Indigenous Language Assessment

Indigenous Language Persistence, Archival Methods, and Story

Bri Alexander, Ellen Cushman, Sara Hopkins

Executive Summary

The product of two years of research and participation with indigenous language learners, teachers, and speakers, the Luce DAILP Research Team Our team members (Cushman, Alexander, and Snyder Hopkins) gathered participant observation, informal interviews, and literacy artifacts from Cherokee Nation and United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians community members and online learners; the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians' language classes and community groups; and the Shawnee Tribe Language Department and Archive. The Luce DAILP Research Team overviews alternative means and criteria for assessing indigenous language proficiency as a lifelong learning process sustained by meaningful purposes and practices. Findings suggest that the impact of culturally sustaining pedagogies and language documentation efforts is limited by the extent to which rhetorically meaningful purposes, audiences, and situations are created for that practice. Findings also suggest that assessment criteria for language proficiency should include criteria that grow out of situationally meaningful purposes for language use as defined by tribal communities, or language assessment sovereignty. Finally, findings suggest the crucially important role that intergenerational learning and support play in developing indigenous language proficiency.

Support

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Bios

Bri Alexander (Shawnee Tribe, Cherokee Nation) is a Ph.D. candidate in Linguistic Anthropology at the City University of New York, Graduate Center. Her anthro-political linguistic research, developed and carried out in collaboration with her Native Nations, is personal, familial, and communal. Her dissertation research, funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation and Spencer Foundation, reimagines Shawnee land and language reclamation projects in Shawnee terms: as cycles of perpetual renewal and relationality instead of responses or reactions to political and social climates/events. Ultimately, her work challenges various normalized conventions in academia by engaging deeply with Indigenous Knowledge Systems and centering Indigenous concepts, perspectives, and histories across research design, practice,

and write-up. With an M.A. in Native American Linguistics from the University of Arizona, she is passionate about language learning, land-based pedagogy, the health benefits of language and culture, and cultural education for Native American/American Indian/Indigenous communities. She has shared her knowledge in various capacities, from lecturing and teaching university courses to building interactive games for children. Most recently, she has joined the Digital Archive of Indigenous Language Persistence team as a Research Associate and she continues as a Curriculum Developer for both her tribal Nations.

Ellen Cushman (Cherokee Nation) is Dean's Professor of Civic Sustainability at Northeastern University and a Professor of English. Her research explores the ways individuals and communities use reading and writing to endure and create change. Her work is premised on Cherokee ethics of reciprocity, civic responsibility, and perseverance: she is a Cherokee Nation citizen and has served as a Cherokee Nation Sequoyah Commissioner. She has helped build curriculum and taught in and for the Cherokee Nation and has co-led digital storytelling projects with Indigenous youth and teens in Michigan. She is the project leader of the Digital Archive for Indigenous Language Persistence (DAILP), a community-led, online translation space for indigenous language documents created with grants from the National Archives and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Working with the translation team at the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians, the DAILP team produced *Cherokees Writing the Keetoowah Way*, the first digital edited collection of Cherokee language manuscripts with audio and commentary.

Sara Hopkins is a linguistic anthropologist and ethnomusicologist. She is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at Western Carolina University where she is Director of the Cherokee Language Program. Prior to working at WCU, Hopkins taught elementary music and arts education at New Kituwah Academy, the language immersion school of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, which was the subject of her PhD. dissertation (Columbia University, 2016). Hopkins is currently finishing a critical edition of the 1846 *Cherokee Singing Book* as part of the *Sounding Spirit* project based at Emory University. She is also the PI and Project Director for Eastern Cherokee Histories in Translation (ECHT), a project in collaboration with EBCI Cherokee speakers to translate and annotate historical Eastern Cherokee social documents.

Introduction

We open with three stories situated in the work we do across three Indigenous language persistence sites.

Hopkins:

At the end of November 2023, Sara received the terrible news that one of the most beloved first-language Cherokee speakers in the EBCI community had passed away. He had

continued to work with tribal language programs up until his passing. As he was in hospice care at the hospital, many of the adult language learners and other members of the community went to sit with his family. Right after he passed away, two of those visitors lifted their voices and sang *gatsv datsiwatv agwadandvdogi utsawesolvsdodiyi ani elanigv* ("Where will my soul find a resting place here on earth?") to the tune "Idumea," to honor their wonderful friend and mentor as he made his final journey.

The two singers are Cherokee adult language learners who sing with the Cherokee Language Repertory Choir. In spring 2023, the choir learned "Idumea," a song made popular in the shape note singing tradition across the Southeast in the early 19th century persisting into the early 20th century. A handful of Cherokee-speaking elders remember people singing in the 'old way' and a couple even remember how to sing the shapes. As the choir members reviewed the song, one of those two language learners, a younger Cherokee man who is known for being a strong singer, said, "I remember Pastor Bo[1] singing this song at funerals. But he sang it in English."[2] The tune indeed conveys the powerful emotions of both joy and sorrow that would be appropriate for such an occasion. Though he sang "Idumea" in English at services, Reverend Parris had included Cherokee words with the tune in the new *Cherokee Hymnal* that he compiled before he passed away in 2020, which is where I had found the song for the choir to learn it. I had introduced it to the choir simply considering it a fairly well-known shape note tune that had been featured in the popular film *Cold Mountain*. That it arose from the voices of Cherokee singers a few months later to honor the elder speaker's passing is a powerful example of language persistence and cultural continuity. Such moments, where language use happens organically in culturally appropriate ways that connect people across multiple generations, are arguably the most meaningful instances of language use yet they cannot be evaluated by standard metrics used to assess language learning and revitalization success.

[1] Reverend Bo Parris was the minister at Big Cove Baptist church for 61 years before he passed away in 2020. He learned the Cherokee language and often sang Cherokee hymns, but not for this tune.

[2] The English text generally sung with this tune goes, "And am I born to die? And lay this body down? And must my trembling spirit fly into a world unknown?"

Alexander:

As the basket reeds weave around in spirals and loops, anchored together by vertical reeds connecting each loop tightly and securely, so too does *saawanwaatoweewe* (the Shawnee language) with time. Circular yet locatable, time in *saawanwaatoweewe* is expressed not in a linear fashion from past to present to future but as an experience either certain in the surrounding present or uncertain in the more distant past or future. What separates time is not how a verb is inflected but rather the surrounding context of the conversation; *ni-lematapi*, for example, can mean "I-sit" currently or "I-sat" two weeks ago, and *ye'-lematapi-ya* can mean "when-sat-I" in the uncertain past or "when-sit-I" in the uncertain future. We only know the tense of the action when we look to the surrounding conversation for clues of temporality, such as a *holaako* ("yesterday") or *hasaye* ("it's been a while").

Assessing learning understandings of time is considered a basic, beginning task in language programs, and yet, in Indigenous languages that experience and express time in a non linear way, much more goes into teaching and understanding time than identifying standard markers in basic linguistic forms. Sometimes, the words that reveal time might come at the start of a conversation and without sufficient ability to follow conversations, could be lost as the conversation continues. How can we account for how *saawanwaatoweewe* learners understand a more complex and advanced linguistic skill when other standardized assessment measures place the skill as a beginning learner task? More importantly, how can we assess our learners in a way that centers the holistically complex nature of our languages and takes seriously the cosmologies that weave our languages together in our communities?

Cushman:

On the inside cover of a 140-page ledger of Cherokee syllabary texts, Willie Jumper frames the stories he wrote in Cherokee for Jack Kilpatrick: "Truly though— it is good to read about what they had done long ago." He uses a complex form of the word truly, ᎤᏙᎯᏳᎯᏃ /udohiyuhino/, throughout his stories to point to those who practiced Cherokee lifeways and were deeply influenced by their proximity to the sacred fire (ᎠᏥᎸ). Though this word commonly translates to its simplest English adverbial form to "truly," it carries within it much more cultural, historical, and linguistic information.

To understand this term in the context of Willie Jumper's 140 pages of stories, the DAILP team worked with community translators from the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee

Indians and the Cherokee Nation. As our teams worked, we remembered and continued with the meaning-making practices inspired by proximity to the Cherokee sacred fire that is evident in the verb stem (ꮻᏰ). Our understanding of this word deepened over time as the profundity of this verb form grew with each interaction. Understanding ᎤᏙᏰᎩᏰᏃ /udohiyuhino/ required our collective translation practices where multiple Cherokee speakers, linguists, students, and scholars work together to reveal its larger meaning. It required insights from Cherokee language specialists who had studied linguistics and were already fluent speakers themselves. The cultural and historical significance of learning one verb stem, ꮻᏰ /ohi/ that forms this adverb in Cherokee points to the need for assessment measures that can better reflect the meaningfulness of the language. In other words, one can pronounce this word and translate it to its common English meaning "truly," if this word was included in a vocabulary test or pronunciation exam, but that's hardly a helpful measure of one's language use in Indigenous languages. The importance of that word resonates with the continued practice of Cherokee lifeways of remaining close to the sacred fire and all that closeness entails.

Producing language speakers has been a key goal for tribal educational programs, but when students graduate into predominantly English-speaking contexts, speaking skills atrophy, to say nothing of reading, writing, and listening skills. Tribal families and communities are hard pressed to create contexts, purposes, and audiences to practice their languages. Given the decreasing number of indigenous language speakers coupled with the problem of not having meaningful reasons to use the language, the stakes are high for any intervention. The Digital Archive for American Indian Languages Preservation and Perseverance (DAILP) focuses on both language persistence (language practice, learning and teaching) and preservation (documentation) as mutually sustaining activities that lend to larger language reclamation efforts. DAILP seeks to provide an archiving space suitable for the collective translation of multiple American Indian language manuscripts to advance indigenous language learning, translation, and documentation.

To understand the extent to which a translation space like DAILP and other digital resources may help provide a communicative context and reason to learn, use, and study Cherokee and

Shawnee languages, our team members gathered participant observations, informal interviews, and literacy artifacts. The team was also interested in understanding how community members understood language practice and learning. What reasons, audiences, and

purposes to practice the language did they think important and why? What criteria make for a good language learning outcome? To understand these questions, we gathered criteria for evaluating language learning and use from curricular materials, informal interviews, and observation. Our research indicates that the value of reading, writing, and speaking indigenous languages remains high, especially around archival documents. It suggests that language learning activities that are based on creating meaningful community contexts for practice can reveal the profundity and cosmological significance of verb phrases.

Our research also suggests that when the opportunity to read, write, and speak about the translation of archival documents presented itself, community members persisted in practicing the languages in those documents. They learned from each other and valued teaching language learners through and with their work. Three important findings from this grant revealed methods for sustaining indigenous language practice: first ***intergenerational peer-mentoring***, both in the community settings and in the workflows of the grant helps languages persist through meaningful practices; second, ***self-assessment across time coupled with realistic criteria for practicing languages*** provides social and cultural support for persisting with language learning*;* third, when structuring assessments, outcomes and measures of success need to be on ***baselines of meaningfulness measured in an on community-based terms***. Realistic language learning and meaningful practice of language must be assessed based on validity criteria and measures of success built from tribally-based values and practices.

The instruments of language proficiency measurement must come from the local communities and programs working together from the ground up to identify what meaning purposes, audiences, and reasons exist for practicing the language. One group might want to read a wintercount in Dakota, while another might want to explain the meaningful connection of beadwork to place, people, and events; while a third might want to recuperate language from audio files archived long ago. Recognizing that Indigenous language practice cannot be imposed upon communities through university curricula, educational policy mandates, or professional certifications, we begin our work with tribal communities by seeking to understand what counts

for them when creating meaningful language learning and persistence practices. Specifically, we ask:

> How best to assess indigenous language practices?
>
> To what extent might a translation space like DAILP help provide a communicative context and reason to learn, use, and study Cherokee and Shawnee languages?
>
> What criteria for evaluation might we use to evaluate DAILP's impact on language documentation in culturally situated and sustaining ways?
>
> To what extent can online resources, such as dictionaries and curricula, be useful in tribally led educational efforts?

In the end, we have developed community-driven assessment methods; findings that help to pinpoint the impact of DAILP on Cherokee language use and study and to help document the use of ILDA dictionary project in Shawnee.

Indigenous Language Reclamation

Indigenous scholars caution that narratives of language erosion, endangerment, and shift can perpetuate systemic forms of social injustice that contribute to uncritical narratives of loss (Chew et al, 2019; Leonard 2017; Tuck 2009). Indigenous language reclamation projects have focused on narratives of recovery and reclamation as central to social justice approaches to indigenous language learning and teaching. Scholars have sought a realistic counter to settler colonial narratives of loss, erosion, and disappearance of Indigenous languages by offering pathways to and stories of ongoing language reclamation and recovery (Leonard 2023).

The need for Indigenous language assessment measures has been identified in recent surveys of multiple language reclamation pedagogies and curricula that have been enacted over the last three decades (see Chew, Leonard, and Rosenblum for an overview of Mentor Apprentice, Total Physical Response, Immersion, and Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling). We share Chew, Leonard, and Rosenblum's understanding that language reclamation projects need to be intergenerational, flexibly structured, and locally meaningful. They find that language reclamation projects work best when assessment methods "prioritize

community goals of supporting shared progress toward reclaiming language use" (19). A crucial component of language reclamation efforts must include practices of building and strengthening relationships among people, and creating opportunities, spaces, and reasons for languages to be used as a matter of educational sovereignty.

Learners and teachers of Indigenous languages "are always (re-)constituting domains for their language in the place where they find themselves" (Chew et al 2024, p. 25). Given the

histories of settler colonialism, removal, relocation, and re-education policies in the United States, many Indigenous peoples have been displaced from their homelands, their tribal communities, and domains of language practice that have been resisted and redressed with noteworthy success in sustaining and reclaiming indigenous language and cultural practice. The historical reality notwithstanding, Indigenous nations and peoples have used new technologies, created robust k-12 education and adult reclamation programs, and created language programs that include immersion, apprenticeship, and story work in culturally significant domains of use (McCarty et al 2019, McCarty, et al 2018, McCarty and Brayboy, 2021). Community-based research has long held reciprocity and story work within communities are key to sustaining indigenous-led language reclamation work. Assessment of these projects must be aligned with communities' criteria and understandings of what works well and less well in partnerships (Barnes and Warren, 2022; Tuhaiwai-Smith, 3rd edition, 2023; Archibald et al, 2019). Assessment criteria can emerge from the domains of language practice created to sustain culture, knowledge, and historical understandings.

Indigenous language assessment in these efforts has emphasized the needs of learners and communities, especially in "capacity nurturing" to create and sustain Indigenous sovereignty in the educational, linguistic, and cultural domains of learning, being, and doing with and for Indigenous peoples (Brayboy et al 2015). Creating educational sovereignty in domains of learning and language use, while measuring the success of these efforts using indigenous baselines of value, has helped to create pathways of meaningful education for all students involved and has helped to reshape the educational work of PhD programs. At ASU, for instance, educational sovereignty philosophy has driven PhD work that produces dissertations which include one published essay (often collectively authored with program and community peers), one book chapter in an edited collection led by tribal scholars, and finally one red paper to

inform indigenous policy in tribal communities (McCarty and Brayboy, 2021). As a matter of educational sovereignty, the impact and outcomes of tribal education programs need to be determined by the specific, measurable, achievable, reliable, and timely (SMART) objectives of the Indigenous people who create them. But how to create these domains of language use and practice and identify the criteria for assessment to be used to demonstrate their impact?

Methods

We used mixed methods approaches for each of our settings— all of which were qualitative; activist teacher-researchers; Indigenous and ally– with a healthy interest in linguistics and language persistence. Our overall methodology is an adaptation of the "Anthro-political linguist described by Ana Celia Zentella (2027). We have adapted this to our settings with the shared assumption that our work as 'anthro-political language activists' with our respective tribal partners and communities is guided by tribal communities' priorities and practices.

Assessment of these projects must be aligned with communities' criteria and understandings of what works well and less well in partnerships (Barnes and Warren, 2022; Tuhaiwai-Smith, 3rd edition, 2023; Archibald et al, 2019). Assessment criteria can emerge from the domains of language practice created to sustain culture, knowledge, and historical understandings. Indigenous language reclamation projects can draw upon a longstanding body of research on Indigenous and decolonial methodologies for knowledge-making with story work, reciprocity, and tribal communities.

More specifically, the team relied on storytelling methods to gather insights into current and past meanings and practices (Archibald et al 2019; Smith 2021; Garcia and Baca 2019). Elders and language specialists shared insights into the language in one-to-one or small group visits. Their insights were later noted to inform our translation and curricular practices. "Storytelling and stories remain central to Cherokee culture…. Because in Cherokee thought, our world still depends on the meaning each of us finds in the stories we hear, tell, and read… They teach Cherokee values and how to live ethically in a living cosmos" (Teuton et al. 2023, 38). Alexander, Cushman, and Hopkins would meet monthly during the study to provide updates, and results, and analyze initial findings. Our meetings often led to a deepening of the Assessment

Criteria (Appendix A) typically used to demonstrate language fluency.

Findings

Alexander

From 2022 on, we have administered the same self-assessment surveys to all of our language learners in the Shawnee Language Immersion Program, asking questions on how often learners feel they can perform various language tasks under the umbrellas “speaking,”

“listening,” “reading,” and “writing.” These assessments were designed to track learner progress as the nine-month long program continues from a curriculum standpoint; the thought was that if learners did not see an advancement in how often they could, say, greet people or introduce themselves, then the problem was likely in how we were teaching concepts. Despite learners overwhelmingly stating that reaching an advanced speaking proficiency (88% of respondents) and listening proficiency (92% of respondents) is quite or extremely important to them and that they feel quite or extremely committed to learning (92% of respondents), most students responded that they understood beginning, basic Shawnee concepts well (such as greetings, goodbyes, and introductions), but many have not gotten to an intermediate level with verbs or understanding spoken conversation. Many students also put in extra hours each week (24% of respondents put in over 3 extra hours a week) to learn Shawnee. These results suggest that learner motivation is not a root cause for not reaching an advanced speaking proficiency. Many students also feel comfortable reading the language regardless of comprehension, so literacy is also not a factor for not reaching an advanced speaking proficiency. We concluded that our program was in need of new curriculum to give learners opportunities to speak, listen, receive feedback, and be in community with other learners, speakers, language enthusiasts, and tribal members.

In 2023, I developed a new system of curriculum that prioritized speaking and listening environments and separated learners into tracks depending on how much time they expressed they wanted to devote to language learning a week. The thought was that some students might be more comfortable in a speaking environment if they had methodically learned basic grammar for

two or four months before being placed in a more interactive environment where language production was mandatory. At the start of teaching our tracks in 2024, I collected self-assessment surveys again from our learners and saw that respondents across the board said their main goal was to learn how to speak Shawnee. While unsurprising, it caught my attention that in response to the learner goals questions, many students provided unique contexts of conversation on which to focus, including following along *saawanwa* (Shawnee) ceremonies, giving introductions at events, learning how to pray, and having basic conversations with elders and family members. It became clear (or, even more clear) that assessing learners goals' is therefore not a task that we are able to standardize.

With only one hired linguist in the Shawnee Tribe's Language Department, it also became clear that we needed to teach students how to find their own answers to simple language questions, such as how to adapt basic conjugated verbs for different actors and temporalities. We fortunately have an online dictionary (ILDA - the Indigenous Languages Digital Archive developed by the Myaamia Center under the direction of Daryl Baldwin) that has over 4000 entries including most independent conjugations for common verbs. The goal behind utilizing ILDA was not only to help students advance their fluency but to also give them confidence in their own language abilities and a place to practice their Shawnee language skills on their own time. Thanks to my work with DAILP, I knew that we could not expect students to automatically know how to use an online archive and that we would have to create language practices and exercises that incorporated ILDA weekly.

It is important to state that the Shawnee Tribe's version of ILDA is not just a repository where students can search for words and conjugations but also embeds Shawnee culture in example sentences. The entries in ILDA are mostly verb stems that then show conjugated forms of the verb (see Image 1 below). However, not all entries include conjugated forms, particularly if the verb is considered taboo. One example of this is the verb stem *niikaana'powee* for "to make future predictions" (see Image 2 below). Instead of showing the conjugations for various actors, the entry only includes a command: "don't you make future predictions." This example sentence is not only for learning purposes where students can identify the different parts of speech that come together to form the sentence (i.e., *teki* for "don't" and *ke'-* for future second person) but also to convey cultural information: it is taboo for Shawnees to make future

predictions!

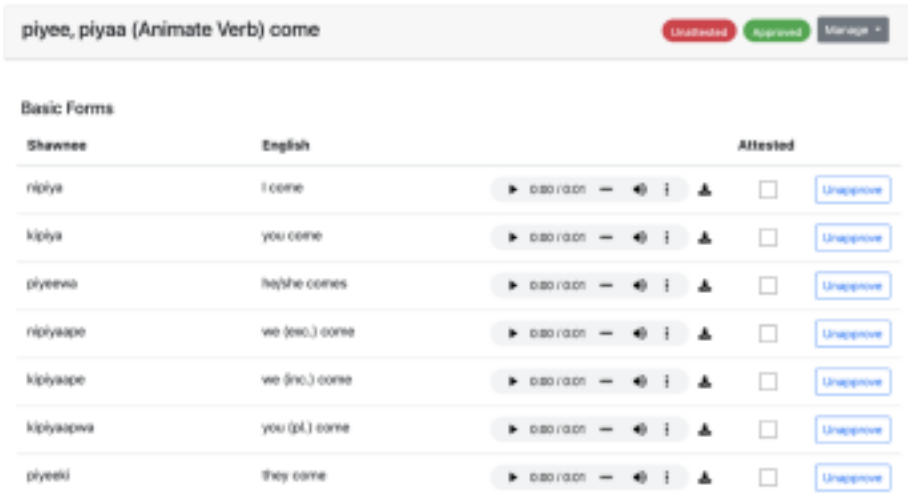

Image 1. Example of ILDA entry for verb stem piyee/piyaa.

Image 2. Example of ILDA entry for verb stem niikaana'powee.

In one class activity, a student actually used the above verb in their homework where they were supposed to switch out a verb for another one that they found in ILDA to practice conjugating.

They chose *niikaana'powee* and conjugated it to say "I am making future predictions," meaning for it to be comical, but in doing so, the student became *hocike* ("taboo"). Instead of focusing on the student's grammatical competency which was spot on, the teachers took the opportunity to discuss how saying that phrase in Shawnee was actually not communicative nor culturally competent. This is important because, if our language classes focus only on correct conjugation and grammatical competency, many students will miss out on their goals of learning how to engage with other Shawnees in a Shawnee world. By focusing solely on grammar, students can forfeit the meaninfulness of the Shawnee language in its larger context including culture, ceremony, well-being, and personhood. For our classes, then, we use archives and other language practices to teach language holistically in a Shawnee context, and have conceptualized an assessment accordingly (see Appendix A for details).

Cushman: During Spring semester 2023, I taught a class called Writing Cultures during which students had the option of co-authoring a paper with me based on translations found on DAILP. Claire McGrath and Cushman began our work with an analysis of the Willie Jumper stories translated in *Cherokees Writing the Keetoowah Way*. As a dual major in English and Anthropology, Claire began analyzing the stories for cultural themes (community, identity, ceremony, people, events) that stood out to her. She cataloged the content of the 32 stories that had been translated to begin finding examples of those themes. As we wrote, we understood we would need to know more about the rhetorical situation that prompted Willie Jumper to write these stories in the first place.

Joshua Webster, a Cherokee speaker and linguist, was consulted with support from the Luce Foundation to translate the inside cover of the ledger containing the Willie Jumper stories. To our surprise, the English translation revealed that the inside cover of the ledger was a cover note to Jack Kilpatrick, the anthropologist who likely commissioned Willie Jumper to pen these stories. Over 24 hours between February 11 and February 12, 1964, Willie Jumper handwrote in the Cherokee syllabary these 140 pages of stories, observations, and remembrances. Willie Jumper, known by his Cherokee name, ᏏᎵᏂᏗ Siquinida, was a Baptist preacher of Cherokee and Creek ancestry. He would have been middle-aged when writing these pages for folklorists Jack and Anna Gritts Kilpatrick. The Kilpatricks had employed Willie Jumper to travel the dirt roads of Northeastern Oklahoma to gather stories, medicines, and formulae written in the Cherokee

syllabary. However, this notebook suggests that Jumper may have written these stories of his own accord to describe the lives of individuals he knew, and to chronicle the knowledge he gathered from elder Cherokees he met along the way.

Jumper knows that the entries might be “a lot for someone to read,” but contends: “Truly though—it is good to read about what they had done long ago.” The included stories share the wisdom of old-timer ways, the perseverance of people during hardships, their generosity with each other, and the stories they told of historical and biblical figures. But it was the word he used for truly that caught our attention– a rare form of the word– ᎤᏙᎯᎶᎯᏃ (udohiyuhino). In the linguistic parsing, Joshua Webster offered a clue to the deeper cultural importance of this verb phrase cum adverb:

Jumper could have chosen the more commonly used Cherokee word for true, ᏚᎶᏫᏣ *duyukdv,* but he chose a different word for truly, ᎤᏙᎯᎶᎯᏃ /udohiyuhihno/, a form of the word ‘true’ that nominalizes the action of being in accordance with Cherokee ways. Joshua Webster, Cherokee linguist and first language speaker, provides an interlinear glossed translation of Willie Jumper’s use of ᎤᏙᎯᎶᎯᏃ:

ᎤᏙᎯᎶᎯᏃ

U²²do²²hi²yu³³hi²hno³

u+(a)d(a)+ohi+yu+hi+hno

3P,SetB+RFL+Influence of The Sacred Fire+INT+NOM+also

/and truly/

When we noticed the root of this word, I followed up with Joshua to ask if it was also similar to words Cherokee learners often hear at the beginning of Cherokee conversation classes: ᏙᎯᏧ, often translated into English as How are you? Or Are you well? Noticing that ᏙᎯ (dohi) was used in this form of the common greeting I asked him if it could also suggest deeper meanings of peacefulness, wellness, and connection with others that come when engaging in stomp dance around the sacred fire? He confirmed. We learned that ᏙᎯᎶ /dohiyu/ may be thought of as a true Cherokee way of peace, balance, and harmony drawn from the influence of ceremonial practice around the sacred fire.

Jumper’s word choice of ᎤᏙᎯᏳᏃ (udohiyhino) was especially telling. We went back to our initial analysis of the stories and searched for further uses of this word among the 32 stories translated in *Cherokees Writing the Keetoowah Way*. We learned that uses of that word were particularly prevalent in stories about people who were especially indicative of what Jumper understood to be “truly” well practiced in Cherokee lifeways informed by the sacred fire. (Cushman and McGrath). The Story of Sequoyah has the most mentions of this word, with stories about medicine people and particularly generous Cherokee farmers having four mentions each. Other stories about individuals have between 2-3 uses of the word to describe their community-minded acts of generosity, protection, and knowledge sharing of skills or medicines. We asked the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians’ members who translated these documents for the DAILP collection what they thought of the use of ᎤᏙᎯᏳᏃ (udohiyuhino)

The ways of the Cherokee people remembered in the ledger represent the influence of the sacred fire, an influence of ceremonial practice, which brings a sense of peacefulness, harmony, and wellness to those any who practice those ways or engage in these stories. In this sense, when reading and writing these Cherokee stories, the stories themselves offer proximity to being and doing well, living in harmony, and in peace with oneself and others.

Snyder Hopkins

Among Eastern Cherokees there is some ambivalence about how much importance should be placed on Cherokee language literacy. Even when New Kituwah Academy was founded, there was a contentious discussion about whether the syllabary should be used or simple phonetics. It was decided that because the children were not yet literate, the syllabary would be used. This also made it possible for the children to learn longer words immediately since the syllabary nearly halves the number of symbols used to represent a word. For example, A-G-I-Y-O-S-I-H-A (“I am hungry”) has 8 discrete letters in phonetics but only five syllables in Sequoyan, “Ꭰ-Ꭹ-Ᏺ-Ꮟ-Ꭽ.”

While the language immersion school teaches syllabary literacy primarily, no other EBCI language program does. Syllabary is introduced and conceptually grasped, but it is not the primary means of reading and writing instruction. Hence, materials developed for New Kituwah

Academy are not immediately usable to Cherokee Central Schools and the adult immersion programs. Some books are printed using both the syllabary and the phonetics so they can be used by all programs, but this is less ideal for children as it creates more text on the page for them to decipher. We also do not teach using the syllabary at Western Carolina University because we feel that it introduces an additional barrier for getting students to speak. Many people feel that the syllabary is only useful once a person has a fairly strong grasp of Cherokee.

As part of a workshop WCU offered about Cherokee language books, I conducted an anonymous Cherokee literacy survey for 16 employees, teachers and administrators, of EBCI Cherokee language programs in 2023. The syllabary versus phonetics issue was raised by one respondent who requested "phonetically written books [because] not all read and write the syllabary." 14 of the 16 respondents did not feel that their program has enough Cherokee language books and also agreed that books need accompanying materials to be effectively used for teaching. 15 participants responded affirmatively that "being able to read and write in

Cherokee is an integral part of saving the language" and 13 answered affirmatively that "studying Cherokee language texts helps me and/or my students learn the language." When queried in an open-ended question about what topics they would most like to see new books about, respondents gave a broad spectrum of topics, but one common request was the creation of new books based on or sourced from first-language speakers and what they would want to teach. Other recurring requests were more Cherokee language books of traditional stories and the language of everyday life.

The needs expressed by the participants were predominantly accompanying materials and teaching tools rather than skill building, as most respondents (13) agreed with "I have the skills I need to be able to read and write in Cherokee" and 12 answered affirmatively that they have the skills they need to teach others to read and write. The opened-ended survey responses offer further clues toward developing resources for teachers as much as for individuals learning Cherokee. There were several requests for accompanying resources for using books to teach – worksheets, lessons, and activities. There were a few comments that requested more grammar instruction in the language. Three respondents explicitly requested that audio be included with books, one going so far as to state, "Having only printed books will not benefit in any way. There must be audio to go along with the print. Students regardless of age must be able to hear the

nuances of the languages so when they do read a text, they will easily understand where those nuances go." Indeed the need to hear texts read aloud cited in this quote is even more pronounced for texts produced in Sequoyan, which require a stronger internalized understanding of how Cherokee words actually sound in order to decode and accurately reproduce meaningful spoken language. For instance, the term for Washington, D.C. used by Eastern Cherokee speakers, ᎦᎾᏁᏍᎩ (ga-na-s-du-gi), can be rendered closer to its actual pronunciation in phonetics, "gahnsdugi." Reading syllabary requires a greater proficiency in spoken Cherokee language to more accurately pronounce words.

The results of this limited survey echo what I have observed more broadly among language programs. Cherokee teachers complain of a dearth of structured teaching resources and curricula more generally. There is no overarching curriculum shared across tribal language programs and the regional universities (WCU and UNCA). Furthermore, some programs (and people) feel proprietary about their materials and decline to share them with other programs despite an initiative by KPEP for programs to follow the principle of "teach what you know,

share what you teach." In fact, many teachers across institutions feel that even their disparate curricula are lacking in structure and content. Hence, there is not only a lack of teaching resources, but also a lack of structure for utilizing the materials that *are* available. Teachers often feel they are presenting activities and topics at random. The various EBCI language programs and universities are relatively close in the scope of our teaching content for beginning learners, but where programs struggle to find direction for curriculum and testing is once students become what fluency scales consider intermediate learners. The adult immersion programs are saying they want to push intermediate learners by shifting them into roles where they are transcribing recordings of conversations and translating written documents in collaboration with fluent speakers. However, the grammatical knowledge, syllabary reading skills, and technical knowledge required for such work are often lacking among language learners. This is a fruitful place for DAILP to intervene in providing training for these learners.

The lack of a shared curriculum runs in tandem with another concern: the need for a shared assessment across language programs. How can we all use the same assessment tool if we are not teaching the same material? WCU Cherokee Language Program received a $242,000 grant from CPF in October 2023. As a condition of receiving the grant, CPF expects WCU to

work with the other language programs toward establishing a mutually shared assessment that all the language programs would use. The rationale for a shared assessment is that we can comparably evaluate students from all programs; for example, a “high novice” speaker from Cherokee Central Schools would have similar skills with a “high novice” from WCU. In theory, this is a good idea. However, in practice, this lofty goal presents a host of questions. Who is responsible for developing the shared assessment instrument? Whose dialect of Cherokee is being assessed? Who is doing the assessing? What should be on the assessment? What counts as fluency? Are standard language assessments even culturally appropriate in light of traditional Cherokee pedagogical approaches? Are there culturally significant language practices that are deeply important to the Cherokee community that fall outside the scope of typical language assessments? In seeking to quantify success in Cherokee language revitalization, we often find ourselves lost in space between the ephemeral, community-building work that language learning does and the assessment evidence funding organizations and employers demand.

In response to CPF’s request, WCU Cherokee Language Program has committed to working with Ben Frey, Professor of Cherokee Language Revitalization at UNC-Asheville, to

establish a shared curriculum map between our institutions. We are also having ongoing discussions with our tribal partners about the development of a shared assessment. Until we know *what* we will teach, collectively, we will not be able to share an assessment. Arguably, a shared curriculum should be the first priority before a shared assessment instrument. And it should be designed around what first-language speakers think is most important for students to be able to *do* in the language.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Language assessment that facilitates Indigenous language reclamation can use external measures of fluency, such as site recognition words, basic vocabulary lists, or practice with basic conversations. However, these measures are incomplete and preliminary indicators of learning and persisting in Indigenous languages. Understanding the deeper meanings inherent in verb forms in Indigenous languages demands continual use of the language in meaningful contexts and for meaningful purposes. Assessments of linguistic knowledge must also include the meaning-making practices supporting the creation of language understanding in larger

Indigenous systems of understanding.

As John Chewey (United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians) suggests, the significance behind reading, speaking and listening to hear the words spoken again, to breathe life into them." Kathryn Michel (Secwepemc) Language Education Specialist at Chief Atahm School said that learning our languages is "to find a pathway to our heart's memories." Candace Day Neveau (Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians) argues to "stay in our languages" is to provide a way for our generations of speakers, learners, teachers, and students to learn together. As language and knowledge keepers for their peoples, we learn from them the ways in which speaking and practicing an indigenous language is central to keeping close to the lifeways of tribal peoples.

In June 2024, the team compiled detailed overviews of their respective projects to present at the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association's (NAISA) Thirteenth Annual Conference. Our presentation gathered 21 audience members on the last day of the conference in Bodo, Norway. Among the audience members were current language activists, scholars, linguists, and archival librarians. Our 92 slides and notes on these are found in Appendix B. We conclude that:

A. **Archives matter** Archives are holistic beings, not just repositories of knowledge and histories but living members of our communities. Archives comprise a totality of Indigenous experience and can be living practices, creating mutuality. Family members are still talking to each other through the archives, fostering a space of inter- and cross-generational conversations that are inherently communal, cultural, social, and spiritual.
    a. Reading, writing, speaking and listening are all important for indigenous language learning and documentation.
    b. Archives are living in our practices and sustained by them.
    c. Working cross-generationally in groups and teams matters most to the living archive.

B. **SSY Work teams matter** Insofar as programs can act autonomously from external educational assessment practices, they can and do help learners, speakers, teachers, and community members create meaningful reasons to practice Indigenous languages across these axes. That being said, adult learners especially need self-paced experiences that acknowledge the complexities of adulting while learning an indigenous language and helping adult learners to set their measures for advancement matters.

A. Curricular Materials

a. assessments map to the curricular ecology, not external mandates
b. reveal what students know and do (how far they've gone)
c. provide learners with generative feedback that signposts for learners the next leg of their learning pathway (where and how far to go next).

B. ᏍᏏᏉ **Work Teams** Intergenerational community-based teams set their own objectives on their own terms; knowledge flows throughout the team members.

C. **Tribal Assessment Measures of Meaningfulness**

a. **Situate in Indigenous Understandings of Language, History, Culture/Ceremony, Land**

i. Situate in knowledge and Cherokee/Shawnee lifeway practices ii. Situate in 'meaningful use' (reasons are related to practicing ᏍᏏᏉ and Shawnee lifeways)

iii. Situate in communicative contexts that use indigenous ways of knowing and being in the woods (such as hunting and cooking small animals, making gigs for fishing, gathering buckbrush or pine needs for baskets, identifying and gathering edible plants, cleansing oneself, and readying oneself for the day at a stream).

b. Enact Relationality

i. Relationships to land and each other

c. Center Indigenous People's

i. Purposes, Audiences, and Genres (e.g. Contexts, Exigencies, Ways of Organizing Learning)

ii. Knowledge and Stories

iii. Media and Tools for Representation (e.g. orthographies, dictionaries, designs, materials)

Looking Ahead

Remaining questions for the research team that emerged as a result of our study. As DAILP and other language documentation resources flourish, the hope is to follow up on one or more of these questions with Indigenous communities. Larger questions of philosophy remain for all three researchers, including:

Sara: That's been my pressing question too. What does "fluency" mean for Cherokee language for Cherokee people? Because language = knowledge. Someone might be able to speak about some things but lack critical cultural knowledge.

Bri: Grammar competency isn't communicative competency, and there's tension between these. How to build guides and curriculum helpful for learners when speaking conversationally is still the holy grail of language competence?

Ellen: Deep meanings of words matter and link cultural knowledge to language use. How to ensure that language specialists are part of each team and that language specialists have deep grammatical structures of the language that they're then able to name and teach others about?

Are we looking at summative rather than formative means of recognizing language fluency?

Practical questions about activities, scope, curricular and pedagogical design also emerged for the team that can have implications for language proficiency measures in Indigenous communities, particularly with archival and digital materials.

Should there be a threshold number for sight recognition words when reading and writing? Should there be a threshold number and depth for verb forms?

How should verb forms be scaffolded from simple (e.g. 9 personal pronouns/9 most common verbs/present tense only) to complex (dozens of reflexive constructions

across both sets of active and passive verbs)? To what extent and how might these verbs be placed in situ?

In what ways might reading/telling stories and hearing stories read/told aloud inform retention and practice of tone and pronunciation rules?

Self-assessment (comparison with previous year's questions, self-reporting). What are the possibilities for a completely self-guided evaluation of language proficiency? Question of proficiency–how can we think of progression about time and commitment versus hierarchical and atomistic?

How to best coalesce language teaching and learning efforts and resources? Could curriculum maps be created–what is being taught and where? (aligning these across settings and teachers to create an indigenous resource database and set of examples to draw on?)

How to incentivize teachers and learners to grow their abilities to teach Cherokee? How to test them into the higher levels? See Kituwah Preservation and Education Program (KPEP); Under KPEP is New Kituwah Academy, Adult Immersion CLMAP, Speakers Bureau; Early Childhood.

The instruments of measurement must come from the local communities and programs from the ground up, working together. Assessments cannot be imposed upon through university or even professional organizational members. Who has a stake in indigenous language learning and what counts for the communities matters a great deal. Finally, we would be remiss if we didn't point out the challenges that remain for us as anthropological language activists working in and with Indigenous communities.

- Building the confidence of language learners and users
- Helping them learn enough of the inflected forms, tones and pronunciations to use these for storytelling about a shared experience from class or translation group or Bible study groups.

- Practices that we're hoping students develop continue forward previous practices or experiences of belonging.
- Remainin grounded in the CARE principles of Indigenous Language Sovereignty (Carroll et al 2019) to ensure that the materials produced remain within the communities who need them for continued language persistence.

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Appendices

A. Assessment Criteria

B. Traditional Second Language Assessment Criteria

C. NAISA Presentation included in full