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Indigenous language learning impacts, challenges and opportunities in COVID-19 times

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Abstract

In March 2020, the COVID-19 global health crisis caused disruption to the daily lives and regular practices of most human populations. Indigenous language revitalization (ILR) work is often undertaken face-to-face and regularly includes the most elderly populations in our communities. Therefore, ILR activities that were not already online were vastly affected. The authors of this Situation Report are three Indigenous colleagues, scholars, language teachers, learners and co-activists in the on-going efforts toward the reclaiming, maintaining, and reviving of Indigenous languages across the lands now known as Canada and the USA. We describe the early impacts, challenges and foreseeable opportunities this current global health crisis brings to the critical work of continuing Indigenous languages into the future.

Keywords

Indigenous language revitalization, language reclamation, language learning, COVID-19

Across Canada, the USA and the world, many Indigenous communities, organizations and individuals are working hard to keep their languages alive and bring them back into everyday use. These strategies vary from early childhood and school-based immersion programs, language classes for various ages, curriculum and recording projects with proficient speakers, to planning activities, among others (McIvor & Anisman, 2018). The majority of language work is territorially based, done face-to-face and therefore had to halt immediately for the safety of speakers, learners and communities at large.

In addition, the pandemic crisis that hit in the first part of 2020 had the potential to silence and deprioritize language work, reducing it to non-critical activity, once again. Indigenous language revitalization (ILR) work often fights for space on the “societal agenda” and even sometimes within communities themselves, to be seen as a priority. The current societal agenda in Canada and the USA, especially, is addressing new and complex health disparities further illuminated by COVID-19, in addition to the realities of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, calls to defund the police, toppling colonizers’ statues, on-going anti-pipeline protests and calls to decommission racialized sport teams’ mascots. ILR could be seen as being in competition with these movements but is better viewed as another form of resistance to colonization. It is important to recognize that the current agenda and movements are largely driven by Indigenous, Black and other people of color as settler-colonial nations struggle to support our agenda on our terms and in a meaningful way (see Anishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson’s (2016) critique of “social justice” and further thoughts on this topic). Simpson’s notion of “constellations of co-resistance” (p. 27) is helpful in considering how we

can co-conspire and support each other while continuing to pursue and contribute to our areas of passion—in this case, for the continuation of our languages—alongside and despite all the other challenges, including the current global health crisis.

As such, language workers all across Canada and the USA took a moment to catch their breath among the rapid changes and assess the new and real dangers in their midst. They then did what Indigenous people have always done in the face of danger and adversity—exercise collective strength and agility. Indigenous communities quickly began to create digital and other visual resources in their languages about the dangers of the new virus as well as protective measures, such as proper handwashing techniques, social media posters and videos. In video-chats with speakers, learners asked how to say “toilet paper” in their languages and shared these recordings with the world, bringing much needed humor—and another reminder of Indigenous ways of survival to the fore. These early responses also showed that just like the water, our languages always find a way. Using available tools, platforms and opportunities, the work is propelling safely forward and not allowing the precious language work to fall away during this time of crisis.

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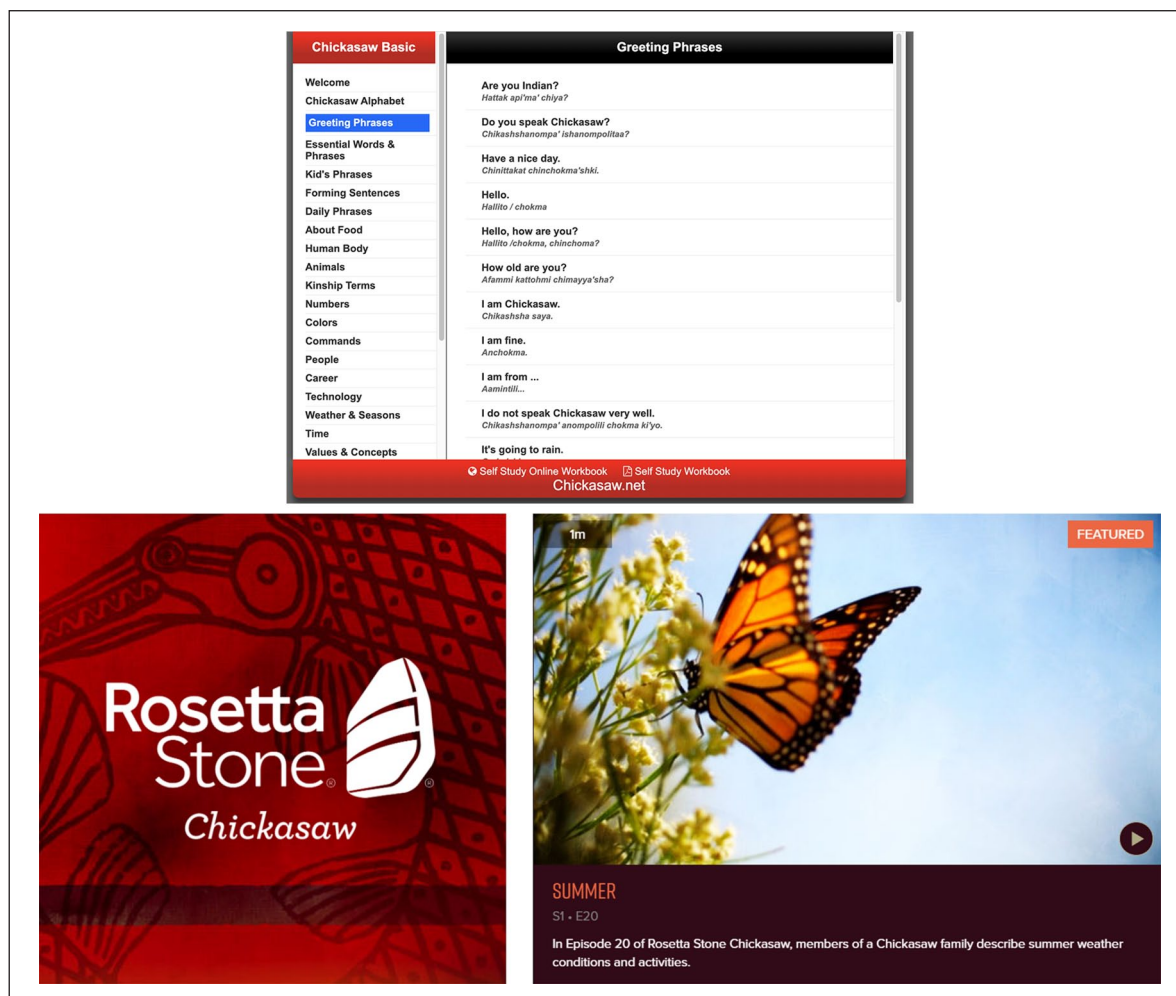


Figure 1. App and video series Kari used to create online language learning lessons to do with her mom (chickasaw.net; chickasaw.tv).

We acknowledge the scope of our reflection focuses on Canada and the USA and while separate and distinct countries, the border between the two is a colonial construct and artificially divides lands, languages and peoples into two different ruling systems but is acknowledged among Indigenous people as false and imposed.

COVID-19 impacts and challenges for Indigenous languages

This story of resilience is not unique to one community, as many Indigenous communities in the midst of revitalizing their languages have been actively responding to the constraints of the pandemic. Collectively, we have seen major cultural events postponed, conferences rescheduled and our ceremonies temporarily halted for the safety of our nations. The interruption of these and other activities signifies lost opportunities to visit, work and learn together, with our elders and others who carry specialized knowledge of our ways. These ways of knowing and passing on knowledge are intrinsic to fostering our kindred relations within our communities and with the natural world. In this spirit, communities are pulling together to innovate, inspire and imagine diverse ways to keep Indigenous languages in the forefront of our lives.

The COVID-19 pandemic pressed language learners and advocates to turn toward technology as a means to continue in their language revitalization efforts. This led to many community language programs restructuring resources to support remote learning. In addition, old recordings and language resources have resurfaced and been given “new life” as ambitious learners revisit and share them across communities. Taking advantage of various virtual meeting platforms, elder-speakers were tutored to access them as a means to continue mentoring and encouraging new speakers. Communities already deeply invested in technology-based revitalization endeavors began to see their work as evermore essential to their efforts. In many cases, the pandemic prompted language workers to create new language resources and reflect on the changing needs of the community.

Remarkably, as the world paused in a new way, some language advocates, learners and speakers have been spending much time at home with their immediate family. Individuals who have largely spent their energies toward communal ILR efforts are now focusing more time on their families and home life. In some communities, like Kahnawá:ke, the pandemic seems to have brought the language back to the families, onto the land, in the gardens, in the bush and on the shores. The long-term impacts of these phenomena have yet to be seen, as the ultimate goal of ILR is for languages to



Figure 2. Tiohnhékwén (Our life supporters): Corn, beans and squash in Kahtehrón:ni's family garden (personal family photo).

thrive once again, in our homes, living across generations in the family unit.

Indigenous languages opportunities within COVID-19 crisis

In the wake of profound and on-going loss, mainstream society has described resilience as working to find the “silver linings” of the pandemic. We approach this discourse with caution because, while optimistic, it positions resilience as an individual attribute and responsibility. Instead, we view Indigenous communities as demonstrating resilience defined as “the strength and power of the collective cultural knowledge” (Thomas et al., 2016, p. 1) carried through language. Cultural knowledge and language lives within relationships and is intricately bound to our wellness. When the pandemic threatened individual and community wellness, we had to consider how we sustain our languages through these relationships while adhering to social distancing guidelines.

For Kari, this required advanced planning and commitment. She and her mom agreed to meet on Zoom daily for 1 hour in the evenings to learn Chikashshanompa' (Chickasaw language) together. This recurring meeting brought together two areas of her life which had previously felt disparate: her scholarly work focused on creating online language learning curriculum and her personal journey to bring language back into use within her family. Kari and her mom used various learning tools to guide their time together—such as these Chickasaw language learning tools (Figure 1), embedded audio and video, to structure their language learning time (chickasaw.net, chickasaw.tv/series/rosetta-stone-chickasaw). Audio and video recordings were



Figure 3. Onowa's new learning space for Mentor-Apprentice language sessions (personal photo).

especially important as they allowed Kari and her mom to create moments of Chikashshanompa' immersion (where only the language was spoken) as language learners. Aside from connecting with each other, a key motivator for Kari's mom was using the language with her grandbaby who joined the call at the end of each session.

For Kahtehrón:ni, the garden became a space to sustain familial relationships and center language while planting their original seeds passed down for countless generations (Figure 2). Spending time each day connected to land, speaking Kanien'kéha (Mohawk language) and telling stories as they worked together, it felt like returning to a natural way of being—a refuge from the increased strains associated with her work responsibilities and doctoral studies. Indigenous ways of knowing manifested through the interactions of language, land and family have inspired pathways within her doctoral studies as she continues to explore Indigenous language pedagogies.

While we share examples of Indigenous resilience through the stories of individuals, we are careful not to conflate “strength and autonomy with responsabilising” communities in a “manner that fails to address the ongoing culpability and accountability” of settler-colonial societies (p. 11). While Kari was able to continue to pursue language in the context of a family relationship, the pandemic greatly impacted language work in the Chickasaw Nation as a whole. Similarly, Onowa, as a university faculty member and mom of two school-aged children, experienced increased demands of the academic institution where she worked as well as the reality of full-time home schooling of two middle-schoolers which created initial barriers to maintaining personal language commitments. However, after some months, she was able to restart a Mentor (Master) Apprentice program (normally face-to-face) in an online format doing sessions through video call with her language mentor. Here is a photo of her preparation for one of those sessions (Figure 3).

Discussion and ways forward

Indigenous language continuation and revival work always carries the potential to be diminished to the “not right now” or the “that will have to wait while we deal

with bigger crises” file. The current global crisis is not diminishing in most places, and therefore we cannot allow Indigenous language efforts to be sidelined. As introduced in Thomas et al. (2016), on-going threats of colonialism are prevalent and unrelenting. Applied to the COVID-19 pandemic, Thomas’ theorizing explains that it occurs within a reality where “colonialism has not ended therefore people cannot be expected to ‘bounce back’ from ongoing adversities” (p. 10). The on-going threats and effects of colonization have not gone away, nor will this global health crisis eliminate them. Yet, Indigenous peoples continue to find collective and individual resilience in their languages and cultures (see, for example, Rice, 2013; Thomas, 2012, among others) and so, this is *not* the time to abandon language work or assume it can wait. Our futures are bound to our languages.

While we may be used to doing the majority of our work in-person, we, as community members with a shared purpose, must find ways to continue our work in the new reality—mainly that of digital connection. And finally, we may learn there are some advantages to working this way—not all the time and for all things, but we must open ourselves to the possibility that perhaps it was also time for some changes. Maybe it was time for a pause to recalibrate our focus and methods, and perhaps, some of the new mediums may help our language work to be more appealing to and inclusive of youth, diasporic and other community members. Our languages will benefit most if we embrace “what is” and find a way to harness the realities before us—then share with each other what we have learned so that we can continue to strengthen and shift our movement to continue Indigenous languages into time immemorial. We have undertaken a small collaborative research project to that end, and have several projects planned to assist with this sharing over the next year (visit netolnew.ca). We invite you to join us, to co-conspire and build strength among and between our movements, keeping our languages alive and strong for all of our relations, and generations yet to come.

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