

# **A Brief History of the Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposia (SILS)**

**Jon Reyhner, Northern Arizona University**

**25<sup>th</sup> Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium  
University of Lethbridge 6/7/18**



Chapter 1, [Effective Language Education Practices and Native Language Survival](#) (pp. 1-8), edited by Jon Reyhner. Choctaw, OK: Native American Language Issues. Copyright 1990 by NALI Board of Executors and Jon Reyhner.

## Keynote Address

### Effective Language Education Practices and Native Language Survival

Dick Littlebear

It is difficult for our Native American languages and cultures to survive and it will get more difficult. One of the reasons for this increasing difficulty for Native language groups is that we are in the midst of a cultural transition which has demeaned our languages and cultures. However, remember that our cultures have proven their ability to survive and adapt over the past thousands of years when they have undergone other cultural transitions. Let us not allow this present cultural transition to be any different. The problem is that others have defined for us how to cope with this transition and their efforts have only minimally succeeded.

This means we must devise our own strategies to counter the negative effects of cultural transition. Especially since this cultural transition is being complicated by alien organizational systems, by high technology, by alcohol, by drugs, by ambiguous values, by exploding populations, by erosion of language and culture, and by a shrinking world which brings new demands that impact daily the remotest villages and reservations. Because of these complications, this transition is forcing us to realign our cultures to fit the present educational, economic, political, and social circumstances in which we native minority language people find ourselves. However, I believe we can use the white man's education, as we Cheyennes refer to it, to our advantage.

By manipulating the white man's education we can shape our cultures to our liking to fit our needs. After all, it is the white man's education and the way it was perpetrated on us that we have objected to; we have never objected to learning itself. Manipulating the white man's education is a challenge. Let's not be discouraged. But above all, let us not say we do not want the white man's education. Though it was imposed on us insensitively, let's make it our own by giving it our own unique cultural input and making it relevant to our situations. Our languages and cultures will have a better chance of surviving if we have the same academic knowledge as the dominant society.

I am optimistic that we can do this with a more manipulative attitude toward the white man's education so that we can have the final word in what shape our cultures assume. Developing this attitude has not been and will not be easy. Getting educated in the white man's way has been difficult, especially for Native Americans, for a variety of reasons. One of them is the lack of positive acknowledgment of our cultures and languages.

Native American students have the highest dropout rates when measured by any criteria. These dropout rates are rapidly becoming a Native American academic tradition. It is a tradition that is being forced on us; it is a tradition with no cultural basis. What causes this dropout rate? In Alaska about sixty percent of urban Alaskan natives drop out of high school, partly because of the stress of changing social and cultural factors (Native, 1989). One of the elements of this "stress of changing social and cultural factors" is the cultural transition I have referred to.

Because this stress is present, I speculate that something definitely is wrong with the way we are being educated. What is wrong is that we language minority Americans have seldom been asked to participate positively in the education of our own children. This brings us back to our conference theme, *Effective Language Education Practices and Native Language Survival*. It contains two ideas, effective practices and language survival, which, when acted upon positively, can help lower the dropout rates of our native language minority students, increase their achievement levels, enhance individual and cultural self-esteem, and aid in the acquisition of English.

Willig (1985) in her research on bilingual education found that students who participated in bilingual programs consistently got higher English language test scores in reading, language skills, mathematics and total achievement. It is clear that educational methods incorporating the cultural and linguistic knowledge of students are the most effective methods for preparing them to compete in the mainstream of society.

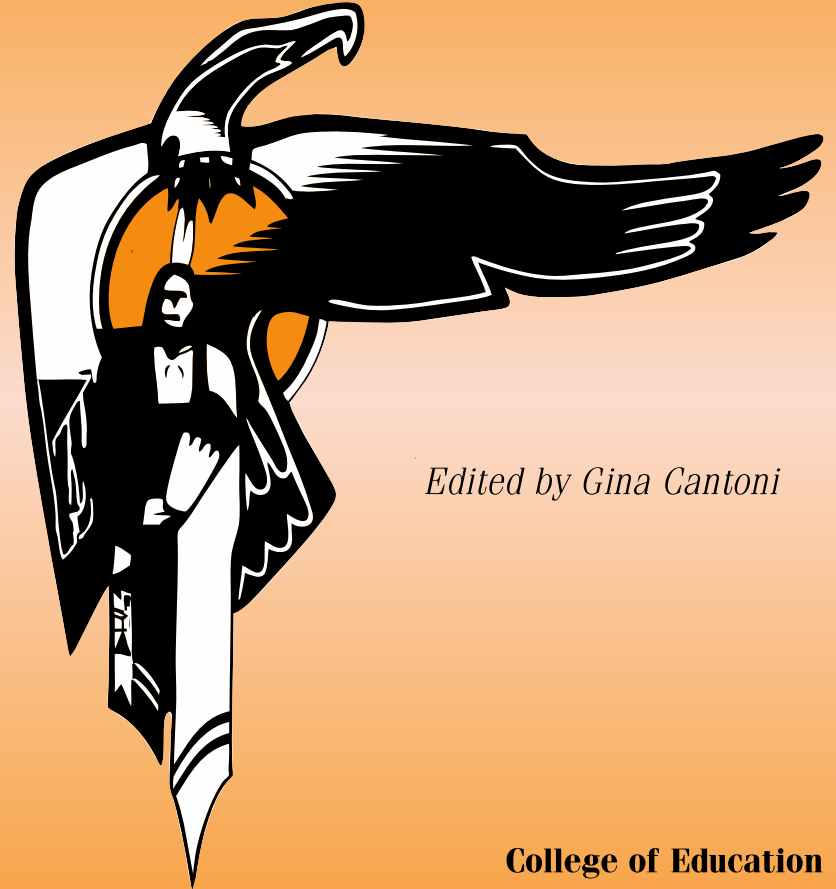
What are effective language education practices? The most effective are those which have been in use for thousands of years; those done by the family. If we are serious about preserving our languages and cultures, we must start using our languages daily and everywhere. We must talk to our children in our own languages and share with them the positive sides of our past and contemporary cultures.

If they are to survive, we must return the learning and teaching of our languages and our cultures to where they rightfully belong--in the families. The parents and elders represent the most effective language learning and teaching practices that we can utilize to ensure the survival of our languages and cultures. We must re-instill the value of our languages and cultures in the family unit and not just hope the schools will do it for us.

Dr. Littlebear  
keynoted the 9<sup>th</sup> annual  
International Native  
American Language  
Issues (NALI) Institute  
held in Billings,  
Montana, in 1989 and I  
co-chaired it. In some  
ways, SILS is the  
successor to the NALI  
conferences

Symposia were held in 1994 and 1995 at Northern Arizona University that brought together language activists, tribal educators, and experts on linguistics, language renewal, and language teaching to discuss policy changes, educational reforms, and community initiatives to stabilize and revitalize American Indian and Alaska Native Languages.

## **Stabilizing Indigenous Languages**



*Edited by Gina Cantoni*



**NORTHERN  
ARIZONA  
UNIVERSITY**

**College of Education**

**Monograph Series,  
Special Issue**

Northern Arizona  
University Regents  
Professor Dr. Gina  
Cantoni organized the  
first two SILS. The third  
symposia was organized  
by Dr. Dick Littlebear and  
held in Anchorage,  
Alaska. The fourth  
symposia was organized  
by Dr. Jon Reyhner and  
held back at NAU.  
Selected papers were  
published in a series of  
symposium monographs.



Besides Northern Arizona University, the symposium has been hosted at Arizona State University, University of Arizona, University of California at Berkeley, University of Oregon, University of Victoria, University of Hawaii at Hilo, Montana State University, and the University of New Mexico among other places over the years. The Northern Arapaho Nation hosted the 2015 Symposium in Riverton, Wyoming. **We are looking for a host for the 2019 symposium.**



At the symposia and in the SILS publications information about efforts to revitalize Indigenous languages like the 1984 Navajo Nation's Education Policies calling for the teaching of the Navajo/Diné language in all schools serving their children were shared.

# NAVAJO NATION



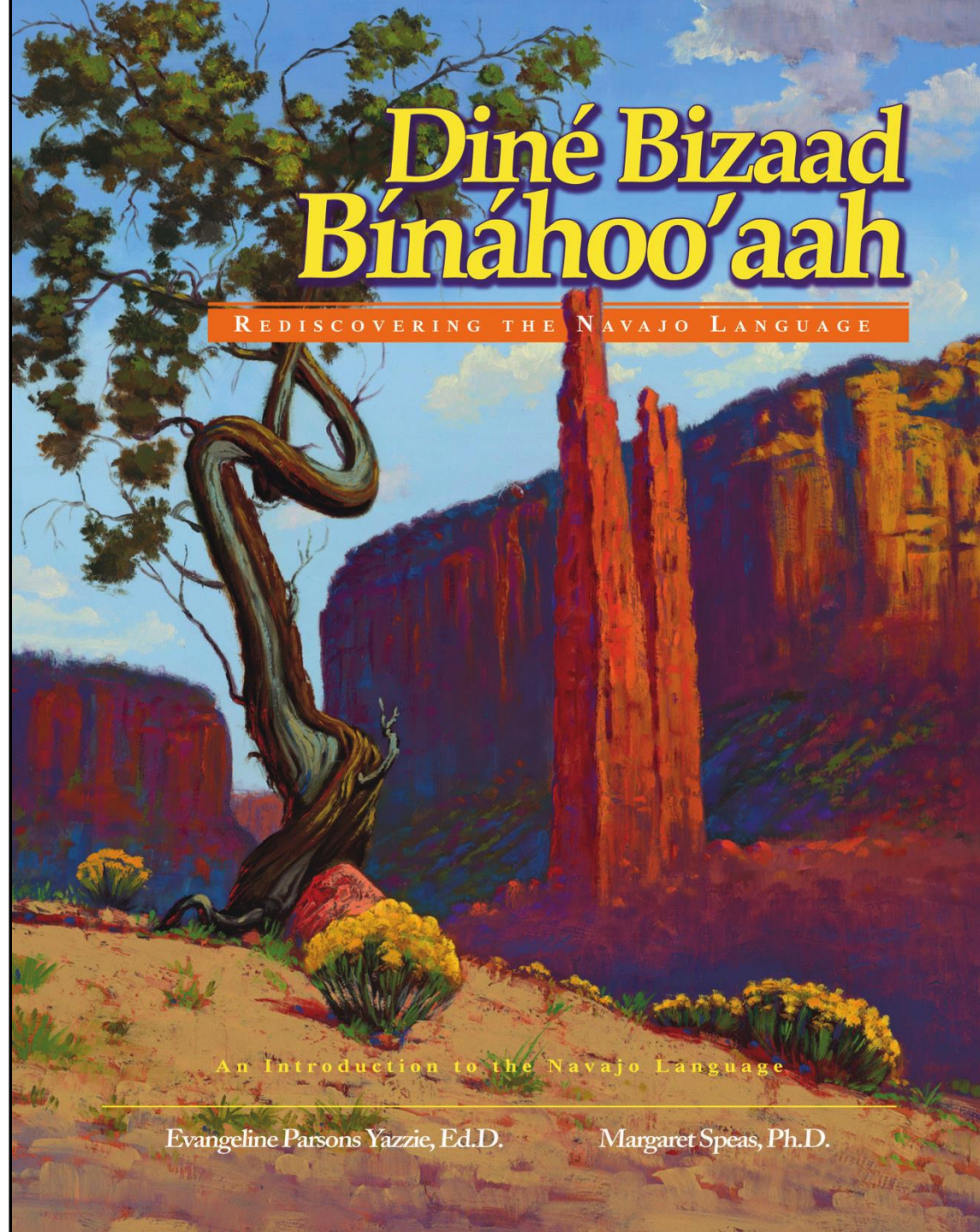
Peterson Zah, *Chairman*  
Navajo Tribal Council

Edward T. Begay, *Vice-Chairman*  
Navajo Tribal Council

## EDUCATION POLICIES

SILS

publications have included articles about writing textbooks to teach Indigenous languages, language teaching methods, and many other topics related to Indigenous language revitalization



# Diné Bizaad Bíná'hoo'aah

REDISCOVERING THE NAVAJO LANGUAGE

An Introduction to the Navajo Language

Evangeline Parsons Yazzie, Ed.D.

Margaret Speas, Ph.D.

# Encouragement, Guidance and Lessons Learned: 21 Years in the Trenches of Indigenous Language Revitalization

Darrell Kipp, Piegan Institute

*“Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.”*

Leonardo da Vinci

## Situational Navajo:

### A School-Based, Verb-Centered Way of Teaching Navajo

Wayne Holm, Irene Silentman, Laura Wallace

Those who work in Indian-controlled school programs have had to learn that, in talking to educators in other programs, what we see as a ‘solution’ in our situation may well be seen as a ‘disaster’ in someone else’s situation. We have had to learn not to tell others ‘the’ way—our way—to do things. Instead, we begin by explaining our situation in some detail. We explain why we do what we do. We talk about our successes and failures to date; we may talk about our residual problems. But we leave it to our listeners to decide how their situation is similar to (and different from) ours—and what parts of our program they may decide to try or reject.

This is also true of Native-language immersion programs. What works in one situation may or may not work in others. A native-language immersion program must come to terms with, among other things, the structure of the language they are trying to teach. Navajo is very much a verb-centered language. Navajo verbs are intricately complex. But they are absolutely necessary. We have struggled to find ways to make Navajo verbs accessible to non- or limited-Navajo-speaking students. Our approach may or may not be useful to those who are trying to teach other languages. Their program must give their children access to the crucial features of their languages.

## Two Demonstrations

We realized only after submitting this paper for publication that it is probably necessary to give readers some sort of ‘feel’ for what we’re talking about. In oral presentations, we have often prefaced the longer expository portions of this paper with two brief demonstrations.

### A noun-based calendar lesson

In the first demonstration, Laura usually takes a small group of adults from the audience to act as students (These may or may not be Navajo-speakers; she has done this both ways). She brings them in close to her to teach what we have come to call “the calendar lesson.” Using a mockup of an ‘enriched’ calendar, she leads them through the months of the year, the days of the week, and the numbers of the dates. The ‘children’ respond energetically and in chorus. They may go on to colors, directions, shapes and the like. And, if they are Navajo-speakers, she may take them on to clothing, body-parts, age/gender terms; she may take them on to kinship terms and Navajo place names.

The ‘students’ usually respond well. They are ‘interested.’ They respond readily—and in chorus. They are getting feedback that tells them they are doing well. At the end of this lesson, we usually ask the audience what they thought of

The first steps taken by me to learn my tribal language took place in 1983. They were reluctant and tentative, akin to a schoolboy distraction on a beautiful summer day. In retrospect, the language embraced me and whenever I experienced an apostasy revealed its power to me. My Blackfoot language is thousands of years old, the conduit of uncountable years of interaction between my people and the Creator. It is not composed of mere words, but instead embodies everything about us to the beginning of Blackfoot time. Today, I am content with the knowledge, insights and privileges it has provided to me. I have become friends with countless people I may have never met otherwise because of it. Knowing people contributing to revitalization of tribal languages blesses my memories, and enlightens my heart. Today is an example of the beauty of sharing our mutual love for our tribal languages. I greet you, honor you and embrace you in the fellowship of our cause.

Today my wish is to encourage those seeking to revitalize their tribal language and to share what I have come to know over the past 20 years. I acknowledge the power of the few to do what many have failed, or refused, to do. I acknowledge the ageless human concept that within every tribe are the few who possess courage to find reason within chaos. I acknowledge the obstacles to revitalize a tribal language are profound, but also understand accepting the challenge is the only way to banish defeat. The tribal language revitalization movement was late in coming into our awareness, yet it attracted the good in good people with its promise of reconciliation. Although, tribal language revitalization programs possess a reality imbedded in all of us there is a deep and haunting question lurking in the shadows of the movement. The question is when a tribe’s language is irrevocably gone will it matter?

David Treuer (2008), an Ojibwe translator and author, provides a slice of the answer in his *Washington Post* article, “If They’re Lost, Who Are We?” His concern is what the loss of tribal languages can bring to tribes. He writes, “at some point (and no one is too anxious to identify it exactly), a culture ceases to be a culture and becomes an ethnicity—that is, it changes from a life system that develops its own terms into one that borrows, almost completely, someone else’s.” Since I firmly believe culture emanates from language, I find myself agreeing with his premise.

It is not my intention to question any group’s plans to keep their tribal language viable and dynamic. I am familiar with the spectrum of methods, intents and logistics in place throughout our universities, schools and communities. I



## Ke Kula Maui Ola Hawai'i 'o Nāwahīokalani'ōpu'u Living Hawaiian Life-Force School<sup>1</sup>

Keiki Kawai'ae'a, Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley<sup>2</sup> & Kaiolohia Masaoka

'O Nāwahī 'oe o Kalani'ōpu'u  
'O ka wahī i wahī 'ia ai  
I milo 'ia ai a pa'a pono  
I hāli'i 'ia ai a nani  
I ka 'ahu pōpōhīnano o Puna  
Uhia aku i ka ahū'ula  
Kau 'ia ka wahī i laila  
Ua pa'a, ua malu,  
Ua malu ka wahī o Kalani'ōpu'u  
'O ka wahī ia i wahī 'ia ai  
I lawalawa 'ia ai  
I 'ope'ope 'ia ai a pa'a  
I kōkō 'ia ai a kau i luna  
A lei i ka umauma  
I ka 'ā'i o nā maka'āinana ē  
'O ka wahī kona  
'O ka inoa wahī kou i 'ane'i 'ae. (Sheldon, 1996)

This chapter presents the case study of a first year Hawaiian language medium-immersion teacher at Ke Kula 'o Nāwahīokalani'ōpu'u school. Insights on the lessons learned are also described from group discussions with peer teachers on Native language immersion education, teacher development and Native, immersion and community dynamics. A closing reflection piece of the case study teacher's journey some ten years later provides inspiration for others wishing to revitalize their endangered languages and cultures as an enduring gift from generations past to current and generations yet unborn.

### PART I: The Setting

Located in the district of Puna on the east side of the island of Hawai'i stands Ke Kula 'o Nāwahīokalani'ōpu'u, a total Hawaiian language immersion kindergarten through twelfth grade. It is one of 21 Hawaiian immersion schools that are contributing to the revitalization of the Hawaiian language through a Hawaiian medium-immersion education model. Each morning the school day at Ke Kula 'o Nāwahīokalani'ōpu'u begins with an opening protocol that calls to order a gathering of the total school community at the piko, the umbilicus of the school. The morning protocol begins with the blowing of the conch shell by two male students standing at the end of the entrance walkway, which signals the

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Cite as from J. Reyhner, J. Martin, L. Lockard & W.S. Gilbert. (Eds.). (2017). *Honoring Our Teachers* (pp. 77-98). Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona University.

## Wenesh Waa Oshkii-Bmaadizijig Noondamowaad? What Will The Young Children Hear?

Margaret Noori, University of Michigan

This essay discusses the practical realities of creating a bi-lingual home, specifically with an endangered language. It begins with a brief introduction to Anishinaabemowin and then describes language activism at several levels—from informal community instruction to full-credit post-secondary courses. Organized around the steps taken to produce fluency and transfer a full aesthetic and cultural understanding of the language, this essay attempts to convey the need for curriculum as well as community support for language revitalization.

In our house, with each passing exchange of meaning, we take, or we miss, an opportunity to use an indigenous language. We wake up, give kisses, tell jokes, tease one another, stop arguments or wipe tears; and with each act we make a choice to use English, or Anishinaabemowin. My goal is for all of us to make those choices un-self-consciously, to make them instinctive dreamtime choices that echo into the day. If we can honor the language and use it regularly, then like dreams remembered, it will guide and define us in ways that connect us to our home, our ancestors and to one another.

This short essay offers some of what I have learned while struggling to keep a language alive and in use in a busy modern household. Sometimes it is like waging war on English and you must have strong defenses, offensive strategies and an endless supply of patience and assistance. At other times it is the most natural and easy form of play, a blanket of comfort that shelters a small community from the larger, sometimes harsher, landscape. I will be honest, we don't yet have days where everyone speaks Anishinaabemowin all the time, and perhaps we never will. But we do try and I think that is what matters. We make space and give children a foundation for bi-lingual learning in the place where it matters the most, the home.

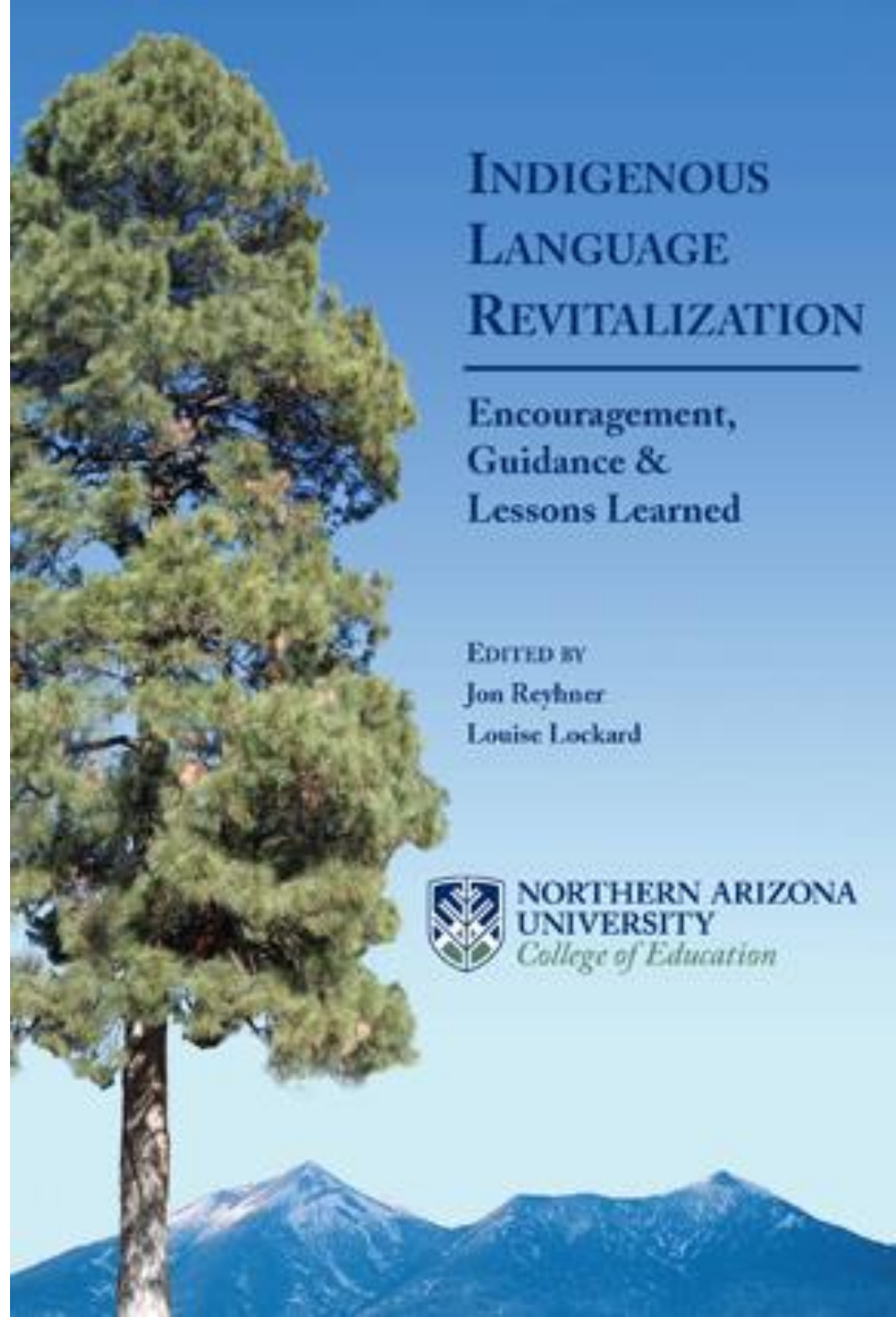
First, let me describe the landscape. Anishinaabemowin is a language shared by people living within, or connected to, over 220 separate sovereign nations that surround the Great Lakes in Canada and the United States. Twelve of those nations are located in Michigan (Lebeau, 2005). According to the 2000 US Census, there are 58,000 American Indians in Michigan. Washtenaw County, where we live in the city of Ann Arbor, is home to 1,161. Most interestingly, the highest number of Native Americans is not in any of the northern or western counties where the reservations are located. It is 20 minutes away from us in Southeast Michigan where 13,000 Native Americans live in neighboring Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties. People still expect reservations to be exotic places where old people speak another language and they expect that "Indians" stay on them.

When I go to work at the University of Michigan, I teach Anishinaabemowin to over 250 students. When we host a weekly language table (see Figure 1, opposite page) as many as 30 to 35 people show up. It is a place where the

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From J. Reyhner & L. Lockard (eds.). (2009). *Indigenous Language Revitalization: Encouragement, Guidance & Lessons Learned* (pp. 11-22). Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona University.

Northern Arizona University for over two decades has helped support and Indigenous language revitalization through conferences, books, and the web site. Many of the SILS publications are available at

**<http://nau.edu/TIL>**



**Important Information**[Conferences & Institutes](#)[Indigenous Language News](#)[Some Basics of Indigenous Language Revitalization](#)[Maintaining & Renewing Native Languages](#)[Rationale & Needs for Keeping Languages Alive](#)[Status of Indigenous Languages](#)[Teaching Methods](#)[Selected Resources](#)[Purchasing Information](#)**Link Pages**[American Indian Education](#)[American Indian-General](#)[Bilingual Education](#)[Education \(General\)](#)[ESL & Language](#)[Indigenous Language](#)[Language Policy & Human Rights](#)[Literacy & Reading](#)[Multicultural Education](#)[Parent Involvement](#)

to be held to.

On September 13, 2007 the United Nations adopted the [Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#), which includes language rights. Only four nations initially voted against this declaration, including the U.S.A. Since then Australia, Canada, New Zealand and now the U.S.A have reversed their positions. On December 16, 2010, [President Barack Obama](#) declared,

*And as you know, in April, we announced that we were reviewing our position on the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. And today I can announce that the United States is lending its support to this declaration.*

*The aspirations it affirms—including the respect for the institutions and rich cultures of Native peoples—are ones we must always seek to fulfill. And we're releasing a more detailed statement about U.S. support for the declaration and our ongoing work in Indian Country. But I want to be clear: What matters far more than words--what matters far more than any resolution or declaration--are actions to match those words.... That's the standard I expect my administration*

Article 13-1 of the declaration reads "Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons" and Article 14-1 reads "Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning." The United Nations General Assembly declared 2008 as the International Year of Languages.

The National Geographic Society's Enduring Voices Project noted a few years ago that by "2100, more than half of the more than 7,000 languages spoken on Earth--many of them not yet recorded--may disappear, taking with them a wealth of knowledge about history, culture, the natural environment, and the human brain." It identifies language "hot spots" around the world where Indigenous languages are most rapidly being lost, two of which are in the North America. The [Native American Languages Act](#) of 1990 makes it U.S. Government policy to promote, protect, and preserve the Indigenous languages of the U.S.A. This "Teaching Indigenous Languages" web site is an outgrowth of a series of annual [conferences](#) started in 1994 at [Northern Arizona University](#) to help achieve the goals of the Native American Languages Act. These conferences focus on the linguistic, educational, social, and political issues related to the survival of the endangered Indigenous languages of the world. The 24<sup>th</sup> symposium was held on May 26-28, 2017, at the Indian Community School in Franklin, Wisconsin. The 25<sup>th</sup> symposium is being held in [Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada on June 7-9, 2018](#). Organizers are the University of Lethbridge and the Piikani Board Of Education. To receive conference updates and related information join the [Indigenous-L](#) List.

At the heart of this site are over a hundred full text papers from the 1994 through 2008 Stabilizing Indigenous Languages conferences as well as the 2000 Learn in Beauty conference and the 1989 Native American Language Issues Institute published in nine [monographs](#). This site also has [over 60 columns](#) from the magazine of the National Association for Bilingual Education, [articles](#), and other materials. There is a [subject index](#), a [language/tribe index](#), and [links](#) to related sites, including an [American Indian / Indigenous Education](#) site. Please direct comments or questions about this site to [Jon Reyhner](#) at [Jon.Reyhner@nau.edu](mailto:Jon.Reyhner@nau.edu).

**NEW LINKS**

[Diné Language Valued by \[Navajo Nation President\] Russell Begaye](#), April 18, 2018

[Opportunity Versus Identity: Indigenous Peoples Learning New Languages](#) 2017 article in *Babel: The Language Magazine*  
[Revitalization of Indigenous Languages: Designing and Facilitating Immersion Programs](#) Special 2017 issue of *Cogent Education*

[Restoring indigenous languages key to preventing youth suicides, Trudeau \[Prime Minister of Canada\] says](#) June 3, 2016

[Early childhood Native language immersion develops minds, revitalizes cultures](#) 8/9/16

[So That Any Child May Succeed--Indigenous Pathways Toward Justice and the Promise of Brown](#) Terri McCarty's 2015 Brown Lecture

“It’s sad to be the last speaker of your language. Please, turn back to your own and learn your language so you won’t be alone like me. Go to the young people. Let go of the hate in your hearts. Love and respect yourselves first. Elders please give them courage and they will never be alone. Help our people to understand their identity. We need to publish materials for our people. To educate the white people to us and for indigenous people.”

--Mary Smith, last speaker of Eyak





“Believing in the language brings the generations together.... If there’ re any seeds left, there’ s an opportunity to grow.”



—Leanne Hinton, Co-chair  
2004 Annual Stabilizing  
Indigenous Languages  
Symposium, University of  
California at Berkeley