

Chikashshanompaat Billi'ya: The Chickasaw Language is Forever

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Abstract

Drawing on research with Chickasaw citizens committed to Chikashshanompa' (Chickasaw language) reclamation work, this chapter focuses on how Chikashshanompa' learners and teachers engage in nation-building as they work to ensure the continuance of Chikashshanompa' for future generations. Complementing Michelle Cooke's chapter about teaching university Chickasaw language courses, I draw upon findings of 5 years of research during 2010–2015 with Chickasaws committed to learning, teaching, and actively using Chikashshanompa'. Together, we dedicate our chapters to the life's work of Jerry Imotichey (1938–2016)—Michelle's co-instructor and a language teacher to both of us. Jerry passed on in 2016, having inspired many with his love for his first language and passion for teaching others.

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As a Chickasaw citizen and language learner, my research is inherently personal. I begin this chapter by introducing my own journey toward reclaiming my Indigenous heritage language. I then explore the significance of language reclamation and current language programming to nation-building. Next, I discuss my use of a culturally-grounded research methodology to conduct interviews with Chickasaws exceptionally committed to language reclamation. These interviews offered key insight into themes central to the vitality and efficacy of Chikashshanompa' reclamation, including a (a) raised critical Chickasaw consciousness, (b) conception of Chikashshanompa' as cultural practice, and (c) (re)valuing of language learners. Ultimately, I argue that the stories of Chikashshanompa' learners and teachers demonstrate the importance of sustaining cultural and linguistic practices to social change, empowerment, and nation-building.

A Personal Commitment to Language

Chokma, saholhchifoat Kari. Chikashsha saya. I was 20 years old when I first learned to use my language, Chikashshanompa', to introduce myself as a Chickasaw person. By that point in my life, I had said these same words many times in English—"Hello, my name is Kari. I am Chickasaw"—but they always felt empty, void of connection to my people and places from which I came. Speaking Chikashshanompa' grounded me in a deep sense of continuity—a connection both to my Ancestors and to generations to come. It was an experience "more than memory or remembering" that left my life forever changed (Ortiz, 1992, p. 9). I awoke to the centrality of Chikashshanompa' to the continuance of Chickasaw cultural identity, and could no longer ignore my felt sense of responsibility to learn and care for the language.

Raised in southern California, hundreds of miles from the Chickasaw Nation, I did not hear my heritage language as a child. In fact, no one in my family had spoken Chikashshanompa' for generations. The story of language loss in my family began in 1837, with my Ancestors' forced removal from their southeastern homelands to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma). My great-great-great-grandparents were among those displaced. Having lost so much, they sent their children to English-language boarding schools with the hope of securing a better future for them. It was a choice not "of freedom but a practice of control—a way to create an acceptable place for themselves in a different world" (Cobb, 2000, p. 37). Subsequent generations in my family learned to speak English as a first and only language. I am the first to begin learning, and thus reclaiming, Chikashshanompa'.

My own family's experience of intergenerational language loss is not unique among Chickasaws, and consequences of large-scale language shift are evident across the Chickasaw Nation. Out of over 70,000 enrolled citizens, fewer than fifty—all born in the mid-1950s or earlier—speak Chikashshanompa' as a first language. Based on this statistic alone, most schemas designed to measure the health of languages classify Chikashshanompa' as severely endangered (see Krauss, 2007). While there is little doubt that colonization and enduring and relentless pressures of assimilation have profoundly threatened the continuance of Chikashshanompa', these numbers fail to capture Chickasaw people's renewed and growing desire to know the language. Between 2011 and 2015, for example, the number of participants in language programming (including classes, camps, clubs, and/or outreach visits) increased from 900 to 1,800 (Anoatubby, 2014, 2015). What is more, a small number of exceptionally committed Chickasaw language learners have emerged as highly proficient language users and leaders of current multigenerational language reclamation endeavors.

Chikashshanompa' Reclamation as Nation Building

Indigenous languages “have been forcibly subordinated in contexts of colonization” (McCarty & Nicholas, 2014, p. 106). As such, language reclamation entails the social process by which Indigenous Peoples (re)claim “the appropriate cultural context and sense of value that the language would likely have always had if not for colonization” (Leonard, 2011, p. 141). In this way, language reclamation becomes an essential means by which community members engage in nation building—“the conscious and focused application of [an Indigenous] people’s collective resources, energies, and knowledge to the task of liberating and developing the psychic and physical space that is identified as [their] own” (Brayboy et al., 2012, p. 12).

While nation-building occurs in many forms, reclamation of cultural identity and language must be at the center (Brayboy et al., 2012). The understanding of language reclamation and, therefore, nation-building, as a social process emphasizes the agency of people in “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). In other words, language reclamation is not about fixing Indigenous languages—which are and have always been vital—but instead about “people ‘doing language’ together in meaningful ways” (Fettes, 1997, para. 8). In this way, Chickasaw people are working not simply to stabilize or renew our language, but to assert our humanity by strengthening our cultural identity and resisting hegemonic legacies of colonization. When we, as Indigenous Peoples, know who we are and express who we are in our languages, we embody both resiliency and resistance.

Within the Chickasaw Nation, language reclamation has been deeply connected to nation-building at both the tribal government level and in the lives of individual citizens. In the last

decade, Chickasaw citizens have recognized the severity of language loss and expressed unprecedented desire to know their heritage language. In response, the Chickasaw Nation established the Chickasaw Language Revitalization Program in 2007. The small staff, comprised of language learners and Elder fluent speakers, has focused its efforts on providing language programming accessible to all Chickasaw citizens and grounded in a vision for the emergence of new generations of Chikashshanompa' speakers.

Critical to language continuance is the rebuilding and strengthening of intergenerational relationships. Out of less than 50 Elder first language speakers, about 30¹ have committed to sharing the language in some way with younger generations. Members of this (great-) grandparental generation who are actively involved in language reclamation efforts share a desire to ensure the continuance of Chikashshanompa' and Chickasaw identity by teaching those dedicated to learning the language (Lewis, 2011).² For Chickasaw learners who do not have speakers in their family, these Elder speakers often take on the role of another set of grandparents, enabling the restoration of intergenerational language transmission within Chickasaw families and the community—the domains where Chikashshanompa' is rooted and can be cultivated (Chew, 2016). In the following section, I provide a brief overview of the language programming that existed at the time of my study, which I completed in 2015.

Language Learning Programming

During the time when I was doing research, the Chickasaw Language Revitalization Program offered programming for youth—including a children's language club, high school language class, family and culture camps, as well as the BakBak Youth Stickball Program—however, most language programming focused on adult learners. Adapted from the model

implemented in Indigenous communities in California (see Hinton et al., 2002), the Chickasaw Master–Apprentice program was an effective model for adult language learning. From 2007 to 2015, the program supported one-on-one teams, comprised of a language learner and an Elder fluent speaker, for up to 3 years. Pairs completed 10 hours of oral language immersion per week. While the program produced several highly competent language learners, it required an investment of resources, in terms of time and speakers, that was not sustainable. As a result, the one-on-one master-apprentice model was phased out and, in 2015, replaced by a group language immersion model.³ While fewer learners are served by the group model, those who do participate spend more time learning the language and have increased financial support for their efforts.

In addition to language immersion programs, learners living locally could take credit-bearing coursework in the language. In 2009, East Central University (ECU), in partnership with the Chickasaw Nation, began offering a series of four Chikashshanompa’ courses focused on examining the linguistic structures of the language. Typically taught by a team comprised of an Elder speaker and experienced language learner, the ECU course utilized Munro and Willmond’s (2008) Chikashshanompa’ grammar as a central text, covering units sequentially over the four courses. Because the text focused on examining the linguistic structures of the language, the course was not designed to produce fluent speaker-users of the language. Instead the goal was to impart student language learners with a strong understanding of and ability to talk about Chikashshanompa’ grammar, a skill that would equip them as more effective language learners and teachers, especially when they pursued learning opportunities outside of class. Still, while the students who enrolled in the course were often Chickasaw or Native American, only a small number had prior experience learning the language through the Master–Apprentice Program, language courses at the high school level, or other community language programming. Often

those students who were committed to learning the language participated in community language programming concurrently with their enrollment in the courses. Retention of students through the four-course series was consistently a challenge, and enrollment tended to drop for the higher-level courses. Still, dedicated language learners, including those who were non-degree seeking, consistently enrolled in and completed the four-course series.

With over two-thirds of enrolled Chickasaws residing outside of the Chickasaw Nation jurisdictional area (Morris, 2016), the Chickasaw Language Revitalization Program has long been concerned with how to make Chikashshanompa' accessible to all citizens regardless of where they live. For years, the only resources available to citizens-at-large were texts, including Chickasaw dictionaries (Humes & Humes, 1987; Munro & Willmond, 1994), an introductory language workbook created by fluent speakers (Thompson et al., 1994), and a grammar of the language (Munro & Willmond, 2008). In 2009, the Chickasaw Nation released a free Anompa: Chickasaw Language Basics app which includes audio recordings of common words and phrases. In 2016, the first of four levels of Rosetta Stone Chickasaw was released.⁴

While current language reclamation efforts are dynamic, they are happening on a relatively small scale within the Chickasaw Nation. In 2015, only about 3% of enrolled tribal members engaged in language revitalization programming, either through classes, camps, clubs, and/or outreach visits (Anoatubby, 2015). Among these 3%, interest in and attitudes about Chikashshanompa' varied, with some Chickasaws desiring only to know greetings and common phrases and others still restructuring their entire lives around language reclamation. The learners and teachers whose stories inform this chapter fall into this exceptionally committed latter group who are the driving force behind current language reclamation work within the Chickasaw Nation.

Asking in a Chickasaw Way

Interested in Chickasaw people's motivations to learn and teach Chikashshanompa', I began researching Chickasaw language reclamation efforts in 2010. I identified poignant themes across generations, including: (a) Elders' strong desire to ensure Chickasaw continuance through teaching the language to others, (b) parents' sense of responsibility to pass the language to their children, and (c) youth and young adults' yearning to speak Chikashshanompa' as they developed consciousness of their Chickasaw identity (Lewis, 2011). This research pointed not only to the potential for the restoration of intergenerational language transmission, but the critical role of language learners in ensuring the continuance of Chikashshanompa'. Seeking to learn more, I conducted additional fieldwork in 2014 and 2015.

As I looked toward exploring the nuanced and diverse experiences of exceptionally committed language learners, asking my questions in a Chickasaw way was a priority. Because I am a Chickasaw person and language learner, my research about Chikashshanompa' reclamation was inherently personal and required me to work from a protocol which embraced—rather than erased—my cultural identity and personal relationships with other Chickasaws involved in language work. To this end, I utilized a culturally-grounded methodology which has arisen out of Chickasaw-authored scholarship and is “rooted in place, built on relationships, and sustained over a period of time” (Guajardo et al., 2008, p. 8).

Upholding the call for ethical and transformative Indigenous research (Smith, 1999), Chickasaw scholar and language activist Lokosh (Joshua D. Hinson, 2007) outlines a protocol for conducting research about, with, and for the Chickasaw community. Based on a

Chikashshanompa' verb meaning "to ask," the Chikashsha asilhlha' protocol includes six ethical guidelines:

1. Respect the house (chokka'), clan (iksa'), and tribe (okloshi').
2. Be visible to the community.
3. Listen and observe before questioning.
4. Reciprocate gifts.
5. Be careful with knowledge that is given.
6. Be humble.

Using the cultural metaphors of house (chokka'), clan (iksa'), and tribe (okloshi'), Chikashsha asilhlha' emphasizes respect for the immediate family, extended family, and tribal nation.

Grounded in respect for these relationships, I did my best to work with research participants in a way that was humble, careful, and also transparent (see Chew & Hinson, 2021).

Interviewing was an important means to collect data. As Hopi scholar Sheila E. Nicholas (2008) writes, "Language shift is an unprecedented phenomenon, a lived experience of an oral society, therefore, accessible primarily through the oral narratives of the people themselves" (p. 64). Altogether, I interviewed 21 participants representing Elder, middle, and youth generations. Eight had participated in my previous study, which enabled me to consider individuals' engagement in language reclamation over a period of about 5 years. I also interviewed new participants who the Chickasaw Language Revitalization Program and community members identified as being exceptionally committed and talented language learners. Interviews were comprised of three parts: (a) a focused life history, (b) details of experience, and (c) reflection on the meaning (Seidman, 2006). This model provided a structure for participants to tell their stories about what it means for a Chickasaw person to reclaim Chikashshanompa'. In

the following sections, I discuss the profound insights Chickasaw people shared through interviews into the phenomenon of language reclamation and what enables Chikashshanompa' continuance.

Enabling Language Continuance and Nation Building

Often—and problematically—language is treated as a thing that can be made “more homogenous and predictable by establishing standards, printing dictionaries, and writing textbooks and curricula” (Fettes, 1997, para. 3). This view of language, however, is detrimental to the goals of language reclamation because it separates languages from their speakers. Instead, a theory of language reclamation “must begin with the speakers, with people ‘doing language’ together in meaningful ways, and work out from there” (para. 8). The following sections discuss three themes common to the stories of language learners and teachers who are doing language together in such a way that enables language continuance and promotes nation building. These themes include the raising of a critical Chickasaw consciousness, engagement with Chikashshanompa' as cultural practice, and a (re)valuing of language learners.

A Critical Chickasaw Consciousness

A critical Indigenous consciousness entails the “awareness of the historical and broad oppressive conditions that have influenced current realities of Indigenous People[s'] lives” (Lee, 2009, p. 318). As a result of colonization and forced assimilation, Chickasaws experienced abuse and discrimination for speaking Chikashshanompa' and asserting their cultural identities. As such, a core component of Chickasaw language reclamation includes raising consciousness of

the historical and ongoing suppression of Chickasaw people and our language and (re)awakening to a cultural identity in which Chikashshanompa' is central.

Often this raised Indigenous consciousness is developed at the transition to adulthood (Lee, 2009). Clovis, a young adult language learner whose family instilled in him a strong sense of pride in his Chickasaw and Choctaw heritages, exemplified this experience. While he “grew up knowing who [he] was” and with exposure to his heritage languages, he did not actively seek out Chikashshanompa' until he went to college. Though the language was not part of his academic studies, learning about other Indigenous communities as part of his Native American studies degree inspired him to seek out Chikashshanompa'. He explained:

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.

As Clovis points out, a critical Chickasaw consciousness is not taught through a formal Western education. It develops within family and through participation in the community over time—and when the individual becomes ready to (re)turn to this knowledge.

Importantly, the raising of critical consciousness is part of the lifelong journey toward becoming fully Chickasaw (Nicholas, 2008), and is experienced across all generations. An example of the ways in which Elders, too, have experienced the raising of critical Chickasaw consciousness came rather candidly during an interview. Explaining the importance of the language in his life, Jerry, an Elder fluent speaker and language teacher, stated: “[The language is] in my heart.” He continued, “I guess it's kind of like the old saying: ‘Once an Indian, always

an Indian.” Immediately after saying these words, he stopped and began to laugh. Jerry recognized the absurdity of describing his sense of identity in words employed by the colonizer to emphasize the perceived savagery and homogeneity of Indigenous Peoples. Reclaiming the saying, Jerry then exclaimed: “No! Once a Chickasaw, always a Chickasaw. Language is it.”

For many, the process of (re)awakening to one’s cultural identity was spurred by a feeling of loss and separation from that identity. Lonna, an adult language learner residing outside of tribal jurisdictional boundaries recalled asking as a child, “What did it mean to be Chickasaw?” The daughter of a boarding school survivor who did not openly share her Chickasaw language or heritage, she always felt that something was missing. Lonna remembered, “It was always like everybody else had their culture and they understood what they represented.” It was not until adulthood, after her mother’s passing, that Lonna began to actively pursue the language as a means to reconnect with the Chickasaw community in Oklahoma. Building on this sentiment, Lokosh, a learner who grew up outside of the Nation and later returned, explained:

You’re removed from it [the culture] and you say to yourself, “Well, I go back and play [stick]ball.⁵ That’s cool. I can sing. That’s cool. I’m a tribal artist.” But what’s the thing that is Chickasaw through and through? That’s the language.

The sentiments of these learners affirm that “language is not only a means to communicate thoughts and reminiscing of the past, it also positions one as part of the community that has a tradition and a past” and, importantly, a future (Wan et al., 2015, p. 118).

Colonization has centered on the erasure of Chickasaw cultural identity through the separation of Chickasaw people from land, family, and consequently language. This means that an essential component of nation building is the act of “counteracting generations of

miseducation” about what it is to be Chickasaw (Akoto, 1992, p. iv). For learners and fluent speakers alike, 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). As Jerry pointed out, this requires the rejection of Western constructions of Chickasaw people as “Indian” and toward Chickasaw conceptualizations of what it is to be human. The words of language learners and Elders reflect that a deep and full understanding of Chickasaw cultural identity requires the language.

Chikashshanompa’ as Cultural Practice

Importantly, language is just one of many ways to engage in one’s culture. Studying the impact of language shift on Hopi young people, Nicholas (2009) found that even without a strong foundation in their heritage language, youth developed a strong sense of cultural identity by “living Hopi” through active participation in religion, customs, and traditions. Further, language was not limited to “talk,” but encompassed oral tradition as a “total communicative framework’ manifest in song words, prayer, teachings, ritual performances, religious ceremonies, and cultural institutions” (Nicholas, 2009, p. 333). Many Indigenous Peoples understand this oral tradition as the means through which they are instructed “how to be a people in heart, thought, behavior, and conduct as they pursue life’s fulfillment” (Nicholas, 2014, p. 64). The understanding of Chikashshanompa’ as cultural practice is critical because it shifts emphasis from the language itself to how Chickasaw people are deepening a sense of cultural identity through the language.

Significantly, youth and young adult students who were learning the language had much insight into the importance of Chikashshanompa’ as cultural practice. One student, Ezra, who

studied the language in high school explained that he often used the language outside of class.

He recalled a distinct memory of serving food to Elders at a community event:

I remember [one Elder] coming up and saying, “Yakkookay [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 to have that few seconds is what counted.

What Ezra did in these moments extended far beyond the exchanging of niceties in the language.

He upheld a cultural value showing respect to an Elder by greeting him and serving him a meal.

Although one does not need to be proficient in the language in order to serve Elders, the significance that Ezra attaches to this memory of language use reflects that Chikashshanompa’ is what Nicholas (2009) calls the “missing piece” to deep and full understanding of the totality of a Chickasaw way of being. By using the language in this cultural context, he engaged in a process of acquiring essential Chickasaw values and concepts. Several years later, Ezra reflected again on this memory—thinking not only of the hope he himself experienced as a language learner but also of the hope this Elder must have experienced when a young person answered him in the language. In Ezra’s view, this memory encapsulates what it means to reclaim one’s language, to use it with purpose, and to ensure its continuance across generations.

Lonna, like Ezra, also offered insight into what it means to enact Chickasaw values which are understood in the context of the language and cultural practice. Describing the challenge of learning language without being around fluent speakers, 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.

In Lonna’s view, language learning is a social activity that, much like the preparation of traditional dumplings, is difficult to do in isolation. Without an experienced teacher who has knowledge of the language and how it should be used, an essential component of the language learning process will inevitably be lacking. This metaphor of dumpling making can also be understood another way. A Chickasaw person can learn to make dumplings relying on English—“the recipe”—without knowledge of the language. As Lonna 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.”

The stories of youth and adult language learners alike provide important insight into the significance of language as cultural practice to nation building. Reclaiming Chikashshanompa’ is a lifelong pursuit in which one gradually and continually develops sophistication in increasingly esoteric domains. This process of accessing and acquiring deep cultural knowledge through in-depth language study can be likened to an iceberg (Barnhardt, 2008), in which the visible tip of the iceberg above sea level represents surface culture. Submerged and unseen is the body of the iceberg representing deep cultural knowledge, which will only be accessed by some language learners who choose and are invited by the community to dive beneath the surface of the ocean that is the language. Nation building begins with individuals’ reclamation of deep and full understanding of Chikashshanompa’ as cultural practice and grows outward.

(Re)Valuing of Language Learners

The devaluing of Indigenous heritage language learners is a legacy of colonization. Expectations of failure loom over Indigenous language learners, who have been characterized within scholarly literature and, in some cases, their own communities as “dysfluent” or

inherently unable to acquire their heritage languages (Meek, 2011). Such deficit views of Indigenous youth contribute to a damaging notion that these language learners are inherently unable to speak their languages or that they have intentionally “abandoned” their heritage languages in favor of a dominant language (McCarty et al., 2014; Meek, 2011; Wyman et al., 2014). Both research and experience demonstrate that is not the case. The (re)valuing of language learners counters internal colonization allowing for the (re)building of relationships which enable and reinvigorate language reclamation work.

Bradley, a Chickasaw student enrolled in the ECU college course shared a powerful perspective on the way in which the ability to learn Chikashshanompa’ is a special gift. He explained, “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.” The language is a living entity and once it goes to sleep and is no longer spoken, it is difficult to reawaken. Bradley recognized that part of his responsibility as a young person was to learn and remember the language throughout his life. In his view, skills like beading and playing stickball can be taught more easily than the language. As a result, he did not feel the same urgency to learn how to bead as he did to learn the language because he could learn how to bead anytime. The language, on the other hand, may not always be accessible to him. Bradley’s statement further indicates that the ability to learn and remember the language is a gift and life calling that not every Chickasaw person has.

Importantly, Bradley recognized a unique gift in himself as a language learner. The Chikashshanompa’ classes he was taking at school strengthened his sense of identity and helped him to find his place in his family and community. He explained that members of his family had unique talents—such as beadwork or crafting stickball sticks—which contributed to Chickasaw

cultural continuance, but no one spoke the language. Over time, Bradley's family began to esteem him a keeper of knowledge of the language, turning to him to teach them and answer questions. Not only that, the community began to notice as well. Because of his demonstrated commitment to learning Chickasaw in his high school courses, the student was selected as an aide for the classes during his senior year. Together, an internal and external recognition of language learner's talents and gifts motivates and sustains their engagement in language reclamation.

Nearly all the language learners I interviewed as part of this research described being inspired both by Elder speakers and, importantly, by one another. For Clovis, a primary source of motivation to continue to learn and use the language was working with others and seeing one another's progress. Clovis explained of learning with others, "I think we kind of push each other [to learn and use the language more] without really knowing." By valuing each other's accomplishments as language learners, these language learners formed strong bonds to one another. Significantly, these bonds around the language have enabled language learners to envision themselves continuing the legacy of current Elder language keepers. These language learners especially enjoyed seeing Chikashshanompa' Elder speakers, who were longtime friends, visit with each other and speak the language. Clovis explained, "It's just amazing to sit there and listen to them . . . They start talking over each other and cutting words off. Listening to them do that is something to look forward to." Not only did Clovis feel inspired by these Elders to continue learning the language, but he was able to see himself and his coworkers in them. He reflected, "It'd be pretty neat if me [and my coworkers] could sit around and talk Chickasaw being not Elders, but semi-young still. It'd be pretty neat to sit around and talk with each other."

Clovis's vision of himself as a "semi-young" competent speaker-user of Chikashshanompa' is significant because it speaks strongly to Tara Yosso's (2005) notion of aspirational capital, or "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (pp. 77–78). Such ability, especially among younger generations, is critical both to cultural continuance and to nation building. As Yosso further explains, "These aspirations are developed within social and familial contexts, often through linguistic storytelling and advice . . . that offer specific navigational goals to challenge (resist) oppressive conditions" (p. 77). 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.

Conclusions

When I began my research with Chickasaws involved with language reclamation work in 2010, I learned that many were motivated by a sense of urgency of language decline—a fear that the language could be lost forever. Four years later, when I returned to conduct both new and follow-up interviews, this fear was overshadowed by a force much more powerful: hope. As one language learner powerfully asserted, "I'm not afraid of [Chikashshanompa'] going to sleep anymore . . . I'm not afraid of that." Chickasaw people are choosing to prioritize Chikashshanompa', restructuring and dedicating their lives to ensuring the continuance of the language. As a result, for the first time in recent history, fluent speakers and language learners alike are able to envision a future where Chikashshanompa' is spoken (Chew, 2019).

During one especially memorable interview, Elder speaker Jerry reflected on how his perception of language learners and the importance of language reclamation had evolved over time. For years, he had been skeptical of younger generations' interest in the language. In fact, when the Master–Apprentice Program began in 2007, he declined to participate, saying that he did not believe teaching the language was good or appropriate work. Jerry explained:

When this language thing began to be told about in the Indian communities [and] when [younger generations] began to hear [the language], they began to want to learn. I told them (which is wrong), “If I teach you, who are you going to speak to? There’s nobody else . . . that speaks it . . . [and] I’m not going to live forever.”

Jerry had internalized the belief that the language was destined to perish with his generation—what he perceived to be the last generation of fluent speakers.

What is significant about Jerry’s statement is his admission that the belief he had once firmly held was wrong. After being asked repeatedly to be a master language teacher and taking time to think about it, he finally agreed. To his surprise, he came to embrace teaching Chikashshanompa’ as rewarding and worthwhile. Not only did he agree to participate in the Master–Apprentice Program, he co-taught the ECU language courses and assisted with language immersion programming. The younger people he worked with were eager to learn, and what is more were becoming proficient users of the language. Seeing their dedication and progress inspired Jerry to ask again: “If I weren’t here anymore, who’s going to carry [the language] on?” This time he answered—with absolute conviction—of the committed language learners he had taught, “They’ll be the ones to carry it on.” Jerry’s statement speaks powerfully to the central role of language to cultural continuance and to nation building.

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Notes

1. There are a number of reasons why some speakers choose not to teach Chikashshanompa'. Many speakers have experienced immense trauma associated with speaking their Indigenous language.

2. Published under the author's maiden name.

3. At the time of my study, the Chikasha Academy group immersion approach had not yet begun. Most adult research participants had completed the Master–Apprentice Program. (For more information about this approach, see Hinson, 2019; Morgan, 2017.)

4. This language software was not yet released at the time I conducted my research.

5. Stickball is a traditional game central to Chickasaw culture and spirituality.

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