Rising Voices: Indigenous Language Resurgence as Organic Interconnectivity

Endangered languages and the communities that speak them are under extreme stress. Even conservative estimates paint a picture of near-catastrophic endangerment levels, with half of the world’s remaining speech forms ceasing to be used as everyday vernaculars by the end of the 21st century (Krauss, 1992). The pressures facing endangered languages are as severe as those recorded by conservation biologists for flora and fauna, and in many cases more acute (Sutherland, 2003). Yet linguistic endangerment is by no means a natural or inevitable process, the unfortunate by-product of modernization. Rather, the marginalization and erosion of local and Indigenous languages is the direct result of colonization and the racist policies that accompanied it. Across the world and through a variety of efforts that have included education initiatives, punitive legislation, and intentional neglect, colonial authorities have instituted language policies that sought to weaken traditional cultural ways, assimilate Indigenous populations, and gain access to their land and resources.

Colonial authorities have used the power of language and the language of power to further their own strategic ends. In some cases, and seemingly paradoxically, this involved supporting Indigenous languages; in most cases, however, they sought to erode them. In the first instance, believing in the inherent superiority of Christian theology, many missionary linguists focused on translating scripture into Indigenous languages. In Papua New Guinea and other regions of the Asia Pacific, scholars and administrators actively strengthened Indigenous languages through standardization programs that involved grammatical descriptions and the compilation of dictionaries and other pedagogical tools (Wurm, Muehlheausler, & Laycock, 1977). The goal—in many cases—was for local languages to be harnessed to transmit and disseminate an imagined Christian modernity. In other instances, as in Canada, settler-colonial authorities observed the unique relationship that existed between a language and the land on which it was spoken and focused their attention on breaking this apart by destroying the language and forcibly relocating communities far away from their traditional territories.

To this day, Indigenous communities around the world make use of traditional place names to ascribe current or historical meaning to places and spaces that are locally resonant and historically important. Such toponyms often encode lived experience and traditional ecological knowledge in an ancestral language in a way that is almost impossible to translate into a more dominant national or international language. By disconnecting the language traditionally used to refer to a specific site, and by introducing new place names in a colonial language (the terms “New Zealand” and “British Columbia” serve as enduring examples), the relationship that local peoples have with their land was rendered opaque and further attenuated. Having weakened this connection to land, the colonial goal of relocating communities in order to extract resources from their territories became more achievable.
Yet, for as long as efforts have existed to impose colonial languages on Indigenous peoples as a means of reshaping their identity, these same processes have been vigorously opposed by speakers of these languages. Anti-colonial opposition to externally imposed language policy takes many forms, from active resistance to passive non-compliance. Everyday forms of resistance have included the direct avoidance of colonial education programs by concealing children and evading census enumerators to more contemporary and structured efforts at language revitalization and reclamation. The emergence of the Caribbean linguistic mosaic can be seen as an anti-colonial response predicated on “the need to speak and not be understood by the downpressors (slave masters, elite of society)” (Barcant, 2013, p. 51). Viewed in this light, the creation of a patois/patwah or creole/kweyol can be read as a linguistic manifestation of a moral objection to the imposition of a hegemonic identity advanced by an imperial state, a perspective further substantiated by the Métis of Canada, who “moulded the aboriginal and settler languages into coherent patterns which reflected their own cultural and historical circumstances” (Michif Languages Conference, 1985).

To make sense of contemporary efforts torevitalize Indigenous languages, we need to understand the political and historical context that has shaped their marginalization. The use of the prefix ‘re’ in words such as revitalization, rejuvenation, revival, and resurgence points to the undoing of some past action or deed (Glass, 2004). If the world’s linguistic diversity had not been “devitalized” to begin with—through colonization, imperial adventure, war, and forced migration—there would be less need for historically marginalized languages with ever-dwindling numbers of speakers to be “revitalized” today.

The work of language revitalization is inherently multidisciplinary and political, with long-range cultural and social goals that extend beyond the immediate task of generating more speakers. Increasingly, language revitalization programs are as much focused on decolonizing education and plotting a path toward Indigenous self-determination as they are directed at reclaiming grammar and speech forms.

Language loss does not occur in isolation, nor is it inevitable or in any way “natural.” The process also has wide-ranging social and economic repercussions for the language communities in question. Language is so heavily intertwined with cultural knowledge and political identity that speech forms often serve as meaningful indicators of a community’s vitality and social well-being. More than ever before, there are vigorous and collaborative efforts underway to reverse the trend of language loss and to reclaim and revitalize endangered languages. Such approaches vary significantly, from making use of digital technologies in order to engage individual and younger learners to community-oriented language nests and immersion programs. Drawing on diverse techniques and communities, the question of measuring the success of language revitalization programs has driven research forward in the areas of statistical assessments of linguistic diversity, endangerment, and vulnerability. Current efforts are re-evaluating the established triad of documentation-conservation-revitalization in favor of more unified, holistic, and community-led approaches.
The growing recognition of the legacy of colonial oppression of Indigenous languages has also motivated a realignment of the discourse around language endangerment. The majority of languages spoken across the world have endured punitive policies that actively sought to eradicate them. Their continued use to this day—even if only by a handful of speakers in some cases—is indicative of the resilience of communities in the face of continued oppression. Commonly used terms that highlight the “endangered-ness” of a language—we may think of words such as “weak,” “loss,” and even the word “endangered” itself—overrepresent diminishment and underrepresent the resurgent strength of communities of speakers who have never stopped using their ancestral languages.

The currency of terms such as “vanishing” and “disappearing” not only forecloses the possibility of revival and renewal but communicates an apparently agentless process in which language loss is both inevitable and naturally occurring. Such terminology both effaces the intentionality of colonial policies that legislated marginalization and undermines the efforts of those working to reclaim their languages. When speaking and writing of “endangered languages,” then, it is crucial to remain attentive to the words that are used and to seek balance in highlighting ongoing community revitalization efforts on the one hand, while historically contextualizing the increasingly vulnerable state of most Indigenous languages on the other.

With language revitalization increasingly situated as an expression of self-determination and political empowerment, some language communities are developing a terminology for discussing endangerment and revitalization that is in itself empowering. One example is a movement to refer to languages without any current native or first-language speakers as “sleeping” rather than “extinct” (Hinton, 2001). While the distinction might appear unnecessary or even naively aspirational to researchers not closely involved in such work, all terminology has both symbolic value and political impact. The biological extinction of a species has a monodirectional finality that linguistic “extinction” does not. As Indigenous linguist Wesley Leonard poignantly notes, “the paradox of speaking an extinct language is not imaginary” (2008, p. 28). The designation “sleeping” rather than “extinct” points to the potential of a language to be reclaimed and revived after it has lost its last first-language speakers—an opportunity that is not available to the dodo or a dinosaur. While bringing a language back from sleeping to having a community of fluent speakers is a phenomenon that has been uncommon in human history, there are recent examples, such as the remarkable and compelling case of the Wampanoag (Algonquin) language, which was sleeping from the late 19th century until revitalization efforts resulted in fluent child speakers of the language in the 21st century (Makepeace, 2010).

For peoples like the Myaamia (Algonquin), who have no first language speakers left, “the ultimate goal of this work is to eventually be able to raise our children with the beliefs and values that draw from our traditional foundation and to utilize our language as a means of preserving and expressing these elements” (Baldwin, 2003, p. 28). Rather than some ideal, end-state fluency, it is the sustained effort of communities that shape and determine the goal and success of any language revitalization project. As all who are engaged in language revitalization can attest, the work is never complete: success starts when revitalization efforts begin and doesn’t end until efforts themselves cease (Hinton, 2015).
Elders and youth in Indigenous communities are actively using and appropriating emerging technologies to strengthen their traditions and languages; Indigenous peoples are creators and innovators (not just recipients or clients) of new technologies, particularly in the domain of cultural and linguistic heritage. While technological efforts in the 1970s included specially modified typewriters and custom-made fonts to represent Indigenous writing systems, communities are now making use of digital tools—online, text, Internet radio and mobile devices—to nurture the continued development of their respective diverse Indigenous languages and cultures. Yet such interventions are not without risks and consequences. Digital technologies cannot and will not save languages. Speakers keep languages alive. A digital dictionary itself won’t revitalize an endangered language, but could assist the speakers who will. At the same time, technology can be as symbolically powerful as it is practically useful, and can carry considerable political weight. In the English-dominant world of cyberspace, Indigenous communities are engaging with, disrupting and re-imagining digital practices. By generating digital visibility and legibility, Indigenous communities claim a ‘presence’ online, and exert control over the terms of Indigenous representation rather than risk misrepresentation.

As a practice, language revitalization takes many shapes. Some of the earliest language activists were the children and students who, risking corporal or psychological punishment, continued to speak their languages in residential and boarding schools and at home with their families. Since the retraction of explicit bans on speaking Indigenous languages in public in many countries, some of which have only been lifted within the last few decades (Anchimbe, 2006; Bulcha, 1997), language revitalization has become noticeably less subversive. Many language revitalization programs now receive support from band councils, non-governmental organizations, philanthropic foundations, and even governmental bodies and programs.

Recalling the central relevance of language to many other aspects of community well-being, the transformative healing nature and holistic benefits of language revitalization have much wider impact and relevance than linguistic vitality alone (Whalen, Moss, & Baldwin, 2016). Indigenous language revitalization speaks as much to ‘hard’ indicators of health and well-being as it does to ‘soft’ indicators of culture and identity. As the Sto:lo/Xaxli’p educator and writer Q’um Q’um Xiieł (Jo-ann Archibald) said to Aboriginal educators in 1999, while “we need to preserve our oral traditions, we also need to let them preserve us.” Recent studies demonstrate both the central relevance of language to many aspects of community well-being and how the transformative healing nature and holistic benefits of language revitalization have an impact beyond nurturing linguistic vitality alone. Underscoring the interrelatedness of language and community well-being, a recent Canadian study showed a compelling correlation between Indigenous language use and a decrease in Aboriginal youth suicide rates in British Columbia (Hallet, Chandler, & Lalonde, 2007). Such statistical research helps to highlight the multidimensional nature of language revitalization and its cross-sector impact on the lives and livelihoods of Indigenous communities.
The Federal Government of Canada and its research councils are beginning to provide targeted resources to explore the intersection of language, well-being and health. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau spoke to the Assembly of First Nations in December 2016, pledging to introduce a federal law to protect, preserve and revitalize First Nations, Inuit and Métis languages: “We know ... how residential schools and other decisions by government were used to eliminate Indigenous languages. We must undo the lasting damage that resulted...Today I commit to you our government will enact an Indigenous Languages Act.”

The bitter irony of the current context is inescapable: colonial governments have for centuries marshalled their economic, military and administrative might to extinguish Indigenous voices. Now, in the eleventh hour, they are looking to resource that which they first set out to destroy. Benign neglect would have been less damaging than two centuries of violence followed by a last-minute U-turn. Will citizens of settler colonial nations hold their government to account and demand that effective and progressive Indigenous Languages legislation be enacted?

We need to listen to and learn from Indigenous communities, and support community-led revitalization programs through respectful partnership. Indigenous communities know their needs better than anyone, and acknowledging this place-based expertise is a step towards reconciliation. Indigenous communities need better resourcing for language instructors to promote stronger learning outcomes, language retention and trust. They are proposing that learning goals be set by the community as these are more attainable, more credible and have a higher chance of fulfillment. Indigenous communities need more funding, dispersed in a better way, to plan strategically over the long term. Communities must not be positioned as competitors for resources and visibility, but rather have dedicated funding streams that will enable long-term sustainability.

As ever, leadership is coming from the grassroots. From September 2015, all students in kindergarten through Grade 4 in Prince Rupert, B.C., have been learning Sm’algyax. “We are on traditional Tsimshian territory and Sm’algyax is the language of the territory,” Roberta Edzerza, (Aboriginal Education Principal for her District) told CBC Radio One. “We are so proud and we would like to share our language and culture with everybody. It’s one avenue to address racism. Education is key. Learning the language and sharing in the learning and the culture”.

While the alarms bells have sounded and the threat of languages ceasing to be spoken remains a reality for increasing numbers of communities, the indomitable human spirit in the face of adversity should not be underestimated. Language communities across the globe have proven throughout history that the odds can be beaten and that the effects of colonization are surmountable. Indigenous communities must be supported and resourced to design and implement their own research agendas, funding needs, and success criteria for language revitalization and reclamation work. Through engaging in collaborative linguistic and cultural revitalization work, building partnerships, providing resources and nurturing communities of practice and at academic, governmental, and grassroots levels, the tide can be turned and more languages will join the ranks of Hawaiian, Māori, Myaamia, and Wampanoag.