



“She can do it in English too”: Acts of intimacy and boundary-making in language revitalization



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A B S T R A C T

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This article argues that, for endangered languages, intimate modes of interaction become bounded in ways that both promote and endanger a threatened language. This contradiction becomes apparent when conceptions of “community” and “language” in relation to boundary-making practices are unpacked across different realms of discourse. Evidence from fieldwork conducted in the Yukon Territory, Canada, shows that on the one hand, the bureaucratic regimentation of endangered aboriginal languages forecasts an inclusive community; on the other, it delineates categories of “stakeholders.” Similarly, within an aboriginal language community, participation and responsibility become demarcated along various social lines such that the actual work of language revitalization creates opportunities for contestation, revealing how even the “intimate grammar” of interlocutors adumbrates differences in boundary-making and crossing.

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“She can do it in English too,” the organizer of the workshop announced. The audience appeared to grumble a little as the elder sitting in front of the microphone prepared yet again to narrate her experiences on the land for some future audience as well as for the muttering one in front of her. Later she would reflect on this experience, along with other similar ones, where her peers seemed to dismiss her expertise, her knowledge of aboriginal practices; “Maybe... [they] don’t like us so [they] don’t want us to get in that story, eh?” These workshops, centered on documenting and (eventually) analyzing aboriginal language practices and knowledge for preservation and pedagogy, were intimate affairs in that the preservation of knowledge and language were for younger and future aboriginal community members and the individuals involved were peers, having grown up with each other and relied on each other over the years, like family if not actually being family.

Drawing on Povinelli’s concept of “intimate grammar” and Herzfeld’s notion of “cultural intimacy,” Webster (2010, 2012) argues for the recognition of those “emotionally saturated” linguistic significations that “can create a common bond of sociality.” He beckons researchers to take a closer look at language use, marveling not only a language’s complex grammar but at the creative, esthetic details that evoke senses of comfort, longing, memory and so forth, details that *cross language boundaries* as delineated in grammars, dictionaries, language textbooks and other standardizing texts. For Webster, these linguistic flourishes are not merely words or the mixing of codes or the punning of phrases, but acts of intimacy, of signaling a deep,

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penetrating history re-experienced through linguistic practices and especially through the emotive elements of these signifying practices, language users facilitate recognition, relatedness, and thus community. They invoke a kind of intimacy while at the same time they highlight the borders of sociality. That is, as acts, they create, reify, iconize, or suggest boundaries and participate in processes of boundary-making and boundary crossing. This linguistic intimacy not only connects individuals to their ancestral heritage but can be taken up and used to construct and deconstruct the bonds, and boundaries, of membership. Analogous to Urciuoli's concept of "strategic shifter" (Urciuoli, 2003), these emotionally valenced linguistic acts, these intimate grammars, become strategically managed and manipulated in the making and scaling of social boundaries.

A non-linguistic case of boundary-making is the reckoning of tribal citizenship. An issue that has gained greater media attention in recent years has been the disenrollment of tribal members, turning citizens into non-citizens. (Wenona T. Singel, a professor of law at Michigan State University has argued that this a human rights violation.) In one case, a case in California, the elder who was disenrolled under new tribal leadership was claimed to be the last fluent speaker of the indigenous tribal language. This statement inspired cries of indignation and retribution from bloggers and on-line posters. Her connection to the tribal community, as indicated by her linguistic actions and knowledge, had been violated. Even so, her intimacy with the tribal language did not suffice in her claim to a kind of tribal intimacy. For endangered languages, such modes of signification become bounded in ways that both promote and endanger a minority language. For example, Silverstein's discussion of "language community" reveals the distinctive bounding of linguistic practices in relation to competence, participation, and nation-building, and thus both real and imagined linguistic inheritance (Silverstein, 1998). This boundedness becomes apparent in the bureaucratic rhetoric surrounding language endangerment and revitalization and the institutionalized practices that accompany such discourse. Muehlmann, for example, shows how such rhetorics circumscribe indigenous Cupap settlements in Mexico such that dominant institutional recognition of their indigeness demands a corresponding language, if only evidenced by a performance of *groserías* misrecognized (Muehlmann, 2008, 2012). For Dorian (1980), linguistic lag becomes an indication of degrees of participation in a speech community, and thus a sign of the boundaries of participatory practice.² This pattern emerges in the interactional venues responding to language endangerment. Thus, the contradiction of promotion-endangerment becomes apparent when conceptions of "community" and boundary-making practices are investigated across different realms of conceptualization and action, from bureaucratic categories and efforts to quotidian expectations and practices, from the spoken to the unspoken (assumed or discontinued).

Aboriginal language revitalization in the Yukon Territory, Canada offers an illustration of the making and scaling of boundaries in linguistic acts of signification. On the one hand, the bureaucratic regimentation of revitalization forecasts a boundary that includes all citizens of the territory (a territorial, nationally defined boundary); on the other, it distinguishes categories of "stakeholders" and responsibilities. I begin by attending to the administrative conceptions of community and the goals they are intended to facilitate where all Yukon citizens are responsible for the welfare of the Territory's aboriginal languages. Within this discourse, responsibility for improving their "health" falls on a more precise subgroup, an ethno-linguistically defined community (see Meek, 2009).³ Within this community additional boundaries emerge, delineating participation and responsibility in relation to age, competence, and kinship such that the actual work of revitalization and maintenance among those involved becomes an opportunity for contestation.⁴ I present an interaction at an aboriginal language workshop where one elder's speech is called into question, eliding the inclusive stance of the Territory through an exclusive ethno-linguistic inheritance. It reveals how even the "intimate grammar" of everyday interlocutors becomes subject to territorial politics and local contestations and underscores how intimacy itself is a negotiation of boundaries.

1. "We Are Our Language": imagining speakers, bounding competence

In the Yukon Territory, the public re-emergence, and political emergence, of aboriginal languages is situated within a bureaucratic framework of indigenous self-determination and national multiculturalism.⁵ Codified in the 1980s, Canada's "multiculturalism" and "multilingual" stances suggest tolerance of and advocacy for differences indexed by linguistic and cultural practices, accompanied by the establishment of French as a national language in addition to English ("Official Languages Act"). For the Yukon Territory, this bureaucratic code initiated a counter-move resulting in a language act specific to the territory. The Yukon Languages Act recognizes the two nationally official languages, English and French, and additionally

² In "Linguistic Lag as an Ethnic Marker," Dorian discusses the relationship between a time-differential ("lag") and linguistic practices in defining groupness. Her research with East Sutherland "fisherfolk" reveals the variety of forms that linguistic lag can and has taken: an "unusually pure" Gaelic, an "imperfect English," and an enduring bilingualism (1980: 39). The lag appears by comparison of certain ways of speaking with the linguistic norms of the time. Her insight is that "[a] marked linguistic lag can operate as a perfectly adequate marker of in-group membership even when the language spoken is not peculiar to the group in question" (1980: 39). That is, it is the lag, the "out-of-step behavior," rather than the language that signifies a group boundary.

³ In a similar fashion, Paul Nadasdy has argued that the land claim settlements and self-governing agreements negotiated with First Nations governments in the Yukon Territory, a literal boundary-making project, has also resulted in the emergence of ethno-territorial nationalisms among the First Nations, a boundary project fraught with similar opportunities for community-internal contestations (Nadasdy, 2012).

⁴ Much scholarship on gender and language shift illustrates this as well, revealing the range and ranking of categories of participation in language maintenance and revitalization efforts (for example, Bilaniuk 2003; Cavanaugh, 2006; Chernela, 2004; Echeverria, 2003; French, 2010; Urla, 2012). Similarly, age has also become a significant category for predicting language shift and for the accompanying rhetoric of language loss (Cavanaugh, 2004; Suslak, 2009).

⁵ For a general discussion of the political history of indigenous rights in Canada and the emergence of multiculturalism as policy, see Leung, 2011; Kallen, 1982; Mackey, 2002; in relation to the Yukon Territory and aboriginal language rights, see Meek (2009).

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