

**The Language Vitality Network Model:
Language reclamation as an integrated, relational process**

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Current discourse about improving language vitality and usage moves away from earlier understandings of revitalization as efforts to increase speakers toward a broader approach to language reclamation, which encompasses not only the creation of new speakers but also efforts “to incorporate community epistemologies such as how ‘language’ is defined and given sociocultural meaning” (Leonard 2018: 15). Language is an integral part of a much larger, connected system of relations, with and between people, social groups, and the natural world. Such a view positions language reclamation as an act of decolonization. It breaks down Western essentialist approaches to language as an object that can be separated from the people who use it and privileges a holistic view of language practices as fluid and dynamic. Moreover, such language practices are part of larger dynamic multilingual repertoire, at the level of an individual and a community (here defined as a group of people of varying size, who are united by shared linguistic and cultural heritage). That is, language shift is necessarily an artifact of multilingual practices, where speakers cease to use, or at least disfavor, their ancestral language in favor of a more dominant, widely used, and/or colonial language. The roots of such shift are anchored in colonial practices; reversing it involves an explicit decolonization process that strengthens relational ties.

A model of reclamation needs to account for the complex nature of relationality, multilingual practices, and the fluid nature of linguistic repertoires. Grenoble & Whaley (2021) propose revising understandings of language to think of it as less about language revitalization as a means to cultivate wellbeing and preview the Language Vitality Network Model as a methodology for modeling such practice. The present talk extends the model to more broadly encompass Indigenous perspectives and research paradigms that underscore the importance of relationality, both in terms of the relationships between researchers and community members, and the relationality of different kinds of knowledge and information, and relational aspects of knowledge production and dissemination (Leonard 2021, Louis 2007, and Tsikewa 2021). Any meaningful model of language reclamation needs to be able to engage with these different relations which are all part of a complex, integrated system. While much of the research in this vein has focused on specifically Indigenous epistemologies (Errington 2008, Kovach 2010, and Smith 2021), the paradigm can be extended to other minoritized and marginalized groups for their own reclamation efforts.

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