Every Word is a Prayer: Heritage Language Literacy and Indigenous Identity

Catheryn Jennings[1]
WRAC, Michigan State University

Abstract: During the time of the Indian removals and Westward expansion, one of the saddest things, beyond the loss of life and land, that was taken from the Indigenous peoples of the Americas was the forced and often violent suppression of Indigenous languages. These efforts drastically reduced, not only the number of Indigenous languages spoken, but also the number of speakers that remain for the languages that "survived" the suppressive efforts. However, modern Indigenous heritage language revitalization and reclamation are working to bring back this piece of what was lost to so many people, and in order to do this, many tribal communities and community members have turned to digital sources for that learning. This project not only discusses the loss of languages and the nature of the efforts to rekindle them, but also serves as a discussion of the ways in which Indigenous methodologies and worldviews can be used to conduct academic research when it comes to this specific topic.

Keywords: *Indigenous languages, Heritage language revitalization, digital learning, Indigenous methodology*

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[1]Catheryn Jennings is a PhD student in the Departments of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures at Michigan State University, Michigan, USA. She can be reached at jenni220@msu.edu.

Introduction

Indigenous languages are an important part of the reclamation process of modern Indigenous people in ongoingly colonized lands. According to Krauss (1998), " Of about 210 indigenous languages still extant in the USA and Canada, 34 are spoken by Speakers of all generations, 35 are spoken by the parental generation and up, 84 are spoken by the grandparental generation and up, and 57 are spoken by only a few aged Speakers" (p.9). This is a seemingly sad state of affairs for the voices of so many silenced people, and it demonstrates the precarious situation in which many Indigenous languages are currently facing. This loss of language is, however, being pushed back against by the revitalization efforts of tribal communities across the continent and globe. These efforts include various forms of language revitalization, ranging from full immersion classrooms for both adults and K-12 aged students, to online classes and downloadable applications for home computers and mobile devices. These programs and tools have been the subject of a fair amount of discussion among linguists and social scientists alike (Hinton, 2006; Krauss, 1998; Peter & Hirata-Edds, 2009; Reyner & Lockhart, 2009; White, 2006). However, instead of statistics about numbers of speakers, or a discussion of the pedagogical methods of language classes, I will instead focus on the people who are using these tools, how they are using them, and the reasons why they have chosen to learn these languages. This is a study done *by* an Indigenous person, involving Indigenous people, not one just *about* them.

For Indigenous graduate students, people who are often geographically distantly separated from the rest of their community, and while working within the constraints of a graduate school schedule, learning these languages is often facilitated through the use of digital means. It is in this intersection of desire and literacy in which the primary goal of this research lies. Why are Indigenous people, specifically Indigenous graduate students, learning their heritage languages at this time of their lives, and how are digital language learning tools aiding in this learning? This study works to not document and analyze my own experience of learning Cherokee, my heritage language, but also to better understand the role that these languages play into identity and cultures as suggested by Hinton (2011) as, "… the goal would be to create the speakers who will themselves carry the language on even if the last native speakers have passed away… As for learning the culture along with the language, frequently that aspect too is being revitalized… a goal may be to have the learners themselves become able to carry on and enhance the practice of the traditions of their culture" (p. 311).

When considering how to approach this project, I turned to the methodologies and community-centric values of an Indigenous research method as informed by scholars such as Absolon, Vizenor, Wilson, Kovach, and King. The methodologies and paradigms suggested by these Indigenous voices within the academy have helped this research to

hold onto what is important to me and to my other Indigenous participants. I want this information and study to respect the practices and community values of the participants and my own tribal community and to remember Absolon's (2011) assertion that "Indigenous searchers believe in knowledge for something, for a reason, for a purpose, as a part of living a purposeful life" (p.80). It is for this reason, this obligation to my community, to my heritage, and what to was taken from my ancestors that this study is important. It strives to better understand how modern, technologically savvy Indigenous people are regaining their languages. More specifically, the study poses the following questions: 1) How do heritage language revitalization tools like online classes and mobile apps digitally promote the continuation of Indigenous languages, in the case of this study, by graduate students geographically distant from their tribal communities? 2) How, if at all, does a literacy in one's heritage language play into the concept of an indigenous identity? 3) How can an Indigenous methodological framework be used to study and discuss Indigenous language practices and efforts?

For the purpose of this project, I will use "heritage language" to describe the Indigenous languages learned by myself, my participants, and the various languages discussed in the texts. Hinton (2011) tells us, "'Heritage language' has come to mean, in its narrow conception, a language different from the majority language of the country, which is spoken at home but was only partially acquired by the children of the home" (Polinsky & Kagan, 2007; Valdés, 2000 as cited in Hinton, p. 310). Other sources use other terms such as "ancestral languages," and these may appear in quotations, but for my own analysis, "heritage language" or "Indigenous Language," if the distinction is needed for clarity or context.

Indigenous Language Revitalization efforts and tools

The efforts being made by Indigenous communities to revitalize and reestablish their heritage languages has been the subject of a fair amount of attention within academic communities. As mentioned before, these programs have taken many different forms, from immersion style classes to online learning spaces with room for video lessons, downloadable apps, and language tools like flashcards to help fill the gaps. According to Hinton (2011):

> Although pedagogical courses on endangered Indigenous languages are available in some colleges and universities, it is rare to find a program leading to second language fluency for its students. This is partly because most of the endangered Indigenous languages have few fluent speakers of a professional age who could teach, and in many cases, those speakers are untrained in language pedagogy. Furthermore, materials and curricula usually have to be designed by the teachers themselves, rather than having any such thing as a state-of-the-art curriculum

handed to them as would be the case with world languages. Thus, language teaching and learning of endangered languages is a pioneering process that involves the development of new models of language teaching. (p. 308)

With both the lack of native speakers and the widely varying methods of language learning available to different communities, the heritage language learning process is difficult to fully analyze. This study looks at learners from only two different tribal language learning programs, but they are distinctly different and offer a chance to see two ends of the Indigenous language spectrum: one of a very small language community and one that is one of the largest in the nation.

As two of the participants in this study are learning Cherokee, myself included, the Cherokee language tools are the most familiar, so I was able to pay special attention as well as actually interact directly with the tools offered by the Cherokee tribes. Both the Cherokee Nation and the Eastern Band Cherokee are making digital efforts to give access to every member of the second largest tribe in the US. We have over 300k members across the US, and by using digital means, the language is more accessible to a larger number of members than any time since the removal. Through the Cherokee Language Program, the Digohweli Cherokee Unicode font, Osiyo TV, and the Shiyo App, the Cherokee people are preserving and spreading our language. The Cherokee Nation's website says, "The goal of the Cherokee Language Program is the perpetuation of our language in all walks of life ranging from day to day conversation, ceremonially, as well as in online arenas such as social media" (2018). This acknowledgment of the ways in which our heritage language can be integrated into modern Indigenous life is an important move toward renormalizing and reinvigorating the use of the language.

However, there is a missing generation of Indigenous language speakers. Those trapped between the ages of the older folks who learned it from first language speakers they grew up with and the younger ones who are learning it in the contemporary immersion schools. All is not lost for this gap generation, though. There is a wealth of digital tools available to facilitate an individual's heritage language learning. And while online classes and an app you can download from the apple or play store may seem like unlikely tools for learning an Indigenous language. My participants and I are members of this missing generation, and we are part of one that is not only comfortable with technology and online schooling; we are also a new generation of tech savvy Indians, and the Cherokee Language preservation program and other online and digital programs are making the tools for us to use; further, like Lyons (2011) tells us, "There is good reason to fear for a future where signs of modernity are considered always already antithetical to indigeneity" (p. 305). The internet and digital technologies also offer the ability to access unprecedented levels of connectedness and access.

One of the participants made it clear how these digital tools were helpful while separated from her community saying,

…it was just a coincidence that I was able to take them. I was in my coursework phase of my PhD program at the same time as these classes started being offered. And yeah, it was just a thing that I had always wanted to do. I was always interested in and I was able to start taking those classes online. And because they were online, they weren't necessarily like infringing on the coursework I was already having to do for my PhD program" (S. M., personal communication, 2018).

This connection to tools for learning and recording Indigenous knowledge is not surprising; like Haas (2011) reminds us, "American Indians have a long-standing intellectual tradition of multimediated, digital rhetoric theories and practices—or theories and practices of communicating via the encoding of information with our fingers and toes using a variety of media" (p. 94). An open arms approach to digital means gives language learners the ability and access to take lessons and communicate with one another online even when we are spread apart.

The importance of groups to be able to work together to help to preserve and spread the language. Nelson (2013) tells us, "Collective continuance is an indigenous community's capacity to adapt in a way sufficient for its members livelihoods to flourish into the future. Adaptation refers to adjustments the populations take in response to current predicted change" (Nelson et al. as cited in Whyte, p. 9) Technology has given us those adjustments to adapt and carry our language out to the people who are seeking it.

Indigenous languages are an important part of the reclamation process of the modern Indian, they were also one of the first things that were taken from us, often violently, and with them was taken another little piece of Indigenous community identity. In *Manifest Manners*, Vizenor (1999) discusses Widget's understanding of Momaday's "urbanized Indian's" efforts to "...retain continuity with one's cultural heritage though displaced from the community that sustains it" (p. 78). This is where my participants and I found ourselves during our language journeys, separated from our communities, but trying to maintain and deepen a connection to it while at the same time building new community in our academic home. By revitalizing our heritage languages, we are not only getting back that piece of ourselves, we are also sharing with our people the ability to tell and to understand our stories and traditions in the voices in which they were meant to be shared. Learning these languages is an act of survivance. We may be thousands of miles away from our tribal communities, but we are attempting to begin righting this small part of the countless things that were forcefully and violently taken from our ancestors, and we are going to learn our heritage languages.

Heritage Language Literacy and Indigenous Identity

When creating this project, I read through scholarship about Indigenous language programs and revitalization efforts being made across the country and continent. As I worked through, a theme that I saw repeated in the language revitalization research that I conducted was that one of the most significant aspects of Indigenous heritage Language learning was the role in which heritage language literacies play in Indigenous concepts of Identity and community. This was seen over and over again with statements such as, "...each Indigenous language is the heartbeat of its respective culture and that the key to the revival of a language is to ensure that each generation transmits their language and culture to their children" (Reyhner & Lockhart, 2009, p. v). Reyhner and Lockhart (2009) also discuss the opinion of the tribal communities they worked with, "Without children speaking your tribal language fluently nothing else will ultimately matter" (p. 2). And in Hinton, "For some, it is a personal desire to regain a sense of their native identity and belonging to a community. For others, it is a political act, part of a desire to assert cultural autonomy or sovereignty" (p. 310). Further, Vizenor (1999) begins his edited collection, *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* with the Steiner quote, " When a language dies, a possible world dies with it. There is no survival of the fittest. Even where it is spoken by a handful, but the harried remnants of destroyed communities, a language contains within itself the boundless potential of discovery, or the recompositions of reality, of articulate dreams…" (p. 1). Because I kept seeing this notion repeated in the texts, I felt it was something that I should explore with my participants.

In the interviews, I asked, in their opinion, what role if any does heritage language literacy play in the creation and concept of Indigenous Identity. From the data I gathered from the interviews that I conducted, I found that the opinion of this notion varied in my participants' answers. While my survey only consisted of three people, one of whom is myself, I am not in a position to say what roles the literacy plays for every Indigenous person or community; however, I can make some comments on the opinion of my participants and their own thoughts on this notion. One of the learners stated:

> So I'm going to give it probably a pretty unpopular opinion here. I am not...I'm not a huge fan of the idea that, that you lose something about yourself or you lose your identity if you don't speak your ancestral language. And maybe this is because I'm coming from a community in southern California where our, many of our neighbors don't have their ancestral languages. Many of our neighbors don't have...any speakers that they can learn from, and they don't have an archive that they can go to and that is not in any way a reflection of who they are as people who they are as knowers are, what their relationship with the land is like. (S. M., personal communication, 2018)

In this case, the participant is pushing directly against the notion that heritage language literacy plays a significant role in Indigenous identity. As mentioned in the quote, this seems to be in response to the complete loss of language of other neighboring tribes and how a concept such as those stated above can affect the relationship between identity and language. Another said:

> We have 300,000 enrolled members and so it makes sense that they had these giant programs in place like this, this huge online class, and they have an app ... and there's a ton of just privately owned... websites that are all for learning Cherokee because we're giant. We're the second largest tribe in the United States, and so it's really different for us [the Cherokee] compared to somebody who only has maybe a few thousand members left, and maybe in that there's only a tiny, tiny handful of speakers left, and so all the rest of the community members, if they don't have access to those few speakers, they might not have the chance to learn their language at all, and it's not fair to say that, "oh, I'm going to be more authentic or I'm going to be, like, more Indian than somebody who doesn't speak their language." (C. J., personal communication, 2018)

I believe that heritage language literacy is important for the preservation of the truer to the original meanings that are lost in stories and songs translated into English, an opinion echoed by my other Cherokee participant:

> ... it's very important when we think about the construction of knowledge and the production of knowledge, which is ultimately what we do as academics is produced knowledge...that knowledge is rooted in particular cultural practices ...And those languages are vital to those cultural knowledges. There's a lot of things that don't translate directly from Cherokee into English. And there are a lot of meetings that are some obscured, secured, and so having a grasp of the language, having, having those language skills, um, helps us to conceptualize and to produce knowledge in different ways. (J. S., personal communication, 2018)

In this case, it is the function of language as a cultural translator and knowledge maker that is key, less about individual identity and more about the role it plays in the community.

It seems then, at least in terms of the participants in this study, that the more community notions of language and knowledge take precedence over the individual identity. This is not to say that the researchers that came before me and made those statements are wrong, every person, every Indigenous person, is unique and so are their driving motives and personal journeys. Identity is difficult, and especially in the academy, identity politics can make it even more difficult to understand and best explain a personal or community concept of identity.

Methodology

As mentioned above, in order to better understand the ways in which Indigenous language revitalization tools are being used by native graduate students to facilitate heritage language literacy, I video interviewed myself and 2 other Indigenous graduate students at Michigan State. In the simplest of terms, I conceptualized some research questions, I created a few interview questions, I recorded and analyzed the data that I gathered during those interviews, and I put it into conversation with available scholarship. However, this project was more than that to me. It was also a change to put into action the lessons and knowledge of other Indigenous scholars.

So why an Indigenous methodology? Why take the extra time to make sure that all of the moves to ensure that the research and inquiry that I performed for this project held to the community values of myself, my participants, and the guiding voices of Indigenous scholars? It is because that in order to decolonize the academy, I, as both a scholar and an Indigenous person, must remember that, "Research is imbued with a power hierarchy, with the researcher having final control over the research design, data collection, and interpretation. The choice of methods is a solid indicator of the power dynamic at work" (Kovach, 2010, p.125). For too long have stories *about* Indigenous people been told through a strongly Western lens, and this has impacted the kinds of stories that have been told. There are too many to list, but for every staged image of a non-plains Indian posed in a headdress, the story has been skewed, every red-faced, cross armed cartoon Chief changes the reality. As the researcher, I do have the power to affect this kind of change on my story and that of my participants, but I also have responsibility. "If Indigenous ways of knowing have to be narrowed through one particular lens...then surely that lens would be relationality. All things are related and therefore relevant" (Wilson, 2011, p. 58). It is my relations, the relationships and connections that I have to respect, and an Indigenous methodology, one that takes into account my responsibility to not only what I say, but also how I say it, and how I share the stories of those who were kind enough to gift them to me for this project.

As both an Indigenous person raised in my tribal community (Cherokee Nation), and an adult heritage language learner, I have a strong personal and community connection to this project. As an academic and a researcher of digital platforms, I am interested in the ways in which modern native folks are using these digital tools to take back some of what was taken from our elders and ancestors and to address Hinton's (2011) idea of the "Missing Generation" of speakers of Indigenous languages, those, like myself and the rest of the participants, who were born and raised in the gap between the reform schools and the immersion efforts (p.313). Telling my story and the stories of others also taking on this monumental and important task (heritage language literacy) are important to my desire to keep true to the practices of Indigenous methodology and knowledge making. Like Kovach (2010) states in *Indigenous Methodologies*, "Through

autoethnographies and autobiographical narrative inquiries, researchers reveal how do you intuitive and experiential work constructs knowledge" (p. 110). And in *Kaandossiwin* (2011), Absolon places the researcher "...at the centre of their methodological process" (p.68). So, as a participant observer and a language learner, I have placed myself into my research, literally and in the understanding of how I fit into the gathering and analysis of my data. "Indigenous methods that are rooted in Indigenous worldviews and philosophies promote Indigenous-based ethics and principles in the research process" (Kovach, 2010, p.63). Through the conversations, the time spent in community spaces with the participants, and through the creation of questions, I have worked to hold myself accountable to those ethics and principles held by myself and those who have come before me and will come after.

Video Essay Format

The completion of this project also involved the creation of a video essay. Using the research questions that guided this research, I interviewed my participants and myself about the experience of learning a heritage language online while in graduate school, and their thoughts on what if any role that this literacy plays in an Indigenous identity. The video essay seeks give me the change to record more than just the words of my participants. With a video, I can also capture the movements, gestures, and facial expressions of my participants, all important elements in the storytelling process. The video will also include quotes by many of the authors featured in this essay, as well as B-Roll footage of myself and the participants engaging in Indigenous community events in the Lansing and surrounding areas. The final video project, *Every Word is a Prayer*, features an edited (with participant involvement and agency over edits) mix of interview, conversation, community engagement, and theory, and it hopefully respectfully captures something beautiful and thoughtful about my participants, their literacy journey, and their stories.

Participant Selection

The participants in the study are all doctoral level graduate students at Michigan State University, studying various subjects, all in some way related to Indigenous knowledges and studies. All of the participants are also members and former or current officers of the Indigenous Graduate Student Collective [IGSC] at MSU and affiliated graduate students in the American Indian/Indigenous Studies department. As far as learning practices, each of the participants are using or have used digital tools like online classes or mobile language applications to learn the heritage language of their Indigenous communities. All of the learners have taken on this task while also in graduate school and have used or

are using this heritage language to fulfill their doctoral language requirements for their degrees. Further, the participants all began their study of the language while in coursework for their doctoral degree and are all from communities outside of Michigan. Since they are all geographically separated from their communities and speakers from whom they could learn the language, the tools used for language learning are helping to facilitate the learning while not actually in the spaces in which they are spoken. The participants have been chosen because while there has been research done (see above for examples) about the programs and measures being taken to revitalize Indigenous languages, there is also value in recording these stories and experiences directly from the community members who are experiencing them. Their stories are important to understanding the relationality of these journeys, a concept key to an Indigenous methodology (As seen in Absolon (2011); Kovach (2010); Wilson (2003); & others). I am including myself in this research because my story is also important to this study. I am on the same language learning journey as my other participants, and we are all connected through our relations and relationships. I also acknowledge that the selection of Native voices I have access to is not reflective of all experiences and programs available for undertaking this journey. The participants in this study, myself included are reflective of those people who were both Indigenous language learners and graduate students at Michigan State.

Participants

C. J. (Myself)- Beginning Language Learner (0 yrs) (Cherokee) Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, tribal community raised in a home with access to one first language speaker (great grandmother).

J. S.- Intermediate Language Learner (2 yrs) (Cherokee) Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, tribal community raised in a home with access to multiple first language speaker

S. M.-Advanced Language Learner (5 yrs) (Luiseño) La Jolla Luiseño and Cupeño, raised separated from tribal communities but with community ties, no first language speaker access.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through interviews, participant stories, and the observation of the use of the digital tools. Each of the participants was interviewed on camera for both this study and for the video essay that was made during this process; data was transcribed using the software, Temi, for this text and used/edited down for the video.

Participants in this study were given the choice to not answer any question or any part of the question. The interviews we a mix of answering the specific questions and sitting and conversing with my participants. I only recorded the actual question and answer portion of our discussions. The stories that we shared when the cameras we not rolling were used only to help to determine what parts of the formal interviews were important. Those conversations were about the person, not about the data, and contain personal details the participants did not want included in the final project. As Kovach (2010) reminds us, "An open-structure conversational method shows respect for the participant's story and allows research participants greater control over what they wish to share with respect to the research questions" (p.124). By simply conversing with my participants as friends, which they were/are, I was able to get more than a simple interview. I was, instead, able to gather community and language learning *stories.* The participants' stories matter, and so when editing them down for the video and for the analysis, I took into consideration the knowledge gained during the casual conversations for the edit. The full transcriptions of the question and answer portion, as well as the interview questions, are going to be made available with the publication of the video essay, but the remaining portions of the conversations and the laughter that was shared are not included. Those moments of openness and vulnerability were something special, something only for us and for that moment.

Since creating the video essay was always one of the goals of this project, the recorded interviews of myself and my participants have been the primary sources of data for this project. However, it is not just the information recorded during the structured questioning of my participants that created the story of this project. Since, as a heritage language learner, I am also a participant in my own study, I am also able to interact directly with the tools that are offered for my own heritage language (Cherokee) as both a participant and as a researcher. I spent time recording myself engaging with the Cherokee Language app, *Shiyo*, as well as during the actual Cherokee language classes offered by the Nation. Data and footage collected during these activities is included in the video essay and synthesized into the textual findings presented here.

Conclusions

Learning a heritage language at any time in one's life is a journey; a journey that is both very personal and, as discussed by my participants and in this text, one that is deeply rooted in community and relationality as well as a history of violence and erasure. The digital tools being used by myself, my participants, and others on this path are offering a chance to begin to long road to healing and recovery within Indigenous communities. However, like Galla (2016) says:

> It is important to note that the use of technology for language revitalization is a supplement to language teaching, since technology cannot replace intergenerational language transfer, teach or save a language single-handedly. Consideration of technology should be ruminated on following discussion of the community's language goals and available resources. (p.138)

And while context in which they are spoken is difficult, and in the case of many Indigenous languages, those speaker spaces are very small, or already lost.

So, this is only the beginning of not only my efforts to learn my heritage language, but also in a wider analysis of how these languages are not only a part of our graduate school experiences, but also what that means to us as both Indigenous people and as language learners living in this current world and climate. I think Lizette Peter (2003) captures the ways that I am feeling well when she discussed the Cherokee Language program, saying:

> … once community members overcome their initial frustration of chipping away at decades of hegemonic practices, participants involved in indigenous language revitalization are beginning to see that community-lead languages and cultural revitalization activities have the ability to renew a sense of pride, cultural identity, and self determination. (p.89)

This is only the beginning of this new chapter of my language journey and my investigation into the tools that others are using to learn their heritage languages, and I am looking forward to seeing where it takes me.

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Appendix A:
Interview Questions:

1. What was/are your reason/reasons for learning your heritage language?

2. What if any exposure to the language did you have prior to this effort to learn your language?

3. What methods are you using/have you used in order to learn your language?

4. How far along in your language learning process are you?

5. What role if any do you think your heritage language plays in Indigenous identity and community?

6. Why are you learning your language at this time in your life?

7. How has it felt to undertake this journey as a graduate student?