Indigenous languages and the field of linguistics

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Indigenous languages play a prominent role in the academic discipline of linguistics, particularly in Canada. Linguists have worked extensively with speakers of Indigenous languages in the documentation and analysis of vocabulary, grammar, and discourse. Such work can have beneficial outcomes for both the field of linguistics and the communities in which Indigenous languages are spoken. However, it cannot be denied that the field of linguistics has often enjoyed a disproportionate share of these benefits. This brief article outlines the goals of modern linguistics, the role that Indigenous languages have played in the field, and the tensions that can exist between the different priorities of academic linguists and Indigenous communities.

THE GOALS OF LINGUISTICS

Most people are aware that the field of linguistics involves the study of language, but it may come as a surprise that linguists do not necessarily learn to speak other languages. The primary goal of linguistics is to understand *how languages work*, at all levels: their structure, their use, their history, their psychological and neurological correlates, and their interactions with social factors. A linguist can study these aspects of a language without knowing how to speak the language.

Linguists approach the study of language from an egalitarian perspective. One of the first points taught to students in an introductory linguistics course is that all languages and all dialects are equally valid. In everyday life, the languages and dialects used by powerful social groups are often held up as a superior standard, such as the varieties of English that are typically taught in schools. However, this supposed linguistic superiority is rooted entirely in the perceived social superiority of the users of such varieties. From a strictly linguistic perspective, there is no objective basis for declaring one language or dialect superior to another. As far as linguists can determine, each different linguistic system is equally well adapted for communication.

A necessary consequence of this egalitarian perspective is that linguists seek to understand how *all* languages work. If our goal is to understand the full range of linguistic structures that the human mind can handle, then an Indigenous language such as Gitksan, spoken fluently by fewer than 400 people in British Columbia (Forbes, 2018), has just as much to teach us as does a global language such as English, spoken by millions of people around the world.

LINGUISTICS AND INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

Although all languages are of equal interest to linguists, a small number of European languages have played an oversized role in the development of the field. Nowadays, linguists recognize the crucial need to engage with understudied languages, including Indigenous languages in Canada, to ensure that our theoretical models accurately reflect the full diversity of human language. Urgency is added to this enterprise by the significant decline in the number of fluent speakers that has affected most Indigenous languages in Canada, one of the damaging legacies of colonization. Most linguistic research becomes impossible if fluent native speakers are not available to participate.

Linguistic research on a particular language normally begins with a comprehensive description of the vocabulary and structure of the language, typically published as a dictionary and a reference grammar, along with the recording and analysis of stories, speeches, and other examples of the actual use of the language. This work is done collaboratively by linguists and speakers and typically involves hundreds of hours of sitting down and discussing the meaning of words and sentences in painstaking detail. In addition to basic descriptive materials, linguists also write articles and books that connect data from particular languages to broader issues in the field; some linguists focus primarily or exclusively on this kind of research. Linguists whose research involves endangered languages may also contribute to community-oriented language revitalization initiatives.

CONFLICTING PRIORITIES

Imagine an academic linguist whose research focuses on the structure and use of the passive voice. If this linguist were to notice interesting parallels between the passive voice in German and Cree, the linguist might meet with speakers of both languages to record examples of passive sentences and might then write a research paper that uses this data to advance our overall understanding of the passive voice.

The research project sketched above may seem innocuous. Indeed, it is hard to imagine an objection to using data from a prominent language such as German in this way. But the use of data from an Indigenous language is more ethically fraught than it may first appear. Consider the context in which the research takes place. The academic linguist is affiliated with a university, an elite and prestigious institution, whereas the speaker of an Indigenous language

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is a member of a historically marginalized community that has not enjoyed full access to such institutions. The linguist sets the agenda for the research and decides what kinds of knowledge are valuable; the speaker provides the data that the linguist needs. The linguist leverages their published research to climb the professional ranks; the speaker is compensated for their time at an hourly rate. The overall community of academic linguists gains an interesting new set of data; the overall Indigenous community gains little of practical value. Does this sound like an equal exchange?

It should be emphasized that not all linguistic research proceeds in this way. In fact, this model of research is much less common than it once was. As Rice (2006) discusses, many linguists now incorporate an element of *advocacy* in their research, aiming to do work that has clear benefits for the speech community; and the gold standard for linguistic research is now an *empowerment* model in which the community itself plays an active role in setting the research agenda and carrying out the work. Successful examples of this model in Canada include recent dictionaries of East Cree (dictionary.eastcree.org) and Innu (dictionary.innu-aimun.ca) and the "Cayuga: Our Oral Legacy" project (cayugalanguage.ca).

Nevertheless, despite such successful collaborations, there remains a disconnect between many of the goals of the field of linguistics and the needs of speakers of Indigenous languages. Not all linguistic research involving Indigenous languages has immediately obvious benefits for Indigenous communities. Although this fact is clear, our understanding of its implications continues to evolve along with other aspects of Indigenous–Settler relations in Canada.

REFERENCES

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Algoma University, Sault Ste. Marie spoke on the factors of both historical language shift and contemporary revitalization in Anishinaabe communities of northern Ontario.

Indigenous language rights lawyer David Leitch, who had spoken at the 2016 colloquium, spoke on the failure of the new legislation to provide any new actionable language rights to Indigenous people; demographer Mary Jane Norris presented her new interactive website on the demographics of Indigenous communities and languages; and Adam Richard presented an online dictionary portal, developed in Mohawk but adaptable to any language.

In all, it was a three-day opportunity to share ideas and initiatives with the common goal of ensuring that Indigenous languages will gain strength—both speakers and opportunities for use—in the future.

Most of the colloquium speakers are also contributors to an upcoming volume (eds. Key Jr., Chacaby & Martin from McGill-Queen's University Press). The collection is expected to appear in 2021, in time for the UN Decade of Indigenous Languages, which the United Nations recently declared will start in 2022. News on further developments in the field of Indigenous language policy will be posted on the CRLCC website.

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