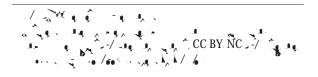# Refusing "Endangered Languages" Narratives

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T he United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCOT

community language programs, and new networks of scholar-practitioners and activists. Language policy has shifted accordingly, both at the level of individual Indigenous communities and by non-Indigenous governments and organizations, with many calls to support language maintenance and revitalization. The IDIL, for example, "aims at ensuring [I]ndigenous peoples' right to preserve, revitalize and promote their languages, and mainstreaming linguistic diversity and multilingualism aspects into the sustainable development efforts."[3] Organizations geared toward this work, along with several language documentation initiatives, have been created. Even the U.S. government, long an agent of violence toward Native American nations and languages, passed in 1990 the Native American Languages Act, which established as policy that the United States will "preserve, protect, and promote the rights and freedom of Native Americans to use, practice, and develop Native American languages."[4] Most important, many Native American communities are working hard for language maintenance and recovery.

I come from a Native American nation that is engaged in such work. I am a citizen of the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, and our language, myaamiaataweenki, fell into almost complete dormancy during the 1960s, having been replaced by English until community efforts began in the 1990s to bring our language back by learning it from historical documentation. I am proud to report that myaamiaataweenki is used by many Miami people today. In this essay, I draw from my experiences in Miami language work, as well as my training and research as a linguist who specializes in ⸻ , a decolonial approach to language revitalization that centers community needs and goals and focuses on addressing the underlying causes of language shift.[5] The way language reclamation brought my community together corroborates, alongside similar examples from other communities, the assertion in the aforementioned Native American Languages Act that "the traditional languages of Native Americans are an integral part of their cultures and identities and form the basic medium for the transmission, and thus survival, of Native American cultures, literatures, histories, religions, political institutions, and values."

What happened among Miami people– a story of extreme language shift but also, and crucially, of language recovery– is shareMCID h ft but

wider society.[9] Particularly important for this essay is *, , ,   *, the project and supporting logics whereby governments such as those of the United States and Canada try to replace Indigenous peoples– and by extension our languages, lifeways, intellectual traditions, and futures– through resettling Indigenous lands with new polities and linguistic landscapes.

Given the violence of settler colonialism, scholarship in Native American Studies frequently references oppression and trauma. As these accounts are crucial for understanding realities such as the current status of Native American languages, I include them. At the same time, I share Unangax̂ scholar Eve Tuck's observation that "damage-centered" accounts can promote problematic views of contemporary Indigenous peoples and mask our resilience and successes.[10] My response is to refuse the assumptions of inferiority that often accompany such accounts and instead to promote reclamation, with emphasis on how Indigenous cultural and intellectual traditions provide tools to support this work. For example, the focus on relationships that is core to Miami and other Native American communities' ways of knowing is hugely important for language reclamation. A relational approach to understanding the world illuminates how language shift occurs when something ruptures the relationships people have to languages; language recovery thus requires rebuilding these relationships.

Though linguists certainly consider relationships such as how multiple languages may derive from a common source, it is not a disciplinary norm of Linguistics to follow the relational model described above. Instead, aligning with dominant academic practices of conceptualizing knowledge as universal and disembodied, it is common for linguists to focus on discrete elements, such as sounds, words, and clauses. Moreover, it is common practice for researchers to present linguistic analyses without mentioning their relationships to the communities whose languages are under discussion or engaging the question of who is licensed to make or share a given analysis. According to this logic, the quality of research conclusions lies in their reasoning, evidence, and impact. In Native American Studies, conversely, these metrics apply, but there is also emphasis on how knowledge is produced in particular places and contexts, with significant attention paid not only to what knowledge should be produced but also if, how, and by whom it should be shared.

As a Miami person whose lived experiences with language shift and recovery primarily involve my own and other North American Indigenous communities, and whose professional training occurred at U.S. institutions, my analysis draws on global trends but focuses on North American (particularly U.S.) dynamics. For this reason, the points I offer in this essay should not be taken as universal, though I draw attention to two themes that I believe are true for most Indigenous communities. First, members of Indigenous communities (as with minoritized communities in general) share the experience of being the characters, rather than the

ample, some versions explain that members of minoritized language communities adopt languages of wider use to get jobs. However, beyond failing to query the economic injustices that often characterize these situations, the narrative frequently omits key linguistic principles that bring such explanations into question. Multilingualism is the historical and contemporary norm in most parts of the world, and people can and do learn additional languages while maintaining those they already have. Nevertheless, the narrative naturalizes Native American communities' wholesale 〟 ⍁I 〟 of their original languages. Along with "wouldn't it be better if we all spoke one language?"-type arguments that dismiss the harms of language shift, the narrative misses how language maintenance and reclamation occur in contexts of multilingualism, which has long been the norm across Native North America.[14]

And sometimes the implied reason for communities such as my own shifting entirely to English is that it just happened.

sions with other Native Americans. These are the stories that must be shared, honestly acknowledged, and responded to. Again, owing to my experiences and relations as a Miami person, I draw heavily on examples from my own community.

I begin with literal displacement via land theft. Despite a series of treaties by Miami leaders with the U.S. government stating that the original Miami homelands in Indiana and surrounding areas would remain Miami forever, our community was split in 1846 when many families– including my direct ancestors– were forcibly removed from these lands to a reservation in Kansas by U.S. agents. Traditional Miami cultural practices, which reflect relationships to particular homelands, were, of course, disrupted. And then in a second removal in the late 1860s, several Miamis, though not all– again, splitting the community be-

on weekends went to church and Sunday school. She emphasized how on Sundays, they didn't get supper but instead got a piece of apple pie and gingerbread, and that she would never forget that apple pie![18] But she did forget– perhaps was forced to "forget"– our tribal language.

Other boarding school survivors share their experiences of language oppression more directly, as with the following story from a Warm Springs Elder:

> Before I went to the boarding school, I was speaking [a Native American language], and all my sisters and brothers were speaking it. That's all we spoke, and then we got into boarding school and we were not allowed to speak. And I grew up believing that it was something very bad, because we got punished, or switched, and so they just kind of beat it out of me.…That boarding school did bad stuff to us, and they took the most important thing, which was our language.[19]

As Diné scholar James McKenzie explains in an essay directed to applied linguists, trauma experienced directly by boarding school survivors, which in many cases extends far beyond language oppression to include physical and sexual violence, does not end with the survivors themselves.[20] Instead, the trauma can be passed on to subsequent generations, continuing to harm individual and community well-being until something intervenes. Language reclamation can address this trauma by helping people to (re)establish healthy relationships with their languages and what those languages represent in their respective community contexts and cosmologies.

Around the same time as the development and spread of Indian boarding schools in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the U.S. government increasingly adopted policies and promoted nationalist narratives that furthered an ideal of English monolingualism. Even though the earlier historical record of settler life in the United States documents a landscape of many languages and more acceptance of language diversity, the notion that English was ، language of the United States became increasingly promoted as an imagined original American trait.[21] This belief, which remains strong today, impedes the maintenance of Native American (and other) languages.

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preserving, or otherwise engaging with languages separately from the social and political contexts of their historical and contemporary use and users.[22]

Both strategies occur in dominant endangered languages narratives, which adopt and naturalize "endangered languages" as the unit of focus as opposed to the broader process of endangerment. This frame of "endangered languages" reinforces a theory of languages as objects: named, bounded sets of grammatical patterns and vocabulary that can be counted, analyzed, or lost. Indeed, research by language scientists, which as shown throughout the essays in this volume has great potential to promote social justice, can also foster harm by rendering languages into disembodied data or objects whose primary value lies in what they contribute to science. I emphasize that it is common in Native American communities for languages and peoplehood to be heavily intertwined.[23] In such contexts, objectifying the language by emphasizing, for example, what its grammar reveals for science easily objectifies the people who claim the language.

Unfortunately, as extractive models of Indigenous language research remain sanctioned in normative research practices, associated framing is common in the dominant narrative. For instance, it regularly includes queries about how Native American languages contribute to "our knowledge," where "our" is contextually referring to members of dominant groups, such as language scientists. Asking "What do we lose when a language dies?" has a similar overtone, especially when relayed in a context with few or no Indigenous people. This noted, it is not my opinion that wider society cannot or should not appreciate and learn from Indigenous languages. The problem is rather that these queries too often lack important counterparts, such as "What does colonialism have to do with it?"

It is common in Linguistics to categorize and theorize "endangered languages" through biological metaphors such as _ and ˻ _. This practice, which also occurs in Indigenous communities, is not surprising, given that using language is so intertwined with human life experience. Moreover, language endangerment, like biological species endangerment, occurs when environments have been seriously disrupted. If employed to express these links, the use of biological metaphors could facilitate social justice by calling attention to the issues that must be addressed to reverse language shift. In general, however, use of biological metaphors warrants great caution. In the narrative, Native American language shift is normally framed unidirectionally (only away from the original languages) using categories that represent increasingly severe stages of endangerment and end at ˻ ˎ . This is highly problematic.[24]

Actual extinction of a biological species is normally understood as a lost cause, an irreversible eventuality. By extension, if a language is "extinct," interventions that could promote its future use, such as funding language programs, are illogical, hopeless, and unlikely to be supported. But here the species extinction meta-

> Speakers and signers of Indigenous and minoritized languages have repeatedly explained that their languages are endangered due to failures of social justice—the oppression, marginalization, stigmatization, exclusion, deprivation, and so on—that take place in the context of imperial, colonial, and nationalist domination.[27]

Beyond working to reverse the injustices created by this domination, the second key to an alternative narrative is a focus on reclamation, and what non-Indigenous agents and institutions can do to support it. Shifting the unit of analysis away from "endangered languages," which focuses on languages rather than the peoples who claim them, is crucial to this narrative. "Language endangerment" is an improvement, as it references a process rather than objects, but better yet would be to position community language ecologies as the anchor for the story. Language ecologies are the ways in which languages exist in their environments, and an ecological approach thus inherently emphasizes place (which is especially fundamental to Indigenous communities) along with sociopolitical, economic, and other factors in language shift and recovery. An ecological approach emphasizes relationships, which as noted earlier must in some way have been severely changed or damaged in order for language shift to have occurred. Unlike the dominant narrative's focus, this approach firmly engages the multiple oppressions those communities have experienced and continue to experience, while also drawing attention to their rights, needs, goals, and futures.

Finally, following from the last point is the importance of prioritizing the lived experiences of members of Native American language communities when planning and executing language work. Roche notes that dominant approaches to theorizing language endangerment largely miss the political factors and lead to "a refusal to sincerely hear the voices of the linguistically oppressed."[28] I follow Roche's observation that many members of oppressed language communities are already explaining the causes of language endangerment and sharing stories of language reclamation, and yet we are not fully being heard or seen.[29] In Native North America, where settler colonial logics teach that Native Americans for the most part no longer really exist, this is to be expected; and by extension, the stories we relate and the needs we articulate are easily dismissed by dominant discourses and the actions they promote. As shown throughout the essays in this volume, however, many tools to address these injustices already exist. The question is whether people with power are willing to engage them.