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Putting the fourth crow in the sky: Using narrative to understand the experiences of one non-heritage learner of an endangered language



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ABSTRACT

Building on contemporary approaches to narrative analysis, this article examines how one non-heritage learner of an endangered Native American language described his experiences of learning Lenape in a college course. Analysis of a multimodal digital narrative created as a course project demonstrates the ways that this student employed a legend as a metanarrative to contextualize his individual language learning journey as part of a broader linguistic and cultural revitalization movement. Structural elements of the narrative downplay the narrator's individual role and agency in studying the language, showing ways that this learner negotiated his position and privilege in learning a language previously only spoken by members of the Lenape cultural community. The article considers the utility of narrative analysis and the constructs of investment and imagined communities in a language revitalization context.

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Introduction

Spurred by dire predictions of an endangered language crisis, endangered language advocates have in the last several decades developed many models for teaching endangered, primarily Indigenous, languages. Ranging from approaches that look like traditional foreign language classes to innovative models such as immersion preschools or master-apprentice partnerships (e.g., Hinton, 2013; Hinton & Hale, 2001; Hinton, Vera & Steele, 2002), language revitalization has become an area of experimentation with language instruction, and also a field of scholarly inquiry beyond the documentation and analysis of these languages. Scholarship on language revitalization both describes and advances means of engaging with such projects (e.g., Amery, 1995; Dick & McCarty, 1996; Dorian, 1994; Goodfellow, 2003; Grenoble & Whaley, 1998; Hornberger, 2008; Leonard, 2012) and critiques these projects, often for employing discourses of disappearance or essentialism (e.g., Costa, 2013; Dobrin, Austin & David, 2007; Duchêne & Heller, 2011; Hill, 2002; Meek, 2010; Moore, Pietikäinen & Blommaert, 2010).

Research on language revitalization rarely intersects with research in applied linguistics, in spite of clear areas of common concern, such as understanding the conditions that allow for successful language learning. Reasons for this disconnect may include the fear of demonstrating that revitalization programs are not effectively churning out new speakers with native-like proficiency, and dynamics of distrust between Indigenous communities and academics. This gap is occasionally lamented,

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as in a special issue of *Language and Education* that called for “cross-disciplinary networking for revitalization and education in endangered language contexts” (Cope & Penfield, 2011). In this paper, I demonstrate one way of applying insights from research on language teaching and learning to the study of language revitalization. I argue that narrative analysis, which has proven a powerful tool for understanding language learners’ subjective experiences with language learning, provides an appropriate method for investigating similar questions with learners of endangered languages.

In this paper, I focus on narratives produced by one learner of an endangered language: Zack, who identified himself as “not a heritage learner” (interview, 5/24/2012) of Lenape, an Algonquian language historically spoken in the areas that are now Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and parts of New York. Zack took two semesters of Lenape language classes during his four years at Swarthmore College, an elite liberal arts college in Pennsylvania, where he majored in education with a minor in linguistics. I focus closely on Zack’s language learning narratives, in particular a digital narrative combining Lenape narration, English subtitles, images, video and music, created for a class assignment. This paper is part of a larger ethnographic study of Lenape language revitalization efforts in Pennsylvania, which informs the present paper. The purpose of this investigation is to examine the motivations of a learner of an endangered language, and in particular, of a non-heritage endangered language learner, a population that I suspect is growing as more universities offer courses in endangered languages (De Korne, 2013). This growth is a result of increased awareness of language endangerment, and a sense that institutions of higher education may provide a site to teach such languages, in addition to increasing the prestige of these languages due to their use in the privileged realm of academia. This growing population of non-heritage language learners provides a useful site for developing understandings of the interaction between language learning, motivation, and identity.

Lenape at Swarthmore

Lenape language courses at Swarthmore College are a rare example of a local Indigenous language being taught as a language subject (rather than an object for linguistic analysis) at a private college, and are one part of wider Lenape language and culture revitalization efforts in Pennsylvania (see also De Korne & Weinberg, 2013; Hornberger, De Korne & Weinberg, *in press*). The course began after the Lenape Nation of Pennsylvania’s Assistant Chief and Language Specialist, Shelley DePaul, met Swarthmore Linguistics professor Ted Fernald at a conference. Fernald asked what Swarthmore could do to support local Lenape language efforts, and together they hatched the idea of a college-level course. The introductory course, which has been offered since 2009 and continues to be offered every other year, introduces college students to the structure of this language as well as providing a “front lines” view of language revitalization (student interview, 4/19/2012). In many ways, the course resembled a traditional grammar-translation approach to language teaching. Most class meetings included a review of homework from the previous session, sometimes with a vocabulary quiz, before moving to covering new vocabulary and grammar points from a textbook developed by DePaul.

While classroom activities involved a fair amount of memorization and repetition, Lenape’s status as a rarely taught and highly endangered language¹ created opportunities for students to engage with the language in other ways. In particular, students’ final assignments centered on developing the pedagogical corpus for the language, as students wrote stories that have been incorporated into later versions of the textbook, and also completed original final projects that often involved creating pedagogical materials, such as storybooks, translations of stories, or elaborating a verb dictionary. This participatory element of the class experience was particularly salient for Zack, who was one of the students in the first iteration of the class in 2009 and also participated in an advanced second-semester class. As Zack recalled in an interview, the introductory class felt very experimental: the materials that have since become a textbook were still in draft form as photocopied handouts, the orthography was still under debate, and the curriculum was being developed as they went along. In addition, his second semester of Lenape classes was focused on translating traditional stories from English into Lenape, again for use in teaching the language to others.

This paper draws from a larger ethnographic research project conducted between 2012 and 2014. Data collection included participant observation in the Lenape language class offered at Swarthmore College in Spring 2012 and Spring 2014, multiple interviews with DePaul, interviews with students who participated in the course every year that it was offered, and attendance at public and private events related to the Lenape language, such as ceremonies and museum exhibit openings. This paper focuses on one learner, especially the digital narrative he created as a final project for the course. The analysis is also informed by a 90-minute semistructured interview conducted at a coffee shop in May 2012, three years after he first took the introductory Lenape class. While most of the data presented here is about this single student, the analysis is informed by the wider ethnographic context.

Narrative inquiry and language learning

Many scholars of language learning consider learners’ subjective experiences to be central to their area of study. This strand of research sees language learning as not just a cognitive process but also a process of negotiating new identities,

¹ With no living first language speakers, the Unami dialect of the Lenape (Delaware) language has been declared extinct by some sources (Gordon, 2005; UNESCO, 2010), though the most recent version of the Ethnologue recognizes revitalization efforts by labeling the language “Reawakening” (Lewis, Simons & Fennig, 2014).

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