

Centering Indigenous Ways of Knowing in Collaborative Language Work¹

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I became a linguist as a way of serving my own Miami tribal community in our efforts to reclaim our language, which in English is also called Miami but in the language is called *myaamiaataweenki*, or more commonly, *myaamia*. *myaamia* is an Algonquian language from what is now Indiana and Ohio, and was later also spoken in Kansas and Oklahoma after two forced removals of part of the Miami community by the United States government. Ours is a story of using archival documentation to bring our language back into community contexts: *myaamia* went out of use almost completely in the 1960s and was mislabeled “extinct” (Leonard 2008; 2011), but started coming back in the 1990s and is now an active part of Miami life (Baldwin and Costa 2018). This multifaceted reclamation effort has come to involve multiple stakeholders, many of whom are Miami tribal members but quite a few of whom are non-Indigenous researchers in areas such as linguistic analysis, education, and the development of computational tools. My belief, which to the best of my knowledge is widely shared, is that while these reclamation efforts are ultimately for Miami people, they are significantly enhanced through partnerships with non-Miamis, and these partnerships should be mutually beneficial.

My experience over 20 years of engagement in the reclamation process as a tribal member, a linguistics student, and now a professional linguist, has been that most of these partnerships have indeed been positive and mutually beneficial. For example, complex linguistic analysis was necessary to interpret the *myaamia* documentation in archives, and in some cases to fill in gaps based on comparison to other Algonquian languages. It was a non-Miami linguist who completed the foundational research (Costa 2003) and continues this research today in a partnership with the Miami community, a role that also supports his continued work as a linguist in other areas. Similarly, a shared effort between the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma and Miami University, a public university in Ohio, focuses on Miami tribal needs but also supports the research and educational goals of the university (see Baldwin and Olds 2007; <https://miamioh.edu/myaamia-center/>). I have been pleased to witness the development of other successful partnerships between university-based researchers and Indigenous communities along with the resulting products such as dictionaries and language curriculum, as well as intangible outcomes such as friendships, the acquisition of new skills, and community empowerment.²

However, it is also common in my professional life that I learn of less fruitful partnerships between Indigenous communities and academic partners, a recurrent trend being that the Indigenous community members feel the partnership in question to be overly dictated by academic interests and Western approaches. My goal in the current paper is to respond to this issue through an analysis of what has become a buzzword in Indigenous language work:³ *collaboration*, particularly as it relates to long-term language projects in which professional researchers engage with Indigenous language communities. As a general tool, collaboration is recognized as a beneficial approach based on the notion that different people bring diverse skills and perspectives, the combination of which makes a given project stronger than it would otherwise be. This principle is straightforward and can apply to all Indigenous language work, but my focus in this paper is on partnerships between non-Indigenous linguists and members of Indigenous communities, where “collaboration” has become a named approach that has taken on additional connotations.⁴

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A key trend in Indigenous language work is that “collaboration” has come to imply that the scope of the work should significantly reflect the needs and goals of language communities, and that this entails centering those community needs and goals in the design of research. Accompanying this principle is the belief that collaboration between university-based researchers and Indigenous community groups entails the sharing of responsibility and authority for a project from its outset (Harrison 2001; Leonard and Haynes 2010). Under this view, a situation where an outside researcher develops the core points of an Indigenous language project and later solicits community members to take on some of the project’s tasks may not count as collaborative. Keren Rice (2006, 149-150) captures this notion when she argues that “[c]ollaborative working arrangements are not truly collaborative if the linguist still controls the content and framework of the research, and the form in which it appears.”

With its increasing focus on language communities’ needs and values, “collaboration” as a contemporary model of Indigenous language work is partly a response to earlier norms of linguistic fieldwork in which the linguist structured the research project around Western science’s methods and goals, and language speakers provided data. There have been many discussions of this approach, for which I borrow the name “linguist-focused model” as suggested by Ewa Czaykowska-Higgins (2009), who notes as a limitation of this model that “the outputs of the research reflect the understanding and priorities of the linguists, and are produced for the linguists and not for those whose language is being studied ... and are molded by the linguists’ assumptions about knowledge, its construction, and its value” (22).

Collaboration in recent Indigenous language work, particularly for documentation projects, responds to the limitation given above. It is recognized as a strategy of making language work more culturally relevant and useful to members of language communities, and is widely predicated on the notion that this is the appropriate thing to do. Collaboration serves as a strategy of minimizing top-down approaches to language work by integrating the needs and expertise of all parties into the design of language work.⁵ Not surprisingly, collaboration is thus increasingly hailed as an ethical model that researchers *should* normally try to cultivate (but see Crippen and Robinson 2013 for a strong critique of this assumption). Revealing, however, is that I have never encountered the opposite: that language communities *should* try to cultivate collaborative projects with researchers as a way of being ethical. Rather, Indigenous community calls for collaboration are commonly framed around practical needs and the idea that outside researchers may offer valuable expertise or resources.⁶

Emergent from the mismatch described above is something I have found to be fully known in Indigenous communities, and usually known (though sometimes dismissed) among non-Indigenous researchers: Ideas about, as well as the details of, the contemporary Indigenous language work collaborations under discussion in this paper are intertwined with ongoing Indigenous community experiences with exploitative research and colonialism, particularly for the North American context that I work in. As such, it is a given that these collaborations are going to be complex and that even those that are identified as successful will usually entail challenges that go beyond practical issues such as access to funding.

I focus the remainder of this paper on such examples. These are good projects whose stakeholders generally appreciate each other, but where the projects nevertheless experience shortcomings that I believe stem significantly from misalignments between the ideas of the academic and community participants. I suggest that an underlying issue is that these collaborative projects, despite having stated goals of helping Indigenous communities, too easily reproduce elements of the linguist-focused model and related colonial structures, which

are so strongly ingrained in research norms that they are hard to move beyond. I argue that bringing more Indigenous cultural norms into the structures of these projects can address this problem and offer several specific strategies to do so. In recognition that the ethical tenets of collaboration in these contexts are generally framed around the actions of non-Indigenous researchers, especially linguists, I present my commentary with this audience in mind.

I share these ideas with the caveat that I do not intend to offer *the* model, and follow others (e.g. Rice 2018) in emphasizing that what is “best” will vary based on the situation. It is well recognized, for example, that the expectations associated with researchers vary significantly based on cultural context and that “collaboration,” understood as a decolonizing activity under a frame of equal partnership, may not be expected or desired by some language community groups (see e.g. Dobrin 2008 and Holton 2009). Moreover, I strongly believe in respecting the diversity and self-determination of Indigenous groups, and a one-size-fits-all approach is contradictory to this. However, there are concerns that are widely shared among Indigenous peoples with similar experiences of colonization and settler colonialism, such as those in the United States and Canada. By extension, there are some general possible responses that I suggest are at least worthy of consideration when planning, engaging in, or assessing Indigenous language work.

Centering Indigenous Epistemologies Beyond Sharing Information, to Sharing Knowledge

I have been greatly inspired by the work of several Indigenous scholars who have theorized how colonial structures can be dismantled through research practices that center Indigenous epistemologies and protocols (e.g. Garrouette 2003; Wilson 2008; Kovach 2009; Smith 2012). These Indigenous research methodologies highlight the importance of knowing and building relationships, emphasize the responsibility that comes with producing and disseminating knowledge, and draw attention to community needs. They also provide tools to disrupt the privileged and often unmarked status of Western ways of knowing. For instance, Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) offers an important distinction that I believe is fundamental for centering Indigenous ways of knowing in collaborative language work. This is the difference between sharing *information* and sharing *knowledge*. Sharing information, Smith notes, refers to the disclosure of only surface facts or conclusions, while sharing knowledge extends beyond surface facts and conclusions to include “the theories and analyses which inform the way knowledge and information are constructed and represented” (2012, 17).

An example of sharing information, rather than knowledge, in language work might occur in a scenario such as the following: A linguist engages with an Indigenous community in a documentation project that is understood by all stakeholders as a shared effort to assure that the language can be known by future generations, both scientific communities and the Indigenous community. However, the products created by the linguist are all oriented toward academic audiences. The sharing of information occurs when this linguist provides copies of these products to members of the language community, who find them to metaphorically be in a language they don’t understand even though the products are literally about their language.

The hypothetical linguist-focused example given above is not characteristic of the Indigenous language research partnerships that I am most familiar with. It also defies a contemporary expectation of language documentation as a scientific enterprise, which is that the products resulting from the project should be accessible to language communities. However, I more frequently see a less extreme

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version, what might be called the camouflaged linguist-focused model, and offer the following scenario as an example: A linguist engages with an Indigenous community in a documentation project that is understood by all stakeholders as a shared effort to assure that the language can be known by future generations, both scientific communities and the Indigenous community. As part of realizing the community goal, the linguist creates two versions of a grammatical description, the first of which is written for other professional linguists, and the second of which is for community use. (The order is important here.) I support the strategy of making multiple resources to address diverse needs, but a problem can arise when the community version is based on the linguist-oriented version—for example, by replacing technical jargon with more widely known words but keeping the same categories of presentation—thus reinforcing linguists’ norms of approaching language. This second resource is good about making information more accessible, but it fails to share the underlying knowledge.

In situations where the members of the community are already socialized to using Western-style language reference materials, as with some members of my tribal community, this type of resource might be appropriate. However, I have observed other situations where community members appreciate and are able to comprehend such a resource, but feel reluctant to use it or are otherwise troubled because *something about it isn't right*. It may be, for example, that the connection they feel to their language lies not in parts of speech or grammatical patterns, but instead emerges from relationships with land, ancestors, and each other. As I have discussed in earlier work, an ongoing problem in collaborative language work is that the design and goals of a given project are so often centered around linguists’, rather than community members’, definitions of language (Leonard 2017; 2018; see also Rice 2006 for discussion of this pattern).

The definitions of language that are commonly used in linguistic science represent a consensus that emerges from the efforts of previous and current researchers, most of whom operate(d) in a scientific tradition framed around Western ways of knowing (even though, ironically, linguistic science heavily features non-Western languages). Sharing knowledge about linguistic research products, to use the words of Smith (2012, 17), could be described as “sharing the theories and analyses which inform the way [language is] constructed and represented.” Doing so facilitates reciprocity by increasing the likelihood that materials created in contexts of collaborative language work will be not only useful, but also congruent with community cultural norms since the way that something is presented (including whether it is presented at all) emerges from an ongoing negotiation in which the different parties’ knowledge systems are made explicit.

Closely related to the value of sharing knowledge is the importance of sharing beliefs. In her discussion of achieving success in collaborative language projects, Lenore Grenoble notes,

One key step in successful collaboration is what can be called prior ideological clarification ... not only within the community but also, critically, between community members and linguists. Specifically, the various parties or stakeholders need to clarify what their own goals are, what the challenges are, and what the priorities will be ... This ideological clarification must be an ongoing process in any collaborative venture, as goals, challenges and opportunities will inevitably shift as the work progresses. (2009, 66; see also Kroskrity 2009 for additional discussion of ideological clarification)

As discussed above, I have found an especially crucial point for ideological clarification to be how the people in a collaborative project understand “language,” especially as this relates to their goals, challenges, and priorities. Sharing this, along with the key issues of who is expected to do what, forms the foundation to collaborative language work. Among the other points that I have found useful to clarify are the following, represented here as questions that might be asked:

- Are there roles that you’re (un)able or (un)willing to take on? that you’d like to take on?
- Are there things that shouldn’t be shared or used in certain contexts, and why?
- Regarding products that come out of a project: Whose are they? (and is “ownership” the appropriate concept?) How should they be shared?
- How do members of the language community feel about linguist(ic)s?

Whether or not one directly asks such questions is not the issue so much as whether the underlying beliefs are able to inform a collaborative language project, which entails that these views be allowed to emerge and that this occur regularly since views can change. In my own community, I do ask such direct questions, but this reflects a long relationship with other community members and norms of having such discussions openly. Elsewhere, ideological clarification might require creating opportunities for these and related themes to emerge.⁷

Centering Indigenous Approaches to Relationships Beyond Position, to Positionality

In some contexts where I am invited to share my thoughts about language, I begin with a confession: I am a linguist. Among Indigenous audiences, this statement tends to evoke a chuckle. I interpret this reaction as the audience’s recognition that linguistic science can be employed for positive things, but that by locating myself in the field and framing this as a confession, I am associating myself with the field’s problematic history of interactions, research, and assumptions about languages and language communities. In making this connection, I am acknowledging that the lens through which others view my professional activities will at least partly reflect what “linguist” has come to mean, and that this in some cases will occur regardless of whether I personally exhibit a trait that has come to be associated with this named position.

I see this link as natural because I tend to default to groups (including those defined by academic training or focus) as a starting unit of analysis when thinking through issues of interpersonal dynamics. Through this view, there are indeed individual persons, but there is a strong emphasis on how each person is connected to others through a variety of relationships, whether these be direct connections (e.g. family members or in-person interactions) or emergent by virtue of shared traits such as age, gender, and race/ethnicity. As such, when I enter into a collaborative project, my individual personhood is important, but so too are all of the relationships that I bring. Some of these grant special privileges, some bring extra challenges, and some bring added responsibilities.

To draw attention to the effects of such relationships, I emphasize the difference between social *positions*, such as one’s gender, age, and occupation, and *positionalities*, which go beyond the positions themselves to include the context of how these positions came to be and how they relate to other social positions. One might say that social positions are tied to individuals, but positionalities are tied both to an individual person’s positions and to the full set of people who have occupied the same positions, as well as to the broader structures that

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inform social roles. A focus on positionality thus highlights issues that a mere acknowledgment of positions can miss.

Understanding the needs and contributions of “language learners,” for example, does not just stem from general principles of language acquisition (though expertise in the associated research can be very helpful), but rather evokes much wider questions of how community knowledge is meant to be transmitted, which in turn reflects the norms of other social positions and the status awarded to each. Positionality includes the extent to which “language learner” is meant to be an active role (where the person is meant to actively seek knowledge) or a more passive role (where the person is expected to listen and observe), and also draws attention to the positions of people who guide the language learners. Among the positions that occupy the latter role is “Elder,” which in my community, as in many others, goes far beyond age in that it is an actual named role, associated with a high level of respect, and carries privileges and responsibilities. I have observed individuals I believe were well-intentioned treating Elders inappropriately, and my impression is that this (at least some of the time) comes from not understanding what “Elder” means in a tribal context.

“Speaker” provides another example of a position in Indigenous language work, one to which I devote some discussion because I have observed it being employed in problematic ways. Focusing on just the position of “speaker,” without having examined why this has become a named role (an issue of positionality), easily yields a potentially damaging erasure of the full personhood and community roles of individuals who hold this title. For example, in grant applications they become “speakers,” and likewise in academic research (and sometimes in community-based language programs), they are too easily reduced to this specific role. Focusing on how this named position came to be—presumably a distinction that developed because language endangerment made this a marked trait—makes such erasures less likely.

My social positioning of course informs the current paper, both its content and how others will interpret it, and I thus offer some additional details about my background: I am an Indigenous man in my early 40s as of writing, specifically a citizen of the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, and was greatly influenced by my late grandfather, *akima waapimaankwa* (Chief White Loon, 1925-2008), who emphasized the importance of our tribal ways of knowing. I grew up in ancestral Miami homelands and feel a special connection to that place, though I currently live in the lands of the Cahuilla, Tongva, Serrano, and Luiseño peoples. My heritage also includes Japanese and European ancestry, both of which influence my ways of interacting with the world, as well as how I am perceived and granted legitimacy (or in some cases, not granted legitimacy). My doctoral training in Linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley taught me major linguistic theories and socialized me to the norms of the discipline and of academia more widely. It also fostered connections with Indigenous people from around California because there is documentation of California languages held in Berkeley archives, and California Indigenous community members frequently come to Berkeley to consult these archival materials. Several years after completing my doctoral training in 2007, I remain a linguist with respect to my research focus in Indigenous language reclamation. However, my current faculty position is in Ethnic Studies, where I am more supported in following Indigenous research approaches than I believe would be the case in most other university departments.

Centering Indigenous Approaches to Science
Beyond “Objectivity,” to Reflexivity

A focus on positionality, as exemplified by my own story, provides a segue to another topic that warrants examination in Indigenous language work. Here, I reference an idea that has been emphasized frequently to me by other scientists, which is that linguistic research *must be objective*. With respect to the importance of reporting on what’s actually there even if it isn’t what one wants to be there, I agree with this idea, but find that the practice of framing linguistic research as “objective” often functions as a means of maintaining the privileged unmarked status of Western ways of observing and reporting on the world, and by extension, the people who come from this tradition. Similarly, scientific fields such as Linguistics often deemphasize the identities of researchers under the assumption that scientific results should come out more or less the same regardless of who is doing the investigation. The logic to this claim is that the findings come from empirical data—for linguists, linguistic data specifically. However, the packaging of language as sets of data, and the consideration of something as meaningful data, and the idea of calling it “data” as opposed to language examples or something else, of course occurs by specific people who come from certain cultural contexts that guide how they interpret the world and are interpreted by others.

Moving beyond false notions of objectivity is facilitated by a focus on the positionalities of scientists. A corollary for this paper is that it is important for researchers in collaborative Indigenous language work to acknowledge and share their backgrounds, hence aligning with a common Indigenous protocol: emphasizing who you are and where you come from.⁹ To discuss this approach, I adopt from social science research the notion of reflexivity, which captures this idea well. Reflexivity goes beyond being aware of one’s feelings, motives, and assumptions, to also critically reflect on all of these and how they guide research outcomes. For example, both the legitimacy afforded to, as well as the actual use of, a grammatical reference material can vary significantly based on the social positions of the person(s) who created it.

For researchers, being reflexive thus goes beyond sharing information about one’s background to instead call for sharing knowledge about it. The specifics of what this entails will vary by context, but one area I draw special attention to for collaborative language work is the importance of linguists sharing knowledge about the field called “Linguistics,” which is misrepresented as *the* scientific study of language but is arguably better described as a specific (largely Euroamerican) tradition of scientifically studying language. The positionality of “linguist”¹⁰ evokes various power dynamics that emerge from the colonial history of Linguistics (Errington 2008; Leonard 2018), which in turn yields insights about contemporary norms in the field. Sharing knowledge prompts awareness that many topics of theoretical focus in the discipline are misaligned with the needs of language communities (see Mellow 2015), but also calls attention to recent changes in the field and the ways in which it can continue to shift.

Finally, although my commentary thus far has largely been on the responsibilities that emerge from a focus on researchers’ positionalities, I would be remiss to leave out a discussion of how reflexivity regarding positionality sheds light on an experience that I know many non-Indigenous (and some Indigenous) linguists have when they participate in collaborative Indigenous language work. I refer here to linguists who are critical of the linguist-focused model and want to do good things, and feel hurt, offended, or frustrated because they keep hearing negative remarks about linguists. Viewing “linguist” as a position in such situations is not helpful, and sometimes leads these individuals into a defensive mode (e.g. “well, not *all* linguists ...!”) that not only strains interpersonal relations but also fails to

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actually address the underlying issues, which emerge from a complex history of events, ideas, and power relations. An emphasis on positionality shifts the focus from the individual person to that broader history, though of course individual researchers remain responsible for their own actions. A critical examination of the field, and sharing of this knowledge, also highlights the field's diversity.

Centering Indigenous Notions of “Stakeholder”

I recall a recent story of a Miami *ahkihkwá* (usually translated as ‘ceremonial drum’) re-gaining health. The specifics of this story are private (and some details I don’t know), but the basic idea is that a Miami drum got moved away from *myaamionki* (‘Miami lands’), and this drum was not healthy. Among other things, the drum was drying out, and wasn’t making the appropriate noise. A tribal member eventually took this drum home over a long car trip and things improved. The drum began to sweat and make noise as *myaamionki* grew near.

I imagine that people from a variety of cultural backgrounds could come to a conclusion about what happened in this story, the default Western scientific hypothesis perhaps being that the drum had been created for an environment with a certain level of moisture, and performed better when brought back into that environment. This may be true, but an equally straightforward reason is that the drum was happy to be home. The second possibility makes sense in a Miami worldview because ceremonial drums have spirits, as evidenced by the word *ahkihkwá*, which grammatically falls into a class of animate nouns along with words like *mihtohseenia* ‘person,’ *cecaahkwá* ‘sandhill crane,’ and *ahseema* ‘tobacco.’ I remember my grandfather, in alignment with this worldview even though his direct knowledge of *myaamia* was limited to a few words, emphasizing the importance of drums at cultural events, where drums are blessed ahead of time and there are protocols around who can touch them.

I share this story as a way of introducing two stakeholders whose needs and perspectives inform Miami language projects: *ahkihkwá* and my late grandfather. Unfortunately, both stakeholders would be omitted under the definitions of “collaboration” that I have experienced in academic contexts, where the scope normally includes only living humans and sometimes narrows this further to consider only the university-based researchers in a given project. While my experience is that researchers in Indigenous language work always recognize future generations as stakeholders, I have seen less recognition of ancestors as stakeholders. Non-human relatives may also be key stakeholders. A higher power, however conceived of or named, may have provided the gift of language to the community and as an important stakeholder must be recognized. Similarly, beyond serving as the literal foundation on which people perform language work, land may be a key stakeholder. Indeed, specific landscapes are reflected in the grammar and vocabulary of Indigenous languages, and especially for a community that defines itself with reference to a specific place, a collaborative project in which researchers do not emphasize and honor that place is bound to have problems.

Conclusion: Centering Indigenous Notions of “Collaboration”

Thus far, I have addressed several Indigenous protocols that can guide collaborative language work such as the sharing of knowledge rather than information, an emphasis on positionality and reflexivity, and the consideration of all relationships when identifying the stakeholders in a given project. I now take the notion of promoting Indigenous values in collaborative language work idea a step further by returning to the notion of “collaboration” as a concept, specifically if

and how it exists as an idea in a given cultural frame. This might be addressed during ideological clarification with a question such as the following, which can then be expanded upon for truly sharing knowledge: How do you understand “collaboration”?

I emphasize the importance of the issues probed in this question in recognition that the sociopolitical structures within which actions occur can be just as important for guiding outcomes as the actions themselves. For instance, teaching an Indigenous language through Western norms of education can reproduce Western social hierarchies, assumptions, and power relationships, even when the stated goal of teaching an Indigenous language may be to support the Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural values that are embedded in that language. Similarly, protecting tribal sovereignty is a common goal among the Indigenous nations located within the present-day United States, but if the “sovereignty” in question is overly framed around colonial legal systems and norms of governance (in other words, what the United States government says it is), an effect may be that a given Indigenous nation’s intellectual and cultural sovereignty gets diminished. To what extent might the same principle apply for “collaboration”?

I do not have a firm answer to this question, but pose it for further inquiry and conclude this paper by sharing two thoughts on the topic. The first involves how I might answer the question: In myaamia, there is a verb root *wiicimiihkimom-*, which means ‘to work with somebody’ (and even gets translated as ‘to collaborate’). However, the word that comes to my mind first is *aweentioni*, a noun formed off the verb meaning ‘to be related to each other.’ *aweentioni* is translated in old documentation as both ‘alliance’ and ‘peace.’ I interpret this link as capturing my ancestors’ wisdom that knowing and cultivating relationships yields harmony, and note that the specific suggestions in this paper all come down to being thoughtful about relationships. My second thought is that collaboration between academic researchers and community partners, despite having become common for Indigenous language work, is still comparatively marked in other academic contexts—sometimes to the point that it has to be justified. While norms for professional advancement at research universities are changing to increasingly reward public engagement, these institutions still often de-emphasize the scholarly value of community partnerships and fail to account for the time it takes to cultivate relationships. This contrasts with Miami ways of knowing because everything is about relationships such that I think a *non*-collaborative approach to research is what would stand out. In fact, even when I literally work alone, as I have for writing this paper, the aforementioned relationships remain in place so strongly that I feel like I am working with others.

Notes

¹ This paper developed from a presentation titled “Fostering Indigenous-Centered Collaborations in Language Reclamation” at the 2018 Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium. Its current title and focus reflect feedback from Symposium participants. I offer my gratitude to these participants as well as to an anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft, to the organizers of the Symposium, and to the members of the Kainai, Piikani, and Siksika Blackfoot First Nations, on whose traditional territories this Symposium took place.

² Academic writing conventions call for inclusion of specific examples at this point, but I am choosing in this paper to deviate from this convention in recognition that what’s described in a publication represents specific points of view that may not be shared by all stakeholders in a given partnership. I have known of partnerships being described more positively by researchers (who commonly write the publications) than by community stakeholders, and

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recognize that the reverse can also occur. As such, while I am convinced that excellent outcomes exist, I hesitate to identify specific examples beyond those in which I am directly engaged.

- ³ By “Indigenous language work,” I refer collectively to language documentation, description, analysis, teaching, active learning, advocacy, and resource development, along with the interactions that occur as part of these efforts.
- ⁴ There is a large body of literature on this topic, the scope of which goes beyond the current paper. I offer the following as examples: For literature that examines the rise of collaborative approaches in Indigenous language work, I suggest Grenoble (2009), Dobrin and Schwartz (2016), and Sapién (2018). For theory on collaborative models of Indigenous language work, I suggest Gerdtz (1998), Yamada (2007), Eira (2008), Penfield et al. (2008), Czaykowska-Higgins (2009), Leonard and Haynes (2010), Rice (2011; 2018), and Shulist (2013). Supporting these theoretically and philosophically-oriented discussions are many essays on specific collaborations in which the authors also reflect on the collaborations themselves. Examples I have found helpful include Warner, Luna, and Butler (2007), Ahlers (2009), Eira and Solomon-Dent (2010), Cruz and Woodbury (2014), Stenzel (2014), Czaykowska-Higgins et al. (2017), Sarkar (2017), Genee and Junker (2018), and Langley et al. (2018).
- ⁵ “Collaboration” is also used to describe joint efforts between multiple researchers (Glenn 2009) and within community-internal language projects. However, my focus in this paper is on researcher-Indigenous community collaborations, which have become the prototype for theorizing practices of academic Indigenous language work.
- ⁶ This is not to say that community members don’t address the needs and goals of researchers. I have been in such discussions, which sometimes explicitly raise questions about the community’s ethical obligations. However, I would characterize these as discussions about ethical protocols within a given project, not the idea that cultivating a collaborative project is itself a strategy of being ethical.
- ⁷ Related to this is that what is left unsaid can be as important as what is stated, especially when there are significant power differentials among the participants in a conversation and/or cultural norms of indirectness.
- ⁸ Speakerhood includes people who have learned a language later in life, but I use “speaker” here as I commonly hear it employed in contexts of North American Indigenous language work, where it refers to individuals who acquired a given language as a child through intergenerational transmission.
- ⁹ The relevance of positionality of course applies to everybody in a given collaboration, but in recognition of the researcher privilege that tends to characterize such situations, I place emphasis on the responsibility of researchers.
- ¹⁰ It is beyond the scope of the current paper to fully analyze this title, but I emphasize that this is important to do. In some contexts, “linguist” includes language scholars beyond those who are prototypically identified by this title. It may also be narrow—for example, to refer only to linguists from a particular place or institution, or to those whose identities as linguists intersect with specific traits, such as being missionaries.

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