



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Addressing historical trauma and healing in Indigenous language cultivation and revitalization

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## Abstract

This paper demonstrates that historical trauma, healing, and wellbeing require attention in Indigenous language cultivation and revitalization. While historical trauma affects Indigenous peoples across the spectrum of language knowledge and use, little is written about the ways it can be addressed in the teaching, learning, and development—the *cultivation*—of Indigenous languages. For Indigenous language educators, *how* we address historical trauma in our language cultivation may be one of the most critical factors affecting our potential to cultivate the wellness we seek, and new generations of speakers of our languages. Drawing on a Diné (Navajo) lens and voices from other Indigenous communities, this article focuses on historical trauma, healing, and wellbeing as important considerations in Indigenous language cultivation and revitalization, to which applied linguists, Indigenous peoples, and others interested in Indigenous language revitalization and Indigenous wellbeing should pay attention. It argues that many of the most appropriate approaches can and will come from within our own Indigenous ways of knowing and healing, and that sharing more work of this kind can strengthen cultivation and revitalization efforts. It provides recommendations for applied linguistics and allied fields, educational, governmental and other resource holders, and Indigenous communities, programs, language cultivators and revitalizers.

**Keywords:** historical trauma; healing; Indigenous language revitalization; Indigenous language pedagogy

As a member of the Diné Nation, a (re)learner of our language, Diné bizaad, and a person who devotes much thought and energy to identifying and contributing to its maintenance and revitalization, I have long tried to understand the most important factors in the teaching, learning and development—the *cultivation*—of our language. Although such cultivation shares some considerations with broader second language learning situations, Indigenous concepts of language—and language cultivation and revitalization—are often unholistically served by prevalent approaches to language teaching and learning, which, among other things, largely overlook the effects of settler-colonial oppression of Indigenous languages. For Indigenous language cultivation to reach its potential, it

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must address the effects of this oppression. This article focuses on historical trauma, healing, and wellbeing as important considerations in Indigenous language cultivation and revitalization, to which applied linguists, Indigenous peoples and others interested in Indigenous language revitalization and Indigenous wellbeing should pay attention.

Approaching this article, I draw on experiences learning world languages and how learning *my own* language has been both more difficult while at the same time *healing* in a way that is only possible in our language. I approach it with caution, as it can be deeply personal, involving our own families and communities. Wary of damage-oriented depictions of our peoples (Tuck, 2009), I find it important to not only call attention to our challenges but also to emphasize how the same knowledges and resilience that have helped us survive can also help us to heal. While my language community has a sizeable number of first language speakers/users, today we see a dramatic decline in the number of young speakers, and we grapple with historical trauma and its effects on natural cultivation of our sacred language. Becoming aware of historical trauma as a language learner, and then as an educator, I have felt a growing sense of responsibility to address it. Facilitating talking circles, listening to frustrations and pain, and talking through challenges with relatives and friends engaging with our language, I have wished I could do more. This has led me to think more deeply about the *how*. How do we best help our people, of all ages and walks of life, to heal with and through our languages? (McKenzie, 2020).

### Historical Trauma and Indigenous Language Shift/Loss

Systematic efforts by settler colonial governments of the United States and Canada to remove and eradicate Indigenous peoples from our lands and to forcibly assimilate us have led to Indigenous peoples developing historical trauma (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Whalen et al., 2016). Historical trauma has been defined as “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences” (Brave Heart, 2003, p. 7). As unresolved grief caused by systemic loss (which will become clear below), it involves assault by dominant culture, affecting those traumatized biologically, psychologically, and societally, and it can be transmitted from the generation directly experiencing it to future generations (Shea et al., 2019, p. 554).

Among the aspects of Indigeneity most profoundly impacted by historical trauma are Indigenous languages. Though not always addressed, historical trauma affects our peoples across the spectrum of language knowledge and use, including first language speakers, silent speakers (who understand but do not speak the language), as well as (second) language (re)learners (Elijah, 2020; Thompson, 2021).

Elder Indigenous language speakers who experienced violently oppressive treatment for speaking their languages often struggle with emotional pain triggered by using their language. Elders have described to me being forced to keep a bar of soap in their mouth for long periods, or having their mouths washed out. Elsewhere, elders recall children being picked up by their hair and shaken while being threatened with beating in class, toddlers exposed to ice-cold showers and a child being forced to put their tongue on a metal flagpole in winter (Twitchell, 2018). Due to such experiences, Tahlitan educator David Rattray articulates the deep wounds that first language speakers can face in language revitalization work:

The amount of emotional pain that exists is so horrific [...] when we talk about language revitalization, we have to factor in a huge healing component [...]. There

is so much pain in our Nation that language revitalization [...] when you sit back and watch them try to implement it, it's extremely difficult because there's too much pain in our communities. (Thompson, 2012, p. 140)

Often traumatic experiences happened in government-run boarding schools, which were places of terror for many Indigenous children. The traumas, widely inflicted by school personnel, had disastrous effects on the wellbeing of Indigenous youth, particularly with respect to their languages (Twitchell, 2018). Tlingit residential school survivor Annie Johnston describes her physical inability to speak her language due to her experiences:

But there's others like me that understand but don't speak. And we talk about what happens when we're trying. You get the lump in your throat. Your stomach starts churning. And all the other emotions that come in there. All the walls that were built up. Those walls weren't built by me! [...] The nuns did a good job on a lot of us. (Taff et al., 2018, p. 8)

Such trauma led to loss in ability to communicate cross-generationally about love, understanding, and cultivating knowledge (Taff et al., 2018), resulting in deep linguistic disjuncture. Great numbers of our peoples were brainwashed and traumatized into keeping their ancestral languages from next generations. Consequently, historical trauma also affects generations who grew up without their ancestral languages. Younger generations who have not learned their Indigenous languages can suffer from cultural guilt and shame, as they feel alienated from their own language and identity (Elijah, 2020; Twitchell, 2018). As Chickasaw scholar Kari Chew shares, "The far-reaching impact of colonization and the enduring pressures of assimilation had prevented me from knowing my language and, thus, fully knowing myself" (Chew, 2015, p. 155).

I have seen this surface as anger toward older generations for not having passed the language on—I still remember the voice cracking, tears, and frustration accompanying one of our learners' emotions, as they recounted not being raised in our language. Further, learners can experience criticism or judgment for their (perceived lack of) language abilities, or discouragement from learning the language (Abtahian & Quinn, 2017; Lee, 2009). These can be caused by internalized oppression carried by speakers due to trauma that they may not know they carry. I will never forget, after committing to (re)learning Diné bizaad as a young adult, being laughed at and told I was too old by a man from my own community. As learners internalize negative feelings surrounding our language, I have heard them put themselves down for not speaking it. They have voiced apprehension at trying to use our language, and they are not alone.

Pausing to think, how do prevalent language pedagogies and praxis address the challenges described in this section? For example, instructors did not address intergenerational language-related trauma, emotions and their relationship to my language development as I learned Mandarin, Spanish, or German. Most attention was on building structural-grammatical knowledge, communicative ability, and cultural competence. Based on the intergenerational struggle to survive with our languages, cultivation and revitalization of Indigenous languages requires additional layers of support.

### Returning to Indigenous Languages as Relational Medicine for Healing

Today, researchers are describing both negative health effects of not speaking one's Indigenous language as well as health-related benefits of Indigenous language

maintenance and revitalization (Erasmus, 2019; Jenni et al., 2017; Shea et al., 2019; Taff et al., 2018; Whalen et al., 2016). Some researchers suggest that participation in maintenance and revitalization efforts may help people recover from the effects of historical trauma. By having connection to their Indigenous languages, people better understand who they are, which can promote better health (Jenni et al., 2017; Moore, 2019; Thompson, 2012). This only affirms an understanding long shared by our elders and ceremonial practitioners: language *is* medicine. In this sense our languages can *literally* heal us.

The profound effects of (re)learning one's Indigenous language may be difficult to demonstrate empirically. Yet, for Indigenous peoples who experience such effects, it is clear that language, mental, psychosocial, spiritual, and physical wellbeing are inextricably linked. As a participant in one study described:

It opens the gates for emotions, like generations all bottled up inside of people that sometimes just cannot describe why they're so emotional, so grateful and overwhelmed with the relearning of their mother tongue. I think that when we're spiritually in balance, when we're in balance with Creation, we might not always see it scientifically, but OUR SPIRIT can feel it [...] If one can relearn their language and begin to clean out the generations of trauma, it can create a ripple effect within our bodies, within our communities, within our Nations. (Taff et al., 2018, p. 7)

Still, healing can take many years, even our lifetimes, as wounds from historical trauma cannot be expediently and easily bandaged and fixed (Thompson, 2012). It is complex as we each (individually and as communities) come to and navigate it at our own pace. Thompson asks, "...what specifically would work best for my people? How can we involve community in both healing and in language revitalization?" (2012, p. 240). Answering these questions means not only looking at how schools teach our languages but also at how all members of a language community help language keepers use and share their languages again, how we help learners feel good about developing and using their language in class, and especially with their families and communities. It is about *how* the community embraces returning to the language as a relational web of support, offering help for all language users in need of various levels and forms of healing, and embedding wellness and healing in language cultivation.

### Supporting Healing in Indigenous Language Cultivation Pedagogy

All who are involved in cultivating Indigenous languages are likely to encounter the effects of historical trauma in our work (Hermes & Kawai'ae'a, 2014). For Indigenous language educators, *how* we address historical trauma in our language cultivation may be one of the most critical factors affecting our potential to cultivate and maintain the wellness we seek and new generations of speakers of our languages. I have received this message clearly at times—in talking circles in which learners shared how their experiences affect their feelings with the language; in supporting a loved one who still gets the lump in their throat, halting them from using the language.

Teachers involved in cultivating our ancestral languages must be acutely aware of, prepared for, and responsive to effects of historical trauma. Anxiety, shame, and challenges with self worth are some of the many effects teachers should be aware of and

prepared to address, requiring positive support (Johnson, 2017). Not all (re)learners need the same level of support at the same time in their respective journeys, but we should be attentive to this support, just as we are to things like pronunciation or syntax—even more so—because a person's ability to open up to receiving and using the language is a prerequisite to other learning.

At the same time, we must also provide supportive space for all speakers to experience healing as they engage in our languages, and educators must be able to look inward toward our own experiences and perceptions to find ways to heal. In all that we do, we must carefully think about current language teaching and research practices that might unintentionally reinscribe the effects of historical trauma. These types of critical awareness and skills to address our unique language teaching and learning situations require distinct focus and educator development beyond common second language education pedagogy.

Of particular interest is language cultivation grounded in Indigenous values and ways of restoring balance and wellness (Real Bird, 2017). Many of the most appropriate approaches can and will come from within our own Indigenous ways of knowing and healing, which we have had for countless generations. For instance, Elijah (2020) explores applying an Indigenous form of healing to language efforts by considering how Rotinonshión:ni ceremony can support language regeneration with silent speakers of Kanien'kéha. Western mental health approaches may also contribute to healing. The First Peoples Cultural Council's *Reclaiming My Language* program offers an example, using cognitive behavioral therapy to help silent speakers reclaim their language (First Peoples' Cultural Council, 2021).

Sharing more work of this kind can bolster efforts to address wellness and healing in our pedagogy. For example, the annual Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium and conferences held by the National Indian Education Association provide important forums for research, workshops, and dialogue. Ideas and inspiration for healing approaches can also be supported by Indigenous peoples sharing our experiences across contexts (see McIvor et al., 2009), much in the way Hawaiian educators share with Indigenous groups developing immersion education programs (K. Kawai'ae'a, personal communication, April 2016), or as occurred in a 2020 virtual series highlighting Indigenous practitioners' approaches to language nests (Ojibwemotaadidaa Omaa Gidakiiminaang, 2020).

### Moving Forward

Little has been written about what programs, scholars, communities, and individuals are doing to foster healing through and with language cultivation and revitalization. Although it is helpful to articulate broader concepts of wellness integral to language revitalization and maintenance (e.g., Bell & Marlow, 2009; Twitchell, 2018), and to hear voices representing the positive effects of revitalization on health, we need more. While important research on language revitalization is being done (e.g., Crowshoe et al., 2021; McIvor & Chew, 2021), to better support our learners and speakers in their language journeys we need more resources that specifically address healing in language cultivation. With that in mind, I highlight the following recommendations, outlined for various roles, which can help us realize interconnected goals of wellness, healing, and language cultivation and revitalization in Indigenous communities:

**Scholars in Applied Linguistics and Allied Fields Should:**

- Increase their understanding of, and support for, holistic Indigenous concepts of language (Leonard, 2017).
- Intentionally, and with Indigenous community consent and guidance, contribute to broader understanding of healing/wellness as and through Indigenous language cultivation.
- Support research studies, as requested, illuminating *how* Indigenous peoples promote healing through and with language cultivation and revitalization.
- Support projects facilitating Indigenous peoples' learning from/with each other to experience healing and language resurgence using *our own Indigenous knowledges*.
- Support Indigenous students/advises in researching connections between wellness, healing, teaching, and revitalization of Indigenous languages.

**Educational and Health Institutions, Tribal/Federal/State Governments, and Other Resource Holders Should:**

- Support language revitalization efforts that include Indigenous-defined wellness and healing through/with language development.
- Incorporate focus on historical trauma, Indigenous language learning and use, and considerations for healing and wellness in teacher preparation and professional development for educators.
- Provide community- and family-focused resources for information building and sharing around connections between historical trauma, healing, Indigenous language learning and use, with particular attention to language use and cultivation in families and supporting healing toward restoration of language use within them.
- Provide resources to raise awareness about, and address historical trauma, healing, and Indigenous language learning and use in school settings with staff, families, and students.

**Indigenous Communities, Programs, Language Cultivators and Revitalizers:**

As Indigenous peoples, we must all raise and maintain our awareness as to how our own thoughts, actions, and behaviors may be affected by historical trauma, how that can affect our interactions through/with/about our languages, and identify positive ways to address this for our own and our communities' wellbeing. Language programs should identify and implement concrete steps, support mechanisms, pedagogical and curricular elements that address historical trauma and healing with all community members, especially approaches that draw from our own Indigenous ways of healing.

As we have done in other areas of wellness for generations, sharing knowledge and practices for healing, let us increase Indigenous cross-cultural and cross-community sharing of what we are doing to address historical trauma in language cultivation and revitalization, to offer inspiration and ideas as we identify our own community-specific approaches. Let us support each other in our healing, in all the ways that might take shape, to use, learn, gift, and live with our languages as wellness for today and for our future generations.

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