

PERSPECTIVES

Toward linguistic justice for Indigenous people: A response to Charity Hudley, Mallinson, and Bucholtz

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Charity Hudley, Mallinson, and Bucholtz's (2020) target article details the urgent need for linguistics as a field to develop its theoretical, analytical, and political engagement with issues of race and racism. We agree with Charity Hudley et al.'s assertion that the 'hegemonic whiteness' of linguistics as a field 'has been profoundly damaging both for linguistic scholarship and for linguistics as a profession' (p. e211). In this response, we wish to expand upon this point specifically in regard to how linguists and linguistics relate to Indigenous peoples and their languages. We outline key respects in which academic linguistics has, or might be seen to have, perpetuated harm against Indigenous peoples. We also outline strategies for mitigating harm and supporting the language work done by members of Indigenous communities.*

Keywords: language documentation, language revitalization, Indigenous languages, fieldwork, colonization, metalanguage, intellectual property

1. INTRODUCTION. We view Charity Hudley, Mallinson, and Bucholtz's (2020) target article as an important step toward linguistics' overdue reckoning with its own 'hegemonic whiteness'. Our response considers the consequences of this whiteness for Indigenous communities, particularly with regard to the documentation, description, and revitalization of their languages. As Charity Hudley et al. observe, 'linguists of color have taken the lead in conducting research on race as well as in exposing and interrogating historical and contemporary practices of white supremacy within linguistics' (p. e202). By contrast, it is overwhelmingly white linguists who have led in the development of the fields that prominently engage with speakers of Indigenous languages: language documentation and description. In this response, we outline the ways in which linguistic scholarship may inadvertently replicate colonization (§2) and violate Indigenous people's intellectual property and other rights (§3). We also consider a raft of problems that arise from considering linguistic data outside of its (cultural, political, social, environmental) context (§4), from the rhetoric commonly employed by linguists (§5) and from the prescriptive norms consciously or unconsciously promoted by linguists in contexts of language reclamation (§6). Charity Hudley et al. (pp. e212–e213) provide a list of steps the discipline must take to address issues of racism within linguistics. We conclude in §7 by augmenting this list with a set of principles and practical steps that might pave the way toward mutually beneficial collaborations between (non-Indigenous and Indigenous) linguists, language activists, and communities.

2. LINGUISTIC COLONIZATION. Linguistics as a field has long been concerned with language endangerment.¹ But of course, to save languages through the production of

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¹ See, for example, <https://www.linguisticsociety.org/about/who-we-are/committees/endangered-languages-and-their-preservation-celp>, but also Roche 2020 on linguistics' failure to reverse language loss.

grammars, dictionaries, and other documentary artefacts is like saving endangered animals through taxidermy. While non-Indigenous linguists by and large view themselves as aligned with the communities they collaborate with, this collaboration can be experienced as profoundly disempowering for Indigenous language speakers and their descendants. The subsections below detail some ways in which Indigenous communities may feel dispossessed of their languages through engaging in linguistic research. These issues intersect with the issues of control over linguistic research and language revitalization discussed in §3.

In documenting/describing Indigenous languages, linguists commonly collaborate with speakers who have been or are being displaced from and/or dispossessed of their lands, frequently as a result of colonization. Colonization not only disrupts peoples' connection to their land, but is also often accompanied by violent, direct or indirect attacks on Indigenous people's connections to their language, their culture, and one another. Education and other policies may be linguicidal in effect, whether or not this is their intended purpose (Bear Nicholas 2011). In this context, it is critically important to ensure that any research project does not aggravate or compound colonial trauma. Accordingly, researchers and professional societies alike have for decades stressed the importance of ethical research practices, including decolonizing research methods (see, for example, ALS 1984, Battiste 2008, Eira 2007, Leonard 2017, Stebbins et al. 2018, Thieberger & Musgrave 2007, Tuhiwai Smith 1999, Wilkins 1992, Zepeda & Hill 1991). But however laudable these theories and policies may be, they have not translated into the wholesale change in practice that they advocate for, and which many Indigenous people identify as critical to linguistic research respecting the human rights of Indigenous people. In the subsections below, we outline three key respects in which outsider linguists' engagement with Indigenous communities may not only fail to mitigate the linguicidal effects of colonization, but may even replicate colonialism itself.

2.1. ALLOCATION OF KNOWLEDGE RESOURCES. Linguistic research frequently redirects the time of elders and other knowledge holders away from community-led language (and other) work. As Grounds (2007) points out, while outsider linguists and community language practitioners/researchers might seem to be natural partners, in reality they have 'separate agendas'. Language documentation projects in small Indigenous communities with very few fluent native language speakers create competition for the very limited time and energy of expert elderly speakers (Grounds 2007). Therefore, the process of language documentation can be perceived as a transfer of language knowledge from communities to archives and academe.²

2.2. CONTROL AND OWNERSHIP OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION. Non-Indigenous people have long been at the helm in the production of knowledge about Indigenous peoples (Rigney 2001). The extraction, storage, and control of this knowledge has been foundational to many academic qualifications and careers (one present author's included). This displacement of knowledge from Indigenous communities and its cultural context is a major concern for Indigenous people. It is unsurprising in this context that Indigenous people should be apprehensive about participating in research. As Battiste (2008:506) points out:

² While participation in linguistic research does not remove language knowledge per se, the finite resource here is the time and energy of language experts and elders. This competition for resources, coupled with an end result of language knowledge being located in archives/academe (accessible to researchers) and not in the community (inaccessible to descendants), creates an appearance of transfer.

As discussions develop regarding the principles and ethics governing Indigenous research, the issue of control or decision-making reverberates the singular most important principle—Indigenous peoples must control their own knowledge, a custodial ownership that prescribes from the customs, rules, and practices of each group.

Questions of control, ownership, intellectual property, and copyright are explored further in §3.

2.3. AUTHORITY. Not only do linguistic researchers traditionally exercise control and ownership over the production/appropriation of knowledge (§2.1), but this process also often involves a transfer of authority to the researcher and their outputs. Non-Indigenous linguists working in Indigenous communities are operating from a position of privilege which shapes the nature of collaboration in the research itself, but it may also impact how Indigenous knowledge holders relate to their own knowledge subsequently. In a refreshingly honest case study reflecting on the impact of ethnomusicological research in the Kimberley town of Derby and the Indigenous communities along the Gibb River Road, Rona Googninda Charles describes a situation that she faced in her own community when, after many years of research had been done on the *junba* songs of the region, the old people referred to the written records (a thesis) rather than passing on the songs as had always been done, orally. She said:

Yes! I remember, I call him abi [brother], [he said] ‘I’ll tell you blokes. I’ll tell you the story.’ He was one of the main people responsible for teaching my sons. When they made a mistake, he used [to correct them]—[but] he said [to them], ‘It’s in the book, read it.’ (Treloyn & Charles 2014:177)

In this case, which is representative of many others, the researcher ‘was granted clear privilege over potential learners in the cultural heritage community such as Rona’ (Treloyn & Charles 2014:178), in ‘a sobering example of not only discomfort but the symbolic violence of colonial Western discourse in action [... such that] even the returns of research to communities delineate a “discomfort zone”’ (Treloyn & Charles 2014:179).

2.4. PRIORITIES AND SCOPE OF DOCUMENTATION AND DESCRIPTION. Academic linguists rarely prioritize the documentation of those aspects of language that are most valuable to and valued by later generations working on language reclamation. Whether due to the requirements of the academy, their background and training, or personal interests, outsider linguists are far more likely to document the paradigm of case-marked pronouns than how a name is bestowed upon a baby, for example, or the song that lulls that baby to sleep. In many informal discussions, community language researchers and activists report their frustration with gaps in documentation pertaining to the very most basic aspects of language use, including greetings and the expression of emotions, not to mention the vast amounts of cultural knowledge that could have been captured with an autoethnographic approach to documentation. Moreover, those aspects of language that receive more attention in linguistic research projects (e.g. phonotactics, allomorphy, phrase structure) will almost certainly be described using concepts and terminology that are impenetrable to anyone without extensive linguistic training, itself rarely available to members of small Indigenous communities (see §3.3).

Taken together, the factors outlined in §§2.1–2.3 may conspire to replicate colonization by placing Indigenous knowledge under the control of (predominantly non-Indigenous) researchers and institutions, frequently both physically and conceptually inaccessible to the descendants of the original knowledge holders. Reversing this flow of knowledge in order to return it to the heritage community is of vital importance to Indigenous communities. The painstaking and often painful process of linguistic repatriation (or

‘rematriation’; Bennett 2019) requires an enormous investment of time and energy by emerging speakers, often with support from linguist allies and partners (see §3.2).

3. INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY. Much of the time, linguists (as depositors) or their descendants control who may access archived language materials and what they may do with them. Many linguists with a university-affiliated web presence (one author included) report receiving requests that they bestow an ‘Aboriginal’ (or ‘native’ or ‘Indigenous’, and so on) word to name a child, product, business, or organization. It is of course ludicrous for an outsider linguist to be in the position of gatekeeper to Indigenous knowledge, yet this is the position many linguists find themselves in. We consider below three kinds of linguistic ‘property’ and how intellectual property rights might be negotiated in each case.

3.1. ARCHIVAL DATA. There is a tension between the value of endangered languages to humanity and to the community concerned. Much of the funding and rhetoric surrounding language endangerment emphasizes the former, framing endangered languages as the common property of humanity. This rhetorical strategy may motivate funders and the wider public to value and support languages they are not personally connected to. But it can also be profoundly disempowering for the communities concerned. Likewise, while open access to archived and other data is of enormous benefit to scientific integrity and progress, open-access principles may privilege the value of endangered language knowledge to the scientific record and humanity at large over the rights of the original knowledge holders to control how, when, and to whom this knowledge is disseminated (Berez-Kroeker et al. 2018, Christen 2012, Michaels 1985, Seyfeddinipur et al. 2019, Singer 2014). There will be considerable regional, national, community, and individual differences that shape how these competing priorities are balanced, but in any context it is imperative that linguistic researchers respect local epistemologies of knowledge and abide by protocols around access to and sharing of knowledge. It is also imperative that Indigenous people’s wishes in this regard be built into a research agreement that ensures their rights are respected and protected.

3.2. PUBLICATION. Indigenous people’s concepts and responsibilities as custodians of their traditional knowledge, including language knowledge, can directly conflict with the legal system of copyright and the practice of linguistic research by non-Indigenous linguists. The consent forms approved by university ethics review boards typically employ legalistic language and concepts that may be foreign to members of small Indigenous communities. They frequently include allowances for ‘wide-ranging nonspecific’ ongoing secondary uses of language data, which may be of concern to communities for several reasons: (a) it continues to perpetuate Indigenous peoples as passive subjects of scientific research; (b) it denies Indigenous people the right to claim their knowledge as their own and to protect it; and (c) it denies Indigenous people the right to have any say in how they themselves are represented in these publications. In some places, Indigenous councils, representative bodies, or language centers have developed their own ethical guidelines, protocols, and agreements for working with Indigenous people in their communities.³ Increasingly, plain-language agreements between Indigenous people and researchers are being established, many of which aim to keep the copyright of language and cultural knowledge with the language speakers and include succession plans for

³ For example, the Innawangka Banyjima Nyiyarpali Group (IBN) and Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre in Western Australia.

copyright. They may provide the linguist with a license to use the language data for specific agreed-upon purposes.

Some linguists worry that these agreements are out of kilter with the requirements of the academy. Coauthoring with Indigenous co-researchers is emerging as a practical way of managing the intellectual property of the Indigenous coauthor. However, authors typically relinquish copyright to the publisher. In this case, coauthoring does not provide any protection to Indigenous people's language and cultural knowledge in this respect, and it has the effect of twice removing from Indigenous people their language and cultural knowledge. Linguists could look to publishers that do not seek to take copyright of the publication. This is a significant challenge for Indigenous people in their aspirations to manage and control their language and cultural knowledge.

Agreements between researchers and collaborating individuals and communities should also stipulate the distribution of any profits derived from research publications and/or side-products of linguistic research, such as audio recordings of songs or oral histories (Thieberger & Musgrave 2007). Of course, in the case of academic publishing it is rare for authors to receive royalties. But while publishers are typically the direct beneficiaries of the sale of books and journal subscriptions, it is also true that researchers indirectly leverage esteem from publications to build (potentially lucrative) careers. What proportion of the indirect remuneration of an academic career is owed to the community whose intellectual property is foundational to that career? Though there may be no easy way to arrive at a number, this is an important question to ponder at the outset of a collaboration and to revisit as the balance between community-directed and academically oriented research inevitably shifts and reshifts over the course of a long-term collaboration.

3.3. METALANGUAGE. The academic outputs of language documentation/description are typically couched in technical vocabulary ('regressive assimilation', 'unergative', 'telicity', 'anaphoric coreference', 'mirativity'). Intellectual access to these outputs requires extensive academic training, rarely available to members of small-scale Indigenous communities. This is a significant problem, given that an understanding of the outputs of a research project is critical to contributors' informed consent to participate in that project.

The impenetrability of grammatical description is also a barrier to language revitalization. Sharon Edgar-Jones, a Senior Language Worker at Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture Cooperative, describes acquiring the grammar of her family's language as like receiving her inheritance in 'a treasure chest covered in concrete, tied up in chains'. But these chains can be broken. Programs like the 'Breath of Life' (Baldwin et al. 2018) help community researchers to develop jargon 'bolt cutters', to help them cut through to the knowledge underlying linguistic analysis.

Complementing the delivery of training in linguistic concepts and terminology, there is also a growing push to produce 'plain-language' descriptions of Indigenous languages. One of this article's authors, Lesley Woods, is developing a plain-language grammar of her family's language, Ngiyampaa. She describes the importance of plain-language descriptions as follows:

It has taken me many years of linguistic study to get to the point where I could take up a Ph.D. and begin the work of unlocking my language from turgid technical language of linguistics. Linguistics itself is not a complicated field per se; it is only the way in which it is presented, couched in tediously pompous language that makes it hard to comprehend. I would recommend that linguistics move to a plain-language model as can be seen in the legal profession in the United States.

Metalinguistic terminology and analysis—plain language or otherwise—need not be in a colonial language such as English. In the Solomon Islands, teacher and scholar

Alpheus G. Zobule has developed a vernacular metalanguage used for describing Luqa grammar; ‘Zobule worked hard ... to deny English any status as metalanguage and convey the internal logic of the Luqa on its own terms’ (McDougall 2012:330).

4. DECONTEXTUALIZED LANGUAGE. Linguists commonly define ‘language’ narrowly, whether in theory or in the practice of language documentation/description, which can dramatically impact the scope of later language reclamation efforts. Warner (1999:89), for example, explicitly critiques the idea of ‘an autonomous entity called a language’ as a legitimate target of language revitalization, arguing instead that ‘language and culture are inextricably linked [... and] inextricably linked to the people from whom the language and culture evolved’. Ingram and Horn-Miller (2020) apply this to the imperative to document languages alongside cultural practices and their environmental context. The preservation of the physical environment not only is critical to the well-being of the community in general, but is also directly connected to language maintenance. The physical environment (for example, a particular tree species) supplies the materials and contexts for cultural practices (for example, the weaving of baskets from the bark of those trees), which are fundamental not only to certain semantic fields of vocabulary but also to opportunities for language use and social connection through language.

The narrow window of what is recorded by linguists may also intersect with other societal biases. For example, the ‘audist’ bias of linguistics has privileged spoken languages in the documentation/description of Indigenous languages, with catastrophic consequences for the documentation and survivance of Indigenous sign languages (Adams 2020).

Broadening our interest from the narrowly defined structures of a language to the broader contexts of its use can also help sensitize linguists to the immediate and significant trauma and disadvantage experienced by their collaborators. As Perley (2013:118) argues, ‘the fetish of language, the love of research funding, and self-approbation are the riches that can blind language experts to the disparity between the comfort of their academic privilege and traumas of heritage language loss suffered by endangered language communities’. Participating in linguistic research and/or language revitalization can exacerbate these feelings of loss and trauma. In programs where Indigenous community researchers uncover archival records of their heritage languages, such as the Breath of Life institute mentioned above, Indigenous researchers may be confronted by racist or otherwise hurtful and damaging materials. Ebony Joachim is a trainer with Living Languages, but also a teacher and researcher of Yorta Yorta. Reflecting on her experience at the ‘Paper and Talk’ institute (an Australian program analogous to the US Breath of Life; Marmion et al. 2020), she observes:

One thing most people don’t realise is that some of the work done with old documentation continues the intergenerational trauma of past wrongs that have happened—the very few language workers communities have are the ones that are subjected to this material and readings the most. They do this part of the work so their whole community isn’t directly subjected to the trauma and the language used by the people that have written about them in derogatory ways.

This is only one of the hazards of archival research. As Charity Hudley et al. point out, ‘[s]cholars of language who rely on archival and historical sources should also consider how the dynamics of colonialism and racism may have influenced the nature of the data’ (p. e215). For Indigenous linguists and researchers this entails decolonizing their materials from archives and trying to reframe it in Indigenous ways of being, doing, and seeing. Nevertheless, the process of language revival can also be healing; ‘people wanting to establish a language revival programme might also envisage that such outcomes will add to a shared process of healing mental and physical pain associated with pun-

ishments endured in the past and connected to the use of traditional language' (Bell 2013:400).

5. REIFYING THE 'ANCIENT', DISPARAGING THE PRESENT. The rhetoric used by linguists in describing Indigenous languages and their speakers can itself cause harm. For example, some prominent work in evolutionary linguistics (drawing on the tradition of evolutionary anthropology) analyzes data from contemporary 'hunter-gatherer societies' to draw inferences about the use and structures of language among early hominins (see Botha 2016 for a summary of key works). This misconstrual of modern-day (co-eval) fellow humans as a window on our evolutionary past frames Indigenous people as 'prehistoric', unconsciously aligning with the racist history (in the academy and beyond) of nonwhite people being depicted as subhuman.

In other fields of linguistics, too, the elevation of conservative forms of Indigenous languages and cultures is frequently coupled with a devaluation of and/or disregard for the varieties spoken by Indigenous people today (including creoles, revival forms of traditional languages, and Indigenous varieties of English). Modern forms of Indigenous languages are frequently described in pejorative terms (e.g. as 'impoverished'), with legitimacy reserved for languages described as 'ancient' (Revilla 2019), contributing to the misperception that Indigenous languages belong in the past not the future. This tendency is reinforced and strengthened by discourse around 'last speakers' of 'endangered' and 'extinct' languages. Many scholars have argued persuasively against the use of terms like 'extinct', 'moribund', and 'last speaker', and the metaphor of language 'endangerment' altogether, documenting the harm it may do to efforts to support (re)emergent languages (Davis 2017, Hill 2002, Leonard 2011, 2017, Perley 2011, 2012). Critically, not only does this rhetoric shape what kinds of linguistic work are prioritized and funded, but it may also impact the language ideologies of Indigenous speech communities; parents may be less likely to rear their children as native speakers of a language that belongs in the past than a language construed as a pathway to a viable economic future (see e.g. Bell 2012:160). Indeed, even where emergent speakers are making hard-won progress in speaking their language, the legitimacy of their speech may be challenged in part BECAUSE linguists had classified that language as 'extinct' (Leonard 2011; see also §4).

6. LINGUISTIC PRESCRIPTIVISM. In contexts of language reclamation,⁴ difficulties may arise where the unspoken goals of emerging speakers and the linguists supporting them do not align (Couzens et al. 2014). For example: should the target pronunciations for language learners be the historical phonetic forms reconstructed from archival materials, or the pronunciations with currency among community members who speak English as their first language? Is it important for language learners to be taught to use case inflections to distinguish subject and object, or is it legitimate to use English word order for this purpose (placing subject before the verb and object after, even if this was not the traditional system)? (See Couzens et al. 2020, and Stebbins et al. 2018 for more detailed examples.) This tension is aptly—and regularly—illustrated by linguists using an archaic/conservative pronunciation of a language name in contrast with the modern pronunciation of the language name preferred by the community itself. It might be argued that linguists have an obligation to share their knowledge of the traditional forms and structures of that language so community researchers may make an informed choice in which variant they adopt. But in practice, many community researchers report

⁴ Also referred to as 'language revitalization', 'language revival', 'language reawakening', and more.

feeling undermined or humiliated when outsiders display access to knowledge about their ancestors' use of language that the community has been dispossessed of. This is often expressed as 'shame' and can sometimes have the effect of retraumatizing community researchers and members and discouraging them from engaging with their language. This point of course converges with the issues outlined in §5, since linguists' use of rhetoric around endangered languages in popular media, funding proposals, appeals to governments, and so on almost always focuses upon the conservative, traditional forms of these languages as worthy targets of maintenance and revitalization (see also Bell 2013 on prescriptive or 'puristic' attitudes toward the target of revitalization within the community itself). This feeds a broader disrespect for newer Indigenous varieties (including creoles, contact languages, and varieties of colonial languages such as Aboriginal English) and downplays the precious continuity of knowledge evidenced by phonological, lexical, and grammatical traces of 'sleeping' languages in these newer varieties. This devaluation of innovative forms of Indigenous languages is surely ironic, given linguists' avowed commitment to describing—not prescribing—language usage.

Non-Indigenous linguists may also be prescriptive in advocating for particular methods of language revitalization. For example, as Meakins (2010) points out, linguists' own monolingual biases may lead them to undermine the multilingual communicative conventions that have supported traditional language maintenance in the community; 'if language mixing is a common practice even of older people then the goal of fluent monolingualism in the target language requires not only language learning but also changing communicative conventions' (Meakins 2010:225). As well as respecting established communicative conventions and language practices in the relevant community, it is important for linguists supporting language revitalization efforts to respect norms and preferences around knowledge holding and transmission (Pérez Báez 2016). These norms may be flouted, for example, by revitalization programs that target children as first learners, as Bell (2013:402) describes:

Some community members prefer to see the children in the community benefit from the teaching of the language, while others may express their disappointment if the programme is not offered to adults in the language community before the children, because they claim that in the old ways it would have been the adults in the family teaching the children the language, not the other way around. (J.B., p.c., December 15, 2010).

7. LINGUISTIC ALLIANCES. In conclusion, while it must be acknowledged that linguistics can perpetuate harm against speakers of Indigenous languages, there is also much potential for good. Indigenous people want the skills and knowledge to be able to undertake their/our own linguistic and language work and for that work to be valued and supported by non-Indigenous linguists. If the discipline of linguistics has historically devalued and excluded the intellectual contributions of researchers of color in general (Charity Hudley et al. 2020:e200), this is especially the case for Indigenous linguists, researchers, and knowledge holders. By contrast, as Charity Hudley et al. propose, an interdisciplinarily informed understanding of how race and racism have shaped our field will deepen both the quality and impact of linguistic research into the future. There are many examples of strong, mutually beneficial collaborations between linguists and Indigenous language researchers and practitioners. As Charity Hudley et al. conclude: 'Linguists—and especially white linguists, who bear the greatest responsibility for dismantling white supremacy in the discipline (Bucholtz 2020)—can use our scholarly expertise and our institutional access to work for greater social and racial justice (Charity Hudley 2013)' (p. e222). With regard to Indigenous languages and speech communities, this may involve the following practical steps:

(i) Rep/matriate Indigenous language knowledge (§2). Linguists are responsible for ensuring community control over—or at the very least community access to—the language knowledge they/we collect, and that this knowledge is recorded and archived in accordance with local community protocols. Linguists from all subfields can also contribute to the rep/matriation of language knowledge by supporting Indigenous language activists, researchers, and practitioners in accessing training and materials and passing on their linguistic knowledge and skills (including by making linguistic research accessible through plain-language ‘translations’; see §3.3).

(ii) Recognize Indigenous knowledge sovereignty (§3). Given that intellectual property and copyright laws fail to protect Indigenous people’s rights to their language and cultural knowledge, we must explore alternative means for Indigenous people to manage this knowledge, including who has access to it and how (see e.g. Fre 2018, Karuk Climate Change Projects 2016). Genuine collaboration between linguists and language knowledge holders cannot occur without this recognition of community authority over both language knowledge and the methods, processes, and goals of language reclamation. This recognition must also inform the methods, process, and goals of linguistic research, including coauthorship and other means of asserting the intellectual property rights of community knowledge holders. This is best achieved through a jointly negotiated research plan and agreement.

(iii) Avoid degrading or dehumanizing language and rhetoric (§5). We must avoid rhetoric that frames Indigenous languages as static, ancient, or located only in the past. Wherever possible, adopt the terminology favored by the relevant speech community, or where this is unclear, make conscious rhetorical choices informed by the scholarship of Indigenous linguists, anthropologists, and others. This includes everything from the labels applied to the groups concerned (e.g. ‘Indigenous’, ‘Aboriginal’, ‘Native’, ‘First Nations’, or more specific terms) to the description of ‘language endangerment’ or ‘emergent vitality’ (Perley 2011).

(iv) Acknowledge the context(s) of language (§4). It is crucial to appreciate the complex social, linguistic, economic, cultural, and political environment in which Indigenous languages are spoken. Linguists may analyze language data in isolation from the context in which it was produced, but this should be recognized as an illusory heuristic: languages cannot exist without speakers, and those speakers live in a complex world. This is particularly true in contexts of language reclamation, where it is crucial for linguists to acknowledge that they/we cannot ‘save’ languages or give them life. Languages can live only in the hearts, minds, and mouths/hands of the people they belong to.

If done right, ethical collaboration between (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) linguists and Indigenous communities has enormous potential. Linguists have a wealth of expertise for community language activists, researchers, and practitioners to draw on in furthering their/our own language goals; the language and cultural expertise of Indigenous language speakers has made and will continue to make a crucial contribution to theories of language. The ubiquity of English (and, to a lesser extent, other colonial/majority languages) in theories of syntax, semantics, natural language processing, and so on serves neither the interests of Indigenous (or other minority) communities nor scientific advancement. There is an ever-growing literature exploring the ways linguists can or should engage and collaborate with (and be guided by) Indigenous communities (ALS 1984, Eira 2008, KLRC 2010, Hinton 2010, Thieberger & Musgrave 2007, Warner 1999, Wilkins 1992, Woods 2017), as well as a range of theories and models of best practice in language revitalization (Davis 2018, De Korne 2017, Hinton 2013, Leonard 2011, Lokosh 2019, McCarty 2018).

Given that some of this literature is decades old, one might ask why a ‘meaningful and overarching, discipline-wide discussion of the ethical responsibilities of all linguistic researchers to language communities’ remains, in the words of Charity Hudley et al., ‘long overdue’ (p. e213). A broader acceptance of these ideas—and their translation into changing practice—will no doubt be aided by the growing number of linguists researching their own Indigenous languages. In parallel, we believe that the kind of reckoning proposed by Charity Hudley et al. is essential to all linguists’ addressing the human rights concerns of the speakers of the languages they/we study, preventing our files, libraries, and archives from becoming cemeteries for Indigenous languages.

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