

## Indigenous Activism and Language Reclamation

Darcy Allred and Natalie Jipson

In this co-interview, Darcy Allred and Natalie Jipson investigate connections between Indigenous activism and languaging practices. They consider the ways that translanguaging and antecedent knowledge impact our ability to learn and reclaim languages and discuss the vital work being done in Indigenous communities.

This Grassroots Co-interview was created from a conversation Darcy Allred and Natalie Jipson had about Indigenous activism and the language reclamation work that Darcy has been pursuing both with the Wyandot(te) community (as an enrolled citizen of the Wyandotte Nation in Oklahoma) and on ISU's campus. Grassroots Co-interviews are aimed at bringing two people together to discuss literate activities that they engage in. A "literate activity co-interview" is when two people with an interest in particular activities where literacies occur have a conversation, which is then turned into an article, using the dialogue to showcase the many ways that humans interact with literacies and language as they exist and move about the world. The goal of these co-interviews is to see how discussion about literate activity can extend to the everyday writing, reading, and communicating that people engage in. In this case, both Natalie and Darcy have an interest in activist work. In particular, Darcy is contracted by the Wyandotte Nation to help tribal community members reclaim their heritage language, Wa<sup>n</sup>dat. Natalie is also interested in social justice activism and has been an active member of the newly formed ISU Graduate Workers Union. However, Natalie found Darcy's discussion of the need to understand and create opportunities for

**Darcy’s Note on the Spelling of “Wyandot(te)”:**

Today there are three Nations of the Wyandot(te): the Wyandot of Anderdon Nation, the Wyandot Nation of Kansas, and the Wyandotte Nation (of Oklahoma). Wyandot(te) citizens had previously shared the same spelling of their community’s name as “Wyandot.” The contemporary, “Wyandot(te)” is to both distinguish and include all descendants of the Wyandot people as recently adopted among many of their diaspora.

**Social Identities**

These are identity categories that align with specific communities including various racial or ethnic groups, genders, sexualities, religions, abilities or disabilities, classes, and so on.

language diversity so fascinating, that this co-interview focuses heavily on that topic. In this text you will see Darcy’s portion of the interview and Natalie’s portion, along with contextual information co-written by Natalie and Darcy.

Because US history has been whitewashed and recorded primarily with ideas rooted in settler colonization, it is important to address some key terms and concepts before we dive into the main event! The first thing we want to point out is that the term Indigenous Peoples encompasses a large group of separate nations and communities. Each of these has their own customs, cultures, and language practices. While much of our discussion will focus on the Wyandot(te) community and their sleeping Wa<sup>n</sup>dat language, this is not the only Indigenous language that is being reclaimed or stabilized by Native communities. It is important to remember that just like other **social identities**, there is no monolithic experience that resonates with all community members. In other words, we all have unique

and varied lived experiences, and they are all valuable in understanding how we see the world and live within it!

It is important to explain the next set of terms: colonization, anti-colonialism, and decolonization. *Facing History* explains that colonization is “the process of assuming control of someone else’s territory and applying one’s own systems of law, government, and religion” (“Colonization”). In the case of the US, this also included genocide of Indigenous Peoples and attempts to destroy Indigenous languages, traditions, and governing systems. Because the US is a country built upon settler colonization, there are deeply held anti-Indigenous beliefs embedded in US culture and institutional support for those views through laws and policies.

The process of challenging colonization is called anti-colonialism. Makes sense, right? Anti-colonialism is the process and work of challenging and removing colonial values, while advocating for Indigenous Peoples’ rights. It stops short of decolonization, which is the process of actively returning (or “repatriating”) to Indigenous Peoples their homelands

and other ancestral belongings housed in museums and other US cultural institutions. Decolonization also applies to the reclamation of cultural knowledge and language. Now that we've covered a few of the basics, let's jump into activism and language reclamation.

## Colleges and Standard American English Supremacy

During the interview, Natalie and Darcy spent time talking about English language supremacy, and specifically the lack of support and appreciation of multilingual folks and diverse ways of Englishing. Despite the fact that ISU's Writing Program emphasizes the value and importance of **translingualism**, there are still individuals, groups, and organizations within the university that harbor resistance to the idea that there is more than one way to speak and *write*. This is not just a problem on Illinois State University's campus, however. Even in K–12 schools, students have often been told that there is one way to English: Standard American English (SAE). The trouble is, "SAE is not truly 'American' in that it is not the language of all Americans and has often been used to normalize white, middle- and upper-class language systems and to denigrate language systems that differ from them" (Chun et al). Standard American English has been used by those in power to label their version of English, and a specific one at that, as the "proper" way to speak and write.

So, what sorts of challenges are there, on campuses and off, that attempt to limit people's ability to use multiple languages, dialects, and so on?

**Darcy:** I guess my biggest issue right now, there's just not enough infrastructure at ISU for Indigenous students, especially when thinking about literacy and monolingual English-speaking universities, like ISU and the US in general. What can we do to have programs for students whose first language isn't English, or if they're like me and trying to reclaim their Indigenous language? There are examples of other schools that do that. Miami University in Ohio has a Myaamia language program, founded by Darryl Baldwin, where Myaamia college students can earn credit at Miami University for learning their language, and that's the dream. I feel like all the work I am doing here, the activist stuff, is important to help build that infrastructure for all Native students at ISU. But at the same time, it's taking away the time that I need to become literate in my own heritage language.

### Translingualism

According to ISU's Writing Program, translingual writing acknowledges that English is not the same in all English-speaking countries, that there are variances of English even within the US, and that it is valuable to hybridize or add multilingual content to writing and speaking.

**Natalie:** Yeah, there is a lack of understanding and appreciation for multilingual students and experiences. Even though I've only been teaching here for a year and a half, I've had a bunch of students talking about how they've had instructors who are very rigid, who are unsupportive of the idea that there can be a blending of languages or some hybridity happening. It seems to be something that is just generally frowned upon. I have a group of students who are in Communication 110 right now who were talking about how they were explicitly prohibited from using any African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Spanglish. It was outlined in the rubric saying that they can't utilize those language practices.



**Figure 1:** For more details about common English language requirements for international students wanting to attend US universities, scan this QR code to see a US government website called *Study in the States*.

**D:** Yeah, and that's the legacy of homogenous white American eyes and policies, especially whenever we're thinking about immigration in the US at the turn of the twentieth century. International students have these discriminatory eligibility requirements that domestic students don't, like the TOEFL or IELTS language exams (Figure 1), even if they might know English a lot better or have a better handle of English grammar than a lot of US-American-born students. Yet, they have to prove English language proficiency and fluency by taking tests or enrolling in courses, all of which can be expensive. It's definitely another sort of predominantly white institution value system that results in discrimination against people with diverse, rich knowledge bases in their multilingualism.

### Valuing Antecedent Language Knowledge(s)

Between the limitations placed on students by instructors, as well as the arduous testing and education requirements placed on international students, it seems clear that the complexity of languaging is often ignored by institutions. Schools and government organizations alike have created processes for assessing and accessing language tools and resources that favor one very specific way of Englishing and stigmatize variation.

Let's all face the fact that language is messy!!! It isn't as simple as learning phrasing and grammar. We all write, speak, and read differently because of our **antecedent knowledge**. We need to embrace the beauty of language variation, folks!

Language reclamation, particularly in the case of sleeping languages (i.e., languages that no longer have any fluent speakers), can be tricky in

conjuring up antecedent knowledge. This is because a community has experienced a dramatic language shift where intergenerational transmission of a language (parents teaching children a language in the home) exchanges a heritage language for that of a more dominant language in society. This is what happened during the federal US Indian boarding school era, during which Native families and children were severely persecuted for speaking their languages. So in waking up a sleeping language (a language that was stolen), communities are not only trying to learn a language, they're trying to reconstruct worldviews and different meanings in a language that does not easily—or at all—translate to English or any other commonly spoken global languages. Heritage language learners of sleeping languages must resist a lot of their antecedent knowledge about how meaning is constructed, especially if they're literate monolingual English speakers. In order to make more effective progress in learning the often-complex grammar and sound features of an Indigenous language, it's important to perhaps use antecedent knowledge of an experience or habit you developed to help change your way of thinking or behavior—like deciding to go on a jog every morning during the coldest part of winter, when you have no prior experience as a runner! Similarly, language reclamation requires lots and lots of discipline to build a better habit to practice and study a system of knowledge that you have no prior experience with.

#### **Antecedent Knowledge**

This term refers to all the prior knowledge—everything you already know—that can come into play when you're encountering a new literate activity (ISU Writing Program).

### **Languaging on College Campuses**

As graduate students in an area of study that has language requirements, Natalie and Darcy also discussed the way that both undergraduate and graduate programs view certain languages as meeting the criteria for general education and language requirements, while others are not considered acceptable for college credit.

For example, if the language you already speak isn't offered in classes by ISU, your only option is to complete a proficiency exam, but there are only certain languages that have an exam available at the university. At ISU those languages are French, German, Italian, Latin, Portuguese, Spanish, Chinese, or Japanese ("Language Requirement"). These tests cost ten dollars to take. If the language you speak isn't among ISU's offerings, you have to pay an additional 150 dollars to take a test with another agency, which creates inequality for students whose languaging abilities and language-learning

interests aren't prioritized by the university. For some languages and dialects there isn't even a testing option at all.

**D:** The other issue I have is what can count toward students' credits. Whatever minor or general education courses meet their foreign language or second language requirement, it often only includes four or five language options. Often these are French, Spanish, German, or Mandarin. These are usually languages that are pretty common on a global scale but rarely include marginalized languages such as Indigenous languages unless it's a tribal university. Maybe there are some universities that include more common North American Indigenous languages like Tsalagi Gawonihisdi (aka Cherokee), Diné (aka Navajo), and Anishinaabemowin (aka Ojibwe) who have relatively bigger heritage-language-speaking communities and often get more funding. But it sucks for the little guys who have dormant (sleeping) languages and are trying to do the work to bring them back out of sleep. It's just a huge long process, and if we had more help from universities to bridge the gap, that could be a great mutual sort of benefit in recruiting more Native students while helping them reconnect with or expand upon their ancestral ways of knowledge-making.

**N:** Yes, it seems like there is this possibility of a beautiful partnership, it's just that many universities aren't taking advantage of an opportunity to provide this support and research to marginalized communities. I mean, the English department is a great example because we have folks who specialize in linguistics who could partner with Indigenous communities that are doing this language reclamation work. There just seems to be a level of resistance at a lot of academic institutions to forming community partnerships.

### Modalities

ISU's Writing Program describes modalities as the different modes used to communicate between humans, including "Alphabetic (stuff we write using the alphabet), Visual (pictures), Aural (sound), Oral (spoken), and Symbolic (using symbols that aren't alphabetic, like emoticons or emojis)."

Even when we are just talking about one language, there is a lot we can do to think about and include diverse languaging practices. For example, throughout the interview, Natalie and Darcy shared that through researching their own writing and speaking practices, as well as those of their students, there seems to be a huge difference between alphabetic Englishing and oral Englishing. These two **modalities** used for communicating do different work in the world and can open up pathways to investigating language practices that work against the monolithic idea of standard-English-only models.

**D:** The way people speak, it's still in their own languages or dialect of whatever. In writing, it's often completely the opposite, so yeah, it's a lot to sort of disrupt.

**N:** Yeah, I mean even in my own writing practices, and I'm a monolingual speaker, I still feel like there is a huge variance in what I feel comfortable with, including my own personal voice when writing. There does seem to be a separation there and that's with someone who doesn't have additional languages. There is that weird divide between what we feel like is comfortable putting on a written page versus what we feel comfortable saying out loud.

**D:** As a former ENG 101 instructor at ISU, I noticed that some students come into their first-year writing class with these really prescriptive ways of writing versus speaking in a class discussion. They'll say something that may sound kind of scripted because they're intimidated or are trying to sound smarter. I don't know if there's an educational sort of trauma with feeling like you have to talk a certain way or write a certain way, but writing is definitely stressful because of all of that—all of the different rules you feel like you have to follow instead of just diving into writing from your own perspective.

It seems that there are different comfort levels that folks have with either speaking or writing, but as Darcy pointed out, this also seems to change based on the environment they're in and who they are languaging with. In the case of college classes, there often is pressure to language in a way that mirrors or fits department, administrative, or community standards and often disregards the value of less jargony vocabulary. And let's face it, the academic space is an elitist space that has done very little to make variations of languaging acceptable. This pressure to conform to a certain communication style is felt by students and faculty alike.

## Reclaiming and Relearning the Wa<sup>n</sup>dat Language

After their deep dive into the problems of multilingual learning on college campuses, Darcy began to tell Natalie about the history of her heritage language (Wa<sup>n</sup>dat) and the important research and reclamation work that she has been doing. Darcy has been engaging in a blend of writing, speaking, and research because of the way dormant languages are relearned. It isn't as simple as finding an introductory French textbook and turning to the first chapter. There isn't a study guide or even a dictionary with which to look up new words. There are many forms of research that have to take place

before any new vocabulary or sentence structures can be learned. This is the writing research work that Darcy has been engaging in to awaken the Wa<sup>n</sup>dat language.

**N:** How are you working with your tribe to learn a language and how does that language reclamation work happen?

**D:** So, it [Wa<sup>n</sup>dat] is a sleeping language, which means that our last fluent speakers died in the early 1970s. Our relatives were less likely to pass down our language because of the US Indian boarding schools and colonial legacies of assimilation, removal, and displacement of Native peoples that have led to cyclical poverty and disruption of generational transmission of our traditional ways of living and being. Throughout the twentieth century, Wyandot(te)s often had to choose political and economic survival over maintaining our culture and language, especially in a time where it wasn't "cool" to be Native. In the 1920s era, when my great-grandma had my grandmother (both Wyandotte), she didn't pass the language down to my grandmother because they were super poor in rural Oklahoma during the Great Depression. They just wanted to survive and fit in—you know, assimilate. All of those socioeconomic factors combined with historical traumas inside boarding schools that not only forced Natives to learn English but also punished them for speaking their Native languages. Over time we just kept teaching our kids English instead of Wa<sup>n</sup>dat. And now we have issues with "anthropologists" or other academics and how they recorded some of our ancestors speaking because it's based on their asking them, "hey, how do you say x, y, z," etc. We do have a lot of archives, more than a lot of other dormant Indigenous languages do, but the problem is getting enough help and skills-training needed for language recovery. We have language classes, but we also need constant meetings to talk about certain words. Many Wyandot(te)s and our tribal

### **Orthography**

According to Wikipedia, an orthography is "a set of conventions for writing a language including norms of spelling, hyphenation, capitalization, word breaks, emphasis, and punctuation" ("Orthography").

linguist have been working for several years (some for decades!) to standardize our **orthography** and publish an updated English-to-Wa<sup>n</sup>dat dictionary and grammar book for our community. We also need more language teachers, linguists, multigenerational participants willing to learn the language, and lots of renewable funding to sustain our efforts and keep the momentum going. Right now, there is so much piecemeal, overwhelming work to do. But it's important we don't give up.



There are a lot of non-Natives who have published books on our language and lumped it in with our cousin nation, the Nation Huronne-Wendat in Quebec, Canada, and think that Wa<sup>a</sup>dat is merely a dialect of the Wendat language. But our languages and our peoples, while closely related, are not the same. So we've had a lot of scholars—deceased and living—who conflate us, and they're publishing these works that are completely inaccurate. I have to correct a lot of people, and it's not their fault because most mainstream sources about us are inaccurate. It's not even just about learning the language, it's about learning the unevenness of the whole historical, political, and geographical factors involved with how the Jesuits first started transcribing our languages too.

**N:** In most language learning scenarios you already have translations and dictionaries. For what you're doing, there's so much rigorous research involved because these records have such colonial history. Because of the history and the lack of ability to be immersed in fluent speakers, a team approach must be important to the reclamation effort. Who's been working with you on this project?

**D:** So it's a growing number of Wyandot(te)s and our tribal linguist (who's non-Wyandot) who participate in beginner language classes via Zoom and other cultural activities. I'm taking a class once a week and facilitate a class twice a week with Wyandot(te)s and invited guests. We have a Facebook page and calls for a digital class every so often. There's a momentum of interest right now, which is super exciting! However, it's still difficult for adult learners to join classes due to a lack of time and energy or availability due to busy work, school, and/or parenting schedules. Our people have overcome so much and are thriving more than ever since colonial contact. We are working to build more widespread interest in tribal citizens, as well as to instill a value that our heritage language is so crucial to who we are as a civilization of people, a nation. Language is an epistemology, a way of being in the world. It's also important to remember that English is actually a foreign language on this side of the continent.

Thinking of English as a foreign language challenges everything we have been taught about the US. There is so much time spent focused on the establishment of the nation that for the most part, English is considered naturalized in the US.

**N:** Part of breaking through the belief that English is the original language of the US is to challenge the antecedent knowledge that writing researchers come in with.

## Challenges in Activist Communication and Bureaucratic Red Tape

After discussing so many important topics related to language and activism, Darcy and Natalie turned their conversation toward solutions and funding opportunities that could make campuses, specifically ISU's campus, more equitable.

**D:** Another tricky thing is money. Investing substantial amounts of money—especially whenever it comes to federal or state dollars—sometimes can be an issue. While money is incredibly necessary to sustain renewable funding for different programs or projects, the university should be more intentional in how funding is allocated for a new committee or particular project related to diversity advocacy and extracurricular student engagement on campus. For example, if there was a resolution passed by the Board of Trustees that they could give us a million dollars, how do you have things in place to make sure that money is used sustainably and ethically? Are we hiring the right faculty and not just box-checking and meeting the diversity hire quota? I would love to see more Indigenous faculty, but I also have very specific Indigenous research interests and just hiring one or maybe even a cluster of Native faculty could be great, but how do you ensure they're meeting the needs of Indigenous students on campus? There needs to be an administrative deep dive into what can be done for marginalized students to ensure that ISU is making their education work for them. Stop using these assimilation methods like the box-checking sort of thing. I think we do have to build more intentional spaces for marginalized groups of people.

The Board of Trustees makes so many decisions on behalf of us—multimillion dollar projects that lots of student voices are not consulted on. We don't get to vote and yet they directly impact us, so it's something that is very challenging. It can be difficult to navigate and advocate for the assistance needed to be successful.

### Discourse Communities

This term refers to “a group of people who have some common publicly stated goals, mechanisms of participation, information exchange and feedback, community specific genres, a specialized terminology, and threshold level of members” (ISU Writing Program).

**N:** Yeah, the funding thing is so confusing. Through some of my activism on campus, I really struggled with understanding the practices of these **discourse communities** because it seems to exist outside of student-led spaces, and often the rules and regulations are not accessible to people outside of that closed circle. On top of the practices and regulations being challenging to access, meetings of the ISU Board of Trustees and the Academic Senate are also very hierarchical spaces that can be intimidating for student activists to enter.

**D:** Going back to the language aspect, there is literacy involved in knowing how these bureaucratic systems work—systems that are historically designed to box out the people who have the least power. It makes it harder to go through the hoops and hurdles to be able to understand that languaging and get a seat at the table. For example, you get a certain amount of time to talk at these meetings, but depending on public comment interest, that time may shorten significantly. This can mean improvising on the spot, having multiple commenters join one statement, or speed-reading to try to be heard. Even if you know how to speak that language, the power dynamics are intense. For example, although I have made public comments, none of mine have received a response. It's in the Academic Senate and Board of Trustees' regulations that they must respond. Not all rules and regulations in these literate spaces are enforced equally, and for student activists, this presents a steep learning curve.

**N:** And even the labor involved for you to have to go search through their bylaws and find out what they're supposed to be doing is something that just adds to the taxing of energy to have to navigate all of these different communities and their sets of rules. Sometimes you can Google search these things, and sometimes you come up with out-of-date documents and have to dig further. All of this additional work has to be done by people to try to penetrate those systems which makes it even more inequitable.

**D:** And if you come off as too antagonistic, they're just going to start ignoring you, but sometimes you need a time and place to rally and protest. Sometimes you need agitating sorts of methods to get underrepresented people empowered and to get those in power to actually listen to the people who are the most vulnerable and affected by the decisions they're making. People who are dealing with inequalities have only so much time and resources to fight back because of those inequities. If you are a full-time working student, that time and those resources are in short supply. That's why it's so hard for us to all raise our voices and why solidarity and coalition-building really matter.

Clearly, the possible solutions to the problems of English language supremacy, unequal language requirements, lack of resources and funding, and discrimination on campus are not simple. They require significant institutional changes as well as grassroots activism to function in tandem if there are to be improvements in resources for marginalized communities.

As we have discussed in this interview, language is complicated, varied, and alive. It doesn't exist in a vacuum. Indigenous languages in particular

were persecuted and stolen by the US's mandated settler-colonial state violence. But they can be reclaimed when Native community members are able to join efforts in reawakening or stabilizing the abundant meanings and worldviews that an ancestral language holds. Thank you all for taking the time to read about Indigenous language activism and reclamation!

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Notes

