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Reflections on language documentation in North America

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In this paper we reflect on the state of language documentation in North America, especially Canada and Alaska. Using our own early experiences with the archival record on languages of North America as a launching point, we discuss changes that have come to this field over the past twenty years. These include especially the increasing recognition of long traditions of community-based language research within North America, and of members of language communities as primary stakeholders in efforts to preserve and properly share records of linguistic knowledge.

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For each of us, our own first encounters with language documentation led us to understand, appreciate, and ultimately strive to practice community-engaged and community-directed research (eg., Czaykowska-Higgins 2009). Our personal trajectories as researchers align with and reflect a paradigm shift around language research in the United States and Canada, also echoing changes in other parts of the world with shared colonial histories persisting in present realities. In this chapter, we describe what we see emerging as standards of practice in North America. We also tell our origin stories as researchers working with language and community, and in so doing, we adopt methodology we have learned from our Indigenous research partners: to introduce

ourselves, to explain where we are from, and why we are doing this work. We begin at the end: with the products of language documentation projects stored in archives.

Daisy: *Twenty years ago, around the time Himmelmann 1998 was published, I visited the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at the Butler Library of Columbia University. I was an undergraduate student in Sally McLendon's Hunter College class on North American Languages and Cultures, and my assignment was to find an original manuscript in an Indigenous American language to write about. An archivist placed a box on the table in front of me and I pulled out a stack of manuscripts pencilled in George Hunt's careful hand. I read through the texts and stopped at one titled 'The Brothers', a Comox story written in Kwak'wala. In the interlinear translation, I recognized a Wakashan version of a Salishan story written about by Dell Hymes in "In Vain I tried to Tell You", with telltale motifs of spousal betrayal, transvestite deception, brotherly revenge, and a younger sibling who tries but fails to warn her family of danger in the home (Hymes 1981: 317). I didn't yet know what language documentation was, nor that the papers I was reading belonged to a 'Boasian trilogy.'*

In defining documentary linguistics as a separate pursuit from descriptive linguistics, Himmelmann proposed that language documentation be conceived of as a "radically expanded text collection...suitable for a range of purposes." Himmelmann does not mention Boas, but the prototypical documentations in North America are Boasian trilogies of a grammar, dictionary and set of texts, created by Boas himself or one of his many students.[1] Himmelmann encourages linguists to value documentation and see, as noted by Rice 2011, that "it is impossible to imagine current linguistic theory, be it formally or functionally oriented, without the existence of the quality descriptions found in the Boasian trilogy" (Rice 2011: 192). Such Boasian trilogies originated in a moment of salvage ethnography, born of the presumptive nostalgia assigned to Native communities imagined to be in the process of disappearing. And yet, twenty years after Himmelmann, we can see that the greatest value of good documentation is to today's descendants of the speakers themselves.

Daisy: *I wrote a paper about Kwak'wala discourse markers in 'The Brothers', and the erasure of these discourse markers in published versions of the story.[2] Ten years later, that paper was part of my graduate application to the UC Santa Barbara. The following summer I found myself working with two speakers of Kwak'wala, Beverly Lagis and Daisy Sewid-Smith, and several community members engaged in language documentation and reclamation, during the inaugural InField in a class coordinated and led by Patricia A. Shaw. A collaboration with Mikael Willie from Kingcome Inlet, a language and culture teacher who participated in the course, brought me to the Tsulquate Reserve of the Gwa'sạla-'Nakwaxda'xw Nations, where I continue to work today in partnership with the Elementary School on the Reserve.*

The research partnership between George Hunt and Franz Boas produced copious documentation of Kwak'wala language and Kwakwạkạ'wakw culture; some of these records remain at the Columbia University where Boas founded the Department of Anthropology. Another large set of records is archived at the American Philosophical Society (APS) in Philadelphia. Brian Carpenter, the curator of Native American Materials at the APS, described recent news of the collection in March 2018:

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[1]See `https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franz_Boas#Students_and_influence` for a list of Boas' students and their influence.

[2]The image in Figure 1 is not of *The Brothers* but shows a manuscript from the same collection; the Boas fonds at the Columbia RBML are still not digitized, but the Library provided an image of another manuscript.

Figure 1: A manuscript page written in George Hunt's hand, with added annotations by Franz Boas. Photo credit: Tara Craig.

Figure 2: Gwi'molas potlatch.

(i)n 2015 and 2016, the APS was honored by an invitation to attend two Kwakwaka'wakw potlatches held in Alert Bay, British Columbia. At these traditional gatherings, the APS gave away books [...] containing unpublished manuscripts from the APS Library written by George Hunt in the Kwak'wala language and English. These books [...] were distributed to the assembled hereditary chiefs, matriarchs, singers, and other community members. It is precisely these people who are the primary constituency, core experts, and research public for these manuscripts. (Carpenter 2018; italics added)

Carpenter continues:

This distribution of just some of Hunt's materials served as the largest increase in access to these materials for the Kwakwaka'wakw community in history. Most importantly, this approach came about entirely through the guidance of Kwakwaka'wakw people. ... [We are] working with members of several Kwakwaka'wakw communities on making the contents of Hunt's ... manuscripts easier to navigate, and also seeking guidance to help ensure that the materials are represented and utilized in ways that are respectful of Kwakwaka'wakw protocols concerning [...] different kinds of knowledge and information. (Carpenter 2018)

For Carpenter, the Kwakwaka'wakw community members attending the potlatch and receiving copies of George Hunt's work are the '*primary* constituency, core experts

and research public' for the materials contained in a language documentation. This is not a necessarily a new phenomenon: there has always been strong interest among community members in the work carried out by linguists and anthropologists about their language and culture. While Himmelmann acknowledged the likely interest of community members in documentation, his definition of language documentation was oriented toward an audience of university-based researchers interested in questions about Language and linguistic structure. However, as indicated by Carpenter, it turns out that within North America the most significant and core audience which one may anticipate will access documentations of a language is *not* other linguists interested in typological or theoretical questions (who remain a relatively small group), but the members of a given speech community interested in researching, learning and teaching their heritage languages, many of whom may be accessing recordings of their ancestors.[3] These numbers are growing, as exemplified in the success and growth of the 'Breath of Life' model of archival research, initiated at University of California Berkeley by Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival over twenty years ago and since replicated in Washington D.C., Oklahoma and British Columbia.[4] As a result, archives play a significant role in linking community members to linguistic and cultural knowledge. Existing repositories are thus reconceiving their relationship to content, while new repositories are being developed under community control.

Andrea: *My entree into the world of language documentation in North America began five years after Himmelmann 1998 was published. In 2003 I was an MA student in linguistics and a student employee of the LINGUIST List, and I was selected, along with my coworker Sadie Williams, to participate in an NSF-funded project known as the Dena'ina Archiving, Training and Access project (DATA, Holton et al. 2006). Under the direction of the project PI, Gary Holton, our task was to travel to Alaska to assist in developing an online database of the Dena'ina language holdings in the Alaska Native Language Center. The ANLC was at the time just beginning its foray into digitizing their massive paper-and-tape collection, guided by the best practice recommendations of another LINGUIST List project known as E-MELD (Electronic Metastructure for Endangered Languages Data; Boynton et al. 2006).*

The three semesters and two summers I spent working on the DATA project were undeniably formative. I witnessed first-hand the tremendous impact that access to records of one's own linguistic inheritance had on Dena'ina Elders and young language learners alike. Later, during my doctoral studies, Kari Shaginoff of Nay'dini'aa Na' Kayax (Chickaloon Village) invited me to the land of the neighboring language Ahtna, where Karen Linnell, Liana Charley and Taña Finnesand of the Ahtna Heritage Foundation brought me onto their team to build C'ek'aedi Hwnax, the Ahtna language digital archive that is fully administered by the nonprofit wing of Ahtna, Incorporated[5] (Berez et al. 2012).

These early experiences with these various models of archiving reflect a more general trend in archiving of North American languages, in which a shift in the locus of archiving practice is slowly becoming Indigenous-community centered. The ANLC was for many years an excellent example of the kind of institutionally-based brick-and-mortar repositories that dominated the archiving landscape in the 19th and 20th centuries, as Golla (1995) so beautifully described. Among these were other well-known collections

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[3]This observation is echoed by several language archive directors working in North America in Wasson et al. 2016.

[4]See `https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Breath_of_Life_(language_restoration_workshops)`

[5]*Ahtna, Incorporated is one of thirteen Alaska Native Regional Corporations created under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971.*

including the American Philosophical Society, The National Anthropological Archives, The University of California at Berkeley, and The Jacobs Collection at the University of Washington. All of these had long been important for collecting and maintaining the analog anthropological record, but even in 1995 Golla was able to see important changes on the horizon. In particular Golla noted that digital databases would allow for the decentralization of materials so that they could be accessed in satellite locations. He mainly mentioned other university- or college-based "research centers" like the then-incipient Native American Language Center at UC Davis, but also tribal-sponsored collections like that of the Confederated Tribes of the Coos, Siuslaw, and Lower Umpqua, kept "at their tribal offices in Coos Bay, Oregon, a quite thorough archive of the published and unpublished documentation of their traditional languages (all of which are now extinct), including copies of sound recordings made by linguistic fieldworkers" (Golla 1995:157).

When Himmelmann was writing his treatise, the world was on the cusp of a digital revolution that would bring new procedures for digitizing and sharing information. Universities could buy digitization equipment and storage space for converting their collections relatively cheaply. Individual language workers could now produce born-digital language documentation to deposit in increasingly-digital language repositories. Access to digital information was also becoming easier; in North America in particular, the ramp-up to high speed internet in many remote locations was relatively quick in comparison with some regions of the world.

The onset of the digital era represents a turning point for language documentation archives. Universities and other non-Indigenous institutions had previously assumed the role of being the only qualified keeper-of-the-record, where interested audiences would be allowed to come visit materials.. This well-meaning–but in hindsight, imbalanced–dynamic was not immediately reversed by the early years of the digital revolution, but institutional archives soon began to investigate better ways to provide access to records. The DATA project represented one archive's attempt to take advantage of these digital advances for the sake of getting language information into the hands of Alaska Native people. No longer did an interested Dena'ina person need to drive ten hours from Kenai, or charter a plane from Nondalton, to access the language materials at the ANLC in Fairbanks. One needed simply visit the qenaga.org website from a browser window in one's own living room or at the local school.

In recent years there have even been some steps toward archives better acknowledging the needs of the archive user (Shepard 2016, Wasson et al. 2016) who is more likely to be a member of an Indigenous language community than a non-Indigenous linguist. Expectations about expertise and authority have shifted along with these changes, away from prioritizing expertise held by specialists in institutional archives, and centering the authority and expertise of Indigenous communities in determining the stewardship of records of their knowledge.

We believe this is a welcome change. As Wasson and colleagues (2016) have observed,

> [...] archives are constructed within a paradigm of Western scientific concepts and assumptions [...] This includes curation practices that serve as a form of control or even suppression when decisions as to what is put in or kept out of an archive are made solely by archivists and linguists, rather than by members of the communities whose language data are being placed in the archive[...] (Wasson et al. 2016: 650)

In kind, some institutional archives in North America are now shifting to a support role, rather than positioning themselves as the sole body capable of maintaining collections. One example of this is the *Indigitization* project[6] at the University of British Columbia, which provides training and equipment to Indigenous communities in the preservation of knowledge, but does not demand that the resultant digital resources be lodged with the university. The C'ek'aedi Hwnax Ahtna language archive has a similar arrangement with the University of Alaska Fairbanks: UAF provides long-term "grey storage" backup of all the digital language materials at no charge, and also turns over all decisions about access to the Ahtna Heritage Foundation. Another notable effort is the FirstVoices project[7] of the First Peoples' Cultural Council,[8] which provides tools for documentation, archiving, and dissemination of Indigenous languages.

Along with accessing archival documentation, community-based researchers in Native North America are themselves a large and growing constituency practicing language documentation and description. There have always been, in the hundreds of communities across Native North America, community-based scholars whose mission is the carrying-forward of their knowledges and traditions, and there have always been community-based experts in language use. But recent discourses around Indigenous and decolonizing research methods (cf. Kovach 2009; Smith 2012; Wilson 2008, inter alia) contribute to and reflect a paradigm shift in the academy which has increased recognition of research on language and culture generated beyond the ivory tower. University-based researchers from Indigenous American communities have impacted, shifted, and expanded traditional university-bound notions of what language documentation is and should be, and for whom (Begay 2017; Cranmer 2015; Jacobs 2011; Leonard 2007; Lukaniec 2018; Rosborough 2012; inter alia). Universities in Canada and the United States are increasingly supportive of community-engaged research, encouraging partnerships, and seeking to welcome Indigenous researchers whether they choose to work within or outside of universities. Many funders now request letters of support from community partners, and/or a Memorandum of Understanding indicating some degree of community support for a proposed project (cf. Government of Canada 2012). Universities and funders also increasingly recognize the complexity of community-engaged work, and are learning to shape expectations for project results accordingly.[9]

Community-external linguists have also been deeply impacted by their long-term working relationships with community partners, through which they have gained broader perspectives on how Indigenous communities follow protocol, set research priorities, identify research questions, frame research processes, and define key concepts such as 'language', 'culture' and 'territory' (cf. Czaykowska-Higgins 2009; Leonard 2017; Sapién & Thornes 2017). The past decade has seen a profusion of literature related to linguistic research which explores in depth concepts of collaboration, partnership, and appropriate models for research in community contexts (Amery 2009; Crippin & Robinson 2009; Czaykowska-Higgins 2009; Leonard & Haynes 2010; Leonard 2017; Shaw 2001; Whaley 2011; inter alia). Institutional growth has followed suit. The American Indian Language Development Institute at University of Arizona (AILDI ca. 1978) and Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Institute at University of Alberta (CILLDI ca. 2000) are university-based programs supporting Indigenous-centered capacity building focused

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[6]http://www.indigitization.ca/
[7]https://www.firstvoices.com/
[8]urlhttp://www.fpcc.ca/
[9]See Whaley 2011 for some examples of such complexities.

on language reclamation. The biennial Institute on Collaborative Language Research (CoLang), initiated in 2008, as well as the Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Conference (SILS ca. 1993) International Conference on Language Documentation & Conservation and the journal *Language Documentation & Conservation* also provide vital venues for knowledge exchange between academic and community experts.

This influence is evident in evolving best practices for the design of language documentation projects. The 'lone-wolf' approach to fieldwork asked Western-trained linguists and anthropologists to generate a research proposal, determine research questions, lay out a methodology, and seek funding in isolation without consultation with the community in question. Outside researchers might arrive in a community with a language documentation plan that had received input from their advisors on campus but did not reflect community protocols, goals, and intentions. In a broader global context, there are situations in which such an approach may still be the most appropriate model (see Crippen & Robinson 2009, 2011 and Bowern & Warner 2017 for a discussion of this), but in the North American context, linguists working in this way risk replicating the extractive dynamics of colonial policies which took both language and land from Indigenous communities. Language work is time consuming. The time of Elders who are willing to share their language is particularly precious; their knowledge is key to efforts to reclaim and revitalize language and culture. For this reason, many linguists, whether outsiders or community members, feel a strong ethical imperative to ensure that their research is guided by community intentions and contributes to community priorities for language reclamation.

In North America, documentation projects may be initiated by communities with revitalization in mind; others may result with outreach from university researchers to communities, or descend from previous relationships. In any case, relationship-building lays the groundwork for an emergent and iterative approach to project design (Hermes et al. 2012). Research goals are set in response to community intentions, articulated through a process of consultation; work-in-progress is shared at key points with community stakeholders, allowing for feedback. Outcomes may evolve as the project develops. Czaykowska-Higgins points out that "...in community-based research it is often the case that *the process itself is a result*" (Czaykowska-Higgins 2009: 43).

Documentary linguists have often felt the imperative to 'capture' as much 'data' as possible in order to provide a full picture of an endangered 'language', but language documentation projects emerging from consultative partnerships and reflecting community-based goals of language reclamation may not prioritize comprehensiveness, nor seek to create a representative sample of a language. In fact, they may not consider language to be an object at all, but rather relate to it as a living being; a medium through which the world is experienced; a conduit for communication to ancestors (cf. Leonard 2017; Hermes et al. 2012).

Despite a vast diversity of community contexts in which languages are being documented for purposes of reclamation, several themes emerge as shared among many North American communities engaged in such projects. Especially in contexts of urgent necessity, community-based researchers may prioritize recording texts which are most likely to be useful for teachers and learners over texts which are widely representative. Certain types of language that have traditionally been valued by academic researchers, such as monologic formal speeches or sacred stories, may be less likely to receive attention. Both academic and community-based researchers note the high value of audio and video documentation of conversational speech, interaction, questions and answers

(Mithun 2001; Sammons & Rosenblum in prep) to language reclamation efforts, as well as to understanding the dynamic structures of interaction. Many projects also emphasize the importance of documenting 'everyday language' and daily routines of life at home. Documentation for reclamation may also need to respond to the specific features of a given language structure in order to provide useful material for teaching and learning, such as the semantically-rich and morphologically complex 'beautiful words' of Kwak'wala (Kell et al. 2011; Rosborough et al. 2017) which are treasured by language learners but are only produced in certain documentation contexts (Rosenblum 2015).

Finally, a shared theme among many projects is the documentation of place-based knowledges. Documenting ecological knowledges of territory occupies a special privilege for many communities, with concrete relevance and associated sensitivities. These themes motivate language research for communities continuing to live in their ancestral homelands (Cruz 2017), as well as for those who have been relocated or removed from their traditional territories. The Myaamia, whose homelands are south of the Great Lakes but now live in diaspora extending from Ohio and Indiana through Kansas to Oklahoma (and indeed, around the world), researched moon phases, plant names, and seasonal descriptions and recover traditional ecological knowledge held in the language contained in archival manuscripts in order to create a lunar calendar which is now in wide use (Voros 2009; Wigram 2009).

The effort to document placed-based knowledge can be part of a larger community movement to connect younger generations with their homelands, to reclaim knowledge of those places in the language which belongs to it, to reoccupy territories and to heal from past trauma.

At the same time, in Canada, cases concerning the territorial rights of First Nations are a crucial ongoing piece of the Indigenous response to colonial occupation (cf. Delgamuukw v. British Columbia 1997; Tsilhqot'in Nation v. British Columbia 2014; Nair 2018). Many First Nations in British Columbia are actively negotiating treaty settlements. As a result, when language documentation involves knowledge of territory, harvesting practices, and traditional use and occupation, it is not only highly valued, it can involve information which is privileged and may need to be protected for various reasons. Language documentation projects must be able to plan for and accommodate such concerns; for this reason and many others, open-access requirements on data recorded within such a project may need to be flexible and responsive to these community needs.

In North America, the need for language documentation and revitalization is inextricable from the history that led to language loss. In reflecting on varying relationships to language documentation, Hermes, Bang & Marin note that for Indigenous communities, "the language revitalization movement is passionate, political, and deeply personal, particularly for many Native people who are acutely aware that the federal government's attempted genocide was the direct cause of Indigenous language loss" (Hermes, Bang & Marin 2012). Leonard defines language reclamation as 'a larger effort by a community to claim its right to speak a language and to set associated goals in response to community needs and perspectives'....Reclamation is thus a type of decolonization. Rather than exhibiting a top-down model in which goals such as grammatical fluency or intergenerational transmission are assigned, it begins with community histories and contemporary needs, which are determined by community agents, and uses this background as a basis to design and develop language work" (Leonard 2017: 19). In this framing, language documentation has the potential—and many would say, the

responsibility—to contribute to decolonial and anticolonial projects within and beyond Indigenous communities. Such work is emotionally heavy, and as outsiders we two authors recognize that we can never fully understand the burden of that history as it weighs on our research partners.

Given this opportunity to reflect in print, we two authors have observed that, over the past two decades, a shared and consultative approach to project design has inevitably led us and those around us to expand concepts of what research is, how it is approached, and what it should produce. But there are still plenty of steps to be taken. Looking ahead, we both hope that the institutions within which we work can continue to expand definitions of 'language', including allowing for multiple definitions to co-exist; to adjust the scope of what is considered 'documentation'; and to allow the research process and its products to be determined by teams of experts, crucially involving members of speech communities. We are optimistic that two decades from now, language workers in North America will be able to look back to today and be proud of how language documentation has evolved to reflect the priorities of the communities it is intended to serve.

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