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Producing language reclamation by decolonising 'language'

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Abstract

Indigenous language documentation and description efforts are increasingly designed to support community decolonisation goals, particularly with respect to implementing practices that will facilitate the use of the resulting products in revitalisation efforts. However, the field of Linguistics may inadvertently reinforce its colonial legacy (Errington 2008) when researchers produce their work around linguistic rather than cultural units, categorise and theorise Indigenous languages using norms for major global languages, or default to Western constructs of what 'language' is when engaging in Indigenous language research, teaching, and advocacy. Results of this include ineffective language learning materials and ill feelings toward linguists by Indigenous community members. Similarly, the success of internally-operated Indigenous community language programs is also informed by the integration of community needs and worldviews into these efforts. Using insights from Native Americans who are engaged in language programs, I exemplify these issues and argue for a paradigm of *language reclamation*, which moves beyond a focus on direct language measures such as creating new speakers (*language revitalisation*), to incorporate community epistemologies such as how 'language' is defined and given sociocultural meaning. I show how a reclamation framework links community needs to language research and teaching, and encourage its wider adoption.

Keywords: collaborative language work, definitions of language, decolonisation, language reclamation

1. What does it mean to say that linguists support communities?¹

Many Indigenous language research initiatives are intertwined with community efforts toward decolonisation, a process which entails identifying and resisting the imposition of Western values and knowledge systems that contribute to the subjugation of Indigenous peoples. As part of this, linguists who focus on Indigenous languages have increasingly been called upon to address social justice in their work, as exemplified by numerous discussions in the literature about meeting Indigenous community needs and the research approaches through which this can or should occur (e.g., Ahlers 2009; Cameron et al. 1993; Crippen & Robinson 2013; Czaykowska-Higgins 2009; Dobrin & Schwartz 2016; Eira 2008; Goodfellow 2009; Leonard & Haynes 2010; Penfield et al. 2008; Rice 2009, 2010, 2011; Stenzel 2014; Yamada 2007, 2014). Interacting with small Native American communities in the United States, the opinion I normally hear in discussions of this topic is that community decolonisation goals can and should be supported by *language work*, a term I adopt for the current paper as an umbrella expression to include language documentation, description, teaching, advocacy, and resource development.

In many cases of Native American and other Indigenous language work, community goals are indeed realised, with stakeholders in collaborative endeavours forming genuine friendships and other mutually beneficial relationships. I have participated in such efforts where professional linguists are clearly working to support community goals and are respected for doing so. Papers in the current journal and in similarly themed publications such as *Language Documentation & Conservation* likewise offer many relevant examples. However, clouding these success stories is a discourse that Goodfellow (2009:1) terms ‘Linguists: The Bad Guys’, a frame in which linguists do not focus their attention on community needs, and may even state that community-focused language work should be outside of what they do (e.g., Newman 2003). Goodfellow’s summary of this view as ‘uncharacteristic of most who are involved in language maintenance efforts’ corroborates my experience, and yet there is a related pattern that I do encounter regularly. Here, I refer to collaborative language work in which Native Americans opine that linguists, who claim to want to help, are not actually doing so; sometimes,

¹ I would like to thank the many people who supported the development of this paper, particularly the Indigenous language practitioners who contributed their insights. I received valuable feedback on earlier drafts from Anne Connor, Haley De Korne, Kylan de Vries, Megan Farnsworth, Christina Wasson, and two anonymous reviewers. My special thanks go to the National Science Foundation Documenting Endangered Languages Program for its support of the 2011 Breath of Life Institute (discussed in Section 3), which inspired the study on which this paper is based.

this includes accusations that linguists are tearing apart their languages or otherwise disrespecting them.² Notably, in many of these situations, the linguists have expended significant time analysing the languages, developing orthographies, producing reference materials, and teaching what they have discovered – all things that seem to support community needs. From this arises the question, 'what went wrong?'

I take this question as a starting point from which to examine issues of colonial legacies, power structures, and worldview differences – ideas about language in particular – that I believe beget such conflicts and also explain successful outcomes in language work. Through three case studies of Native Americans engaged in language work, I illustrate how the execution and perceived usefulness of this work emerges through cultural lenses. For ease of presentation and also because it has frequently been employed in discussions of this topic, I locate much of my analysis and commentary within the frame of 'linguists working with communities', a discourse in which 'linguists' are normally understood to be non-Indigenous academic professionals, and 'communities' are the groups that speak or claim an Indigenous language.

Of course, as exemplified throughout the paper, this frame is problematic. First, it may fail to account for the diversity within both groups, particularly as it applies to the reality that ideas about language work are contested in both. Second, it imposes a binary categorisation that erases the many examples of people like me who fit into both categories (see Hermes 2012 for discussion of this topic): I am a linguist and a member of a Native American community who entered academia to do language work. My tribal heritage language, *myaamia*, was sleeping for a long time until many stages of language work brought it back into the community from legacy documentation (Baldwin et al. 2013; Baldwin & Olds 2007; Ironstrack 2014; Leonard 2007, 2008, 2011; Rinehart 2006). As a citizen of the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, my connection to *myaamia* is both personal and academic.³ It is because of others' earlier language work that I have access to my heritage tribal language, and it is so others can have similar access that I focus my research on how to best produce Indigenous language work.

I begin my analysis with an overview of the historical legacies and resulting practices in language work that frequently come up in conflicts between linguists and communities, focusing especially on the United States and the colonial origin power structures that underlie these conflicts. Next, I

² I deliberately use a pronoun with an ambiguous antecedent here to capture that the perceived disrespect may be toward languages or toward members of language communities.

³ For clarity, I will use *myaamia* for the language and 'Miami' for the people and culture, though the reverse is also possible. By convention, *myaamia* is not capitalised.

turn to the aforementioned case studies, focusing on individuals' definitions and beliefs about language in the context of their language work experiences. Interspersed within these stories is my commentary on the themes that emerge and their implications for future language work.

2. Identifying and counteracting colonial structures in language work

Linguistics⁴ and its personnel, particularly in the United States, get linked to a tradition that often disregards Native American views of language. Errington (2008) argues that Linguistics developed hand in hand with colonialism, and that the field thus adopted a practice of writing (i.e., documenting) Native American languages in ways that served Euro-American needs, particularly in the choice of what was described and the categories employed in doing so. The contemporary field, though increasingly reflexive about researchers' responsibilities to language communities, originates from this tradition of salvage research and maintains several of its legacies. I offer the following generalisations for Native American language work as it might be described in a critique of this legacy: 'Good' speakers, whose legitimacy is determined by the researcher (Leonard & Haynes 2010), produce language that is transformed into 'data', which is conceptualised through a 'language as object' metaphor (Stebbins 2014; Whaley 2011) that tends to emphasise structural properties at the expense of social practices. Products based on this data focus on grammatical phenomena and are organised around structural categories (Amery 2009); exceptions to this pattern are marked. For instance, a grammar produced for linguists is just called 'a grammar' because scientific audiences are the default, whereas something produced for community use needs a longer name (e.g., 'a pedagogical grammar').⁵ These products are touted for their potential to support community goals of reversing language shift. However, those goals, along with the assessment of their success, are imposed in a way that assumes the value systems and usage patterns of world languages to be the norm and ideal (Leonard 2008, 2011; Moore, Pietikäinen & Blommaert 2010), thus maintaining linguists' control.

⁴ This paper follows the convention of capitalising the names of academic disciplines but using lower-case to refer to what professionals in the discipline study (e.g., scholars in Linguistics do research in linguistics).

⁵ Related to this, community-oriented language work is further marked within the academy when it gets framed as separate from, or extra to, linguists' primary work. See Warner, Luna & Butler 2007:§3.4 and Dobrin & Schwartz 2016:§2 for examples and discussion of this phenomenon.

It is not my claim that this summary is an accurate representation of contemporary practices, though I concur with Shulist's (2013) observation that it is primarily practitioners in Linguistic Anthropology, rather than Linguistics proper, who emphasise the need to address the legacy of salvage research and develop tools to do so (see also a related call by Ahlers (2009) for more integration of Anthropology into language work). Nevertheless, it is true that even the production of language work in Linguistics has evolved from earlier norms, particularly with respect to the larger scope of what gets investigated, increased expectations of community involvement in the process, and improved standards of archiving and dissemination in ways that address the concerns of multiple stakeholders. Moreover, I do not wish to discount the disciplinary tools of Linguistics, which facilitate comparison and analysis by adopting common taxonomies and norms of description. However, I follow Stebbins (2014) in concluding that Western ideas of language work inherently become elevated over Indigenous ideas when they are uncritically adopted as self-evident, explanatory, and/or accurate.

This is especially true with 'language' itself, a unit of special importance in that it guides the identification and adoption of other units. However it is conceptualised, 'language' provides the basic framework through which people plan, execute, and assess language work. When speaker-consultants participate in language documentation, for instance, it is their understanding of 'language' that informs their motivations in doing such work. When they negotiate ethical and other concerns, it is with this as a backdrop. When community members engage with language documentation or with pedagogical materials based on documentation, it is with their understanding of 'language' that they use these products and assess their value.

In focusing attention on Indigenous definitions of 'language', one of my goals is to move away from the common practice of theorising how Indigenous language work might facilitate *language revitalisation*, to instead consider how it can support *language reclamation*. I have in previous work characterised *language revitalisation* as a process focused on language itself wherein the goals and measures of a given effort revolve around variables such as the number of speakers, and differentiated *language reclamation* as 'a larger effort by a community to claim its right to speak a language and to set associated goals in response to community needs and perspectives' (Leonard 2012:359, see also Leonard 2011:141). Reclamation is thus a type of decolonisation. Rather than exhibiting a top-down model in which goals such as grammatical fluency or intergenerational transmission are assigned, it begins with community histories and contemporary needs, which are determined by community agents, and uses this background as a basis to design and develop language work. As a broader approach than revitalisation, reclamation more strongly links language work with the underlying causes of language shift. Reclamation likewise recognises that in certain worldviews, what in Western science would be considered social factors that are merely

associated with language might instead be part of what someone understands ‘language’ to be. As exemplified through the case studies presented later, reclamation calls for an ecological approach to language work, one that recognises how language is never independent from the environment in which its speakers (and potential future speakers) live. Language work thus must be produced in a way that integrates ‘non-linguistic’ factors.

Returning to the scenario described earlier in which well-meaning linguists were clashing with Native American community members, I suspect that much of the incongruity in such situations stems from the linguists conceptualizing their contributions in terms of revitalisation, and defaulting to their own understandings of language in the process. *Revitalisation* tends to call for a focus on creating speakers, and locates this effort around mastery of linguistic units such as words and grammatical rules – things that Linguistics is good at analysing and describing in precise ways, but that in the context of some Native American language efforts may divert attention from desired community outcomes. I suggest that thinking in terms of *reclamation* is more effective because it calls for the participants in language work to not only ask about community needs, but to also query and respect the worldviews and histories that inform those needs.

It is my thesis that even well-intentioned Indigenous language work will perpetuate colonial power structures when its products demote ideas from Indigenous communities relative to those of the Western academy, a process Smith (2012:62) describes as ‘establishing the positional superiority of Western knowledge’. Such an approach can yield many negative consequences. Primary among these is the continued marginalisation of Indigenous peoples, as might be revealed through community perceptions that a linguist engaged in Indigenous language work is acting inappropriately even when the linguist believes that he or she is doing good. There are also scientific implications: Framing questions in a way that restricts the possible answers, as can occur when categories from one culture are uncritically applied to analyse another, may engender conclusions that are incomplete, if not wrong. Language work that identifies and legitimises local notions of language, while not a panacea, can diminish both problems.⁶

My thinking on these issues is informed by Indigenous approaches to research, which collectively critique the imposition of Western epistemologies and the corresponding erasure of Indigenous worldviews. Of special relevance is Radical Indigenism, whose tenets capture the arguments of this paper.

⁶ For length reasons, I focus on my new case studies and only touch on other examples of how this can occur. I recommend Shaw (2001) and Rice (2010) for good examples of First Nations-framed language work in Canada, and Couzens & Eira (2014) for a valuable study on Aboriginal notions of language in Australia.

Proposed by Garrouette (2003:113), Radical Indigenism takes as a core assumption that Indigenous 'philosophies of knowledge are rational, articulable, coherent logics for ordering and knowing the world' – and further argues that this knowledge has a place in the academy. As with other Indigenous approaches, Radical Indigenism centers Indigenous perspectives and critiques the narrowness of what counts as evidence in Western science. Applied to the current discussion, Radical Indigenism calls for Indigenous concepts to guide the production and assessment of Indigenous language work.

This is not to imply that Indigenous notions of language are not already part of language work, as there is significant interest in this topic and the associated research is useful for understanding what sorts of issues are likely to arise. For example, a growing body of literature in Linguistic Anthropology examines how ideologies guide language work in situations of endangerment (e.g., Collins 1992; Hill 2006; Sallabank 2013; and many essays in Kroskrity & Field 2009 and Austin & Sallabank 2014). Collins (1992:407) recognises the need to identify and reconcile epistemological differences in such situations, noting explicitly that community definitions of language often differ from those held by professional linguists, whose 'categories of analysis are part of the practices that characterize social realities', and whose credentialed positions elevate the authority of their categories relative to those of Indigenous communities.

Collins' point, which is situated in his own history as a non-Indigenous linguist who conducted fieldwork with the Tolowa community of California and Oregon in the 1980s, is supported by the findings of others who describe various problematic effects of academic research on Indigenous language work. These include the idea of languages as bounded codes (e.g., Dobrin, Austin & Nathan 2009; Stebbins 2014) that can be enumerated (e.g., Hill 2002; Moore et al. 2010), documentation of which can serve to establish what is often the speech of a small number of people, in a specific time and context, as a named standard (e.g., Mühlhäusler 2006; Whaley 2011) or 'authentic' (Bucholtz 2003) baseline from which new speakers are assessed (e.g., Collins 1992; Goodfellow 2003, 2009; Meek 2010). Most research in this area starts with Western perspectives to theorise what occurs in Indigenous communities, especially in terms of language ideologies and their various effects. My aim in the following case studies, conversely, is to elevate Indigenous 'ideologies' to definitional status and to examine language work from this perspective.

3. Background to case studies

The case studies reported on in this paper come from an interview-based study of Native American practitioners of language work that I began in August 2014, and which is ongoing as of writing. In these interviews, which last

approximately one hour, I ask about participants' background in language usage and study, including training in linguistics; their history and intended future engagement with language work; and their ideas about language, including its definition(s) and social value. I also query how well their perspectives are integrated into the Indigenous language work in which they are involved. I note that recent scholarship in Linguistics, particularly regarding language documentation methods and priorities, has explored issues of ethics, responsibility to language communities, and how to make language work most useful for all stakeholders. I communicate my wish to add to this conversation by sharing language practitioners' perspectives.

The original inspiration for this study comes from a diversity in ideas about language that emerged at the 2011 Breath of Life Archival Institute for Indigenous Languages. Funded primarily through a grant from the National Science Foundation Documenting Endangered Languages Program, with the intent of promoting, disseminating, and improving the tools of linguistics in the context of language reclamation from documentation, this workshop focused on language resources held in archives in and around Washington, DC.⁷ Part of this two-week Institute was devoted to training in linguistics for purposes of being able to interpret the archival documentation, much of which had been created by linguists, so that it could be repurposed for community efforts. I was one of the Institute's organisers and an instructor-facilitator for sessions on topics such as 'grammar without tears', 'language and politics', and 'access, ethics, and intellectual property'. Language work during the Institute occurred in teams, each comprised of one or more community researchers (the Indigenous individuals engaging in reclamation) and a linguistic partner (usually a professional linguist) whose role was to assist in the interpretation of the archival materials.⁸

Early in the Institute, all participants were engaged in a group discussion and the topic serendipitously shifted to what 'language' was. A process unfolded wherein many of the community researchers began sharing their definitions of language. These were diverse and included functional (e.g., daily communication), spiritual, and socio-politically-oriented views (e.g., 'language is us', 'language is power'); none, however, referenced the structural or

⁷ Major funding was provided by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 0966584. Additional support came from the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, Consortium for World Cultures, Endangered Language Fund, National Museum of Natural History, Native Voices Endowment, Recovering Voices, and the National Museum of the American Indian.

⁸ At the 2011 Institute, the individuals who researched their heritage languages were 'participants' and the professional linguists who worked with them were 'mentors'. Breath of Life has since moved away from these names, which elevate linguists' status, and has adopted those I use here.

cognitive notions that are common in Linguistics. From this sharing ensued additional discussion of language and its roles. Over the course of this discussion and those that followed, it became clear that this exercise aided people of different backgrounds – in this case community researchers and linguistic partners – to understand each other's perspectives, which substantiates Kroskrity's (2009:73) call for 'ideological clarification' as an essential component of collaborative Indigenous language work. I have thus started including this exercise into Breath of Life programmes whenever possible; as of writing, I have participated in four since the 2011 Institute. Again, although a few linguistic partners have offered definitions from Linguistics, none of the community researchers have.

This trend continues in the interview case studies I turn to next, which I selected because they illustrate common themes, yet provide different insights for language work. I present the case studies in separate sections – not as subparts of a 'data' section – to emphasise that each is its own story and should be read in this way. Also in the spirit of reclamation, which includes the idea that people should be able to name themselves however they deem appropriate, I invited participants to specify how they wanted to be acknowledged. This paper follows each person's preferences and also adopts the language names that they used. My comments link each person's insights to broader issues in Linguistics and Indigenous language work practices.

4. Language as the basket that holds culture

L. Frank is an Indigenous California artist, self-described 'decolonisationist', and language activist with personal heritage to many languages, including English, German, Spanish, Rarámuri, Ajachmem, and Tongva. The following discussion focuses on Tongva, which is the language that she most heavily studies. Tongva is indigenous to the present-day Los Angeles area, and it was here that L. first heard it when she was four or five:

The first place I ever heard Tongva was on a site that's now an archaeological dig below Loyola Marymount University. It's where I used to play, and that's where they found 400 women – predominantly women – and they used to talk to me.

L. explained that this experience made her seem odd within her own family, and that even she was initially concerned 'because [she]'d never heard voices coming ... like this before, so [she] was intrigued and stayed'. L. eventually realised that she was welcome, and that it was good that she visited these women.

L.'s deep personal relationship with language is reflected in the spiritual connection captured in this anecdote, and is affirmed by her professional work. She is a founder of the Advocates for Indigenous California Language

Survival (see www.aicls.org) and serves in other organisations focused on traditional language and culture, such as the California Indian Basketweavers Association (see www.ciba.org). L. also co-developed the Breath of Life model discussed earlier (Hinton 2001; Sammons & Leonard 2015:209-211). Using archival material was her only option to learn Tongva, which was a sleeping language prior to L.'s and others' recent efforts. L.'s motivation in founding Breath of Life was to provide similar access to other Indigenous communities with sleeping languages, and was informed by her recognition of the connection of language to life. L. feels that knowing her language is essential, as it provides guidance without which she will not be able to move on to the next world, an idea that she integrated into the definition she offered:

Language is the basket that holds all of our culture ... in order to understand why this oak tree sitting on a hilltop is *so critical* to my afterlife, the language is the only thing that explains that and carries that and is that ... I need the language to understand. I don't want to take a wrong road when I get to the edge of the land of the dead ... so language is pretty much everything.

When language is 'pretty much everything', it ensues that the responsibility of people who engage with it will be high. Well-executed language work gains tremendous potential, and the implications of poorly executed language work are likewise serious. Having organised and participated in language work with non-Indigenous linguists, L. had much to say about this topic. She has had various 'cultural arguments' with linguists over the years regarding how language documentation should be interpreted, and notes that the linguists may have been correct with respect to grammar, but that they were incorrect culturally and could not understand this. Presumably, these linguists were not recognizing how L. defines language and were defaulting to their own categories. L. acknowledges that mutual understanding is not unidirectional, and that Indigenous community members should respect Western scientific needs in the context of collaborative language work. L. argues, however, that achieving reclamation ultimately requires that the heritage community's views be the basis from which language work is developed and assessed.

In offering this perspective, L. raised practical and ethical questions regarding the appropriate roles of linguists in Indigenous language work, a topic of significant attention in recent literature (e.g., Gerdts 2010; Hermes 2012; Newman 2003; Rice 2009, 2010; Speas 2009; Stebbins 2012; Stenzel 2014; Warner et al. 2007; see Penfield & Tucker 2011 for a valuable examination of this issue specifically for applied linguists). Here, L.'s concerns about the non-Indigenous scientist's need to respect and emphasise Indigenous cultures in language work were especially prominent. For example, she spoke about the crucial nature of context in language documentation, and noted her appreciation of a dictionary – one created by a

linguist – that she likes because it ‘puts things in as much context as possible’. L. also lamented a case in which she and others were listening to historical audio documentation, and a scientist interjected metadata (the date, the location, etc.) over the speech of an old man. To L., the person making the recording had inappropriately determined what was important.

Regarding this example, contemporary standards of documentation would likely preclude what happened (see Austin 2010:28-29, 2013); a basic rule is that metadata should not mask data. However, such generic ‘best practices’ truly work well only when the broader sociocultural context is understood *and* respected; this is necessary for applying (and sometimes modifying) general standards to specific language work situations. Speaking to this idea, L. further discussed how a person’s epistemological orientation may preclude a willingness to accept another’s views, even when these views have been shared. L. focused on the problem of Western scientists not only dismissing, but even actively resisting the experiences and worldviews of Indigenous people. She related an anecdote from a conference she had attended whose goal was to bridge Indigenous and Western ways of knowing for museums, and did this by bringing together members of Indigenous and scientific communities. L. reported that some Western scientists were holding their heads when Indigenous people were relating their worldviews, as if the ideas were so different from the scientists’ own that they were difficult to take in.⁹ L. believes that non-Indigenous scientists need more ‘emotional, spiritual unhinging’ and during her interview with me, addressed an imagined scientist directly: ‘These groups of [Indigenous] people will believe in things that don’t make any sense to you at all, and it matters everything to them.’

The implications of L.’s ideas for Indigenous language work are significant. Based on her assertion that ‘language is about feelings; it’s not about orthographies’, L. called for face-to-face meetings for planning and executing Indigenous language work, noting that the emotional side of language does not lend itself to impersonal communication. Related to this point, L. shared examples of difficult situations that precipitated Indigenous language shift, such as the abuses that occurred in California Indian missions. She argued that openly acknowledging such ‘gut things’ must occur early in the training of researchers who have not experienced such trauma, the lasting effects of which have been passed on inter-generationally in Native American communities. Most important in these stories was the solution to these issues: L. commented that through open communication, understanding *does* develop. For example, the scientists discussed above eventually grew more comfortable with the ideas being

⁹ The reverse, however, did not occur; the Indigenous participants were already familiar with Western scientific approaches to understanding the world.

shared by Indigenous participants in the workshop. A result was the fostering of mutual respect through which beneficial partnerships began.

5. 'It's not just a language'

D is highly involved in the affairs of her tribe, whose heritage language is a variety of Paiute. She was previously an elected tribal leader, currently chairs her nation's Cultural Committee, carries an unofficial title of 'the tribal historian', and does significant work in museums with respect to Native American issues. D cares deeply about the importance of respecting tribal traditions and, more generally, acting in ways that align with tribal culture. Stemming from this concern, D has significant professional background in policy on culturally sensitive issues such as repatriation, land protection, and language. Through such experience, D has developed a strong awareness of the ways in which Native American epistemologies are frequently demoted relative to those of Western science, and works to counteract this trend.

Growing up on her reservation, D heard her language spoken by her grandmother and other older relatives. However, these relatives usually spoke English and shifted to Paiute 'so they could talk privately'; for some of these private conversations, D and other members of her generation would explicitly be excused. For this reason, D's exposure to Paiute as a child was mostly limited to common words and household commands, and today she describes herself as somebody who knows 'Paish' (Paiute-English) and as a learner of Paiute.

Although D has taken some French classes and is familiar with the norms for teaching widely-spoken languages in the United States, she has not had formal training in linguistics. However, she has experience with its major concepts because they have arisen in her Paiute study, which includes language classes taught by fluent speakers, self-study with pedagogical materials such as CDs, and engagement in traditional activities that incorporate Paiute. For example, D has observed some dialect leveling among Paiute varieties and is aware of disputes arising from the dialectal differences that do remain. Similarly, she is aware of the political ramifications of choosing orthographies such as 'the Wycliffe spelling', and describes the 'many variations of [Paiute] spelling' as a major challenge for her community. Although D did not specifically mention linguists in this part of her story, it is not hard to link her observations to larger issues of how orthographies are connected to people and power structures, and how linguists must recognise that their orthographic choices are never neutral.

In reference to her heritage language, D offers the following definition: '... you would be able to communicate ... speaking to one another or a group and understanding.' A seemingly basic definition that at its surface focuses on

shared intelligibility of a code, this may suggest that vocabulary and grammar should be the key areas to document and to teach. Important, however, is the larger discussion in which this definition was offered. In reference to her own goals, D explained,

It's not just a language ... it's the essence of a language ... one word can take on such a bigger part [of meaning ...], emotional, spiritual, and essence ...

D further noted that her language allows her to comprehend the full meaning behind traditional stories. For instance, the colonisers taught her people to feel shame, but the stories explain that they should not. The implication is that the understanding emphasised in D's definition of language requires cultural context that may be fully achievable only through Paiute, as English indexes colonial trauma.

Predictably, it is primarily in traditional cultural activities that D has experienced language in the way she defines it. Evoking a common theme among Native Americans, which is that the culture of a given Native American group is intimately tied to land, D reminisced about her Paiute aunt who had 'all the stories' and used to relate the Paiute names for various places and then discuss these places in the language. The interconnections of the language to Paiute life and place showed up prominently in a story about making a rabbit blanket:

When I was sitting there with my aunt going up in the hills and learning all of these different places, and she's talking in Paiute, she's telling me the ceremony... We went out, and it was much more than just killing the rabbit, skinning it, you know, and processing the fur so that I can make a blanket. It was whole entire everything around it, the location we went to, the prayers that we said for the rabbit, it's all of it ... and it's all through the language.

D's ideas about Paiute and its inseparability from place and history echo a worldview I encounter frequently in my language work, one that is captured effectively in the following statement by Holm, Pearson & Chavis (2003:13):

Language defines places and vice versa. Place-names ... bespeak a relationship with the environment or describe an area within the context of a [Native American] group's sacred history and culture.

Unfortunately, due to a series of circumstances in D's tribal government, cultural programmes are administered separately from language programmes. Viewing this as a real problem, D expressed frustration with her nation's language programmes:

It almost seems like to me that we have been trying to get it right ... for over 20 years that I know of, and it just, we haven't hit it yet, and it's like, what's missing from it?

As an answer to her own question, D argued that language learning 'needs to be simple and relevant' to people, and voiced concern that current efforts are disconnected from cultural practices. The classroom language lessons she has experienced have been 'elementary' and based on common lexical domains such as body parts and colors, the follow-up use similarly focused largely on discrete words in contexts such as Paiute Bingo.

Musing about the motivation of others who follow a more structurally-oriented definition of language or who view Indigenous languages as historical artifacts, D offered the following hypothetical discussion that she envisioned herself having:

Living in today's world, how practical would it be to revitalise a language? ... I could give you all kinds of reasons why it would be a benefit, but would other people buy into it?

In sharing these ideas, D acknowledged that some members of her community likely think of language in non-Paiute ways that do not capture the value embedded in her own definition. Implicit in this discussion was D's call for community members to embrace traditional Paiute values and practices, and for language work to be structured to help this occur.

6. A Miami story of reclamation

This story reports on themes that emerge from my own tribal community and our language reclamation efforts, as I discussed them with participants of a *myaamia* language workshop. This weekend gathering occurred in Washington State and was intended to serve Miami Tribe of Oklahoma citizens who live in the northwestern United States.¹⁰ Although my commentary is informed by all participants of this workshop, as well as participant observation in community language programmes since the mid 1990s, the following discussion focuses on insights from Jarrid Baldwin, a *myaamia* language instructor who was there to facilitate the workshop, and Fred de Rome, a construction contractor who was there to connect with other Miami people.

¹⁰ For historical reasons, Miami people are in two political groups, which are based in Indiana and in Oklahoma, and citizens of both groups are geographically dispersed beyond these states.

Jarrid is part of a well-known Miami family that made *myaamia*, a language that linguists once deemed 'extinct' (Leonard 2008), into the language of their home, and also aided its spread into the wider Miami community. This entailed the parents – initially the father – learning the language entirely from historical documentation, and raising their four children, of whom Jarrid is the second, in a Miami cultural context in which *myaamia* was a language of daily communication (Baldwin et al. 2013; Leonard 2007). Jarrid's exposure to *myaamia* began when he was very young, and he describes himself as having grown up speaking *myaamia*. Jarrid has also learned kiSwahili, from when he lived in Tanzania; a 'fair amount of German', from his time in Germany; and Spanish, which he studied as a subject and learned further when he lived with a family in Nicaragua. His linguistics education includes coursework in Linguistics and Linguistic Anthropology, as well as mentorship from his father, who studied linguistics for his M.A. degree, and from David Costa, the linguist who analysed *myaamia* in his 1994 doctoral dissertation (updated as Costa 2003) and continues that work today.

Soon after graduating from college in 2013 with a degree in Anthropology, Jarrid began work as a language teacher for the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma. He described his interactions with other Miami people as his identity, and wants to continue learning and teaching. He defined 'language' in a way that aligns with these goals: 'how a community connects to each other and how they express ... themselves and their culture to each other.'

Predictably given that his job entails developing language programmes to support community needs, Jarrid believes that his ideas are reflected very well in Miami language work, and noted that language facilitates a stronger community bond: 'Language provides within the [Miami] community a mapping for us to learn more about each other and ourselves.' He further remarked that language had already brought Miami people together, and referenced examples of 30-50 tribal members coming together just to learn *myaamia*. Jarrid's comment corroborates what I have observed: These language programmes bring people together both in the sense of developing and strengthening shared notions of Miami identity, and also in that Miami people literally gather with a frequency that far exceeds what was true before the programmes began. Reclamation in this context responds to historical events that include land loss with a resulting diaspora of the Miami people, and entails creating opportunities for community members to engage with each other in re-establishing Miami spaces through Miami cultural practices (see Leonard & Shoemaker 2012 for examples).

A relative newcomer to tribal language programmes, Fred agreed with Jarrid's insights, expressing that he found *myaamia* language efforts to reflect and support community needs. He noted that if we could return to 200 years ago, those of us who were participating in the workshop would have already been engaged in common activities. Given the historical factors that led to

community fragmentation, however, Fred suggested that we had to recreate those situations and that speaking *myaamia* could do this:

I believe that when you're using the language, you're expressing more than just a need for fulfillment of a request; you're also expressing a feeling, a hope, a desire, a gratitude ... you have your immediate family, and our family with our Miami Nation.

Fred further noted the importance of integrating culturally relevant interaction into teaching efforts as he mused about traditional games that we played during the workshop:

What I did find was during the games, where you're using the language in your game, and you're learning and also greetings and things like this, these are applications that we're working with. And we're not working with 'the verb goes first, or second, or the pronoun ...'

The sentiments expressed by Fred were echoed by other participants of the workshop,¹¹ and reflect a general pattern in Miami language programs: They revolve around interpreting and practicing Miami lifeways, are inspired by community needs, and are administered by community agents. Through my participation in many of these programs, I have observed differing opinions about the details of how, where, and by whom language work should be implemented, but have always found agreement in the basic tenet that *myaamia* is part of our peoplehood. This idea also appeared in the conversation I had with Jarrid and Fred, which ended with a discussion of how 'language' is expressed in *myaamia*: *-aatawee-* 'to speak a language' is a bound morpheme. Jarrid noted that 'it can't stand alone; we have to attach it to [the people].'¹²

¹¹ In an article about the Washington workshop, *aatotankiki myaamiaki*, the newspaper of the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, reported (2014, 12(3):Section B) that 'participants especially enjoyed playing the bowl game and the moccasin game, both traditional *myaamia* games, and enthusiastically used *myaamia* numbers to keep track of the game results'.

¹² In English, Miami people often refer to our language as *myaamia*, though in the language we use verbs forms such as *myaamiaatawee-* 'speak Miami' or *myaamiaataweenki* 'the Miami language' [lit. 'Miami is spoken'].

7. Conclusion: Producing reclamation through language work

I began this paper with a discussion of the norms of Western approaches to language and their implications for Indigenous language work. I then turned to three case studies of Native Americans engaged in different types of language work, all of which illustrate local notions of 'language' and how those ideas guide the practices and effects of language work. I conclude by revisiting my earlier discussion about *revitalisation* and *reclamation* as each concept might be applied to the situations described in these stories.

For L. Frank, who has to rely on legacy documentation to learn Tongva, revitalisation might call for more analysis and reconstruction of Tongva's grammar and lexicon, while reclamation might instead lie in others' willingness to recognise her spiritually-centered definition of 'language' as the truth that it is. Were we able to refabricate the Tongva documentation on which L.'s current learning efforts are based, I extend Hill's (2006) call for more ethnography in language documentation to argue that it would be prudent to include the Tongva consultants' definitions of 'language' on par with the grammatical and lexical information that is already included.

For D, traditional culture is firmly embedded into her definition of language, but only some of the language work that occurs in her community reflects this. As such, it is not surprising that she expresses frustration with the colonial ideas of language that are manifested in language classes and in community attitudes. Given that some Paiute language classes are already run by community agents, but appear to be operating through non-Paiute assumptions and approaches, theorising language work through a reclamation model identifies a need for significant discussion among tribal stakeholders about their language goals and whether the current approaches are structured to meet them. Revitalisation might call for more language classes without critically examining their pedagogical methods, while reclamation might instead start with making rabbit blankets and interacting with the landscape.

Within the context of the Miami language workshop discussed above, reclamation was already occurring in the sense that *myaamia* was appropriately attached to people and cultural contexts. However, it is worth noting that this approach developed over time: When I was first involved in Miami language programs in the 1990s, the term we used was *revitalisation* and there was more focus on teaching our language as a subject. An outcome was that many programme participants expressed that they could learn vocabulary and grammar, but felt disconnected from *myaamia*. In this way, my community's language work has evolved, and to be successful must continue to evolve in ways that respond to changing community demographics and needs.

Keeping these points in mind, I now return to the 'what went wrong?' question posed in Section 1, which referenced situations in which all parties in language work are well meaning but community members express discontent.

So long as colonial definitions, categories, and methods are imposed onto Indigenous language work, I predict that this will continue. I argue that the way to change the paradigm so that more discussions become about ‘what went right’, is to recognise that decolonising ‘language’ is necessary to produce language reclamation, and to structure language work accordingly.

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