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## THE COMMENTARIES

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### Learning by Observing and Pitching In in the Context of Sleeping Language Reclamation

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In “Pathways Forward for Indigenous Language Reclamation,” Henne–Ochoa et al. contend that a language-as-social-interaction ideology is more consistent with Indigenous worldviews than Western notions of language as an object, and by extension, that learning by observing and pitching in (LOPI; Rogoff, 2014) aligns with Indigenous values about language learning and use. They further observe that uncritical use of Euro-Western models of teaching and talking about language can reinforce structures, ideologies, and practices that work against Indigenous community needs and values. This is indeed true, as is the reverse: Uncritical adherence to Indigenous traditional language learning practices brings its own challenges, particularly in contexts where cultural ruptures have been so severe that initial stages of reclamation might require deviation from otherwise desirable cultural norms. In this commentary, I address this issue and offer thoughts about LOPI as it applies specifically in contexts of reclaiming *sleeping languages*—those that have gone out of use, but that have the potential for future use by virtue of being documented and actively claimed by a community.

Key for sleeping language reclamation, at least in the initial stages of this multigenerational process, is that language learning will not occur in the prototypical way that it has occurred historically. To my knowledge, no Indigenous community has a tradition of learning language from old, written, often decontextualized documents crafted largely by non-Indigenous men, and yet this is an increasingly common process across North America and beyond. It is what occurred in my myaamia (Miami) community starting around 1990, when some members of my community started learning our then-sleeping language, *myaamiaataweenki*, from our ancestors’ voices as they were recorded in a large corpus of written documentation.<sup>1</sup> Learning from historical documents clearly differs from prototypical language learning, though both entail observing what was said by language speakers. Archival work adds to this the need to carefully interpret the

context and adjust for the cultural lens(es) of the person(s) who curated the documentation.

This commentary reflects my experiences as a professional linguist focused on Indigenous language work across North America, and as a myaamia scholar, practitioner, and beneficiary of a community reclamation process that has allowed me access to a language I did not grow up with. Though it was others who performed the initial work of interpreting and learning *myaamiaataweenki* from archival records, I have long been involved in reclamation efforts. I am a continuing language learner and researcher of community language ideologies and practices, and for many years was involved in developing language programming.

Arising from these experiences, and especially by observing reclamation leaders’ insistence on guiding language work on our own tribal terms—often in defiance of naysayers, including many linguists who claimed sleeping language reclamation was not possible—the idea of *language reclamation* emerged (Leonard, 2011, 2012, 2017). As built upon by Henne–Ochoa et al., language reclamation is a decolonial framework of doing Indigenous language work that identifies and addresses the underlying issues that precipitate language shift in a given community, and centers community goals and views of ‘language’ in all areas of language work. As a tenet of reclamation is that language work should be planned, executed, assessed, and described in response to specific community histories, needs, and goals, I begin with an overview of the myaamia story that guides this commentary.

Indigenous to what is now Indiana and the surrounding area—but later also spoken in Kansas and Oklahoma following forced removals by the U.S. government of part of the myaamia community from tribal homelands—*myaamiaataweenki* largely fell silent in the 1960s. This extreme level of language shift resulted from several processes of settler colonialism, including the two removals along with the associated theft of lands, and the forced assimilation of my ancestors

through boarding schools and similar institutions. More commonly referred to at the time by its English names *Miami* and *Miami-Illinois*, *myaamiaataweenki* was then labeled ‘extinct’ by linguists. Members of my community contested the colonial logic of ‘extinction’ and exercised our linguistic sovereignty by instead using the term *sleeping* to describe our language during its dormancy (Baldwin, Noodin, & Perley, 2018; Leonard, 2011), recognizing our agency and responsibility to bring it back from written documentation. Using the same metaphor, our broader cultural reclamation story has come to be called *myaamiaki eemawiciki* ‘(the) Miamis awaken.’

Indeed, *myaamiaataweenki* has come back into the community to a significant degree. While English remains the primary language of communication for events such as business meetings, I now also hear *myaamiaataweenki* at tribal gatherings, parts of which are entirely in the language. Though it is frequently pointed out that *myaamiaataweenki* is a verb that literally means ‘speaking the Miami language,’ our language is now also produced in written form in tribal publications and signage, and appears online in media created by community members.

Both in the narrow sense of language learning and also in the broader sense of engaging in the cultural practices embedded in our language, LOPI’s tenets have long been a theme in *myaamia* reclamation efforts. Our programs employ culturally sustaining and revitalizing pedagogies (McCarty & Lee, 2014), which recognize “the need to reclaim and revitalize what has been disrupted and displaced by colonization” (p. 103). As noted earlier, the effects of colonization for my people entail damaging disruptions in our relationships with each other and with our lands, ancestors, and language. Thus, cultural programs focus significantly on restoring relationships through activities that draw upon and celebrate our shared kinship, history, values, and language. LOPI emerges naturally in such relationally oriented activities.

Summer youth camps provide an example. Though some participants have long been connected to their tribal community and come with some language proficiency, others are newly experiencing cultural programming and come with little language knowledge. Regardless, all participants in these camps have roles and responsibilities to each other and collaboratively contribute to building a healthy camp community. For example, at the camps I codirected in the 2000s, the participants formed groups (called clans), which had rotating responsibilities such as cleaning and tending the fire.

With their special focus on language, youth camps at times have language lessons that in the moment resemble an assembly-line-instruction model of teaching where an adult explains language concepts to a group of youth who have assembled for this purpose. However, most lessons are grounded in LOPI since they are accompanied by activities that actively bring language into community relations and practices. For example, at one year’s camp where the theme was *miüwa, aawiki, myaamionki* ‘path, time, Miami place,’ participants learned the language associated with different positions of the sun. They then observed ecological markers, such as shadow movement and the location of the sun relative to features in the landscape, while also noting the behavior of animals as a way of further determining the various periods within ‘daytime,’ which *myaamiaataweenki* demarcates to a higher level of detail than does English. This activity fostered ecological awareness, which could then be leveraged for a useful task—determining time and organizing the day, a point around which camp participants were collectively accountable to each other. Camp activities largely took place relative to sun location and to when the group was ready.

Part of the responsibility of learning *myaamia* culture is to teach and otherwise support other members of the community, and camps reflect this principle. One of my favorite camp activities was the creation of a language-learning CD by camp participants, in this case where most were language beginners. Each person recorded a phrase they had learned during the week, and the idea was that others could learn from this CD. Another example is *pakitahaminki* ‘lacrosse’ games at these camps (as well as at most other tribal gatherings). Each team normally includes people at diverse levels of game skills and experience, and the main communication within the game occurs in our language with recurring phrases like *pimaahki-ilo* ‘throw it’ and *ahtoolo* ‘put it [in the goal].’ It is expected that more experienced players will guide newer players in game vocabulary and in key game practices, such as how to cradle the ball.

Thus far, I have been primarily discussing children’s learning, in recognition that this is how LOPI is usually discussed in academic contexts. However, in sleeping language reclamation (and, in my experience, also in situations where there are a few speakers), equally important are learning and socialization across the full community—even when the explicit focus is on supporting youth language development and use.

I end this commentary with a cautionary note that emerges from my observations about language reclamation in such contexts, where there is frequently some misalignment between ideal and actual community dynamics. Reclamation efforts are often predicated on a goal of embracing traditional roles and practices, including those associated with language transmission and socialization. However, many activities associated with reclamation efforts—those of sleeping or recently sleeping languages in particular—entail disrupting certain traditional practices along with the roles of a person by virtue of kinship, age, gender, occupation, and experience.

While the story of *myaamiaki eemamwiciki* ‘(the) Miamis awaken’ (i.e., our reclamation story) has evolved to the point where children are increasingly learning language in ways that are congruent with traditional *myaamia* culture, as with the summer camps discussed earlier or in their homes, the initial stages of the story involved re-creating *myaamia* language practices, along with several associated cultural practices, through research. For this reason, it was common at the time for tribal leaders, even some Elders, to learn language from younger tribal members who researched archival materials. As I noted in earlier work with fellow *myaamia* scholar Scott Shoemaker, language reclamation in our community “is a reciprocal process that requires speakers, in both the literal and metaphorical sense [which includes people with knowledge of the language’s cultural contexts], to listen to the non-speakers (...) just as much as in the other direction” (Leonard & Shoemaker, 2012, p. 207). As is also the case for many other Indigenous communities, ‘pedagogy’ in *myaamia* programs includes both learning and teaching. In our language, these ideas are formed off the same verb root, and I increasingly hear reciprocal forms like *neepwaantiinki* ‘learning from each other.’

Aside from initial misgivings by a few Elders, I have observed that most members of my community accept the contemporary norms of *myaamia* pedagogy, and some even embrace it. For example, I have heard grandparents commenting on how much they value learning language from their grandchildren, noting how language engagement brings the family together. In other contexts of language reclamation across North America, however, I have several times observed strong warnings about breaking protocol, especially as it regards how language is ‘supposed to be’ learned—for example, orally rather than through writing, in the home rather than in

school, and by younger people from older people who have more life experience.

As reclamation is a local process embedded in specific community needs and dynamics, I suggest that crafting specific ‘best practices’ for addressing this issue would be odd, though I propose that it is always appropriate to recognize and discuss norms and possibilities of language learning in a given community so that an appropriate response can emerge. Where this issue has come up in my professional work, I have found it most useful to discuss how temporary modification of certain historical cultural practices can serve as a means to address deeper needs: In my community, given the severe historical disruptions in our relationships with each other and with our lands, ancestors, and language, cultivating relationships has been especially crucial. Even when the particular dynamics differ from historical norms, speaking our language is one of the ways we have done this, and our community has become stronger as a result.

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#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> *Miami* is our English name; *myaamia* (normally written in lower case, plural: *myaamiaki*) is our endonym. Members of my community often also informally refer to our language as *myaamia*, but it is more specifically named with the verb *myaamiaataweenki*.

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## Rethinking Ideologies of Learners' Speech and the Multilingual Learning Process

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In “Pathways Forward for Indigenous Language Reclamation,” Henne–Ochoa et al. make clear the importance of an approach to language revitalization shaped by relationality. This approach does not objectify language and separate it from speakers, context, and use (‘assembly line instruction’), but fosters shared experiences and meaningful communication through observing and pitching in (Rogoff, 2014). The call to decolonize Euro-Western ideologies of language—from an object that can best be preserved by expert linguists in printed books, to a way of making meaning and a process of sustaining relationality that is controlled and defined by speakers—is a much-needed shift. In this response, I will focus on a related concern that poses a challenge in many language reclamation initiatives: ideologies and praxis around learners’ speech and the relationality of the different languages and styles in learners’ communicative repertoires. Language learners, in particular Indigenous language learners, often navigate multiple stigmas and uncertain or conflicting expectations about how they may be considered legitimate speakers. With the goal of supporting the learning process as an integral part of language reclamation work, I pose some questions that have no universal answers, but that can best be answered by educators and learners in specific contexts: What kind of rethought ideology of the learning process and learners’ speech might help to move away from deficit views of learners’ speech? What ideological and practical approach to bi- and multilingualism would best support language reclamation?

These questions are unavoidable in language education programs where students are explicitly assessed and compared to their peers; they are also important in less formal learning settings, where unwritten social norms may lead to implicit forms of evaluation and critique in daily interactions. Henne–Ochoa et al. propose a subtle, activity-based approach to assessing, and

possibly correcting, learners’ communicative competence. They specify that in the learning-by-observing-and-pitching-in (LOPI) approach, “assessment and evaluation is not really intended to judge contributions” but rather to recognize and appreciate learners’ efforts (p. xx). They suggest that speakers might give “mild ‘correction’” to learners “by repeating acceptable versions of what they are trying to say, for direct comparison, and providing opportunities for them to rehearse” (p. xx). Such an approach offers a constructive, non-deficit way to consider learners’ communicative contributions to the group, and takes seriously the danger of demotivating learners through “overtly judgmental” teaching (p. xx). Nonetheless, in practice there are many thorny questions about what correction is mild enough, when someone is understood to make an error or produce an unacceptable form of communication, and when their speech is accepted. For example, if a learner communicates successfully by using elements from both the language they are learning and another language they already know, (when) is that acceptable? If their grammar is correct but not idiomatic for the communicative context, (when) should they be corrected? How participants in language reclamation projects address these kinds of questions is influenced by often unexamined ideologies about learners’ speech and about the relation of the Indigenous language with other languages in the learners’ repertoire. Even if the facilitators of reclamation initiatives are whole-heartedly supportive of learners’ emerging abilities and potential mixing of diverse communicative resources, learners are all too likely to experience critical and deficit discourses about language learners’ speech from other social or educational sources.

I write as an educational or applied linguist of white settler colonial American background, who has been involved in Indigenous language education initiatives as an assistant, collaborator,