The role of linguistics in community-based language documentation: Bottleneck or bootstrap?

Jordan Lachler • lachler@ualberta.ca
Sally Rice • srice@ualberta.ca

CILLDI, University of Alberta

The Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute (CILLDI) is developing a Community Linguist Handbook tied to its existing Community Linguist Certificate program. The Handbook and its accompanying website will allow students to build a portfolio of their language through a graded series of exercises, beginning with individual sounds and moving through words and phrases, then to full texts.

Keywords: training, revitalization, documentation, resources

THE COMMUNITY LINGUISTIC CERTIFICATE

History
The Community Linguist Certificate is a provincially-recognized certificate administered through CILLDI and awarded by the Faculty of Arts at the University of Alberta. The certificate was founded in 2007. The program was designed to meet the growing need for Indigenous communities to have their own trained experts who can lead community-based language documentation and revitalization projects.

Goals
The goals of the CLC program are to:
- Develop a cadre of linguistically-trained community-based Indigenous language workers and artists who encourage some speakers to consider further training in linguistics
- Provide models of University-Community collaboration
- Give UAlberta students a chance to meet with, learn from and develop relationships with CLC students

Student Population
The typical CLC student is a fluent speaker of a Canadian Indigenous language. Most are working as language teachers in their communities, or are involved in other language and culture projects through their Band. Some have previous University experience, but for many this is their first exposure to post-secondary education.

Structure of the Certificate Program
The program encompasses a six-course sequence. Students typically take two courses each summer, completing their certificate over three summers. The typical CLC class has around a dozen students, speaking 4 or 5 different languages.

Year One
- LING 111: Introduction to Linguistics for Indigenous Language Revitalization
- LING 211: Phonetics of Indigenous Languages

Year Two
- LING 312: Morphosyntax of Indigenous Languages
- LING 313: Sentence and Discourse Patterns of Indigenous Languages

Year Three
- INT-D 311: Language Policy & Planning for Indigenous Language Communities
- INT-D 318: Technologies for Endangered Language Documentation

Scope of the Training
The training covers the following areas:
- The basic of linguistic analysis at all levels
- The special properties of Indigenous languages
- Best practices in language representation
- Exposure to language documentation techniques
- Community language advocacy and activism

The CLC Philosophy
The CLC courses also aim to impart to students a shared set of beliefs and practices about languages like all living things, they grow and change over time.

No one speaker, or linguist, or speaker-linguist can know everything about a language

Oral language is primary -- written language is an imperfect reflection at best

You can't

But the irregular parts are just as important, maybe even more so

The Next Steps
Beyond the core CLC courses, CILLDI continues to develop more courses that offer targeted training in advanced topics in community linguistics. These include:
- Building a Community Dictionary Cover-to-Cover
- Language Documentation
- Language Revitalization
- Online Tools for Language Revitalization

These courses build directly on the skills that CLC graduates have already developed, and prepare them to undertake more comprehensive language documentation and revitalization projects.

Community-Based Delivery
Although most delivery of CLC courses continues to happen at the annual CILLDI Summer School each July in Edmonton, we are continuing to expand possibilities for year-round community-based delivery. In 2009, CILLDI delivered all six CLC courses at the Tusa Yiu First Nation, and in 2011 we are doing the same with the Axiss Hakata Sioux Nation. We are eager to develop partnerships with other Indigenous and University-based institutions to bring CLC courses to communities across Canada and beyond.

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