Interview Transcript

Interviewee: David (pseudonym)
Interviewer: Ashleigh Surma

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David: [I'm] sleepy.

Ashleigh Surma: I know I am too. It's a long day. Okay, so today is Tuesday, July 23rd, 2019 here at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Ashleigh Surma is the interviewer, and I'm using a Zoom H6 to do the recording. Okay. So just to kind of start out, so my first question would be if someone from the community that you live in, if they want to learn [the language] right? Is that the name of the language, [language name]?

David: Yeah. So it can be [language name, language name,] or [language name]. Either of those three.

Ashleigh Surma: Okay. So if anyone wants to learn the language, how would they go about it do you think? What kinds of resources do they have? Are there classes that they can take? Are there kinds of books that they might read, or what do you think?

David: Well, so there isn't anything that's set up in terms of classes that you can do that would be ongoing, where you can go where there's actual curriculum built and sort of set plans on what you're going to be learning. There is resources online that people can use. So there's the Yukon Native Language Center that has a website. There's also community based websites where just people from the community have created websites where you can look at stuff, and there's also YouTube, which has quite a bit of things in there. There's also a lot of literacy materials that have been done. There are lots of recordings as well. The only thing is those recordings haven't been digitized, so they're just sitting in archives right now. Usually people's best bet if they're wanting to learn is to try and befriend a speaker really.

Ashleigh Surma: Are there lots of younger people that speak ... Are there younger people that speak the language nowadays? Is it mostly older people?

David: I would say that there's a resurgence of younger people who are trying to learn, so like millennials or Gen X, Gen X who are trying to learn. Not a lot of older people who are not within those generations are really learning. There's a few older people who are taking part in an immersion program. I wouldn't really call it an immersion program though. It's more like a language intensive program, but I think the majority of the learners right now are either Millennials or Gen X.

Ashleigh Surma: Okay. Okay. So in these kinds of immersion, or these kinds of programs, is it kind of just a one-on-one where people sit down and just have daily conversations, or is it more of like a structured kind of you learn about this, and then you learn about this, or do you know anything about that?

David: For the language immersion program?

Ashleigh Surma: Yeah.

David: So how that is it's roughly structured so that everybody has their own learning path that they set, so they're setting their own goals, and there's two fluent speakers who are in the class, and then two actual teachers. So they try to work with all those students, and mostly they are focusing quite a bit on the literacy aspect of it, so working on orthography, and doing stuff like that, whereas their actual focus of immersion where you're just speaking, your comprehension focus is not as strong. Those opportunities where I'm from they're very rare to come by, opportunities where you're just focused on speaking. So those are very rare opportunities, and they're just starting to kind of come around a little bit more where people are thinking it's more important to actually be speaking than it is to be able to read and write, yeah.

Ashleigh Surma: So people are focusing, well have been focusing on reading and writing mostly?

David: Yeah. Mostly a lot has been put on the focus of actual documentation, meaning putting things on paper. So there's extensive documentation of [the language] that's been done and lots of it is on paper. The only issue is finding people who can read it, and who can actually, and sticking with the same orthography because it hasn't been really a standardized orthography for [the language], hasn't been established for quite a while. I think it was back in 1978 that it was sort of how they established it. Even then, there were some people who disagreed with the way that things should be spelled. So there are documents that are totally different

spelling, and you're trying to figure out how to read them, so that's kind of a struggle, but there's lots though.

Ashleigh Surma: Yeah, I can imagine if it's being written a lot of different ways. Do you think that there's any kind of main orthography, and then people like branch off from it, or is it different communities write a different way, or different age groups write a different way? Or is it just kind of people are writing it how they hear it?

David: Well, there's one. There's one sort of standard that everybody uses, and then for people who don't the orthography then it's just write it how you hear it if you're worried about writing it down.

Ashleigh Surma: I feel like that's kind of happening in a lot of different [Indigenous] communities too is people are like, “Oh I'll just write it however I hear it.” Do people use the language online? Do they type in [the language] online, or do they text each other in the language or is it?

David: I think that's just with the small amount of people who are learning right now are trying to do lots of texting and actually typing these emails out in [the language], but it's not really something that's prominent though.

Ashleigh Surma: Yeah, more like I'm learning the language so I want to try and use it more kind of exercise?

David: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Ashleigh Surma: That makes sense. So when they focus on literacy, and their focus is on reading and writing these different groups, what kinds of things are they writing about, or wanting to read about? Is it kind of like you would learn in an English school setting, or is it more cultural information, or the way things used to be, or land based education, or do you have any idea of what kinds of things people are wanting to read and write about your language?

David: Well the stuff that has been done is mostly land based stuff. So literacy is a heavily focused in [the language] about hunting, fishing and actual bush activities. So lots of the stuff has all focused on all the dialogue that you have around going out getting fish, setting a net, or actually going out and [inaudible] fish, or making a fish trap. Then there's lots of stuff about trapping, and then there's lots of stuff about hunting. So there's lots of things in there. So that's kind of where lots of people are focused on when they do their learning, it is lots of people will say, “Well I want to focus on all the things I need to know about hunting, so all this sort of language in there

that you need to know", and it's readily available because that's pretty much all of our stuff that's available is all in those main topics, whereas stuff that's more modern, I would say that there isn't a lot.

David: So stuff in regards to technology, there's not a lot of things stuff in regards to maybe sort of modern stuff, right, like new tech stuff. There's not anything that's been really done with that.

Ashleigh Surma: Like video games-

David: Yes.

Ashleigh Surma: ... computers and things like that?

David: It's all heavily land based literacy stuff that we have.

Ashleigh Surma: Do you feel like there's a desire to talk about those sort of things? Is it people don't talk about it because they don't have the language for it, or people don't have the language for it because they don't want to talk about it or?

David: Well I think the one thing that I really admire about [the language], and I'm not just saying this because it's the one that I'm learning mostly, but is they have since contact had tried to adapt without taking on lots of ["English" in the language], lots of English. So they have words for things that were new, and that's a thing that I come in contact with quite a bit is people say, "Well we never used to have that. Well why is there a word for this", or "Why is there people talking about this when we never had that before?" So there's a desire to do that. It's just a matter of finding speakers who will say that this is something that we can ... Sort of an agreement of a word that can be used for these new things, or descriptors that we can use. So there is the ... and that's the one thing that has to really be incorporated with language is it has to evolve. So like I said, lots of the people that are learning it are Millennials or Generation X, and they're not from the like bush centered vocabulary.

David: So the thing is like myself, I do live out in a very remote place, so I do talk about a lot of stuff, but I go to the city a lot. I interact with people more in the city. So with my friends and people who are learning not my language but who are learning sort of on the same level as me, we are talking about sushi, we're talking about Facebook, we're talking about being downtown, we're talking about modern things, worldly things, right? We are talking on occasion

about setting gopher traps or [inaudible] vocabulary, stuff like that, but it's more modern that we're focused on. So we need to find speakers who are not resistant to creating these new concepts. Even lots of things that we will say as young learners, if you really think about it, it doesn't make sense. But now there's just become sort of this understanding that within our distinguished speakers, and within our [language] speakers that it does make sense, because it's so commonly said.

David: So now these phrases or these sentences are actually becoming [part of the language] whereas before, they would be like, “That does not make sense”, right? Yeah.

Ashleigh Surma: There's a different threshold of acceptance kind of thing happening. English does that too arguably, right? Things that younger people say, older people are like, “That doesn't make any sense.”

David: That doesn't make any sense.

Ashleigh Surma: That's not English, right? Young people are definitely to change the language. Do you feel like this resistance of, “We never used to have that, so we don't need to make a word for it, we don't need to talk about it kind of thing”, is that more of like an age gap or is that just, do you find that younger people kind of have that same resistance, like, “Let's just use the word Google. Let's just use the word Facebook.

David: Well, I think in my opinion, I feel really strongly when people will do that. There's some words that people just put a sort of an accent or something on, and I don't agree with that. I will use actual a different thing to say it. Just for example, there's one, cheese. So there's some people who just say it. They just kind of make it sound like it's a First Nation word. So they'll say cheese like that. But myself, I'm like, “Well that's really accommodating English.” Then I worked with some speakers who they really reflective on that object and then were like, “Hm, so they named it [“cheese” in the language] so the food that the mice eat.

Ashleigh Surma: Oh yeah.

David: So people will still be able to recognize what you're saying. I think that's one thing that's really important is even younger people that I know of, and it's a really small pool of people who are learning, they are sometimes just translating everything verbatim, and then making something out of that, and then speaking with our distinguished or superior speakers and will use it in a sentence and

then just see what the reaction is to try and get those new words. Then sometimes they'll just say, “mm-mm (negative) Nope, no, no, no, no. This is what you're going to say.” Facebook, Facebook was one person, we said, “Oh well let's just say [“Facebook” in the language]” so which translates into “their face cloud.”

Ashleigh Surma: Oh yeah.

David: So that's kind of, and then cloud is paper as well. So we use that, and then there were some people who were like, “No, no.” So they decided to use [the language] the place where the stories are heard. So it's like a different thing. But I think one thing that people are seeing is that it's important to not constantly adapt to English. That's one thing that's really hard too is our speakers are used to having to accommodate English. So everything is always translated in English right away. Even when you're translating it, sometimes you, “How do you say this in [the language]?” Well, and lots of our speakers sometimes I'm like, “I wonder if they're just accommodating it”, which has happened before, right-

Ashleigh Surma: Right.

David: ... whereas [the language] hasn't ever been accommodated. I think that's kind of a resurgence that's talking now is the younger speakers are realizing that there's concepts that don't exist in [the language]. So they're realizing that everything cannot be accommodated, so yeah.

Ashleigh Surma: Yeah, that definitely makes sense, and with that lack of having the language to talk about modern things and modern concepts, that seems to be like the best way, or the most frequent way, right is to kind of create a concept for it and by run it by a fluent speaker?

David: Mm-hmm (affirmative) mm-hmm (affirmative).

Ashleigh Surma: There are a lot of people who just create a concept and then just run with it without checking in with somebody.

David: I would say at [community name], there's nobody that really does that. I think that in terms of [the language], there's a need for a new words council, so that's kind of a project that I was hoping to get started was have a group of people who would come up with these concepts. My colleague as well just was talking to me about this with there'd be a group of younger people who are learning, and then we would get together and say, “Oh, you know what, we need words for this”, or “We need [inaudible]. Does this phrase even

make sense?” Then from there, then we bring it to our speakers who would then decide if that's right, and then they give the approval. I think that's something that's really needed with the new tech, or new stuff that's going on. Even when we were trying to build our curriculum for our immersion program back home, I was very adamant that I said that I wanted all of our distinguished speakers to be able to talk about world topics in [the language].

David: We really thought about that in terms of like, we're going to have to translate a lot of stuff, right? How are we going to translate all this stuff, and who's going to decide? Who's going to decide how to say ... We only have one word for somebody of European descent, right? Are we going to make differentials between somebody from this country or this country, or this food or that food, or different things like that?

Ashleigh Surma: Becomes really important when you're talking about history, or global events, or even current events, right?

David: Yeah, that's a point that we're hoping to get, because right now all of our superior and distinguished speakers, they're used to talking differently, and lots of them are used to the old, old ways of talking. We need to really get all of that on. That's one thing that's really important about recording is right now we're at a point where we need to seriously record everything and anything, but then it's a matter of sharing that so that everybody can hear it, and everybody can learn from it. I think that with our language, when we're at the point where we can't say “This is mine. This is yours, this is mine”, kind of thing. It's like if we actually want people to be talking, we need to make sure that it's shared between everybody. That's kind of one thing that's an issue back home is lots of ... I've heard that there's stuff out there, but getting it is a whole other thing.

David: So, “Oh, okay. I just worked with an elder and she told me this legend”, and then I talk to other people who are like, “Oh yeah, I have a version of this from this person all in this.” Then there's other people, other agencies that are like, “Oh yeah, we have all these, but you kind of have them.” Then it's like, “Well, who's going to listen to them?” I know for a fact people can benefit from them.

Ashleigh Surma: So it's privacies and people hanging on to their own data, right, that needs to be? What do you think would be the best way to make those things accessible?

David: Well that's the thing about making all this stuff public is where would we have it one central place where everybody can see it?

Ashleigh Surma: Right. Where do you store it?

David: There is an online dictionary that has been done, and there's in the dictionary, it's not just working on verbs and nouns, and they're actually complete sentences that were put together. In that too, there's some cultural teachings too that were put into the dictionary. So that's been a huge resource, and it's available publicly for everybody. It's really helpful for people who are learning because then they can pick up new words within those sentences, even if they were looking for a different one. The one thing that's missing is all this stuff, lots of the materials we have, there's no audio.

Ashleigh Surma: Oh yeah.

David: So we have lots of papers and papers and documents and documents, but the only thing is I can read it, but am I saying it, right?

Ashleigh Surma: Right.

David: So that's the only thing that's kind of hard is when you're looking at that is there's people who know the orthography, and know that your voice has to go up, or you have to be more nasally, or you have to pop your words, but sometimes that has happened where like myself has learned a word and then actually started teaching it, and then actually been told “That's not how you say it. This is how you say it”, and then I was like, “Oh well that's how it was spelled. Well it's because they accidentally missed [something] when they were doing it”, right, so that's just one thing that I think is an issue.

Ashleigh Surma: So then possibly maybe verifying these kinds of things that do exist, verify these documents, pronouncing them and getting that. I mean even kind of the same idea as word creation, right? Double checking it with somebody who's a fluent speaker and saying, “Does this sound right? Is this exactly how that is”, that makes sense.

David: Well and I think the thing too in the Yukon is we need more collaboration projects. So there's within [the language] there's four different First Nation governments who all are some of them, and we're all kind of working on their own little projects.

Ashleigh Surma: Oh yeah.

David: So what I'm trying to do is trying get all four of us together as well as the language center there so that we can all work on one

project, and then that way we would create a bigger ripple effect. Yeah, and I think that one thing that we have to work towards is having those opportunities where people can know that they can talk and make mistakes. Yeah, so that's just one of the big things too is, and trying to get all of our stuff digitized.

Ashleigh Surma: Have you had just in your knowledge of what's gone on historically, and what has been done in this type of documentation that exists, is a lot of this stuff, has it been created by speakers of the language, by people in the community, or is it kind of like researchers who come in and make these things, and might get them back, or keep them somewhere else?

David: Well, I know that there was some people who went out there, and they did lots of, in terms of language, they got some pretty good stuff when they went out there. There was [an outsider linguist] who came to the Yukon, and she did a huge amount of research, and there was other researchers too that got lots of this stuff. The only thing is I think it's just with the Yukon government that they left all that stuff with, so that's another thing with trying to get stuff from the Yukon government. So there was them, but those are the major ones because the Yukon's so small. But in terms of people that I know that come in and do recordings of language, there isn't a lot.

Ashleigh Surma: There's not a lot of that exists from that?

David: No, not researchers. It's more community based people who actually will if they're knowledgeable in documentation, and digital with documentation, but like I said, most times it's all written. Things are all written down, and even with some scholars who are currently working with language in Yukon, lots of their stuff is with them or with the university that they're working with. So trying to get that is another issue too, trying to working with them, and I've worked with some of them too and said, “Let's get this public so that we can learn”, because there's only a little handful of us who are learning. So it's like, “Can you share that with us so that we can learn from it”, right? It's only going to benefit the whole group.

Ashleigh Surma: Do they do that?

David: It hasn't been done, yeah because it's just I think it's the resource people who can do stuff like that. Some major projects that we were trying to think of was like what can benefit our community, and what can benefit our learners. So we were like, “How do we create a list of the most spoken words in [the language]”, and maybe that can be a help for people, maybe someone who wants to learn our 100

most spoken nouns, and 100 most spoken verbs, and even getting that list together is something that we don't have the resource people to do.

Ashleigh Surma: Okay, like that high-frequency language?

David: Yeah that high frequency language because lots of the people who are working on language they're teaching, or they might have other jobs, right?

Ashleigh Surma: Right.

David: So even myself, that's part of my job. But when I work, teaching is whole other thing. Just to do class, this huge thing, and then I'm like, “How am I going to go through, scan through all these documents and figure out what are our 100 most spoken verbs?” You know what I mean-

Ashleigh Surma: Right, exactly.

David: ... or our most spoken noun, you know?

Ashleigh Surma: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

David: So that's something that I think our community needs is getting scholars who can do stuff like that, yeah.

Ashleigh Surma: Yeah who can look through this kind of, I mean even the documentation that exists, whether it's written, whether it's audio, and kind of pull out these frequently occurring phrases, the kind of survival language, right, like how to say basically things, and what things get said most often, so you can teach the most frequent things. So a lot of the land based teaching and things like that, is it kind of vocabulary that's just, “This is what this is called”, and “This is what this is called”, or is it actually talking in the language, “This is how you set trap”, or “This is how you rig this net”, or kind of demonstrating? Are there a lot of verbs and stuff, or is it mostly naming things?

David: Well, the way that it's been for a while is just like that. It's just been like, “This is [name in the language]. This is [name in the language]” because those immersion opportunities they're so rare, they're extremely aware because people are like, “Oh, all of our speakers are used to accommodating English and translating everything”, right? So even lots of the stuff that some people have, it's just nouns, like nouns, and you're just saying the one noun. So it's hard

to advance. It's hard to advance if you're speaking because you're like, “I've heard this a thousand times.” Then even when you go to learn lots of people who will come to class have told me, “Well, where's the next level?” I've been coming to class, and I know how to say “It's raining. It's snowing. This is a cup. This is the paper. But where's the more advanced?” So I think that's one thing that we need to work on too, is creating these advanced learning opportunities.

Ashleigh Surma: Yeah, absolutely.

David: I'll just take a break.

Ashleigh: Yeah. No, go ahead. Let me stop it.

[STOP RECORDING]

[RESUME RECORDING]

Ashleigh: That's no problem. Go ahead.

David: So one thing that I think would be beneficial for our community, like in terms of non-Indigenous people partnering with us is we definitely need help with ... We have an online dictionary right now, but it's just finding like the resource people who can work more with that. Because I see that as being like a huge tool in our learning. And there's so many different speakers that are saying different things and new phrases and stuff that I think are very, very important for everybody to be able to learn and benefit from. It's just like actually like a linguist would probably be the best person to actually work on that and have a community person and a speaker working together with a researcher and trying to do that.

David: And then just like in our community, I really think it would be very beneficial for all of our learners to actually know what are most spoken words. And then also creating a database of our verb stems, which will be very, very, very beneficial. Maybe that could even be something that would be ... And in terms of thinking [in the language], are nouns really important to learn? Or maybe is that like an English thing? Because European languages are so different.

David: So thinking about that, it'd be good to have people to work with us who can put together those lists. "These are the most used verb stems of your language," and then people ... I could see people really getting by and as soon as they learn how to morph that, how to do a little bit more morphology with those verb stems, then they can really get out there and communicate.

Ashleigh: That's the key is communication. Right?

David: Absolutely.

Ashleigh: So in thinking of the most used words, would that come more, do you think, from looking at these older documents or looking at these older recordings and things that exist? Because I'm thinking there's that separation, right? You can talk about mostly used words in English and then mostly used words in [the language]. They're probably going to look very different. And there's that resistance, right, to not want to translate from one to the other.

Ashleigh: So would in finding these mostly used words, where do you think that would come from? From the recordings or from just like following people around and recording them in their everyday life and seeing what kinds of words they use?

David: That was one that I was thinking of how you would get that list, and I see because there was so much documentation done on paper that I think that's where you would have to go is have some kind of program that could scan through it and find all of those. And that would be like a matter of trying to figure out a computer program that can identify those that's able to identify all those different words.

David: Because we tried to do that a while ago, just me and my colleagues just sat down and were like, "Oh let's just figure out what are the most 100 used words?" And we were just thinking of it. But the thing is, we're not speakers. So to us, these may seem like they're highly used words, but to a speaker, they might not be. Because we're such lower level speaking than working with distinguished speakers or superior or even ... yeah. So getting that, I think, would need to look at like all of our stuff that we have starting from the '70s on, because there's lots of stuff in there that you would see.

Ashleigh: Right, like a comprehensive look at all of those things.

David: At all of it.

Ashleigh: Yeah, it's tough when you just look at individual materials too because, for example, if you look at a record of trapping rabbits or something, you're going to get the word rabbit that comes up a million times. Which is super useful when you're talking in that context, but not necessarily for just hanging out and talking with your family. So yeah, I think comprehensive would be better, that too definitely.

David: And, I mean, that's another thing too is would we create a list of the most used nouns, the most used verbs, things like that? Or would it just be what is mostly used in terms of like that, because maybe if you learn the most ... And I'm thinking in English, you think of when you're learning a language, usually people say it's like the most 500 used words. So maybe that's not the case in [the language]. Maybe it could be way less. And even thinking about it too, because it's very tonal. And I was thinking, "Well, if you know this, then it's different. Like it's very different." So you could learn the difference between the high tone and the low tone. And creating that database, is it a low tone E or a high tone E? Which makes a difference, what is used more? The [sound] or like [sound]. Things like that or [sound] or [sound], stuff like that.

David: So then it said the other idea of like getting that English mindset out and work, yeah.

Ashleigh: So, the top 10 used tones or the top 10 used verb stems and 500 ways to conjugate them. Like, 500 of the most common ways to conjugate them or something or use them. Because that seems to happen a lot too in resource development. It seems like you look at these in English, Spanish, French, Russian, whatever as a starting point and then kind of translate from that. But what would it look like if you started from a [Indigenous language] point of view and do it that way?

David: Yeah, and I think that would be a real thing to reflect on too is when you're creating materials and when you're doing things like that, you really ... And I know it's very hard. I myself catch myself doing that too, translating everything and making it accommodate. But when we create these resources, the first thing that has to come, it has to be from whatever language you're working with. Make it directly like that. So that would be ... I think that would be totally beneficial for our community to start doing something like that. And then even working with a new words council, like actually creating that, and how would we actually create a new words council because I know they've been done in different parts of the world.

Ashleigh: It has.

David: And that's just something that I think would be really beneficial is like, "Okay, this is our words council and this is what they do," and getting that started.

Ashleigh: Exactly, and getting that going because, I mean, even if you have a new words council, even getting that kind of system in place, that kind of structure in place, that could be branched out to include so many other things beyond just new words. And in thinking of doing this kind of language work and things like that, in your mind, would it be beneficial for

linguists to come in and assist with this kind of work? Or would it be beneficial for linguists to come in and train people who might be interested to do this kind of work, or a mix of both, or neither?

Ashleigh: I guess what I'm asking is, would it be better received, in your opinion, for someone from the outside to come in and do the work or someone to come outside in and train someone from the community to do the work?

David: I think it would be more better received if our people were trained in doing stuff like this and then mentored by linguists. I think that would be more ... that will be well received. Because then the thing about when we have people come and do work for us is when they leave then we don't have the capacity to keep it going. So lots of stuff ... and actually to be honest, in our community, that's kind of the way that our governments are going, our First Nation governments are going to train our people so that they can continue to do it rather than having to continually rely on the outside source. So it would be way better received if people were to come in, work with our people, and then get them going on some of these things that need to be done, and then mentoring them like an ongoing process. So it'd be kind of a lengthily thing, but in the long run would benefit us more.

Ashleigh: Absolutely, kind of that, teach a man to fish versus give a man a fish kind of thing. Yeah, yeah, that makes sense.

David: And just like the mentoring I think is important.

Ashleigh: And the mentoring aspect, yeah. I think it would also be beneficial for the linguists, arguably because it's less of like just looking at the language on paper and being in there and working with the language and working in the area of the place where the language is spoken with people who speak the language, that could also provide beneficial things both ways probably.

David: That's it?

Ashleigh: That's good. Are you good?

David: Yep, I'm good.