# The Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute and Linguistic Research

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## Introduction

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| *K'a•dih ulah u•ch' q'e' i•łi'e.* | Useless to go back there. |
| *Sitinhgayu•dik sixa'* | My uncles too have all died out on |
| *I•nsdi'ahł.* | me. |
| *Sitinhgayu• sixa' lisł'ahłch'aht q'al* | After my uncles all died out my |
| *ahnu• si'ahtgayu• q'uh ya•n' q'e'* | aunts next |
| *disłiqahqł,* | fell, |
| *al i•sinh.* | to die. |
| *A•n,* | Yes, |
| *de•lehtdal dlagaxu•,* | why is it I alone, |
| *ts'it dlagaxu• atxsłilahł?* | just I alone have survived? |
| *Atgaxłala•ł.* | I survive. |

(Excerpt from *Lament for Eyak* by Anna Nelson Harry, 1982)

The words above are written in Eyak, a language once spoken in coastal Alaska. They were composed by Anna Nelson Harry, one of the last remaining speakers of Eyak. The last speaker, Marie Smith Jones, died in 2008 (Anonymous 2008). Eyak has become a symbol for language death and for the struggle to preserve endangered languages – and attempts to revitalize them. In the following I will provide a perspective on a project at the University of Alberta aimed at countering language loss. I will tie this to research in which I am personally involved, in order to show how linguistic research and language activism can complement and aid each other. The project at the University of Alberta is the Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute, CILLDI (/silldi/) for short, a summer school aimed at speakers of aboriginal languages. Before describing CILLDI and the research on the Pan-

Athapaskan Comparative Lexicon, I will briefly discuss language endangerment, fieldwork and revitalization as the context in which these two projects are situated.

## Language endangerment

Eyak, the language of the introductory poem, may be gone as a living language, but it did have the benefit of intensive study at the hands of the linguist Michael Krauss. In contrast to many indigenous North American languages still spoken, Eyak is relatively well documented. Moving eastward and inward from the Alaskan coast into the Yukon and the deeper Canadian interior, one finds more endangered languages and less representation in publications and print resources. In 1998, it was estimated that of the 50 indigenous languages spoken in Canada at the time only three were seen to have a long-term chance of survival (Norris 1998: 8). As in many other parts of the world (Hale 1992), speaker populations of Native languages are ageing, with less and less children learning to speak the languages of their grandparents. Linguists say a language that is no longer learned by younger generations is moribund. If that is the case, it is generally considered that the language is doomed to extinction, unless there is a sudden and dramatic reversal of the situation (Krauss 1992: 4). Philosophically it may be debated whether this situation is bad or unnatural. It might be argued that over the millennia since language first evolved, countless languages have become extinct. Never having been recorded, these languages were forgotten a long time ago, and today remain wholly unknown. Their absence is felt as little as that of a creature known only through its fossilized remains, a loss decried perhaps only by some sentimental palaeontologist. In personal interactions with community members whose languages are seriously threatened, however, it quickly becomes obvious that language loss is painful, undesirable and tragic. This is even more so for those peoples that unwillingly adopted other languages, such as indigenous children in Canadian residential schools who were forbidden to speak their own languages.[1] Language and cultural identity are closely intertwined. An assembly of First Nations' document states:

> *"Language is our unique relationship to the Creator, our attitudes, beliefs, values and fundamental notions of what is truth. Our languages are the cornerstones of who we are as people. Without our languages our cultures cannot survive."* (Assembly of First Nations 1990)

There is thus ample reason to maintain, even revitalize, languages from the personal, subjective perspective. Even for the hard-nosed scientist however, the loss of a language always means the loss of potentially crucial data which could reveal a further aspect of cognition, of language variation, of grammatical possibilities. This argument in favour of language documentation and preservations is what Krauss considers the lowest of three "scientific arguments" (2007: 15). It is lowest in his estimation because it appears to be a selfish concern of the linguistic community fearing for the loss of its object of study. He advances two further arguments which he calls the informational and the abstract. They are deeply related and I will conflate them here for ease of exposition. What Krauss rightly argues is that each language is a repository of knowledge accumulated over countless generations of speakers (Krauss 2007: 16). The forms of the languages, the lexical information that is encoded and the manner of encoding represent a culture's *Weltanschauung* – its loss would mean the loss of a whole way of interpreting emotions, family ties, events in the natural world and so forth. Finally, each language presents an important piece in the reconstruction of human cultural history and linguistic evolution.

Much is at stake both for the speaker communities themselves and for the scientific community. In order to make clear what happens at CILLDI and how related projects are envisioned to deal with the situation of language endangerment, I will next provide a little background on language documentation, fieldwork and activism.

## Language documentation and language activism

Before going on to describe the work being carried out at CILLDI by both instructors and students, it is worth reflecting on the particular kind of linguistics that has been most directly involved in issues of language endangerment: linguistic fieldwork. In a tradition usually thought to have originated with Franz Boas (Tsunoda 2005: 245), the linguistic fieldworker goes out to investigate a previously little known language and works with native speakers in order to produce a grammar of the language, a vocabulary and a collection of texts. While these undoubtedly still constitute highly desirable products of fieldwork, both the availability of modern technology such as portable recording equipment and a strengthened awareness for natural conversation have led to the widening of scope of modern fieldwork approaches. The Boasian triad has then been expanded in fieldwork theory to the

notion of a "structured corpus" (Himmelmann 2006: 1) containing all the varied products of the fieldwork experience, including both analyses and raw data. The construction and storage of a corpus of data is greatly simplified by modern database technologies and the availability of huge amounts of digital storage space at affordable prices. However, to profit from these technologies the modern field linguist needs to become acquainted, at least rudimentarily, with both the instruments for data gathering, such as video and audio recorders, and basic principles of archiving. Himmelmann characterizes the documentation of a language as "a lasting, multipurpose record of a language" (Himmelmann 2006: 1). The idea is that the corpus produced by the fieldworker is organized in a manner that subsequent generations can access and utilize the data for their research objectives.

The word "multipurpose" is also worth drawing attention to because it brings into focus both the use and the users of the collected data. The data collected from the field is of interest to groups beyond academia. Especially in the documentation of endangered languages for which revitalization efforts are being undertaken, the products of fieldwork are of interest to members of two groups: the scientific community and language activists. Occasionally, both the activist and scientist have been represented by the same person, such as Berkley emeritus professor Dr. Leanne Hinton, author of *How to keep your language alive* (Hinton 2002), as well as many other both technical and practical publications in linguistics. Nonetheless, the two have been distinct enough for Keren Rice to speak of them as "two solitudes" (Rice 2009). The phrase is drawn from Canadian literature, specifically Hugh MacLennan's novel of that name. The novel describes the difficulties of reconciling the two traditional Canadian cultural identities: the Francophones and the Anglophones. Rice's comparison intends to evoke the similarity to research linguists and activists in that they both share the same workspace, but approach it with starkly different attitudes:

> *"Comparing the goals of the field linguist and those of the language activist then, they are not the same: to put it simply and starkly, without the refinement that is clearly needed to fully understand the complex issues involved, one is concerned with the documentation and analysis of the language, the other with language as spirituality, culture and recognition."* (Rice 2009: 43)

Friction can ensue because of the failure to understand the concerns of the other group. A community might fear for the loss of control over data: not all aspects of a language might be deemed suitable for public scrutiny by a given community. The choice of which data is to be collected in the first place could lead to tensions. Furthermore, the products of linguistic research itself might not be very accessible to a community member who lacks the training to decipher the sometimes arcane-seeming technical detail of linguistic analysis. Proper care is therefore of the essence.

Rice reaches the conclusion that both activists and linguists can, indeed must, work together in the effort to sustain or revitalize a language. She notes, however, that "general principles such as relationships, respect, reciprocity and recognition are critical" (Rice 2009: 56). Such general principles should be the basis for all linguistic fieldwork, and are not limited to revitalization either. As Evans and Sasse (2007) point out especially for the analysis of meaning, the work of description and analysis is not done by simply recording the data and translating it. The researchers must return again and again to the data and the speakers in order to develop their analysis and provide mature interpretations of the data. It is therefore beneficial both for the research interests and the activists' efforts to revitalize a language so that a continued relationship between community and academia is both forged and cultivated. If, as Rice writes, reciprocity and recognition are critically important, then it is not merely enough for the linguists to develop social skills and cultural awareness to deal more effectively with the communities whose languages they study. The communities themselves must increase their awareness and competence in dealing with language matters. This has led to calls for the empowerment of community members through training:

> "A future perspective in terms of the community also means considering the sustainability of the work done on the language, through empowerment of members of the community, particularly in the form of continued training of speakers and semi-speakers [...]." (Grinevald 2007: 43)

Beyond the empowerment of speakers, providing linguistic training to community members outside academia also serves the purposes of scientific research. The *Atlas of the world's languages in danger* (Moseley 2010) predicts that over half of the languages spoken today will be extinct by the end of the century. The quite limited

numbers of linguists actually doing fieldwork can only cover so much of this vast and crucial mass of data. Training non-academics to carry out documentation work can therefore extend the data coverage, something that can only be deemed a desirable end. This sort of training is offered to interested speakers of indigenous languages at the Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Institute.

## The Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Institute

On the first day of the 9th CILLDI summer school in 2009, the halls of the Faculty of Education building are shaken from their summer quiet by the sounds of a drum song and the powerful scent of a traditionally tanned moose-hide. The program at the Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute (CILLDI) summer school begins with a sharing circle. A Cree Elder says a prayer after which students begin to introduce themselves. People from many Bands and Nations have come, but the majority are from the Prairie Provinces and the Northwest Territories: speakers of Algonquian and Athapaskan languages. Some speakers of Mi'kmaq have even come from as far away as Nova Scotia. This makes for quite a cultural variety, a fact which is remarked upon by some in the circle, saying that they had at first felt somewhat uneasy at being among other groups. Despite these differences, the moose-hide and drum song evoke feelings of familiarity. Classes typically begin in the afternoon of the same day.

CILLDI was created in 2000, motivated by the growing necessity to document and describe endangered languages, and inspired by the American Indian Language Development Institute (AILDI n.d.), a similar institution based in Arizona. CILLDI is a summer school taking place each year in July and August and situated at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Alberta. For 15 days of intensive classes students from a variety of backgrounds are taught in subjects relating to the teaching and description of languages. Efforts are made to provide a holistic approach meshing language and culture together. This helps to make students feel at home in the potentially alien environment of the university, and also reflects the importance of the link between language and culture. In 2009, for example, elders were invited to partake in a moccasin making workshop held over several days. The main focus, however, is firmly on language teaching and documentation.

Students attend morning and evening classes in two blocks. Classes vary from

topics covering core concepts in linguistics and education, to hands-on training with recording equipment and data management software. Some social events are also provided for, but on the whole CILLDI is an intense learning experience.

CILLDI is a tri-faculty initiative shared among Arts, Education and Native Studies. Due to my own training and experience working at CILLDI I will concentrate my description on the linguistic side of CILLDI and the Community Linguist Certificate (CLC). This bias is wholly mine and it needs to be pointed out here that CILLDI covers a wider range than described herein, and students can and do also complete a second kind of certificate: the Aboriginal Language Instructor Certificate.

## The Community Linguist Certificate

The Community Linguist Certificate can be acquired by taking full course work over three summers. The training includes the basics of language analysis and description covering practical phonetics (articulatory phonetics, the International Phonetic Alphabet, etc.), the structure (morphology and syntax), semantics as well as technological know-how in the use of video and audio recording equipment. Potential CLC students need not have completed any programme of formal education before to attend the program. This bears the risk of having very widely diverging levels of skills in the classes. In teaching introductory linguistics ideas and principles this is usually not a great problem, because few people will have encountered these before, even if they have been active in community language work. With regard to computer related skills however, proficiency among students varies greatly. To counter potential difficulties of this nature, CILLDI instructors typically work with a Teaching Assistant (TA), frequently a graduate student or CLC holder. This allows for a relatively large amount of individual attention being paid to each student and increases the effectiveness of the teaching.

The idea behind the CLC is to enable people at the community level to better guide the language maintenance and revitalization initiatives launched by their respective tribal or band authorities. Perhaps even more importantly in the immediate context of language endangerment, CLC holders will be able to carry out effective language documentation in their own communities. It can hardly be questioned that communities of speakers themselves are ultimately in the best position to manage their own language matters. The community linguist has a natural posi-

tion in the community itself, and therefore does not have to spend long periods in building trust and forming relationships as the academic linguist originating from a different cultural context would have to do. The recording and documenting of the linguistic abilities of a quickly ageing population of fluent speakers must be seen as the paramount task in documentary linguistics today: revitalization crucially depends on good documentation. Moreover, the community linguist will better be able to understand the intentions of the research-oriented linguists, which besides safeguarding against the sort of exploitative linguistics that has at times occurred in the past, is also beneficial to the research community.

## The Pan-Athapaskan Comparative Lexicon project

With speakers arriving in Edmonton from communities that are not infrequently distant and sometimes only reachable by plane (or on foot), the opportunity presents itself to gather data for comparative analysis. I am fortunate enough to have been a research assistant on the project of building a large-scale lexical comparative database for the Athapaskan languages that will eventually form a web-based research tool. Part of the larger Athapaskan-Eyak-Tlingit family, these languages constitute the largest attested group in North America both in terms of actual number of languages and in their geographic spread, reaching from coastal Alaska to the Hudson Bay, from the mouth of the Mackenzie to the south-western United States. Comparative work on these languages naturally tends to rely heavily on published resources. It is thus of particular fortune to have speakers of Athapaskan languages arrive in Edmonton from the Northwest Territories or other places that are otherwise far or difficult to reach. These occasions then provide the opportunity to carry out fieldwork without leaving the university campus.

The Pan-Athapaskan Comparative Lexicon is a database containing words from a large but limited list, from all Athapaskan languages and dialects. Words from the list are meticulously annotated, and, if possible, audio recordings of the words are provided. The importance of word lists in linguistic research for the fields of historical linguistics, language classification, diachronic semantics, and so forth cannot be overstated. From comparative lists etymologies of Athapaskan words can be constructed with the ultimate aim of providing a reconstruction of ancient Athapaskan vocabulary. The distribution and nature of words and word-forms can help

archaeologists to gain insight into material culture and social structure in Athapaskan prehistory.

The Pan-Athapaskan Comparative Lexicon is not just useful for the research community, however. It is envisioned as one of those multi-purpose tools that Himmelmann and others believe can come of good documentation work. For speakers and language activists the Pan-Athapaskan Comparative Lexicon can provide a useful tool in filling gaps in the vocabulary. As languages become moribund, it may well happen that none of the remaining speakers remember a certain term or that no one is left who could answer a particular vocabulary question. It could also happen that a new term is required, perhaps for some modern invention that has come about when the language was already no longer being widely spoken. In those cases language activists interested in maintenance or revitalization are left with no option but to innovate terms themselves. Councils of elders are sometimes called to come up with new vocabulary. Such situations can greatly benefit both from information about how closely related languages manage such a lexical situation, and also by insights gained from how Athapaskan languages generally handle lexical innovation and word-formation. A large scale database such as the Pan-Athapaskan Comparative Lexicon makes possible the comparative study of processes by which concepts or notions are rendered in language – a process linguists call lexicalization. The study of lexicalization itself is a very theoretical and abstract undertaking drawing on findings in cognitive psychology and anthropology. Such topics are likely to lie beyond the interest of most language activists working at the community level. The results of such research, however, may very well be useful to those working on language maintenance and revitalization. In this manner, a publicly accessible database such as the Pan-Athapaskan Comparative Lexicon and the results of studies based on it can serve both the academic community of historical linguists, semanticists, archaeologists and lexical typologists as well as those speakers and aspiring speakers who are directly involved in language teaching and study. Such a project requires the careful handling of data and an understanding on all sides about what form the data will take and what potential arises from having the data that way. Last but not least, the Pan-Athapaskan Comparative Lexicon raises awareness for the relatedness of the Athapaskan languages for users and contributors. None too few Athapaskan speakers have been surprised to discover at CILLDI that they share linguistic cousins as far south as the Mexican border area.

I hope it will have become clear that the Pan-Athapaskan Comparative Lexicon and projects like it can achieve their full potential most readily when collaborators and end-users have at least some understanding of linguistic questions, of data storage and of the uses of modern language related technologies. Holders of a Community Linguist Certificate are in an excellent position to form part of such a project and to take the role of watchdogs for their communities, ensuring that the data is handled properly and that the wishes of the elders are carried out in the scientific community.

## Conclusion

Many issues that arise in language documentation have not been discussed here. Linguistic fieldwork on indigenous languages has sometimes, especially in North America, carried the moniker of *anthropological linguistics*. Despite this name and the field's inherent closeness to cultural anthropology, linguists have been a little later in reflecting the impact of their work on indigenous communities, and linguistics lacks some of the critical self-reflexivity that has played such a big role in its sister discipline. Of particular importance in this respect are questions regarding ethics and data proprietorship, questions that have particular weight in the sometimes politically charged atmosphere of language documentation and research with Canadian aboriginal communities. Legislation is not as yet available to cover all aspects of fieldworker-community interaction. However, all research carried out at the University of Alberta must pass the review of the internal ethics board. Beyond this, special care is taken to safeguard speaker identities when they so desire, and to keep the availability of collected data to the desired users. The Department of Linguistics is particularly fortunate to have enjoyed a long and sustained collaboration with several speaker communities, notably the Tsuu T'ina Nation (referred to as Sarsi or Sarcee in older anthropological literature) and speakers of Dene Sųłiné (Chipewyan in older writings) of the Cold Lake First Nations in Alberta. The success of this collaboration is due in no small part to the enduring efforts of Dr. Sally Rice, who is professor at the Department of Linguistics at the Faculty of Arts, University of Alberta, and I think the spirit of the relationship she has created between herself and the speakers she collaborates with has spread to CILLDI and helps to make it as successful as it is.

I hope to have shown how modern projects in linguistics informed by con-

cerns that have arisen out of fieldwork situations can be carried out with the interests of speaker communities in mind, and furthermore that collaboration between activist and academic communities can be beneficial to both sides. Insofar I wholly agree with Rice (2009) that there must indeed not be 'two solitudes'. Through mutual respect and understanding the advancement of knowledge can be achieved and cultural diversity maintained. I believe that CILLDI plays a very important part in this. A statement taken during an exit survey at CILLDI sums up that sentiment in the words of a former student: "People from the university level, people with PhDs or Masters, they're getting involved with more or less the grassroots people and I think that's a very good move" (CILLDI n.d.).

## Note

[1] For a brief overview of the residential school system and its effects see Ray 2005: 237-243, for a more detailed assessment see the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996).

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