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# Sustaining and revitalizing traditional Indigenous ways of speaking: An ethnography-of-speaking approach<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This article makes a case for greater attention to traditional ways of speaking in Indigenous language maintenance and revitalization initiatives. It contends that traditional Indigenous communicative practices are overshadowed in many language revitalization programs by Euro-Western language ideologies and communicative norms that pervade language instruction. Through examples of speech by Lakota people, this article shows how the ethnography of speaking can usefully illuminate traditional Indigenous ways of speaking. It is posited that this “ethnography-of-speaking turn” promises to stimulate approaches to language revitalization that are more consistent with sustaining and revitalizing Indigenous cultures.

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## 1. Introduction

In Indigenous communities interested in revitalizing their Indigenous languages, a common strategy is to use school- and daycare-based language programs. In the United States and Canada, these programs are typically Indigenous-language-as-a-second-language (ILSL) programs for children and youth whose native language is a non-Indigenous language, usually English (McIvor and McCarty, 2016). Less common, though growing in number, are Indigenous language immersion (ILI) programs (McIvor and McCarty, 2016). ILSL programs tend to follow Euro-Western ideologies of language (Kroskrity, 2000; Schieffelin et al., 1998) and corresponding Euro-Western language pedagogy, where a language is primarily conceived of as a code, and instruction is oriented toward explicit teaching of the language's vocabulary and grammar. This often involves direct vocabulary and grammar instruction through lessons that are not grounded in Indigenous ways of speaking, or even in authentic contexts of communication. Yet, regardless of the type of language program, ILSL or ILI, in many cases students do not carry their Indigenous language knowledge and skill into interaction in family and community domains. That is, in many ILSL programs, the Indigenous language is decontextualized from the everyday social life of the Indigenous community in which the language is, or was, embedded in culturally traditional interaction. Instead, the language is atomized and curricularized and treated as a distinct school subject, much like mathematics or science. It is often disintegrated from authentic communication, particularly oral communication as it occurs outside of the language lessons themselves.

Not surprisingly, as I have come to know through my own ethnographic work among the Lakota people of Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, South Dakota, USA, which I will discuss below, and what I have learned from friends and colleagues whose work involves other Indigenous communities, ILSL learners develop minimal Indigenous language knowledge and skill, even

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after several years of instruction. It is not the fault of the teachers, or the students. Rather, it is a consequence of structural constraints on time and other resources, as well as other colonialism-related factors, factors outside of teacher and student control, that limit the development of Indigenous language knowledge and skill (see [Battiste, 2013](#), and [Lomawaima and McCarty, 2006](#), for additional information on assimilationist policies regarding Indigenous languages). Also, we should keep in mind that while Indigenous language fluency may not develop as a result of these programs, they are still very important contributors to enhanced self-esteem, cultural pride, academic achievement, community building, and closer intergenerational ties ([Demmert and Towner, 2003](#); [McCarty and Lee, 2014](#)). And in some communities, developing fluency may not be a goal of school-based programs.

Indigenous language immersion (ILI) programs, on the other hand, are better able to produce fluent Indigenous language speakers. This is, of course, a major reason why such programs are spreading to more and more communities, those wanting to restore informal, intergenerational use of their Indigenous language. Yet, even as ILI programs are growing in number, the literature does not adequately address how participants in these programs in formal educational institutions use their Indigenous language skills to any substantial degree within social interaction that takes place in home and community contexts (however, see Hawaiian and Maori examples in which boundaries between school, family, and community are intentionally fluid and interpenetrated). One of the reasons for this is the same reason why language revitalization programs tend to be situated in formal educational institutions in the first place: in some families and communities, Indigenous language use has almost or completely ceased; it is limited mostly to interaction between and among elderly speakers who acquired native Indigenous language fluency from infancy. Still, there is a tacit assumption that once learners develop fluency in and confidence with their Indigenous language through immersion in daycare and school settings, they will expand their use of it into other domains, situations, and events. And even where there are family and community members who are Indigenous language speakers—potential interlocutors for the immersion students—daycare or school programs tend not to provide sufficient opportunities for students to learn about the variety of their own heritage culture's traditional *ways of speaking*, that is, the patterns and functions of speaking that are part of the traditional Indigenous culture ([Hymes, 1974](#)).

Instead, the students' ways of speaking the Indigenous language are usually grounded almost exclusively in their experiences within formal educational institutions, which typically does not include more than a narrow range of traditional heritage culture ways of speaking ([White, 2006](#)). Their knowledge of and skill using the Indigenous language are inextricably bound up with what occurs in the daycare or classroom. This does not provide sufficient opportunities to develop knowledge about how to use the language in culturally appropriate ways in other contexts and for different purposes. For example, students do not ordinarily encounter at school models of how to talk to an infant or elder, provide wise advice, or give a speech in ways that are consistent with the speaking standards of their Indigenous culture (see, however, [Holm et al., 2003](#), on the use of 'situational Navajo').

This raises an important question: How do we strengthen the home-school-community interface ([Lee, 2016](#)) so as to revitalize and sustain Indigenous *communicative practices*? The answer entails not only enabling potential speakers to learn vocabulary and grammar, which is what the dominant Euro-Western ideology of language—language-as-structure or code—wrongly implies is sufficient for communication to occur. In addition to having linguistic competence (i.e., knowledge of language structure), one must be able to use the language in real situations, which, combined, [Hymes \(1962, 1972\)](#) defined as *communicative competence*. Communicative competence entails having the linguistic knowledge and skill necessary to engage in appropriate social interaction, appropriate according to culturally determined standards or norms ([Sherzer and Darnell, 1972](#)). And developing communicative competence in the heritage language requires being exposed to a variety of authentic interactions in the language that comprise the range of speaking situations and events found within home and community life—not only those interactions found within formal educational institutions. Yet, as mentioned above, exposure to these situations and events by potential new speakers is often limited, depending on access to Indigenous language speakers while they are interacting with one another in the Indigenous language.

In this article, I make an empirically grounded case for greater attention to traditional Indigenous ways of speaking in order to enhance and further decolonize Indigenous language revitalization programs and education. I contend that contemporary Indigenous language programs, particularly those in daycares and schools, would benefit if more attention is given to traditional Indigenous patterns and functions of speaking. Through examples of speech by Lakota people, I show how the ethnography of speaking can be used to identify traditional Indigenous ways of speaking so that they can be sustained and revitalized via Indigenous language revitalization programs, be they school-, family-, or community-based. I posit that making this 'ethnography-of-speaking turn' promises to further disrupt Western language ideologies and instructional practices and, instead, stimulate approaches to language revitalization that make a greater contribution towards sustaining and revitalizing Indigenous cultures.

## 2. Background

The case I present in this article derives from my ethnographic research on Lakota ways of speaking. Before laying out my case, it will be useful to elucidate the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the ethnography of speaking, as well as provide background information about the Oglala Lakota of Pine Ridge Reservation and their sociolinguistic landscape.

*Ethnography of speaking.* With roots in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, the *ethnography of speaking*—both as theoretical framework and methodology—offers a vantage point on language and communicative practices as embedded in sociocultural context ([Bauman and Sherzer, 1975, 1989](#); [Hymes, 1962](#); [Gumperz and Hymes, 1972](#)). Speech communities, we

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