

(Re)connecting to the Spirit of the Language: Decolonizing from Eurocentric Indigenous Language Revitalization Methodologies

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Abstract : The Spirit of the language embodies the motivation for indigenous people to connect with the indigenous language of their lineage. While the concept of the spirit of the language is often woven into the discussion by indigenous language revitalizationists, particularly those who are indigenous, there are few tangible terms in academic research conceptually actualizing the term. Through collaborative work with indigenous language speakers, elders, and learners, this research sets out to identify the spirit of the language, the catalysts of disconnection from the spirit of the language, and the sources of reconnection to the spirit of the language. This work fundamentally addresses the terms of engagement around collaboration with indigenous communities, itself inviting a decolonial approach to community outreach and individual relationships. As indigenous researchers, this means beginning, maintain, and closing this work in the ceremony while being transparent with community members in this work and related publishing throughout the project's duration. Decolonizing this approach also requires maintaining explicit ongoing consent by the elders, knowledge keepers, and community members when handling their ancestral and indigenous knowledge. The handling of this knowledge is regarded in this work as stewardship, both in the handling of digital materials and the handling of ancestral Indigenous knowledge. This work observes recorded conversations in both nêhiyawêwin and English, resulting from 10 semi-structured interviews with fluent nêhiyawêwin speakers as well as three structured dialogue circles with fluent and emerging speakers. The words were transcribed by a speaker fluent in both nêhiyawêwin and English. The results of those interviews were categorized thematically to conceptually actualize the spirit of the language, catalysts of disconnection to the spirit of the language, and community voices methods of reconnection to the spirit of the language. Results of these interviews vastly determine that the spirit of the language is drawn from the land. Although nêhiyawêwin is the focus of this work, Indigenous languages are by nature inherently related to the land. This is further reaffirmed by the Indigenous language learners and speakers who expressed having ancestries and lineages from multiple Indigenous communities. Several other key differences embody this spirit of the language, which include ceremony and spirituality, as well as the semantic worldviews tied to polysynthetic verb-oriented morphophonemics most often found in indigenous languages — and of focus, nêhiyawêwin. The catalysts of disconnection to the spirit of the language are those whose histories have severed connections between Indigenous Peoples and the spirit of their languages or those that have affected relationships with the land, ceremony, and ways of thinking. Results of this research and its literature review have determined the three most ubiquitously damaging interdependent factors, which are catalysts of disconnection from the spirit of the language as colonization, capitalism, and Christianity. As voiced by the Indigenous language learners, this work necessitates addressing means to reconnect to the spirit of the language. Interviewees mentioned that the process of reconnection involves a whole relationship with the land, the practice of reciprocal-relational methodologies for language learning, and indigenous-protected and -governed learning. This work concludes in support of those reconnection methodologies.

Keywords : indigenous language acquisition, indigenous language reclamation, indigenous language revitalization, nêhiyawêwin, spirit of the language

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