Beliefs, Power, and Practice: How Language Ideologies Impact Native American Reclamation Efforts

1.0 Introduction

The world's languages are disappearing at an alarming rate, with a language dying roughly every two weeks (Crystal 2000; Harrison 2007). There is a great deal that will be lost, for individuals, communities and humanity, if these languages are no longer passed on to future generations. Traditional languages hold entire bodies of knowledge, connect individuals to their environment and culture, and provide a means to express one's worldview perspective (Crystal 2000; Errington 2003; Harrison 2007; Hinton 2001). Knowledge of an individual's traditional language can be important to maintaining a sense of identity and belonging to a particular group. Once this linguistic knowledge has been taken away or lost, an individual must express himself in the language of the dominant society, often leading to a loss of cultural and sometimes individual identity. Language embodies cultural knowledge and symbolizes the social interactions that have been learned through numerous generations. These shared sets of meaning demonstrate cultural understanding and knowledge for a particular group. Additionally, language is the foundation by which children are enculturated to a specific community worldview; it is therefore a basic human right for an individual to have the ability to speak the language of choice (Crawford 1998; Crystal 2000). Linguistic and cultural revitalization programs provide a means for these cultural groups counter the causes of language shift.

Revitalization is the conscious effort by members of a cultural group to reestablish, reformulate, and perpetuate certain aspects of the indigenous culture. Current revitalization movements have increased in earnest, gaining momentum in the 1960s and 1970s with the civil rights and indigenous movements around the world; these movements have become a way for individuals and groups to redefine who they are as a people. Language revitalization efforts have become a means for many communities to also revitalize their cultural practices. Scholars have also become interested in language revitalization efforts, as a way to understand the sociocultural underpinnings of these movements, and often, to contribute their expertise to this work. Language revitalization goals vary depending on the program, but for many communities, the ultimate goal is to create new fluent speakers and re-establish their language(s) across multiple domains or, at the minimum, second language speakers and learners with some degree of language competency (Grenoble & Whaley 2006; Hinton 2001; Meek 2010).

Throughout the United States, colonialism, forced relocation, boarding schools, and power influences greatly affected Native communities' abilities to continue the practices of their ancestors. However, during the 1970s, many communities around the country began to claim their sovereign rights and started their own revitalization efforts. In recent years, language revitalization movements have increased significantly. Issues of power dynamics, contemporary relevance, and identity all greatly influence how a community approaches language and cultural revitalization. Constant struggles of internal strife and external pressures can define the circumstances under which language and culture may be practiced or taught, and the individuals who participate in these practices. Individuals find themselves questioning whether traditional practices can fit into their modern everyday lives, and if so, how. Given the individual dynamics

of each community, "...it is necessary to understand language revitalization challenges not in terms of failure or success, but as a function of contemporary sociolinguistic landscapes," (Meek 2010). That is, a more advantageous approach to understanding language revitalization, is to analyze the efforts as reflective of the community's language practices and ideologies. As stated by Field and Kroskrity (2009), "[w]ithout understanding these and other Native American language ideologies, scholars and researchers – both Native and non-Native – cannot hope to understand Native American languages and the way speakers use them, change them, and renew them" (10).

The focus of this paper is on the language ideological assemblages found within the Flathead Indian Reservation, and more specifically on the dynamics of the Séliš-Q̓lispé community of practice that impact language reclamation efforts. The reservation in Western Montana is diverse, home to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes that includes the Kootenai and Seliš-Q̓lispe cultural groups, as well as a majority non-Native population. The Séliš-Q̓lispé traditionally speak two different dialects of Séliš and share many cultural characteristics and histories, particularly since the establishment of the reservation. As such, these two groups are referred to as the Séliš-Q̓lispé people and Séliš language in this paper. This Séliš-Q̓lispé community is currently working to maintain and breathe new life into their traditional Séliš language. At present, there are a limited number of fluent Séliš speakers remaining from whom individuals can draw linguistic and cultural knowledge, the majority over the age of 70 years. Building on the efforts of previous generations, dedicated Séliš-Q̓lispé individuals are working to revitalize their culture and highly endangered Séliš language. Kroskrity's (2018) language ideological assemblages (LIA) provide an essential framework for highlighting the diversity of language ideologies and practices within and across Native communities, in addition to the non-Native public.

Documenting and analyzing these ideologies as 'assemblages' is critical to understanding the vitality of endangered languages, as well as how LIA hinder and/or facilitate community language revitalization efforts. Investigating the ideologies within the Séliš-Q̓lispé community, including Natives and non-Natives, as a web of interaction and influence, one begins to comprehend the dynamic language environment and magnitude of language revitalization efforts tribal members face. Further, while the language ideological assemblages may highlight the complicated picture of language revitalization, these diverse perspectives can also be utilized as a resource for the perpetuation of the Séliš language. To demonstrate the importance of considering language ideologies as diverse interactive assemblages, I detail concepts of iconicity and generational variation of "entanglements."

2.0 Seliš-Q̓lispe in Context

Native American languages and communities share numerous similarities in how they came to be endangered, yet each language situation and any subsequent revitalization efforts must be considered distinct. Historical events have shaped current language use, cultural practices and beliefs of the Seliš-Q̓lispe. It is important to understand how and why the changes occurred to help contextualize the social and linguistic climate which the tribe currently faces.

The aboriginal territory of the Bitterroot Seliš and the Upper Pend d'Oreille spanned from northwestern Wyoming, into Montana from east of the Continental Divide and westward into Idaho and then north to British Columbia (Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes 2012; Malouf 1998; Teit & Boas 1975). The first direct contact that the Seliš-Q̓lispe had with Euro-Americans took place in 1805 with Lewis and Clark entered their territory (Seliš-Q̓lispe Culture Committee and Elders Cultural Advisory Council 2005). While there were some changes and factors that decreased group stability, the Seliš-Q̓lispe were able to practice and maintain a traditional lifestyle primarily free of restrictions, until the treaties negotiated with Governor Stevens in 1855. Prior to 1846, Euro-American interactions with the Plateau region were motivated by exploration rather than land acquisition; yet after this date attitudes towards Native Americans drastically changed. The Flathead Indian Reservation was created through the Treaty of Hellgate in 1855, which forced the Bitterroot Seliš, Pend d'Oreille and Kootenai tribes to move onto the designated land for their occupation and use. As a result of the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887, commonly referred to as the Allotment Act, the Flathead Indian Reservation was opened to non-Native homesteaders in 1910, against the terms and negotiations of the Hellgate Treaty. The Allotment Act marked the beginning of substantial inequalities in power and control of resources, which led to a significant decrease in the traditional practices and language use for the community (Bigcrane & Smith 1991; Seliš-Q̓lispe Culture Committee and Elders Cultural Advisory Council 2005; Malouf 1998; Vanderburg 1995). The nomadic and hunting and gathering lifestyle was no longer a feasible subsistence system for the majority of the Seliš-Q̓lispe. Individuals were often required to enter into the economic system of non-Natives for employment, subsidies, and goods. In the early years of co-existence many non-Native shopkeepers and missionaries were conversant in the Seliš language. However, as the dominant population increased, fewer and fewer non-Native individuals made attempts to speak the Seliš language, which necessitated the knowledge and usage of English for daily interactions with non-Natives (Malan 1948).

During this time, many Seliš-Q̓lispe individuals also began to disguise their knowledge or proficiency of Seliš in order to fit into the changing environment and hide "feelings of shame" (Malan 1948:164). While the changes to the economic and power dynamics contributed to the greater use of English, the most explicit factor in the language shift was boarding schools. It was common policy across the United States to use boarding schools as the primary means to assimilate Native Americans into non-Native society; this practice proved very effective in changing traditional language and cultural practices of the Seliš-Q̓lispe. Beginning in the 1880s, children were forcibly removed from their homes and sent to the schools so that they could be "civilized" and stripped of their traditional way of life. On the Flathead Indian Reservation, US Indian Agent Peter Ronan adopted this same assimilation principle. Malouf (1998) writes that "...Ronan used these same tools of coercion to compel parents to send their children, as young as five, into the institutions, where they were corporally punished for infractions such as speaking their own language" (308). These institutions included the Sisters of Providence boarding school, established in 1884 for girls, followed by a Jesuit run boys' school in 1888 (Montana Office of Public Instruction 2010; Ronan 1887; Schaeffer 1936). The Ursuline Boarding School in St. Ignatius, ran by Jesuit missionaries, was established in 1890. This school served as the primary education system for kindergarten through high school-aged Native children on the reservation until 1972 (Montana Office of Public Instruction 2010). Children were removed from their homes and sent to boarding schools where they were not allowed to speak their traditional

languages, had to endure forced labor, and were forced to cut their hair (Beck 1982; Beckham 1998; Malan 1948; Mourning Dove 1990; Vanderburg 1995).

Despite these and other hardships and pressures faced over the past roughly two hundred years, the Seliš-Qlispe culture persists. Today, there are currently 7,829 enrolled members of Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of which 5,223 reside on or near the reservation (Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes 2012, 2023). The Flathead Indian Reservation, has a total population of 29,717 individuals, the majority of whom are non-Native (Montana Department of Labor 2020). The multicultural background of the reservation community results in diverse attitudes, ideologies, and power dynamics that influence the belief systems and practices of the Seliš-Qlispe cultural group. The pressures of these power dynamics, among other factors has led to a shift away from traditional cultural and linguistic practices. Also, the reservation geography and demographics make access to language and cultural programs challenging.

3.0 Methodology & Language Ideological Assemblages

Concerned with the decline of fluent Séliš language speakers, the Séliš-Qlispé community began revitalization efforts in the 1970s with the creation of the Séliš-Qlispé Culture Committee and have been expanding their efforts through several formal and informal undertakings. Current opportunities to learn the Séliš language have, out of necessity, become almost entirely based in the formal educational setting. As the language is only spoken by a limited number of individuals and in a limited number of contexts, the formal learning environment is a crucial way to help interested community members learn about the Séliš language. Formal learning contexts range from head start programming to a K-8 immersion school, private high school, college curriculum, and adult language programs. Some informal opportunities include various cultural camps and events, family gatherings, youth groups, although these can be sporadic. Learning materials are also continually being expanded and range from classroom lessons to language apps. The revitalization goals and practices of the community are heavily influenced by language ideologies that embody larger sociocultural perspectives.

This research with the Seliš-Qlispe stems from long term collaborations with the community, beginning in 2011. The ethnographic research developed from a grassroots approach with community members and is designed to further enhance their own revitalization efforts. This means that Native community members determined the direction of the project, control any materials produced, and make determinations of how scholarly and pedagogical materials develop and are disseminated. Having a working and respectful relationship, allowed for far deeper conversations around the project development and implementation. Semi-formal interviews focused primarily on documenting and understanding language contexts and sociocultural ideological factors that contribute to the continued shift from Seliš language to English. I observed and compared mundane, private interactions within the home to those broader interactions in the community, including formal and informal education settings, traditional practices, and public events. I chose these contexts to examine and link micro-level socialization practices to the macro-level practices of the larger community (Schieffelin & Ochs 1996).

Analyzing revitalization programs "as a function of contemporary sociolinguistic landscapes," (Meek 2010:41) and more specifically, from language ideological assemblages (LIA), untangles the language beliefs and practices that contribute to the continued shift away from Séliš and contributes to the development of a much needed theoretical and methodological framework for language revitalization (Penfield 2013). The perceptions of the community, both internally and externally, directly affect reclamation efforts; analyzing ideologies in terms of these interactive assemblages can highlight "…its separate ways of being at the same time as watching how they come together in sporadic but consequential coordination," (Tsing 2015:158).

3.1 Iconicity

The first LIA process examined is *iconization*, which involves a sign relationship that links linguistic features with a social group. This process occurs when particular linguistic features or language broadly becomes symbolic or iconic of a particular culture. Iconization has the potential to serve as a marker of group identity, but more often causes the essentialization of a given culture, reducing both the language and culture to "something homogenous and simplistic," (Field 2009). Within the community of focus, the Séliš language has ideologically become an iconic link to Séliš-Ql̓ispé culture and identity. Iconically linking the Séliš to culture and identity is a common perspective voiced by community members, especially by those involved with language revitalization efforts. The common rhetoric is expressed by one community member,

> "Our language, we believe was given to us by the creator to help express who we are, to help explain and understand the world we live in from that perspective, unique to our people."

For many, if you know the language, then you know the culture. Some have even gone so far as to express that without the language, the culture is dead. Séliš, no matter how limited, is also believed to be the best index of Séliš-Ql̓ispé identity, and a Native identity more broadly. Contexts for more extensive Séliš use tend to be limited to traditional cultural activities and with elder speakers. As such, having the linguistic capital to speak or understand the language offers a level of social and cultural prestige in these contexts. Ideologically linking the traditional language with culture and identity can be very useful in advocating for the revitalization of the language, yet it can also "essentialize the [Séliš-Ql̓ispél] community and create feelings of inferiority for many individuals," (Wood 2017). Additionally, not all individuals believe that Séliš is demonstrative of or relevant to the culture, particularly in the contemporary society. When asked about the biggest issue facing children's acquisition of the language and culture, one interviewee responded, "I guess, to put it as succinctly as I can, necessity. Well, evidently it must be very close to the reason because if there's no necessity they don't want to do it and that's applicable to just about every other aspect of community life." Ideologically representing Séliš as traditional Séliš-Ql̓ispé culture can be seen as contrastive to the modern society and counter-productive to economic and social success. This assumption that Séliš is not relevant in the current society further creates an environment for its decline.

The iconic relationship of language and culture is in opposition to the English speaking, non-Native society; this opposition is then recursively reproduced in the traditional-modern contrast. By ideologically representing Seliš language and Seliš-Q̓lispe culture as contrastive to the modern society, the ideological variation of individuals and across groups can be overlooked. Irvine and Gal (2000) emphasize the importance of considering the "ideological oppositions between activities or social roles, that is, as existing at the intraindividual level rather than defining oppositions between stable groups," (Field 2009:42). For instance, Seliš-Q̓lispe individuals who are struggling to define their identity in the contemporary society, may be further disconcerted with the belief that Seliš language is necessary for participation in Seliš-Q̓lispe practices. During a conversation with a woman about her desire to learn the Seliš language, she said "Language is really important to me." After a brief pause, she looked at me and said, "Or is it? Or do I like the concept of Seliš more than reality."

Furthering the ideological relationship of language to culture, elders are by extension iconically linked to Seliš. The elders tend to be the last remaining fluent speakers of the Seliš language; consequently, individuals are prone to defer to these elder speakers to determine the language of conversation. By waiting for the elders to engage in Seliš language speech, individuals are further socialized to the ideology of iconization and practice of deference. Individuals may also hesitate to use the Seliš in the presence of elders, because, as one individual suggested, "elders can be very critical" of language learners and their pronunciation. This semiotic association between the language and elders confines Seliš to a specific generation. Learners may be socialized to this ideology, leading them to believe the language is not readily available to them for conversational use (Friedman 2012).

The ideological representation of elders places the burden on the elder to be the bearers of the language and culture, furthering the traditional and modern dichotomy with regard to generational differences. Interviewees spoke of the disconnect between the generations, as seen in the following quote:

> "Our speakers are elders…And then there's a huge gap between you know, two three generations, between who we have as kids right now that we're teaching... so I think recreating that place of where people are actually expressing ideas, describing their world, you know especially the world that, our everyday world that we're living in. I mean so, what do we think about with the kids. They go home, they watch TV, they might play baseball, they play games, especially little Nintendo games or laptops. That's their world. They need to be able to express that either in English or any other language they have. They [elders] want their kids to learn about tanning hides and setting up tepees and something that's not in their everyday life." (female, 36 years old)

According to another interviewee (male, 37 years old), "I think if we're talking about Seliš, I think it rests on the shoulders of first and foremost of fluent speakers. I feel like, they were given this gift and it's their opportunity and their responsibility to pass on that gift to another generation." The Seliš-Q̓lispe elders who are knowledgeable in cultural and linguistic practices do share some responsibility in passing on this information to others. Yet they alone are not responsible for language shift, nor can they alone be responsible for revitalizing the Seliš language.

Another aspect of the iconization of elders is that of access. Learning from elders and spending time with them creates special bonds; however, not all individuals feel they have access to these fluent speakers. In fact, many interviewees made note of the difficulty with access to resources needed for learning about the language and culture. If an individual feels he/she does not have easy access to a fluent speaker, then he/she may not feel they can actively learn the language. The issue is not just with language learners having access to fluent speakers either. Elders, as with other individuals, often have difficulties finding domains in which they can use the Seliš language, or conversation partners with whom they can speak in Seliš. Iconically linking the Seliš language with elders also assumes that to be an elder, is to be a fluent speaker. This iconization also evokes the concept of erasure, essentializing all elders and knowledgeable individuals in the language and culture. Iconization also ignores the difficulty, expressed by several elders, that previously fluent speakers of Seliš have in recalling the language. English is now the vernacular of the reservation and elders often "use English with each other because they aren't used to talking in Seliš and it's a lot easier for them to use English" (male, 35 years old).

3.2 Technology & Access

Examining generational variation provides another avenue to examine the language ideological assemblages of the community, particularly in regard to technology and access. First, differentiation amongst the generations can be seen in the perspectives about the advantages or disadvantages of technology. Younger members of the community have successfully pushed to use technology for their own advantage in learning the language, creating computer software programs, games, and mobile apps. Additionally, there is a greater desire to incorporate new terminology into the curriculum that reflects their everyday world, rather than focusing on more traditional concepts. However, many elders disagree about the role technology should play in the perpetuation of the language and culture. Many see the increase in technology and screens as further removal from the natural environment.

When the Seliš-Q̓lispe Culture Committee was first established, language documentation was a priority and so oral recordings were made of fluent speakers telling traditional stories, singing songs, and giving personal narratives. Over the years, the committee has continued recording speakers, albeit with minimal transcriptions and translations relative to the number of recordings. What initially started as a resource for community members, has become a tightly controlled archive with only a handful of individuals that can access the materials. Given the dire language situation, younger language activists are encouraging greater permissions be granted in order to create new, more advanced language curriculum. Leadership within the culture committee serve as a key site for teaching the language and culture, yet they also control the flow of information and control of research on the reservation, which can significantly impact their own revitalization efforts and goals.

Similarly, there tends to be disjuncture of perspectives in terms of who has or should have access to language materials. As noted by Kroskrity (2018), some communities "…can only be characterized as reluctant, guarded, and contingent," (141) when discussing control over resources and the Séliš-Q̓lispé are no different. Linguistic research on the Séliš-Q̓lispél language and closely related Salish varieties has been taking place since the late 1800s (e.g., Mengarini 1861, Giorda 1877, Vogt 1940, Carlson 1972, Speck 1977, Camp 2007, Ward 2008, Flemming

et al. 2008, Pete 2010, Thomason 1997 & 2016, McKay 2022, among others). However, much of that material is inaccessible to those without extensive linguistic training. This is not a unique situation. Historically, linguistic fieldwork was an extractive process, designed to answer academic research questions, rarely considering the needs of the language community. Likewise, most Séliš-Q̓lispél linguistic fieldwork was directed to academic audiences, not to language users, teachers, or learners (Hinton 2010, Davis 2017, Meek 2017, McIvor 2020, Kroskrity 2021, Leonard 2021). In recent years, linguistics has moved towards more collaborative research models (Rice 2012, Leonard 2021, Venegas & Leonard 2023). In these projects, the needs of the language community are considered and shape the project's design. However, despite this shift, one can still find projects in which community needs are considered secondary and, in some cases, not considered at all. There is still an alarming degree of language documentation work that results in materials that are not comprehensible or accessible to the language community. This lack of access is compounded by the distribution of the Séliš and Q̓lispél peoples, residing on over 1.3 million rural acres of land in Montana.

Investigating LIA as strictly generational can be problematic as well, since there are younger individuals in the community that align with "typical" ideologies of the older generations. Similarly, there are elder individuals that would like to see greater access to Séliš materials and increase in technology for language development. It is, therefore, useful to adopt a more nuanced approach to generational ideological variation and practice. Following a performative or interactional based model proposed by Suslak (2009), Meek (2010), and Henne-Ochoa's (2015), helps account for this intergenerational diversity.

3.3 Respect

Erasure plays a significant role in how the Seliš-Q̓lispe perceive of individual attitudes and respect, and how Seliš language use and revitalization efforts are portrayed. Erasure ignores or simplifies particular characteristics or practices of individuals, groups or even activities to fit into preconceived notions of language practices (Irvine & Gal 2000). A common phrase heard during discussion about changes in younger generations was "a lack of respect from children today." Parents, grandparents, elders, teachers, and relatives all referenced how youth today did not respect their elders, the environment, or even themselves. The following quotes are responses from interviewees, when asked, "How has raising children changed since you were a child?":

> "Children at a young age are given too much freedom. They are not responsible to anything, their own bodies, education. There is no respect, for their parents, teachers or society as a whole, and there is no self-respect." (female, 65 years old)

> "My greatest thing is respect, you know, for elders, and respect for each other, you know. And because long time ago we respect everybody. Raising kids, they're the bosses. The thing is when I was small, the parents were the bosses, the elders were the bosses, then it went to the parents were the bosses, then when you're the one that's on the bottom totem pole. Today, the kids are the bosses, the parents are the next and the elders on the last totem pole." (male, 73 years old)

> "… in other families, that they talk back to their parents like their peers and I have no idea where that comes from but sadly, the parents allow it...There is no self-discipline.

> Maybe, I don't know, just maybe, the younger generation now, has no concept of self-discipline. I don't know if they weren't told or if they just didn't listen." (male, 75 years old).

The ideology of blame, in which younger generations are primarily responsible for the absence of respect for others and their surroundings, ignores socialization practices (Kulick 1992) and the ongoing trauma that exists within the community. Throughout my research, young adult language learners discussed much of the trauma that continues to exist, including notions of shame for not knowing more about the Seliš and Seliš-Qlispe practices, and conversely, pride and strength that ensues when one returns to the Seliš teachings (nłoʔpus 'falling into place/heart, going on the right path'). Each student and teacher brought with them different backgrounds, life experiences, and varying degrees of Seliš knowledge, yet each furthered the overall program objectives of "revitalizing the language, perpetuating culture," (SKC 2020). By examining how these students internalized, negotiated, and passed on the lessons, one can begin to see how language ideologies are shifting.

4.0 LIA Impact on Language Revitalization

There are numerous ideological perspectives that can be described, all contributing to the current sociocultural environment of language in interaction. I focused on the iconicity, technology, and respect in the community as these topics display the diverse ideologies and practices associated with Séliš and language revitalization. Many individuals and groups have strong perspectives on the appropriate contexts for and socialization to Séliš, the relevance and vitality of the language, and what its relationship is to culture and identity. However, all these diverse ideologies can be viewed as resources rather than obstacles. Anna Tsing (2015) notes that "[a]ssemblages, in their diversity, show us what…entanglements…might be mobilized in common cause. Because collaboration is always with us, we can maneuver within its possibilities," (134-5). The identification of the dominant ideologies has the potential to aid the community revitalization efforts, as "revitalization almost always requires changing community attitudes about a language" (Grenoble & Whaley 2006:13). Also, if a "primary goal of revitalization is to revalue a subordinate language and grant it prestige through promotion of ideologies" (Friedman 2012:633), then identifying and encouraging positive aspects of the current ideologies or establishing new beliefs within the community value system can prove beneficial to Séliš revitalization efforts. For instance, if we take Kroskrity's approach, as applied to iconization, we can begin to see the language, culture, and identity relationship as flexible rather than a static one to one mapping and celebrate the spectrum of Séliš-Qlispé identities. This can in turn create safe explorations of language use outside normative practices and expectations.

Over the course of my time spent with the community, the language revitalization efforts of the Séliš-Qlispé have undergone many changes, with both positive and negative impacts. There have been observed changes in positions of power that directly influence language valuing or devaluing. For instance, elected Tribal council members have demonstrated their dedication to Séliš through their own efforts to learn the language in one cycle, which is quickly followed by elected officials who see no relevance in the language. There have also been observed changes to the ideologies and practices of Native and non-Native community members on the Flathead Indian Reservation, within the state of Montana, and at the federal level, both positive and

negative. There has also, encouragingly, been a noticeable increase in the amount of Séliš use, although speakers and contexts of use tend to remain limited. As cultural and linguistic situations are continually changing and evolving, even over short periods, it is important to consider the LIA "…to see what comes together – not just by prefabrication, but also juxtaposition" (Tsing 2015: 23).

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