

Reflections on the Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium

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As a doctoral student interested in Indigenous language and literacy I was grateful to receive a bursary from the Foundation for Endangered Languages (FEL) Canada to attend the Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium (SILS) in Lethbridge, Alberta June 7-9, 2018. The 25th annual Symposium was hosted collaboratively by the Peigan Board of Education and the University of Lethbridge. The SILS is the oldest and largest gathering of Indigenous language stakeholders in North America and organizers chose to title the gathering, KANNAITSITAPI MATAKOKSOKSISSTSI' TSI' POWA OOTSI'TSIPOHSOWA "All true people to gain a renewed interest in their language". The three-day symposium was organized around three themes - research, instructional skills and community.

After a warm welcome to the traditional lands of the Blackfoot people Dr. Onowa McIvor (Swampy Cree) kicked off the first day of the symposium as plenary speaker. Her topic, 'One mind, One people: A National partnership to understand and enhance Indigenous adults' contributions to reviving Indigenous languages', spoke to a new national Indigenous language initiative. She began by speaking of her own transformative Indigenous language learning journey, from anger, to compassion, and now to fire or passion for reclamation. This experience fosters her desire to disrupt thinking about Indigenous languages. Dr. McIvor says, "we are not dots on a map" referring to Canadian Geographic's map of Indigenous languages. "Indigenous languages are fluid and the territorial demarcations divide us as long as we continue to promote this neo-colonial attitude." She reminds us that prior to contact with settlers it was common for Indigenous people to be multi-lingual. She feels we have spent enough time talking about the 'why' and now we must 'act' to learn Indigenous languages and learn from one another. Dr. McIvor then provided an overview of the organizational structure of the new national partnership and promoted a new Language Learning (self) Assessment tool available on line for Adult learners. She concluded with the question: "recognizing people who have the (Indigenous) languages, how do we value those people?" "Perhaps," she suggested, "...give them a pay cheque for living in the language - it's a job!"

Conference participants were treated to a beautiful celebration honoring SILS 25th anniversary by Piikani

Elementary school dancers and an honour song just prior to lunch. Then a panel, consisting of four people involved in SILS since its inception, provided an overview of its historical foundation and subsequent development.

The second plenary speaker, Dr. Sheilah Nicholas from the University of Arizona explained how she re-learned her Hopi language and how she continues to practice regularly. She spoke at length about the need for Indigenous language teachers to understand their positioning prior to understanding how to attend to the task of teaching it to others. Rather than attend to "language loss discourse because it is a hopeless endeavour, we need to use or think about language as residing within us, and it has to be pulled out of us". Her dissertation, *Becoming 'Fully' Hopi: The Role of the Hopi Language in the Contemporary Lives of Hopi Youth — A Hopi Case Study of Language Shift and Vitality* talks about her transformational journey. She also talked about her work with para-educators, how they lived the language. She developed a model that articulates their knowing and being through language – language as cultural practice. Her work with the Hopi Institute over six summers reaffirms her commitment to language using a team teaching, mentor /apprentice relationship.

The first plenary speaker on the second day was Dr Wesley Leonard who talked about fostering Indigenous centered collaborations in language reclamation. He spoke of his own experience with his Miami language: "it is not dead...30 years of silence... prior to reclamation". He asked whether linguistics and academia needed to be decolonized? He illustrated this problem with, "Does language like 'polysynthetic'" distance Indigenous people from their language projects or make them larger, rather than balanced?" He used an illustrative model to show how the linguistic needs and expertise can outweigh the needs of community to reclaim their languages. Dr. Leonard raised ideas such as how strategies for centering Indigenous Knowledge in collaborations can be used, and how the 'land itself' can be a collaborator in language reclamation? He spoke at length about the positioning of researcher/linguist in language reclamation projects and the need to think about those implications more purposefully. He concluded with a look at ethical dilemmas such as,



Herald photo by Tim Kalinowski. Herman Many Guns holds up the Eagle Staff before the dancing out of the flags ceremony to end the successful three-day Indigenous Languages Symposium at the U of L Atrium.

“things that shouldn’t be shared or used in certain contexts and why” and “ownership”.

Steven Crowchild, the lunch plenary speaker, talked about the role of young people in language revitalization projects. He spoke and showed an example of his own experience inspiring young people to take up the language in Tsuut’ina territory. He encouraged resources be spent on and in the community rather than on research: “Being an ally is building capacity in us, Indigenous people” which will bring Indigenous people back to the table as co-collaborators.

Robert Hall was the final plenary speaker on the second day. His topic was “Memory, Brain and Language Revitalization”. He spoke about the inconsistencies between written and spoken language and suggested perhaps this tool actually prevents people from really getting to use the language. He promoted learning spoken language, “If you cannot communicate then we need to gently correct, but if we understand, leave it alone.” He ended with a joke about the resistance linguists would encounter if they standardized language: too many tattoos would need corrections!

On the morning of the third day Belinda Daniels was the first plenary speaker. She draws on 13 years of experience, leading a one-week summer immersion Cree camp in Saskatchewan, to reflect on her own Nehiyawewin learning. She explains how a discussion

with well known Cree scholar Willie Ermine helped her reframe approaches like: “why do we need to be accommodated by the weather, instead, how do we learn to accommodate the weather?” Scheduling is simple, she says. It’s about the importance of relationships with others. She asks herself, ‘what does it mean to speak from a Nehiyaw point of view? How do we build capacity in our communities?’ She concluded by emphasizing the transformative power of language reclamation: “Languages are our breath. They are alive. My language gives me pride and purpose. When you know your language, you become solid.”

The Final Plenary session, Blackfoot bogs and boutique languages, was presented by Eldon Yellow Horn, a Piikani Blackfoot and archeologist at Simon Fraser University. He talked about using social media and technology to expand the base of Piikani speakers.

In this short summary I have only briefly touched on messages from plenary speakers; there were almost 40 break-out sessions to choose from. Not only was there a great deal to learn but the food and conference space at the University of Lethbridge was beautiful. For those who were unable to attend a book of conference proceedings is planned (date to be announced). Look for the publication:

L. Crowshoe, I. Genee, M. Peddle, & J. Smith (Eds.), *KANNAITSITAPIMATAKOKSOKSISSTSI’TSI’POWA OOTSI’TSI’POHSOWA*; ‘All true people to gain a renewed interest in their language’ Bringing together our community, our teachers and our scholars. Selected papers of the 25th Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium. Lethbridge, AB.

Reflections on the Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium (SILS)

Nicholle First Rider

It was exciting to attend the Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium (SILS) in my own home territory of the Blackfoot Confederacy. This year SILS was organized by the Board of Education from the Piikani First Nation in conjunction with the University of Lethbridge. It was extremely inspiring to witness how the symposium brought together various participants and presenters from across the globe, all invested in saving and revitalizing Indigenous languages.

Without a doubt, there was invaluable information in all of the sessions I attended. The “Affirming Identity” session by Jon Reyhner was very memorable because I finally got to meet Reyhner, a strong leader in the Indigenous language community – the man who has written many articles on saving languages. Reyhner effectively promoted his mandate on the reasons we as Indigenous language educators, advocates, and leaders must maintain our languages, culture and identity. He stressed that when Indigenous students are connected to the land, practice their cul-

ture and speak their language they are engaged in healing the intergenerational trauma from colonialization and genocide. Additionally, these students improve their behavior at school and in the community and produce higher academic achievement levels.

It was so encouraging to see how my own language of Blackfoot is growing and thriving. The session by Sharon Yellow Fly and Corey Gray was a very upbeat account of how the recent scientific discovery of Einstein’s Gravitational Waves was translated into the Blackfoot language for the international press release. I was also very moved to hear how Ms. Yellow Fly wrote her own Blackfoot Language dictionary to ensure that her children will speak their language.

I would like to thank the event organizers and FEL Canada for the opportunity to attend this year’s symposium.



Professor Jon Reyhner (Northern Arizona University) was the chair of the SILS steering committee, participated in the 25th Anniversary panel on Thursday June 7 and presented a retrospective assessment of key developments over the past 25 years and a prospective view of priorities for the next 25 years. Photo retrieved from: <http://www.sils2018.ca/keynote-speakers/jon-reyhner/>