Navajo can have the following pronunciations:
  - a, á, ą, å, aá, áa
  - low tone, high tone, nasal, high tone nasal, rising tone, falling tone
- The apostrophe in Navajo represents a glottal stop, which is a catching sound in the throat, like the sound in the middle of the word uh-oh in English.
- Verbs in Navajo can have up to 11 affixes, some of which indicate the subject or the object of a sentence.
- The subject of the sentence is usually indicated in the middle of the verb, so that the verb is split into two or more parts. The verb naashnish, for example, means ‘I am working’, but the part that means ‘work’ is náa-__-nish, and the part that means ‘I’ is -sh-.
- Each verb has a different stem for each tense. For example, in the present tense, the stem of ‘play’ is -né, and in the future tense, the stem is -neel.
• Navajo has three different number categories: singular (1), dual (2), or plural (3+). In many verbs, the singular and dual third-person forms are the same.

‘ayá ‘he is eating’
‘ayá ‘they (2) are eating’
da’ayá ‘they (3+) are eating’

• Nouns don’t usually indicate number, but when they do, the dual forms and the plural forms are the same:

‘ashkii ‘a boy’
‘ashiiké ‘boys (2)’
‘ashiiké ‘boys (3+)’

• Navajo has a large number of family terms, including different words for older and younger siblings, and even the words for ‘son’ and ‘daughter’ are different depending on the gender of the parent. Bich’é’é, for example, means ‘her daughter’, while bitsí means ‘his daughter’.

Shape & Number Concepts
Many verbs in Navajo change depending on the shape, type, or number of the subject. Small, round objects use a different verb stem than long, thin objects, for example. Some different classes of objects are:

• animate objects (person, animal)
• solid roundish objects (ball, phone, cup)
• flat flexible objects (blanket, shirt, piece of paper)
• slender stiff objects (arrow, ladder, pencil)
• open container (bowl of apples, cup of coffee)
• non-compact matter (cotton, hay, wool)
• plural objects (2-3 objects)
• numerous plural objects (sugar, sand, seeds, marbles)