

10 Local Power Relationships, Community Dynamics, and Stakeholders

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Among the lessons I learned from my late grandfather, Miami Tribe of Oklahoma Chief *waapimaankwa* (White Loon, 1925–2008), is the importance of understanding relationships – among people, places, ideas, and institutions – and the associated community dynamics. He knew that in order for the Miami people to be successful, the efforts of our tribal government had to be aligned with the values and norms of our community, and he thus spent a lot of time talking to community members and asking about their perspectives. My grandfather’s wisdom combined traditional Miami tribal knowledge with Western education, along with years of experience in leading our tribal nation toward economic sustainability and reclamation of our culture and language, *myaamia*. He championed the revitalization of *myaamia*, which was erroneously labeled ‘extinct’ in the categories of Western science because it went out of use almost completely in the 1960s. As such, a foundational means of fostering relationships within our community – through our language – became compromised. However, *myaamia* was well documented in a large body of written records prior to its dormancy, and from these records the Miami community started learning *myaamia* so that we could build stronger relationships with each other, with our tribal lands, and with our ancestors. I did not have access to *myaamia* until I was a young adult in the 1990s, when revitalization efforts began, but I am proud that I now hear Miami children speaking it.

In this chapter, I offer a synthesis of key ideas that have emerged from the application of my grandfather’s wisdom to my language revitalization experiences within the Miami community and in other Indigenous communities, primarily smaller groups in the United States and Canada. I began this work in the late 1990s as a Miami tribal member and a (then nascent, now professional) linguist, and I write from this perspective. I offer this commentary with the caveat that lessons from my experiences will not apply to all communities that are engaged in language revitalization. Indeed, communities and language situations are diverse; each must be examined in its own context because revitalization is ultimately a local phenomenon, even though it occurs with global influences. Having said

this, as also shown throughout the other chapters in this book, there are recurrent themes in language endangerment and the associated responses. The key theme for the current chapter is that language revitalization occurs among people who have relationships with each other and with their languages. It is important to focus on these relationships when planning, implementing, or assessing a revitalization effort.

I begin this discussion by clarifying my use of certain terms: **POWER**, **POWER RELATIONS**, and **COMMUNITY DYNAMICS**. Often, particularly in discussions of politics or economics, ‘power’ refers to the authority, and the associated ability, to *control* people and resources. For the current discussion, I adopt a more general definition of ‘power’, one that is more representative of my grandfather’s approach to leadership: the ability of individuals or groups to produce an effect, including *guiding and empowering* the actions of others.¹ I use ‘power relations’ as it is commonly employed in social sciences to refer to relationships in which one person or group has higher ability, by virtue of their social positions and resources, to influence the actions of another person or group. By ‘community dynamics’, I refer to the totality of relationships and power relations in a given community, as well as the underlying historical, cultural, legal, and other factors that inform how people relate to each other.

Understanding Power and Community Dynamics

A general principle of language revitalization is that it both builds and disrupts community dynamics at the same time. To understand why this is so, it is useful to consider two questions that are closely related conceptually, but whose answers can be very different:

- What are the social dynamics within a given community?
- What do the members of a given community believe to be their ideal social dynamics?

While language revitalization occurs within a context of actual community dynamics, it is very often linked to broader efforts to restore traditional values and community health – that is, to move toward a different community dynamics. In other words, language revitalization is a response to a misalignment between a community’s actual practices and its ideal practices, and although it ultimately restores community well-being, the mismatches that occur during the process can be a source of significant tension.

¹ ‘Power’ is meant neutrally here, but in contexts where it has come to have specific (especially negative) connotations, one might instead use different terms or clarify power relations through questions such as, ‘Who is expected to guide whom, who listens to whom, and why?’

The disconnect between actual and ideal community dynamics can be particularly severe when a language has gone out of use completely, as occurred with *myaamia*. In these situations, the traditional norms of language transmission and socialization that many people believe to be ideal must at least temporarily be modified. For example, an ideal I have frequently heard articulated in Indigenous communities is that languages should be transmitted through everyday cultural practices from older generations to youth. In my community, this ideal of course could not be realized in our initial stage of revitalization, which entailed learning *myaamia* from documents. In communities where the only first-language speakers are elders, a different problem sometimes results: ‘speaker’ may become overly associated with ‘elder’, although this link exists only because of language endangerment. Such thinking can work against revitalization if it fosters a situation in which younger people are deemed to never be legitimate speakers, even when they learn a language to a high level of proficiency. The role of writing presents another noteworthy example: The ideal may be for a language to *not* be written. However, given that revitalization responds to a situation in which traditional language transmission mechanisms have been compromised, writing may become necessary. Ideas about gender provide yet another example: Community members’ ideas about gendered cultural roles may clash with the values held by other community members, and might also conflict with practical needs even when there is agreement about gender roles. For instance, there may not be any speakers of the appropriate gender to perform a given traditional activity.

I have found two interventions to be useful for addressing conflicts that arise in these situations. First is open acknowledgement and discussion of the idea that language revitalization often entails engaging in social practices that are different from the ‘ideal’ community dynamic, but that can serve as a means of moving toward different social norms should community members want this. Second is recognition that conflicting opinions about community dynamics, while challenging to deal with in the moment, provide evidence that people are invested in their community’s future, and this is a good thing.

Power also can guide beliefs about language structure (grammar and vocabulary in particular) and norms of use.² Describing, researching, and especially learning and speaking languages promote certain ways of understanding, and by extension of thinking about, language. A common

² Here I refer not only to the possible ways a given idea could be expressed in a given language, but also to whether an idea would be expressed at all, and if so, who would be expected to say it to whom in what context.

phenomenon is that whatever is true for the people who have social power becomes the 'correct' grammar and pronunciation for a given language, as well as the 'right' way to think about it. Key for revitalization planning, therefore, is the identification of the underlying community dynamics in a language revitalization effort and consideration of how these play out in guiding language beliefs and practices.

The same principle also applies to language resource materials. Even something that is called 'language description' and has no intent of imposing a certain way of speaking may nevertheless have this effect, especially when the person creating the description has higher social status than the person learning from it. Commonly this happens in language revitalization contexts with published language materials, such as grammar reference books whose descriptions can take on a level of truth, though they are arguably examples of possible analyses by experts trained with particular tools. A strategy for minimizing this problem is to acknowledge (and celebrate) the specific backgrounds of individual speakers and researchers who have contributed to creating language resources. For language speakers, this includes mention of where they learned the language and other factors that inform how they speak and think about language. For researchers, this includes noting how their training influences what they notice and conclude, as well as how they present their analyses.

Another important issue arises with outside researchers, such as linguists, which is that their credentials and expert status often cooccur with racial and socioeconomic privilege, both of which enhance social power. Even researchers who are themselves members of language communities, as is the case for me, often enjoy relatively high social power, though of course equally important as professional credentials are their other traits such as age, gender, membership in a given family, and previous community engagement. As a general lesson, one might say that everybody involved in a language revitalization effort benefits from being aware of these issues, and that the people with higher social power have an increased responsibility to acknowledge how what they say and do may influence others, regardless of intent.

Identifying and Respecting All Stakeholders

Recognizing that tribal community dynamics do not occur in a vacuum, a general practice of my grandfather was to look beyond our tribal community and to foster alliances with members of other communities. This practice has come to characterize myaamia language revitalization programs, which ultimately are for Miami people but nevertheless include non-Miami people in a variety of roles. That is to say, myaamia language

revitalization, similar to other cases of Indigenous language revitalization, has many **STAKEHOLDERS** – people and institutions with a concern and interest in the process. In this section, I address types of stakeholders and the importance of identifying and considering their perspectives.

For this discussion, I call attention to two major categories of stakeholders in situations of language endangerment and revitalization: **COMMUNITY-INTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS** and **COMMUNITY-EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS**. Within the former group are the community members with language knowledge,³ current and future language learners, community leaders in language programs and elsewhere, and others with various levels of community engagement. Within the latter group are researchers whose professional work engages with Indigenous languages, various governments, funding agencies, educational institutions and educators, and the wider public.⁴

Frequently omitted in discussions of stakeholders, but very important for understanding Indigenous language revitalization and related work, is that many communities also recognize stakeholders beyond living humans. Ancestors, for example, may be stakeholders; my late grandfather is among the stakeholders of myaamia language revitalization. A higher power, however conceived of or named, may have provided the gift of language to the community and thus becomes a stakeholder that must be thanked and honored. Similarly, beyond being the literal foundation on which people speak and transmit languages, land may be a key stakeholder. Indeed, specific landscapes are reflected in the grammar and vocabulary of Indigenous languages, and this reflects the relationship between communities and places. To ensure that the full set of stakeholders in a given context can emerge, it is important that ‘relationship’ be defined broadly.

After identifying all stakeholders in a given language context, I have found it useful to consider the following areas to understand their engagement and perspectives: **NEEDS**, **EXPERTISE**, and **GOALS**. For ease of presentation, I discuss each area separately, though they are interrelated (as with everything else) and thus must be evaluated together.

³ In much of the literature on language endangerment and revitalization, there is strong emphasis on fluent speakers who acquired the language as children through prototypical intergenerational transmission, with much less recognition of the linguistic knowledge held by others who do not meet this ‘speaker’ prototype. I use the term ‘language knowledge’ in recognition that speakerhood exists in many forms, all of which have value.

⁴ In real-life situations, there is rarely a clean split between community-internal and community-external stakeholders. Community members can take on the interests of outside institutions that they are part of, and so-called external stakeholders, despite lacking heritage in a given community, may have very strong community relationships.

- NEEDS:** Community needs will presumably include language resources, but I omit a discussion of this point because, in my experience, it is generally self-evident to most stakeholders (though the usefulness of the resources that get provided varies significantly). Somewhat less self-evident, in my experience, have been needs that go beyond language such as a means to earn a living, whether direct (a salary for language work, for example), or indirect (as might occur when university-based scholars are expected to publish about the revitalization work they are engaged in). Identifying and responding to these kinds of needs is crucial for revitalization program sustainability over the long term. Also tremendously important, and in my experience frequently overlooked by community-external stakeholders (though sometimes also by community-internal stakeholders), is that language revitalization requires great emotional and spiritual work, thus creating the need for appropriate support. For example, I have found learning *myaamia* to be very empowering, but it also serves as a reminder of the colonial violence that my ancestors experienced. I thus seek support through relationships with other Indigenous people, both within my community and beyond, who are also reclaiming their languages of heritage in the face of ongoing colonialism.
- EXPERTISE:** While there are sometimes expectations about what one *should* give to a revitalization effort, I argue that focusing instead on what one *can* give, and *wants to* give, is a better practice. Linguistic knowledge is often highlighted as the key resource in contexts of language endangerment, and indeed many people emphasize language speakers and their importance. However, there is a problem with reducing full persons, who have a variety of roles and relationships, to ‘speakers’ and evaluating them accordingly. Speakers, as with other stakeholders, have various types of knowledge and experience beyond language, and bring preexisting relationships and networks into revitalization projects. They also have diverse needs, which are easy to overlook when a person is reduced to a single trait, such as being a speaker. Putting the focus instead on full persons and all of their relationships is thus called for. More generally, ‘expertise’ for speakers *and* other stakeholders must be understood broadly to include cultural knowledge, professional training, personal connections, and other abilities that are important to language revitalization efforts.
- GOALS:** I have frequently observed a difference in the goals of community-internal stakeholders, especially those who are most actively engaged in language revitalization programs, compared to community-external stakeholders, especially those that are less directly connected to Indigenous communities. A recurrent pattern is that they all claim to support language revitalization, but have notably different understandings of what ‘language’ is and also of what constitutes successful language revitalization. This has significant implications for understanding goals.

Among many community-external stakeholders, there is recognition of language's social value and how it reflects and shapes culture, but often in a less direct way than is commonly expressed by members of Indigenous communities. In linguistic science, for example, there is a tendency to privilege structural definitions of 'language', where the emphasis is on grammatical patterns. While the discipline of Linguistics is increasingly recognizing cultural approaches to 'language', it is nevertheless still common for endangered languages to be analyzed and talked about without reference to the people who claim them. Also common with community-external stakeholders, particularly large groups such as governments and funding agencies, is a tendency for languages to be talked about as if they are objects that can be counted, organized into scientific categories, and preserved.

This contrasts significantly with community members who define 'language' in terms of their peoplehood (for example, saying 'language is us' or 'we would not be [community name] without our language'), in terms of spirituality, or with respect to responsibilities they have to acquire and pass on their cultures. I have also heard that 'language is power' from many people in revitalization contexts. This may refer to the idea of social power as discussed earlier, or it could refer to 'power' in a different way (and of course the definition in a specific context should be clarified) – but the general idea of language's importance is clear regardless.

It is only after the different stakeholders in a given effort have clarified their definitions of 'language' that it becomes feasible to truly understand their language revitalization goals, which tend to be framed both by definitions of 'language' and ideas about what constitutes successful revitalization. For second-language learning of major world languages, 'success' often entails proficiency in speaking and/or writing. However, while the ability to speak is a widely articulated goal of Indigenous communities – perhaps the most common – it is problematic to assume that dominant language norms map onto those of endangered language communities, or that it is appropriate to overly focus on a revitalization endpoint that may take multiple generations to achieve. Instead I argue that it is more useful to conceive of smaller, measurable goals (for example, 'I aim to be able to ____ in my language by the end of the summer' or 'I want to be able to pray in my language') that may be located within larger objectives (for example, 'I want to honor my ancestors').

In summary, when cultural marginalization has led a community to shift away from its language, revitalization goes far beyond mastering vocabulary and grammar because it includes restoring cultural practices, beliefs, and pride. In other words, it entails building better community dynamics. I conclude this discussion by returning to what I best understand to be my

grandfather's general goals as a tribal leader of the Miami people, and also specifically for myaamia language revitalization. His general goals for the Miami people focused on creating a positive future, which he saw as emerging from a healthy, sustainable community based in strong relationships. His language revitalization goal was the same: a healthy, sustainable community based in strong relationships.

10.1 Power Relationships and Stakeholders: How to Orient Yourself in Complex Situations

Gregory Haimovich

For those who want to contribute to revitalization of an endangered language, it is useful to remember that there are many situations in which no acknowledged language authority exists. In addition to this, if the language still has a significant number of speakers, with even more nonspeakers who share the ethnic identity associated with the language and are interested in its revitalization, one has to deal with multiple stakeholders who are linked to each other by complex socio-political relations. In such a case, it is undoubtedly important to respect all the stakeholders and mediate between them for the sake of common cause. However, the circumstances may also require an activist to be selective and decide which party it is more advantageous to side with. Based on my experience with the Makushi community in Guyana, I will share an example of how the variety of stakeholders can present an activist with difficult choices.

The Makushi language, which is spoken in Guyana and Brazil, has been in decline in Guyana for several decades, and although there are probably about 7,000 speakers left in the country, the overwhelming majority of Guyanese Makushi children do not learn the language at home. They are shifting toward English, or more precisely, its local creolized variety.

The main organization involved in the revitalization of the Makushi language in Guyana has been the Makushi Research Unit (MRU), which is also engaged in the promotion of Makushi cultural heritage in general. Each member of the MRU is a native speaker who is a trained translator and/or teacher, and who represents a particular village of the North Rupununi district, where Makushi people are predominant. For about ten years from the end of 1990s, the MRU had the opportunity to teach the Makushi language in local schools and publish several language teaching materials, but a lack of financial support has forced the group to reduce its activities. As a result, the language is currently taught only at the Bina Hill Institute to interested students of high-school and post-high-school age.

Bina Hill Institute is an educational organization coordinated and funded by the North Rupununi District Development Board (NRDDB), which consists mainly of Makushi Indigenous leaders. NRDDB relies on village councils, led by village chiefs or *toshaos*. The Ministry of Indigenous Peoples Affairs also exerts a strong influence upon policies in North Rupununi. The ministry controls the work of NRDDB as well as the NGOs supported by it. In addition, it supervises elections of *toshaos* and issues

permissions for foreign researchers to conduct fieldwork in Indigenous territories. In the case of Makushi, the MRU can be considered an active stakeholder in language policy making; however, there are also other, more passive or potential stakeholders, who may nevertheless have more power and resources. These include: the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples' Affairs, NRDDDB, *toshaos* and village councils, Bina Hill Institute, elderly native speakers, and foreign researchers. In the event that there is a burst of activity around the language, any of these 'sleeping' stakeholders may insist on taking a role in decision-making. So the complexity of relations between them becomes a significant factor in language revitalization process.

It is important to remember that there is rarely an ideal situation in which all stakeholders can act together as a well-coordinated organism, where each of them understands and accepts their role, and does not try to challenge others about authority. Sometimes issues that have nothing to do with language and language revitalization can provoke conflicts between stakeholders. If it is not possible to solve a conflict rapidly, a language activist or researcher will have to decide which stakeholder deserves more respect and support in a given situation.

In revitalization activities, stakeholders will usually differ according to the following criteria:

- (1) level of local expertise (knowledge about relevant language, culture, and the social context);
- (2) level of general expertise (linguistic knowledge, technical knowledge, teaching skills, social skills, marketing skills, etc.);
- (3) level of commitment/engagement;
- (4) quantity of resources (including material and human resources).

I view the importance of these criteria in the same order as they are listed above. Most stakeholders are lacking in at least one of these criteria. In other words, an organization can be well funded and present itself as a stakeholder, but if it is not committed to the cause and lacks necessary expertise, it is justifiable for new contributors to give preference to another organization, or even a small group of people, who are already engaged in revitalization activities and represent home-grown experts. Next, even the greatest commitment to language revitalization cannot replace the knowledge and skills mentioned in the first two criteria. And finally, general expertise may be efficiently applied only when paired with local expertise, which is rarely found among external stakeholders.