

# Weaving Words: Conceptualizing Language Reclamation through a Culturally-Significant Metaphor

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## **Abstract**

When the Creator called us to our homelands to become a distinct people, Chickasaws received the gift of our language—Chikashshanompa'—with which to speak to each other, the land, the plants, the animals, and the Creator. Chickasaws have held sacred the gift of our living language, passing it from generation to generation for thousands of years. From this understanding of the purpose of Chikashshanompa', I challenge metaphors of language endangerment, loss, and death which pervade academic research. Drawing on research utilizing a culturally-grounded methodology, as well as Chickasaw epistemologies to conceptualize Chikashshanompa' reclamation work, I introduce finger weaving—the traditional Chickasaw art form used to weave sash belts for ceremonial attire—as a culturally-significant and -appropriate metaphor for the process of ensuring language continuance over generations. I identify distinct strands of the weaving as themes emerging from both academic research and personal experience, including: the development of a critical Chickasaw consciousness, an understanding of Chikashshanompa' as cultural practice, and the (re)valuing of language learners. One of the most challenging aspects of finger weaving is ensuring proper tension between strands. To this end, I explore those forces that may also undermine language reclamation, such as persistent and damaging language ideologies. This shift in metaphor and paradigm emphasizes and values the vital roles of Indigenous community members in language research and ongoing reclamation work. Ultimately, I argue that by upholding metaphors for language work which reflect Indigenous epistemologies, we become guided by a sense of hope for the continuance of language.

## **Introduction**

Metaphor is key to the “process of ‘coming to know’”, especially when shared metaphors become internalized in the mind, heart, and behaviour of a people (Cajete, 2014, p. ix). This process is a fundamental step towards language ideological clarification and is necessary to mediate conflicting beliefs and feelings about language that inevitably emerge from the interaction of Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives (Kroskrity, 2009). In particular, the shifting of metaphors underlying the theories of Indigenous language revitalization and reclamation is critical given that the academic study of languages “developed hand in hand with colonialism ... in ways that served Euro-American needs” (Leonard, 2017, p. 18). Recognizing this reality, Miami scholar Wesley Leonard (2018) suggests returning to the most fundamental of questions: *What is language?*

Within Western academia, this question has largely been addressed in a way that excludes Indigenous epistemologies. A prominent metaphor likens Indigenous languages to endangered species capable of going extinct or being saved by outsiders. This urgent call to document

Indigenous language speakers' last words, in a manner paralleling endangered species conservation, has been employed seemingly for the benefit Indigenous communities—notably, to gain federal backing for passing of the 1990 *Native American Language Act* in the United States (McCarty, Watahomigie, Yamamoto, & Zepeda, 1997). At the same time, this metaphor has undermined language reclamation by privileging Western agendas over the needs of Indigenous communities (Chilton, 1996). In this way, the role of colonization in language shift is downplayed and the agency of Indigenous peoples in language work diminished (Perley, 2012).

In contrast to the language endangerment metaphor, community members and scholars engaged in Indigenous language work have offered different definitions of language. For example, at the 2018 Natives4Linguistics workshop held at the 92nd Annual Meeting of the Linguistic Society of America, a group of Indigenous language advocates co-constructed metaphors reflecting Indigenous epistemologies and emphasizing what Tuck (2009) characterizes as “desire instead of damage” (p. 416). The metaphors shared underscored the notion that, for Indigenous peoples, language is the path already created by the Creator; by the ancestors; by the plants, animals, and other relatives and teachers; and by those who have yet to come.

As a Chickasaw person and Chikashshanompa' (Chickasaw language) learner, my understanding of language and its continuance (Ortiz, 1992) is expressed through *tanni* or the cultural practice of finger weaving. Drawing on Chickasaw epistemologies to conceptualize language reclamation work, this article introduces finger weaving—the traditional Chickasaw art form used to weave sash belts for ceremonial attire. This culturally-significant and -appropriate metaphor conveys the process of ensuring language continuance over generations. I begin by defining and contextualizing language reclamation within personal, familial, and community contexts. Following an overview of my use of a Chickasaw methodology to conduct research, I discuss three strands of the weaving emerging from both personal experience and research, which include: the development of a critical Chickasaw consciousness, an understanding of Chikashshanompa' as cultural practice, and the (re)valuing of language learners. This shift in metaphor and paradigm emphasizes and values the vital roles of Indigenous community members in language research and ongoing reclamation work. Ultimately, I argue that by returning to and upholding those metaphors for language work which reflect Indigenous epistemologies, we become guided by a sense of hope that our languages have always been and therefore will always be.

### ***Language Reclamation in Personal, Familial, and Community Contexts***

My use of the term *language reclamation* reflects a theoretical stance. I distinguish language reclamation from *revitalization*, which is primarily concerned with increasing numbers of speakers and domains of language use. While language reclamation encompasses the important goals of revitalization, it further “requires feeling and asserting the prerogative to learn and transmit the language ... in a way that reflects the community’s needs and values” (Leonard, 2011, pp. 154-155), as well as aspirations (Smith, 2000). The framing of language reclamation as a social process is important because it assumes that Indigenous languages, within themselves, are already vital (Amery, 2016; Chew, 2016; Fettes, 1997; Leonard, 2011)

and cannot be conceived as separate from the communities that claim and speak them (Costa, 2013; Fitzgerald, 2017; Perley, 2012). This framing instead emphasizes the ways in which community members are returning to the practice of speaking and the ways of using the language as a means to strengthen cultural identity and to resist hegemonic legacies of colonization. In order to place Chikashshanompa' reclamation in personal, familial, and community contexts, I begin with the story of how our language came to our people and the purpose it fulfilled.

Aba' Binni'li', the Creator, called my Chickasaw ancestors to our homelands—now called Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee. In one version of our origin story, two brothers, Chikashsha and Chahta', placed a sacred pole into the ground and, as the pole leaned toward the rising sun, the people walked. After crossing the Mississippi River, the brothers once again placed the pole into the ground, though this time, they did not agree about the direction of the pole's leaning. Chahta' believed the pole was upright and he and his people (now known as the Choctaw) remained there and came to speak the Choctaw language. Chikashsha, on the other hand, saw that the pole continued to lean and led the others further eastward to their homelands. It was in this place that my ancestors were given the gift of a distinct language—Chikashshanompa'—with which to speak to each other, the land, the plants, the animals, and the Creator.

Hualapai educator and language advocate Lucille Watahomigie holds that the gift of language “must be cherished, nurtured, and treated with respect to honor the giver” (Watahomigie, 1998, p. 5). This reverence of language was shared by Chickasaw people, as the language was passed orally from generation to generation. With colonization, the ability of Chickasaw people to freely nurture the gift of language became imperiled. Nineteenth century federal US policies sought to eradicate Chickasaw people and seize their lands. The forced expulsion of Chickasaws from the southeastern US to Indian Territory (now Oklahoma) marked the beginning of language shift in my family. During the subsequent boarding school era, my great-great grandparents learned English and did not pass Chikashshanompa' to their children. I am the first in my family to begin reclaiming our heritage language.

As a Chickasaw person, my own interest in both learning and researching Chikashshanompa' developed alongside a commitment to language reclamation by my community as a whole. In response to the passing of over ninety per cent of our fluent speakers in a decade (Chickasaw Nation, 2014; Hinson & Ellis, 2008), Chickasaw citizens began to express unprecedented desire to know their heritage language. In 2007, the Chickasaw Nation established the Chickasaw Language Revitalization Program (CLRP) to provide language learning opportunities and resources grounded in a vision for the emergence of new generations of Chikashshanompa' speakers. It was at this time that I had my first opportunity to learn my Indigenous heritage language. A young adult and college intern with the Chickasaw Nation, I began taking language classes. I learned to introduce myself: “Chokma, saholhchifoat Kari. Chikashsha saya.” While I had said those same words in English countless times—“Greetings, my name is Kari. I am Chickasaw”—there was always an emptiness to them. Saying them in my language provided a sense of wholeness and grounded me in my identity as a Chickasaw person. I felt a strong sense

of responsibility and purpose for my life to continue learning Chikashshanompa' and also to share it with others. It is from this life's calling to learn and care for my language that I continued to pursue Indigenous language reclamation.

### ***Researching Chikashshanompa' Reclamation***

As a Chickasaw person and language learner, the research informing this article was inherently personal and required a protocol which embraced—rather than erased—my cultural identity and personal relationships with other Chickasaws involved in language work (Smith, 2012). I utilized a Chickasaw methodology “rooted in place, built on relationships, and sustained over a period of time” (Guajardo, Guajardo, & Casaperalta, 2008, p. 8). Based on a Chikashshanompa' verb meaning “to ask”, Chickasaw scholar Lokosh (Joshua D. Hinson) (2007) outlines Chikashsha asilhlha' as a culturally-grounded protocol for conducting research about, with, and for the Chickasaw community. Using the cultural metaphors of *chokka'*—house, *iksa'*—clan, and *okloshi'*—tribe, Chikashsha asilhlha' emphasizes respect for the immediate family, extended family, and tribal nation. It is out of this respect that the researcher behaves in a way that is humble, careful, and transparent.

Aligning my research with the vision of the CLRP, I explored how, over a five-year period from 2010 to 2015, Chickasaw citizens engaged in language reclamation. I worked with 22 Chickasaws who represented distinct generational categories. Determined by kinship, familial and community roles, patterns in language usage, as well as age, these generational categories included: the elder generation of revered fluent speakers who were actively involved in language teaching and reclamation; the middle generation of language learners who were learning and teaching Chikashshanompa', often to teach their own children; and the youth and young adult generation who were committed to learning the language.

While Chikashsha asilhlha' does not prescribe methods for data collection, interviews aligned well with the protocol and my vision for the research. As Hopi scholar Sheilah Nicholas (2008) argues, “language shift is an unprecedented phenomenon, a lived experience of an oral society ... accessible primarily through the oral narratives of the people themselves” (p. 64). Participants in my study completed in-depth, phenomenological interviews comprised of three parts: (1) a focused life history; (2) details of experience; and (3) reflection on the meaning (Seidman, 2006). This tripartite model provided structure for participants to tell the story of how they came to restructure their lives around ensuring the continuance of their heritage language.

I transformed interview transcripts and field notes into participant profiles. In crafting these profiles, I sought to convey, to the best of my ability, participants' stories as they told them to me. Because “people's behavior becomes meaningful and understandable when placed in the context of their lives and the lives of those around them” (Seidman, 2006, pp. 16-17), profiles emphasized the kinship nature of language learners' and speakers' relationships to each other and the community. They allowed the researcher and participants to make connections to one another's stories and experiences. This process of co-creating a larger narrative of Chikashshanompa' reclamation was critical because it allowed participants to contribute to the

meaning-making process of the research (Seidman, 2006). There is an inseparable relationship between story and knowing because story is a mechanism for expressing and conveying the local knowledge (Kovach, 2009). While the profiles do not appear in full within the context of this article, they were critical for the data analysis that is presented.

For me, a key part of adhering to Chikashsha asilhlha' was building and strengthening relationships with participants and learning something from them apart from the context of a formal interview. I spent a great deal of time with others committed to language reclamation—at CLRP offices, language classes, and community events. As I learned Chikashshanompa' from elders, I also shared with them what I had learned from my academic studies and research about the language. Further, in return for the gift of knowledge others gave to me, I spent many hours beading. With each piece of beadwork, I thought of the person to whom I would give this gift. That way, when I returned to the university located outside the community to write about the words they had entrusted to me, they would also have a piece of my heart entrusted to them. Though perhaps not immediately reflected in the results of the research, these steps were critical to my methodology because they ensured the reciprocal nature of relationships. It is these positive and established relationships that enable me to participate in my community and continue learning my language.

### ***Finger Weaving as a Culturally-Significant Metaphor for Language Reclamation***

Drawing on Chickasaw epistemologies to conceptualize and guide Chikashshanompa' reclamation work, I look to finger weaving as a culturally-significant and -appropriate metaphor to convey the process of ensuring language continuance over generations. I identify distinct strands of the weaving as themes emerging from both research and personal experience, including the development of a critical Chickasaw consciousness, an understanding of Chikashshanompa' as cultural practice, and (re)valuing language learners. I intentionally identify only three strands of the weaving to leave open the possibility of naming additional strands as language reclamation efforts evolve. As the weaving metaphor suggests, these elements of language reclamation and continuance are not approached successively, one by one. Rather, all strands must be woven tightly and concurrently in order for the weaving to be strong. What is more, finger weavings often begin not at one end of a belt, but at the centre. During the weaving process, a wooden dowel separates the two halves of the belt until the first half is complete. When it is time to weave the other side of the belt, the weaver removes the dowel, creating continuity between the strands already woven and those which will be woven. I argue that the process of language continuance does not entail beginning a new weaving, but beginning the other half of the belt already begun for us by our ancestors. In this way, the finger weaving metaphor reflects a model for community-based language planning in which “language-related decision making ... is motivated by local needs and desires” and guides the wisdom already within the language and community (McCarty, 2018, pp. 23-24).

Notably, the finger weaving metaphor also captures the reality that challenges and setbacks are a part of language reclamation work. One of the most difficult aspects of finger weaving is ensuring proper tension between strands. Beginning weavers may pull some strands too tight, creating a lopsided belt that must be partially undone and rewoven in order to repair. In other

instances, a strand may be skipped which creates incongruences in the pattern. Given that language shift of this magnitude is an unprecedented phenomenon in the Chickasaw community, those working to reclaim language are much like beginning weavers. At times, we make mistakes and must navigate and repair the tension of our weaving. Encountering areas of tension is a natural part of this weaving process. These are simply areas of the weaving which require more attention in order to make it stronger. It is understood that weaving takes practice and that the end goal is not perfection—it is maintaining a good mind throughout the process. The following subsections begin to weave the belt of Chikashshanompa' continuance through the stories of those who participated in this research. I explore how the strands, representing three emerging research themes, are being woven within Chickasaw language reclamation efforts, as well as the areas which require careful work to navigate tension.

### ***Strand 1: A Critical Chickasaw Consciousness***

Chickasaws have experienced abuse and discrimination for speaking Chikashshanompa' and asserting their cultural identities. Weaving a critical consciousness prompts Chickasaws to confront and dismantle internalized oppression and (re)awaken to a cultural identity in which Chikashshanompa' is central (Fettes, 1997). Expressing the importance of language, one Chickasaw elder speaker stated, “It’s in my heart” (personal communication, November 20, 2014). This elder conceived of the language as inseparable from his identity. To further convey his sentiment, he continued, “I guess it’s kind of like the old saying: ‘once an Indian, always an Indian’”, which derives from a colonial perspective of Indigenous peoples as savages. Catching the irony of his words, he laughed and offered a new version: “Once a Chickasaw, always a Chickasaw. Language is it.” Part of developing a critical Chickasaw consciousness entails conceiving of oneself not as being “Indian” but Chickasaw. In rewording the phrase, this elder (re)claimed a distinct cultural identity to which Chikashshanompa' is central.

The raising of critical consciousness is part of the lifelong journey toward becoming fully Chickasaw and is experienced across all generations. In reflecting on his perception of language decline, for example, one young adult language learner stated:

*I have a little more knowledge of things that happened in the past that I was unaware of before because... it's not taught in schools. It's either taught at home or... you teach yourself or you learn from others that you find out have knowledge in whatever you're looking for, whether it be history, whether it be language, whether it be dances, whether it be ceremonies, whatever it is. (personal communication, October 21, 2014)*

This learner suggests that the raising of a critical Chickasaw consciousness is not taught as part of a Western education. Instead, it is learned implicitly and develops within family and through participation in the community over time.

For members of the middle and younger generations—especially those who grew up outside of the Chickasaw Nation—the process of (re)awakening to one’s cultural identity was spurred by a feeling of loss and separation from that identity. A middle generation adult language learner, who grew up far from the Chickasaw Nation, recalled asking as a child, “What did it mean to be

Chickasaw?” (personal communication, February 13, 2015). As the daughter of a boarding school survivor, who did not openly share her Chickasaw language or heritage, this learner felt that something was missing from her life: “It was always like everybody else had their culture and they understood what they represented.” It was not until adulthood that this learner began to reclaim her mother’s language as a means to reconnect with the Chickasaw community. The raising of a critical Chickasaw consciousness has prompted language learners to restructure their lives around the pursuit of language reclamation and continuance.

While some learners pursued the language to better understand themselves, others felt responsible to pass the language to the next generation (Chew, 2015). As one middle generation father explained:

*When my boy was born ... I really started learning Chickasaw pretty intensely ... I wanted to give him something more substantial than just his citizenship card or his [Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood (CDIB)] card. I had this instinct that the language was the way to do it. (personal communication, July 12, 2010)*

Honouring his sense of responsibility to ensuring the continuance of the language for his child and trusting his instincts, this father reshaped his personal and family language policy toward daily active use of language (Hornberger, 2014; McCarty, 2014). As in the case of this father, a raised consciousness of what it means to be Chickasaw in the face of language shift prompted a strong sense of agency in asserting Chickasaw cultural identity and encouraging language reclamation (Lee, 2014).

#### *Navigating Tensions: Persistent and Damaging Language Ideologies*

While a critical Chickasaw consciousness acknowledges the legacies of colonization as forces which undermine the goals of language reclamation, damaging language ideologies nonetheless persist. In order to ensure proper tension in the weaving of language continuance, recognizing the ways internalized colonization has shaped language ideologies in the community is critical. One youth language learner, for example, had Chikashshanompa'-speaking grandparents and parents who deeply valued Chickasaw language and culture. Still, when she was younger, her father advocated strongly that she acquire English before Chikashshanompa'. Her father recognized the importance of Chikashshanompa' as a marker of Chickasaw identity, but maintained the value of English as a means to success in mainstream society. While many Chickasaws actively engaged in language reclamation efforts have begun to move beyond this English-first language ideology, it persists both in overt and subtle ways and acts as a powerful force against language reclamation work. This language ideology not only inhibits the restoration of the intergenerational language transmission, but has a “potent influence on Native youth’s perspectives on the relevancy of their Native language in their lives today” (Lee, 2009, p. 310).

Chickasaw youth engaged in language reclamation perceived an either-or choice between English—representing a culture-less modern world—and Chikashshanompa'—representing a culture-based Chickasaw world tied to the past (Lee, 2014; Wilson & Kamanā, 2014). This two-

world language ideology caused deep conflict for language learners at the cusp of the transition from youth to adulthood. One Chikashshanompa' learner, for example, faced a decision of whether to remain locally in the Chickasaw Nation to pursue the language or to leave in pursuit of different life opportunities. He feared, "If I [leave], I'm going to lose everything" (personal communication, October 28, 2014). While learners may have less access to language programming while outside of the Chickasaw community, this youth's concern that he would "lose everything"—all of his knowledge of the language and culture—is troubling because it ignores the reality, as Lee (2009) writes, that "Native peoples have been adapting to (and resisting) other peoples' cultures, values, and worldviews for hundreds of years" (p. 310).

A two-world dichotomous language ideology renders invisible a reality that contemporary Chickasaw youth face the same choice that generations before them have faced. It is not a choice between two worlds but of how important Chikashshanompa' will remain in their lives as they negotiate one world which "encompasses varied, and often oppositional, expectations" of them (Lee, 2009, p. 310). Dispelling language ideologies which position Chikashshanompa' as irrelevant in contemporary contexts presents a significant challenge. Importantly, Chickasaw people's stories suggest that Indigenous languages are very much present and have a profound influence in the present, within and beyond communities' physical boundaries, and across generations.

### ***Strand 2: Chikashshanompa' as Cultural Practice***

An understanding of Chikashshanompa' as cultural practice emphasizes that language is more than a system of words and grammatical rules (Ortiz, 1978). It encompasses oral tradition as a "total communicative framework" inclusive of song, prayer, teachings, ritual performances, religious ceremonies, and other cultural institutions (Nicholas, 2009, p. 333). As Nicholas (2009) found in her research with Hopi youth, even without a strong foundation in the heritage language, one can "live Hopi" through active participation in religion, customs, and traditions. Similarly, for Chickasaws, language remains the "missing piece" to living Chickasaw through a deep and full understanding of the totality of a Chickasaw way of being (Nicholas, 2008, 2009). One youth language learner, a senior in high school, provided a powerful example of Chikashshanompa' as cultural practice. This youth recalled a memory of serving food to elders at a community event:

*I remember [one elder] coming up and saying, "Yakkookay [meaning 'thank you']." I remember the sense of pride and love, you know. I know what he said and I'm able to answer him back, and we were able to speak. Now, it lasted about thirty seconds and a lot of them elders got words that are way over me, but to be able have that few seconds is what counted. (personal communication, November 19, 2014)*

What the student did in those moments extended far beyond the exchanging of niceties in the language. He upheld a cultural value and protocol of showing respect to an elder by greeting him and serving him a meal in his language. Although one does not need to be proficient in the language in order to serve elders, the significance that this youth attached to this memory of



language is important. By using the language in this cultural context, this youth engaged in a process of acquiring essential Chickasaw values and concepts (Nicholas, 2008).

A middle generation language learner explained this process insightfully. Describing language acquisition, she stated:

*It's like making dumplings. An experienced dumpling-maker knows how to make them because it's the way she's always done it. If you read the recipe, though, there would be no way you could figure it out unless you had somebody there to teach you. (personal communication, February 13, 2015)*

In her view, language learning is a social activity that, much like the preparation of traditional dumplings, is not meant to be done in isolation because an essential component of the process and knowledge will inevitably be lacking. This learner's metaphor of dumpling-making can also be read another way. A Chickasaw person can learn to make dumplings relying on English—"the recipe"—without knowledge of Chikashshanompa'. As the learner indicates, however, something would be missing: "there would be no way you could figure [the culture] out unless you had [the language] there to teach you" (ibid). Ultimately, the stories of those engaged in language reclamation provide important insight into the significance of language as cultural practice.

#### *Navigating Tensions: A Reductionist View of Language*

Reductionist views undermine the weaving of language continuance through preoccupation with isolated words and grammatical features of language. For many language learners and speakers, a reductionist view of language has given rise to feelings of inadequacy more than it has supported effective language teaching and acquisition. As a language learner who has studied linguistics, fluent speakers have asked me if they said something "correctly" in the language, even when the phrase in question had meaning to the other Chikashshanompa' speakers around them. What they were questioning is whether their speech aligned with standardized grammar rules documented by linguists. Similarly, a young adult learner recollected his tendency to rely on translation exercises. While he knew he was supposed to just "talk and make mistakes and keep going", he was impeded by the desire "to know why" (personal communication, October 21, 2014)—to break the language into syllables of sound and to dissect what these parts mean. It was not until he began using Chikashshanompa' daily with others that his hesitancy to speak faded and the language began to "just come out" without having to think. What enabled this learner to progress was a shift from learning about Chikashshanompa' to learning through and by using the language.

Conceptualizing Chikashshanompa' as cultural practice promotes a holistic view of language as an expression of the totality of life. A holistic view of language positions Chikashshanompa' as the means by which oral tradition is conveyed and Chickasaws are instructed "how to be a people in heart, thought, behavior, and conduct as they pursue life's fulfillment" (Nicholas, 2014, p. 64). In this way, language is neither correct nor incorrect, so long as it retains this function and leads to fulfillment for the Chickasaw people. As Chickasaw people weave the

strand representing language as cultural practice, the words of Acoma writer Simon J. Ortiz take on profound meaning. He posits that “a word is complete” in that a word is not spoken with “separate parts or elements to it” (Ortiz, 1978, p. 9). Ortiz continues:

*language is more than just a group of words and more than just the technical relationship between sounds and words. Language is more than a functional mechanism. It is a spiritual energy that is available to all. It includes all of us and is not exclusively in the power of human beings—we are part of that power as human beings. (1978, pp. 10-11).*

### **Strand 3: (Re)Valuing of Language Learners**

The devaluing of Indigenous heritage language learners is a legacy of colonization. When Chickasaw people conceive of language learners as failing in their pursuits of language reclamation (Meek, 2011), we internalize a dominant narrative which positions us as a vanishing race and our language as going extinct (Leonard, 2011). The (re)valuing of one another’s talents counters this internal colonization and allows us to (re)build relationships which enable and reinvigorate language reclamation work. Significantly, this strand of the weaving is especially strong within current Chickasaw language work. Language learners’ talents have been recognized and celebrated—a process critical to the sustainability of language reclamation work. In the case of adult learners who were employed by the CLRP, each came to their position because someone else recognized their remarkable dedication to language reclamation and talents as language learners. One learner, for example, began at the CLRP as a temporary office manager, a position that did not require Chikashshanompa’ proficiency. Because of his commitment to and talent for learning Chikashshanompa’, he was promoted to a teaching position requiring proficiency in Chikashshanompa’.

Chickasaw youth who were committed to learning Chikashshanompa’ recognized that, as members of the youngest generation in the community, they had a unique role in the dynamics of language reclamation. As one youth stated, “it’s my responsibility as a young kid to hold on to the language ... You can always have people who can bead, can always have people who can play stickball, but you can’t always have people who remember the language” (personal communication, October 28, 2014). This youth identified learning Chikashshanompa’ not only as a responsibility, but as his unique talent. Other members of his family were talented bead workers or stickball stick makers, but no one was pursuing the language. When he began learning the language, he took on a new role in his family as a keeper of knowledge of the language, and both parents and younger siblings began to look to him to teach them.

The (re)valuing of language learners entailed both the internal recognition of one’s talent as a language learner as well as the external recognition of that talent from others, and contributed to learners’ increased aspiration to continue learning Chikashshanompa’. It is through this aspirational capital—“the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (Yosso, 2005, pp. 77-78)—that learners find strength to challenge oppressive conditions. For language learners, aspirations of carrying the language forward have developed within a community context which values their talents as language

learners and contributors to language reclamation work. Importantly, this valuing occurs as those involved with language reclamation build relationships within, between, and/or across generations. A hopeful example of this is the way in which elders have come to trust in younger generations to carry the language forward. As one elder speaker said of younger generations, “they’ll be the ones to carry [Chikashshanompa] on” (personal communication, November 20, 2014). This elder’s words serve to nurture these language learners’ aspirations and suggest faith that the efforts of younger generations will sustain the language well into the future.

### *Navigating Tensions: Purism*

The preoccupation with “pure” and authentic language speakers can present an obstacle to the (re)valuing of language learners (Dorian, 1994; Kroskrity, 2009). Although most elder Chickasaw language teachers acknowledged and expected that language learners make mistakes, some learners recounted experiences with judgmental community members who claimed authority over the language in a way that discouraged younger generations from speaking (Dorian, 1994). This language ideology of purism has its roots in Western linguistic theory which is concerned with “an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly” (Chomsky, 1965, p. 3). Purism reflects a monolingual bias in conceptualizations of language learners (Cenoz, 2013; Ortega, 2013), and has damaging consequences within communities.

One experienced language learner provided a poignant example of being directly challenged while teaching a community language class designed for beginning learners. She recalled, “I’ve had fluent speakers in my class stand up in the middle of my class and say, ‘That’s not right!’” (personal communication, October 9, 2014). The learner explained that in such situations, the best response is to say: “Well, that is the way that my [language teacher] taught me how to say it and I’m sure that there are other ways.” Although she felt confident in her response, she still feared that the interaction ultimately “derailed [her] credibility” as a language teacher to other students in the class. The reality is that these occurrences are somewhat common within the Chickasaw community as a whole, and language learners must continually negotiate how to respectfully assert their integrity and their knowledge of Chikashshanompa’ as valid.

### ***Implications***

The Chickasaw community has woven the strands of a critical Chickasaw consciousness, the understanding of Chikashshanompa’ as cultural practice, and the (re)valuing of language learners toward a vision of language continuance across generations. In 2010, when I began my research with Chickasaw community members involved with language reclamation work, many described their motivation to care for the language as arising from a sense of urgency—a fear that the language could be lost forever. Over the course of five years, CLRP language initiatives developed and expanded, as did community members’ commitment to ensuring the continuance of Chikashshanompa’ for future generations. When, in 2015, I conducted both new and followup interviews, this fear persisted in some ways but was also overshadowed by a force much more powerful and compelling: hope. As one middle generation language learner powerfully asserted, “I’m not afraid of [Chikashshanompa] going to sleep anymore ... I’m not afraid of that” (personal communication, October 10, 2014). Across participants’ stories,

themes of hope and the ability to envision a future where Chikashshanompa' remained central to the lives of Chickasaw people resounded. Significantly, it is this sense of hope—nurtured within Indigenous communities—that is absent from dominant discourses which include metaphors of Indigenous language endangerment, loss, and death.

By conceptualizing Chickasaw language reclamation work through the culturally-significant metaphor of finger weaving, I highlight a shift in paradigm that emphasizes and values the vital roles of community members who are caretakers of our language. Moving away from dominant discourses which are heavily preoccupied with elder first-language speakers and often discount the efforts of second-language learners (Hill, 2002; Meek, 2011), I hold that language reclamation is a social process in which each generation has a responsibility (Amery, 2016; Chew, 2016; Leonard, 2011). Elders ensure Chickasaw continuance through teaching the language to others, parents uphold a sense of responsibility to pass the language to their children, and youth and young adults demonstrate agency in pursuing Chikashshanompa' as they develop consciousness of their Chickasaw identity. Whereas dominant discourses place emphasis on the role of elders in documenting their knowledge through writings and records, the finger weaving metaphor affirms the shared responsibility across generations for the language. In many ways, Chickasaws ourselves are represented by the strands of the weaving. Through the strengthening and (re)building of intergenerational relationships, we become bonded together around a shared goal of language continuance.

Both finger weaving and language learning are lifelong pursuits in which one gradually and continually develops sophistication in increasingly esoteric domains of cultural knowledge. Weavers develop their skill over time by practicing, making mistakes, and learning new techniques and patterns. A beginning weaver may start with a two-colour belt woven in a simple pattern while a more experienced weaver may create an intricate belt of many colours. Importantly, while craftsmanship is valued, perfection is not the end goal. What is more important is that weavers maintain a good mind as they practice this art form passed down by our ancestors. Similarly, engagement in language reclamation is not an all-or-nothing endeavour, but exists on a spectrum. On one end are community members who access culture and language at a surface level; at the other end are those who are committed and feel called to pursue deep cultural and linguistic knowledge. All levels of engagement along the spectrum are valid and important in ensuring the continuance of language and culture.

The weaving metaphor further emphasizes that, as a process, language reclamation cannot be separated from a community context (Costa, 2013; Fitzgerald, 2017; Perley, 2012). While the Western academic tradition seeks to collect and preserve Indigenous regalia and cultural items by placing them on display in texts, museums, and archives, these items have function within communities. Finger woven belts are meant to be worn as part of Chickasaw traditional dress and imbued with purpose within the ceremonial context of the stomp dance. Men and women alike wear their belts, oriented toward the central fire, as they dance and lift their prayers to the Creator. In the same way that the belt is meant to be worn, the language is meant to be used within the community.

My use of finger weaving as a metaphor for language reclamation speaks to the Chickasaw community. It is important to keep in mind, however, that Indigenous peoples are not homogenous. Each community, and even individual members of communities, can draw on their own cultural knowledge and epistemologies to express unique metaphors for their work with their language. By sharing our stories of success, progress, and even setbacks in our own words, we reject dominant discourses of language endangerment, loss, and death. In this way, our communities become better enabled to care for the health of our languages in culturally-appropriate ways. Those engaged in Indigenous language work, regardless of whether they are members of the communities they study, must challenge inequities of power within research by privileging Indigenous peoples' perspectives and voices. Importantly, Chickasaws are choosing to prioritize Chikashshanompa' by restructuring and dedicating their lives to the language. Thus, for the first time in recent history, fluent speakers and language learners alike are able to envision a future where Chikashshanompa' is spoken, and to enact continuance.

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