The role of elder speakers in language revitalisation

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The role of elder speakers in language revitalisation

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Abstract

Elder speakers are generally seen as resources for language revitalisation and reclamation (LR). However, it is less common to consider how elder speakers themselves can benefit from the LR process, and the language needs of elder speakers are rarely prioritised in the design of LR efforts. I argue that the role of elder speakers in LR is much greater and more complicated than that of 'resources' to the process, and that the needs of elder speakers as beneficiaries of LR must be considered. Drawing on my experience with a community-based language documentation project, I show that barriers to elder speaker participation may follow from an assumption that LR is 'for' current language learners and future generations only. I demonstrate that inclusion of elder speakers' needs in the development of LR methods, priorities, and goals has the potential to improve outcomes community-wide. Integrating elder speakers' language needs and desires into the structure of a community-led language documentation project helped to address elders' concerns, and yielded more diverse and higher-quality documentation and pedagogical materials than had been originally envisioned.

Keywords: elder speakers, language revitalisation, language reclamation, language documentation

1. Introduction[1]

In the United States and Canada, elder speakers are generally seen as resources for language revitalisation and reclamation (LR) in Indigenous communities facing language endangerment, although there are many barriers and challenges to their participation.[2] These challenges are widely discussed within the LR community, and also to some extent in literature on LR (e.g., Hinton 1994, 2001a; Meek 2010; Oberly et al. 2015). However, these conversations and literature seldom examine how elder speakers themselves can benefit from the LR process, and the language needs of elder speakers are rarely prioritised in the design of LR efforts. Drawing on my experiences as the Language Program Coordinator for the Karuk Tribe in northwest California, USA, from 2008-2011, I argue that the role of elder speakers in LR is much greater and more complicated than that of 'resources' to the process. Instead, based on lessons learned through running a community-led and community-based language documentation project, I argue that the needs of elder speakers as beneficiaries of LR must be considered. Further, I demonstrate that inclusion of elder speakers' needs in the development of revitalisation methods, priorities, and goals has the potential to improve outcomes community-wide.

In order to support this argument, the Karuk case study is contextualised within a discussion of some of the roles that elder speakers have within LR generally, and common barriers to their participation. In this case, many of the barriers to elder speaker participation followed from an unexamined and damaging, though common, premise: that the project was 'for' current language learners and future generations only. Recasting elder speakers' concerns as natural responses to a project that was structured without fully

[2] This paper focuses on the experiences of Native American and Canadian First Nations communities. The extent to which these experiences are shared with other communities around the world is unclear.

considering their needs as both participants and beneficiaries revealed a number of shortcomings in the project's design. Once elder speakers' language needs and desires were integrated into the project strategy, most of their concerns were addressed as a matter of course. In addition, the re-structured project yielded more diverse and higher-quality documentation materials than had been originally envisioned and expected.

2. Elders in language revitalisation and reclamation

The methods and goals of efforts to support endangered languages can vary widely, depending on factors such as the status and vitality of the language, the cultural, social, and political situation of the language community, and the concerns of the individuals and communities involved. The goals of *language revitalisation* are sometimes framed exclusively around language, and can include creating new speakers, (re-)establishing intergenerational language transmission, and increasing the status and domains of use of the language; these goals frequently also connect to issues of cultural vitality, human rights, and self-determination (Hinton 2001a). Leonard (2012:359) proposes the term *language reclamation* to describe the larger effort 'to claim [a community's] right to speak a language and to set associated goals in response to community needs and perspectives', which is discussed in detail in this volume and elsewhere (Leonard 2011, 2017; Leonard & Haynes 2010; Oberly et al. 2015). In this paper I refer collectively to these efforts as LR, and recognise that the Karuk language work I describe represents goals and practices which draw from both language revitalisation and language reclamation perspectives.

LR efforts often include family, community or school-based language classes, language and cultural activities, individual and group mentoring, and language practice (Hinton 2001a, 2013; Hinton & Hale 2001). In addition, LR can involve program and materials development, policy-making, and setting funding priorities at various levels of community, local and national government, and within non-profit and academic institutions. Among LR professionals and within the LR literature there is much discussion of the role of elder first language speakers in the LR process. Elder speakers are seen as a precious resource to efforts to document, maintain, or reclaim a language, and their importance to LR is widely recognised (e.g., Albers & Supahan 2013; Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer 1998; Hinton 1994; Jacobs 1998; King 2001; Platero 2001). They make invaluable contributions to documenting, analyzing, and teaching the language, especially in immersion contexts. They can also provide critical validation for the LR efforts of the tribe or community (Grounds & Grounds 2013; Speas 2009).

Elders participate in LR in many ways, depending on a number of factors, including their particular areas of expertise, other skills and interests,

availability, and inclinations. While my focus here is on elder speakers, it is also critical to recognise that elders may in fact be learners within LR efforts. For instance, several of the community language classes I have participated in have had elder students who are learning the language for the first time. In addition, elder speakers are themselves heterogeneous in their language experiences and proficiency (Leonard & Haynes 2010). Elder speakers are often also referred to as 'first language speakers', which in these contexts is generally understood to mean that the Native language is the first language they learned. However, an elder speaker may in fact have acquired another (Indigenous or other) language prior to learning their Native language. Depending on how terms are defined, this does not necessarily mean that they are not a first language speaker; within the field of language acquisition, 'native' or 'first language speaker' can also mean that the language was acquired before puberty (e.g., Davies 2008). In addition, an elder speaker may have limited proficiency, or limited domains of proficiency, depending on their language experience – for instance, because they shifted to another language, such as English, at an early age.

Elder speakers may directly serve LR efforts in a variety of roles: as classroom teachers in core and immersion contexts; guest experts in classes, workshops, and meetings; 'masters' or 'mentors' to language apprentices; creators of or consultants for documentation, descriptive, and pedagogical language materials; and directors or staff of language programs. They may also provide support in less direct ways: consulting on usage; participating in community language activities; and validating and championing LR efforts. However, generally missing from this conversation is consideration of the ways elder speakers may benefit, both linguistically and non-linguistically, from their involvement with LR efforts.

In some cases elder speakers are hesitant or unable to participate in LR, or even question or present barriers to the process (Speas 2009).[3] In addition, their ability to contribute may go unrecognised even when they are eager and willing to participate in LR (Hinton 1994; Meek 2010). Common reasons for elder speakers being unable to actively participate in LR range from the logistical to the ideological. Poor health or low energy can prevent the elder from even interacting with others, let alone acting as teacher or language guide. Physical ailments such as hearing loss, language difficulties due to stroke, and dental problems can be barriers to listening, speaking, and being

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[3] As a reviewer notes, many of these issues are commonly associated with elder speakers but can in fact apply to speakers (or learners) of any age. Some of the issues, such as physical illness, are more commonly experienced by elder speakers because of their age, or because of the historical context of their lives (boarding school trauma, for example).

understood. Financial or transportation challenges can prevent an elder from traveling to and attending language activities, classes, or other events. In some cases, legal issues or cultural mores prevent certain individuals from interacting with each other, or from being in certain locations such as schools or tribal facilities.

For myriad reasons, elder speakers may experience discomfort with the language or LR community, LR practices, or with the language itself. Widespread and brutal suppression of Native languages through boarding schools and other mechanisms affected many of today's elder speakers, and they may be concerned that increased use of the language will make the community vulnerable to similar practices (Hinton 1994). They may have had previous conflict or bad experiences with an individual or entity currently involved in LR, including the language (as in the case of boarding schools); tribe; linguist(ic)s; language program; school; or other language participants. There may be discomfort with the goals or uses to which language is being put, or with the people who are learning it. Political, social, and family divisions are among many that can negatively impact LR. In some cases an elder speaker may not think the language is important enough to save (Hinton 2001a; Slate 2001).

Shyness or language humility (or insecurity) can also make it challenging for some to participate, especially in the role of a 'language master'. Some of the causes of language humility include lack of recent language practice, the existence of dialect differences and disputes over these differences, and limited skills in a particular grammatical or lexical domain or register of the language. An elder speaker may be concerned about misrepresenting the language or culture, or about being misinterpreted through their involvement with the LR effort. Among elder speakers who have been involved with LR efforts over a long period of time, there may be feelings of boredom or frustration with language activities and a lack of visible progress. When documentation is an element of the revitalisation effort, this may itself be a barrier if elders or the community do not see the relevance of documentation activities to revitalisation, or if they have concerns about being recorded (Hinton 2001a).

Barriers to elders' participation in LR can also come from external sources, even when they themselves are ready and willing to support LR activities. For example, elders may be seen as unable to contribute to school-based LR activities if they are not able to read or write the language, or if they know a different writing system than the one used in the classroom. Lack of familiarity with grammatical terminology, or not having a teaching credential, may also prevent them from participating in school-based LR. They are also often not involved in designing and implementing LR activities, and thus their deep language, cultural, and life knowledge goes untapped. These issues often lead to elders being unable to participate in LR as fully as they are able and would like, resulting in a significant missed opportunity for the LR effort. I

have also heard about some cases where an elder speaker's doubts or disagreements regarding a particular LR effort, or LR in general, has resulted in their active opposition. In other instances, they are supportive of LR but marginalised because of any of a number of factors, some of which are beyond their control. Whether an elder speaker is unable, or not allowed to participate in LR, or openly questions or opposes it, this situation can create serious challenges to achieving the goals.

The barriers to participation described above are primarily focused on how elders can *contribute* to the LR effort. As I have suggested, there are many ways for elders to support LR, and quite a few potential reasons for them not to participate. However, it is also worth considering how elders may *benefit* from LR. Discussion of the benefits of LR generally focuses on the learners, rather than elder speakers who are involved. There are some important exceptions: Hinton (2001b) describes how elder speakers who participate in the Master-Apprentice program report higher self-esteem and better physical health as a result. Jenni et al. (2017) similarly found that elder speakers participating in a Canadian Mentor-Apprentice language program experienced improved cognitive, emotional, and physical health.

In the remainder of this paper, I seek to begin a conversation about how LR can benefit elder speakers, in terms of both language knowledge as well as other forms of well-being. Through my participation with the *Karuk Master/Apprentice Language Documentation Project*, which I describe in detail below, I found that elder speakers experienced significant benefits when their needs and contributions were prioritised in the project (re)design. In addition, approaching LR with this perspective led to improvements in the overall outcomes.

This account is based on my own experience and understanding of the project, but is heavily informed by my conversations with participants and members of the wider community.[4] In order to protect the privacy of the people involved, I have chosen to organise my discussion around themes that arose throughout, rather than around the experiences and contributions of specific individuals. I have thus been selective about the level of detail I provide about individuals and the interactions I report on here. My intent is to show how our project goals variously supported and were in conflict with community needs and values, and how recognising and prioritising elder speakers' needs was critical to the project's success on both a community and grant level. That process and positive outcome was made possible by the

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[4] For the direct perspective of project participants, I recommend watching the short documentary *Capturing the Language for Future Generations* (2011), which was produced by project participants towards the end of the grant.

willingness of the elder speakers, and others, to engage with me, and with the project, even when they had serious issues with the project design, objectives, and management. Finally, I have focused on the ways in which the elder speakers' roles evolved and influenced the course of the project, rather than providing a detailed description of the project itself.

3. Karuk Master/Apprentice Language Documentation Project

The Karuk Tribe is located in a remote, rugged area of northwest California along the Klamath River, just below the Oregon border. The tribe was heavily impacted by the 19th century California Gold Rush, and then later by logging (Bright & Gehr 2005; Diver 2014; Hurwitz 2014). The tribe is federally recognised and has reservation, trust, and fee lands within its 1.48 million acre Ancestral (or Aboriginal) Territory, which is the 'land base that was utilized in the process of receiving federal determination of tribal recognition' (Karuk Climate Change Projects 2016). This territory extends for about sixty-five miles along the Klamath River and Highway 96 roughly from Orleans, CA, to Seiad, CA. The second-largest tribe in California, the Karuk have about 3,500 enrolled Tribal members and 5,000 registered Tribal descendants. Some of these people still live within the Ancestral Territory, but many have moved to nearby population centers such as Yreka and Eureka, as well as elsewhere in California and Oregon and around the world. These circumstances present some challenges for language maintenance and revitalisation, as the population is dispersed over large distances and infrastructure, including roads and telecommunications within the Ancestral Territory, is poor, making communication and travel difficult.

In 2008, I was hired by the Karuk Tribe as their Language Program Coordinator. I am not Native, and I had no previous experience with the Karuk Tribe or language. However, I was born and raised about 100 miles southwest of the Karuk tribal area, in Arcata, CA. While living there I had participated as a volunteer and learner in Yurok community language classes, and I studied Yurok at the University of California (UC) Berkeley, where I received my BA and MA in Linguistics. In addition, I had conducted language documentation on Miskitu, an Indigenous language of Nicaragua, and participated as a linguist partner with Native Californian language activists in the *Breath of Life* workshops at UC Berkeley.

During the three years I worked for the Tribe, I lived in Happy Camp, CA, the small town where the tribe had its administrative headquarters. Happy Camp has a population of roughly 1,400, about half of whom are Native (mostly, but not exclusively, Karuk), and half are non-Native (mostly, but not exclusively, white). As an outsider to the Karuk Tribe and to the community, I experienced both advantages and disadvantages. I was generally (though not universally) accepted and welcomed in my role as

Language Program Coordinator by members of the Karuk language community, by other Tribal employees, and by the community at large. However, I was initially ignorant of many of the community and tribal dynamics and protocols that impacted language work. Fortunately, I had colleagues and friends who understood this, and who took it upon themselves to help me understand and navigate these important aspects of living and working in the community. In addition, my lack of history and connection to the Karuk community was often identified by my colleagues as an advantage both to me and to my work, as I started off with no *negative* history with anybody, and I was seen as relatively neutral with regard to disputes or divisions within the Tribe or the language community.

The Karuk language is severely endangered, and this was a motivating factor in the development of the project described here. The passing of two pillars of the Karuk LR movement, 'Auntie' Violet Super, a cherished elder speaker and language advocate and teacher, and William Bright, a linguist who had worked on the language and collaborated closely with the Tribe for over 50 years, had shaken the Karuk language community. They felt an urgent need to accelerate their documentation of the language in order to ensure that future generations would have access to the recordings of the few remaining first language speakers. They also recognised that, although there was already extensive documentation of the language in the Boasian tradition of 'grammars, dictionaries, and text collections' (Austin 2013), these materials were not necessarily what was most needed for learners in an LR context. They did not always provide examples of the vocabulary, grammatical constructions, and interactional norms that were essential to the everyday activities that learners wanted to talk about (cf. Hermes & Engman 2017).

At the time of this project, there were around ten elderly first language speakers; some of them lived within the Ancestral Territory, but the majority lived in nearby towns, and a few were in cities such as Portland or San Francisco, which are around 400 miles away. In addition to the small number of elderly first language speakers, there were at that time a handful of highly proficient second-language speakers, and perhaps 20-30 second-language learners who had some conversational ability in the language. There were also many more community members who knew words and phrases, and a small number of children who were learning Karuk from birth through their caregivers who number among the second-language speakers mentioned above. There was also a high level of interest in and support for the language within the tribal community, and also among many individuals and institutions in the local non-Native community. Karuk community language classes and youth summer language programs were regularly attended by Native and non-Native students, and a number of public schools worked with the Karuk LR community to offer Karuk language content or courses open to all students.

In my role as the Language Program Coordinator for the Karuk Tribe, I was responsible for implementing the *Karuk Master/Apprentice Language Documentation Project*. This three-year, community-based project was funded by a Language Preservation and Maintenance grant to the Karuk Tribe from the Administration for Native Americans (ANA). The grant was developed collaboratively by the previous Karuk Language Program Coordinator, Susan Gehr, and the Karuk Language Restoration Committee (KLRC), an independent advisory council of Karuk language advocates. The project was modeled on the Master/Apprentice method of language teaching developed by the Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival (AICLS), which pairs a fluent speaker with a language learner and provides training and funding for them to spend (usually) 20 hours per week using the language in their daily activities (see Hinton 2001b for a full description of the method). The project included funding for a full-time project coordinator (me), a part-time, contract Tribal Linguist (Susan Gehr), and five part-time contract 'Master/Apprentice Documentation teams', each of which consisted of a master speaker and a documentation apprentice.

As this was a grant-funded project, we were contractually obligated to use the grant funds for specified activities, and to accomplish a set of objectives and deliverables according to a schedule set out in the grant. The strategy for this project was that the documentation apprentices would record the speech of their master speaker partner, while also learning the language in the process. These recordings would then be developed into video podcasts for other learners, and also be used to create an archive of recorded language. The project deliverables included the raw language documentation, video podcasts, and contributions of audio recordings to the Online Karuk Dictionary.[5]

The Master/Apprentice Documentation teams were selected through an open call for applications in the form of a Request for Proposals. Team members were paid on an hourly contract basis for their contributions to the project. Each team received a complete recording equipment package, including laptop, video camera, audio recorder, microphones, and other accessories. The teams also received ongoing training in linguistics, language documentation, recording, and editing, delivered through weekend workshops held at different locations between Eureka and Yreka. These workshops were delivered by a variety of experts throughout the three-year project for the Master/Apprentice teams, including Karuk language teachers and activists,

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[5] The Karuk Online Dictionary began as an online version of a print dictionary written by Bright & Gehr (2005). It had been developed under a previous ANA grant, #90NL0250. It is hosted, and has been considerably enriched, by the Department of Linguistics at UC Berkeley at http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/~karuk/index.php, accessed 2017-08-30.

Master/Apprentice and technology trainers from AICLS, linguists at UC Berkeley, and others. The workshop topics were set out in broad strokes within the grant, and the details were developed collaboratively between the project staff and trainers, with input from the Master/Apprentice teams. During these meetings and workshops the master speakers often conversed in Karuk. However, due to the limited Karuk skills of the learners and the presence of trainers from outside the community, whole-group interactions were generally in English, with increasing Karuk language content as all project members gained proficiency and confidence in the language.

Community interest in the project was very high. Although the project budget anticipated that only five qualified Master/Apprentice teams would apply to participate, in fact six excellent teams (one of which included two apprentices working with one master speaker) submitted applications in response to the first call for proposals.[6] These master speakers ranged in age from 50s to 80s, and included elder first language speakers and one younger, highly proficient second-language speaker who had learned the language during childhood. Each of them came to the project with a very particular set of life and language experiences, values, and attitudes, all of which both challenged and enriched our project. Several had been involved in Karuk LR efforts for decades, serving as some of the original master speakers under the traditional Master/Apprentice system developed by AICLS. Others had not spoken the language regularly for decades, or even since childhood, and had never been involved in LR activities. Some were culture bearers,[7] traditional artists, or tribal leaders, while a few had minimal contact with the tribal community or traditional lifeways.

The apprentices were similarly heterogeneous, and ranged in age from early 20s to late 50s (the latter verging on elder status within the Karuk community). Some had no experience with the language, while others were well on their way to being competent second-language speakers. Their personal backgrounds, roles, and activities within the Karuk and wider communities were also varied and complex. They were parents, tribal employees, college students, retirees, teachers, tribal leaders, artists, manual laborers, white-collar workers, military veterans, and scientists. A few were paired with a family member master speaker, others were working with an existing language or cultural mentor, and some of the pairs were new to each other.

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[6] Over the course of the three-year project, fifteen community members hailing from points along a 400-mile route from Fortuna, California to Medford, Oregon participated as master speakers or documentation apprentices.

[7] These included religious leaders, singers, experts in Indigenous technologies, storytellers, and healers, among others.

As originally conceived, the project model, in keeping with much work in language documentation and revitalisation, treated the master speakers as critical and expert sources of spoken language and linguistic expertise. They were also seen as filling important cultural, community, and family roles. The apprentices, on the other hand, and the community at large, were to be the beneficiaries of the elders' knowledge, wisdom, and authority. Although elder speakers would be paid for their participation, their primary motivation would be their (hoped for) desire to see the language flourish among the younger generations of learners, which would override any of the barriers or reservations discussed above.

After finding extra funding to accommodate the sixth team, all of the project members gathered for an initial, weekend-long training session in January 2009. This training was intended to introduce project participants to each other, to explain the project structure, activities, and objectives, and to provide hands-on experience with the teams' new equipment, including practice documentation sessions. However, the elders began voicing questions and concerns about the structure of the project and their expected roles in it as soon as the training began. The issues they raised during this initial meeting motivated important changes to the design, functioning, and outcomes of the project, as detailed in the following sections.

3.1. Valuing the master speakers

The very process through which participants were selected, which required master speakers and their apprentice teammates to apply to participate in the project, was a point of contention. One master speaker who was recognised as a cultural and religious leader within the Karuk community was accustomed to being directly approached by learners or tribal representatives when his expertise or participation was desired. He explained that by asking his team to submit an application and to compete for a place within the project, rather than personally requesting his participation, I had insulted him even before the project began.

In addition, some master speakers felt that their compensation for participating, which was based on the standard compensation at the time for AICLS-supported Master/Apprentice teams, was not appropriate to their level of expertise, and was likewise insulting. It would be hard to argue that the compensation matched the value of their contribution, considering the very small number of speakers of the language.

An additional issue was raised over the standard language in their contracts with the tribe, which stated that all materials produced through the project would be under tribal copyright. This dispute was driven by both practical and principled concerns. They were worried that they would be prevented from accessing and using the documentation for future language

work, and for developing additional language products. In addition, they felt that the contract could restrict dissemination of the language materials to language learners. Finally, they felt that the contract was unjustly depriving them of access to their own intellectual property.

While there was little to be done about the way participants had been recruited to the project, and the budget would not allow for increased compensation, the language in the contracts regarding copyright was amended by the tribal council to grant masters (and apprentices) shared copyright of project materials. This was a months-long process, and involved many discussions with project participants, the tribal attorney, and the tribal council. Although it did not compensate for the other two issues, it did provide legal and social recognition of the invaluable intellectual and creative contributions of project participants, and provided legal assurance that they would be able to access, modify, and distribute the materials they produced even after the project ended. This benefitted not only the project participants, but also the tribe and the Karuk learning and teaching community who would use these materials to support language restoration.

3.2. Master and Apprentice roles

An explicit expectation within the project design was that the apprentices would both manage the technical aspects of documentation, including audio and video capture, data management, and post-production, and also plan and guide the documentation sessions themselves. In retrospect, this was not only quite a heavy burden of work on the apprentices, but also contained an underlying assumption that none of the master speakers would have either the interest or the skills to take an active role in these activities. I quickly learned that neither of these assumptions were true.

One master speaker, who had a great deal of experience with filmmaking and with LR, immediately expressed discomfort with the idea of being 'plopped down in front of a camera and told to talk'. He was the youngest of the master speakers, and the only one who had learned Karuk during his youth, not as his first language. He had developed an extensive spoken, written, and linguistic knowledge of the language. He was also extremely active in cultural, educational, and language revitalisation activities, in addition to being a published author in Karuk and accomplished artist, storyteller, and filmmaker. He wanted to take a more active role in his own documentation, and clearly had the skills and creativity to do so.

In fact, he was not only a master speaker but became a technology and filmmaking mentor for the entire group, and especially for his apprentices. He and his two apprentices thus created a unique set of documentation materials. These included many scripted live action and animated short films. In some cases the master speaker was in front of the camera, demonstrating and talking

about everyday activities like peeling a banana. In other films the master was behind the camera and the apprentice was in front, performing household chores like feeding a cat, chopping wood, or building a fire, with narration by the master speaker. They also produced animated versions of traditional stories, and a host of other engaging materials.[8]

This team's excellent work, and the mentoring and inspiration they provided to the other teams, was primarily due to their talent and dedication. Importantly, the blurring of master and documentation apprentice roles and the creative reinterpretation of objectives which led to the work was enabled by the emergence of an explicit dynamic of collaborative goal-setting within the project, and was a direct response to the feedback from participants during the first training.

3.3. Bringing the language to life

Two master speakers who were veterans of LR, with decades of language mentoring and teaching, expressed boredom with answering endless questions and delivering monologues in the language, at the behest of both learners and researchers. In addition to serving as master speakers to many apprentices over the years, they had consulted with linguists researching the language. Elicitation sessions involving word lists were quite familiar to both of these seasoned master speakers, and they were unified in detesting them with a passion, saying that they were extremely tedious and even worse, seemed disconnected from what it meant to actually speak Karuk.

One of these elders had moved away as a young woman, married a Native man from a different tribe, and learned to speak his language. She had been involved in efforts to maintain and revitalise that language, but it wasn't until she was in her 60s that her children learned that she spoke Karuk as well. She had since spent several decades teaching the Karuk language to younger learners, and eventually also moved to a town near the Ancestral Territory. While she remained fully committed to restoring the Karuk language, she admitted that she was disturbed by the lack of progress, in the form of conversational competence, demonstrated by her students even after years of instruction. The other was a cultural and religious leader and renowned storyteller, and he had taught generations of younger speakers and cultural practitioners. During discussion of the Master/Apprentice documentation sessions, in which the apprentice was supposed to guide the elder speaker using conversation prompts or elicitation strategies, he said 'sometimes I just

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[8] Many of these videos produced by the Master/Apprentice teams are available on the Internet Archive at https://archive.org/details/@karuklanguage.

want to talk', referring to using the language naturally rather than 'teaching' or 'performing' the language.

On the other hand, an elder speaker who was a new and somewhat reluctant participant in LR felt that he needed to 'warm up' before he would be ready to be recorded. He had moved away from the tribe's Ancestral Territory as a teenager, and spent most of his adult life working in a nearby city where he had little occasion to speak the language. In addition, he had left around the time that children were ceasing to learn Karuk, but before this situation had become an issue of great notice and concern. As a result, it was only when he retired and moved to a town closer to the Ancestral Territory that he realised that he was one of the last remaining speakers of the language. At a later meeting, he expressed his discomfort with the title of 'master speaker', as he remembered his elders as having had far greater mastery of the language than he did. When he was a child and young adult, his Karuk language skills had been viewed as less perfect than those of the older generation. Even with the knowledge that he was one of the few remaining first language speakers, he found it difficult to view himself as an expert. He was concerned about being recorded immediately, when he did not feel that he had a strong command of the language.

3.4. Speakers Circles

While hearing these criticisms was a challenging experience for me, and probably for everyone present, in retrospect it was one of the most important and pivotal moments of the project. In the end, I came to understand that it had been our collective good fortune that the master speakers were willing and able to articulate these concerns, as well as their own language-related needs and desires. Because of their honest and wise input, and the group's commitment to the survival of the Karuk language, we were able to listen to and learn from each other, both enriching our individual experiences and the overall outcome of the project as detailed below.

The discussions generated about these issues during the initial training and in subsequent workshops and individual conversations, which largely centered on the elder speakers' need or desire to use the language conversationally, led me to hold a series of consultations with the master speakers and apprentices. The goal was to devise a strategy that was acceptable to all involved while still meeting the goals and funder-required deliverables of the project as they had been originally conceived in the grant proposal. It was clear that we needed to create opportunities for the master speakers to use the language with each other, and to delay documentation until they were comfortable being recorded. We decided to organise a series of private and casual language gatherings, to be attended by the master speakers and the apprentices. These gatherings, called 'Speakers Circles', would allow the

master speakers to converse about topics of their own choosing, including those that they might not want to be recorded and shared, such as gossip or culturally sensitive information. It would give those who felt that their language skills were 'rusty' a chance to practice without potential errors being recorded for posterity. Apprentices would also have the chance to listen and participate as their language abilities allowed. The Program Officer for our grant at the ANA was sympathetic, and helped us to structure and frame the Speakers Circles so that they complied with the requirements of our grant. Once we had held a number of these Circles, we would re-assess the master speakers' readiness to begin the documentation phase of the project. However, again things did not proceed exactly as we had planned.

The most vocal and concerned master speaker, who felt he needed to 'warm up,' was given free rein to develop the first Circle. As he worked with me to organise the Circle, he felt that other speakers and some learners in the Karuk LR community who were not part of our project should be invited to attend. As he consulted with the other master speakers, this soon turned into a decision to publicise the event to the entire Karuk community through flyers, emails, and a press release to local media. When a reporter from the local (non-Native) newspaper asked if he could attend, the group felt this would a positive development for the community's awareness about the language and LR efforts, and would counteract the often negative treatment of the tribe by local media, and they gave their approval.

The event was held on a Sunday several weeks later at a tribal community center, and drew around fifteen elder speakers and learners, a few interested community members, and a photographer from the newspaper. As everyone seated themselves and some of the elders began speaking, the master speaker who had felt he needed to 'warm up' before being recorded spoke up. With great concern, he asked where the video cameras were, saying that the event absolutely must be recorded. When the rest of the elder speakers agreed, the apprentices quickly set up their recording equipment which they had fortunately brought with them, and conducted their first documentation session. The next morning a photograph of the Circle was on the front page of the local paper, which was a source of great pride for not only the language project participants but the entire tribal community.

The Circles that followed were often held in conjunction with other tribal events, such as youth leadership trainings, basket-weavers' gatherings, and tribal reunions. They drew between 20 and 80 people, often including elder speakers and active second-language learners who were not involved in the documentation project. Some of these people were active participants in the conversation during the Circle, but many just wanted to hear the language spoken, perhaps for the first time in their lives. The master speakers also varied in how they engaged with the conversations during the Circles. Some were enthusiastic participants, while other rarely spoke, except during breaks or as side conversations. All of these events were

recorded, with the recordings contributing to our grant-required hours of language documentation, and the participants began developing culturally-grounded discussion themes for each Circle based on their interests and language needs. At one Circle, held in the tribe's cultural center and museum, the apprentices brought out museum objects such as baskets and asked the master speakers to explain their significance, construction, and use. Other Circles focused on storytelling or other aspects of Karuk culture and history. In all cases the mood was jovial and lively, characterised by a great deal of teasing and laughter. There was always a mix of Karuk conversation, discussion of the status of the language and revitalisation in English, socialising, storytelling, and eating.

These Circles had a number of benefits that went beyond the original intent of providing an opportunity for conversation and lessening the master speakers' general anxiety at speaking the language. In addition to helping with their inevitable struggles to remember seldom-used terms, master speakers reported increased general language fluency, as well as better recall of stories, songs, and traditional practices through their conversations with each other. One elder told me that he was beginning to remember words, phrases, even stories and songs, as he went about his daily activities. In one case, a whole song came to him, one that he had not just forgotten but forgotten *about* for 40 years. In this way, the Circles significantly benefited the quality of language documentation materials produced throughout the project. Similar results have been observed with Cherokee speakers in language documentation contexts (e.g., Berge 1998).

The Circles allowed the master speakers and apprentices, some of whom were virtual strangers to each other, the chance to get to know each other and develop familiarity and a supportive dynamic that later helped them weather the inevitable challenges that come with LR. The apprentices benefited from each other's camaraderie, moral support, and technical expertise, assisting each other with technical difficulties as they all learned to use their audio and video recording equipment. One of the apprentices was already a very competent second-language speaker, having completed traditional Master/Apprentice language apprenticeships with two speakers, and was also an experienced filmmaker. Another apprentice was a gifted and highly skilled interviewer. Others had specialised cultural knowledge, or were experienced teachers. All of these skills were highly valuable to the project, and the Circles provided the apprentices an opportunity to share and develop them.

An additional outcome of the Circles was a loosening of the Master/Apprentice 'team' model that had been envisioned at the outset of the project. Rather than each team working independently and in isolation from each other, the apprentices began to coordinate documentation sessions with two or more teams: the master speakers could talk to each other, and the apprentices could share documentation and conversation facilitation duties, and learn new methods from each other. These 'documentation dates' ranged

from a porch-side conversation and storytelling exchange, to field trips centered around traditional activities like berry-picking, gathering willow sticks, harvesting Indian celery, and visiting fishing spots on the river. One such excursion, to gather basket-making materials, unexpectedly turned into a lesson on how to select river rocks for cooking that would not explode when placed in the fire. The result of these sessions was rich linguistic and ethnographic material, along with even stronger bonds among all team members. At the same time teams conducted individual documentation sessions focused on elicitation of words and phrases. To make these slightly more comfortable and interesting for the elders, they were organised by semantic domain, to allow for conversations between the master speaker and the apprentice, in English or Karuk, about birds, plants, basket making, fishing, etc. These also reflected domain-specific search categories within the Karuk Online Dictionary.

In addition, the Circles continued to raise the profile of the Karuk language and restoration efforts, and brought recognition and respect, as well as a bit of pressure, to participants in the documentation project. With greater awareness about the project, the community began to take an interest in our work and outcomes, and the team members were looked to as language learning resources by their families and communities. Master speakers and apprentices began to bring the language into new and public spaces, such as during chance meetings at the local grocery store.

A final benefit to this approach was that the master speaker who originally asked for an opportunity to 'warm up', and who was initially skeptical of the entire project, eventually became an ardent supporter of the project, and of Karuk LR and documentation in general. Through his position as a community and political leader, he advocated effectively for LR with fellow tribal councilmembers, other elder speakers, and the community as a whole. He also made himself available during and after the project for numerous additional language activities, including weekly community language classes. This practical and moral support was critical at many points through the rest of the project, and was important in ensuring that LR continued once the project ended.

4. Lessons

The doubts voiced by the master speakers at the beginning of the *Karuk Master/Apprentice Documentation Project* focused our group's attention on some of the common but ultimately misguided assumptions that were held by me, as a trained linguist, and also to some extent by the Karuk language community, which had developed the project. As I have argued above, these assumptions regarding who LR is 'for', and what kinds of contributions different participants in LR can make, are pervasive within

the LR literature and communities of practice. They also connect to language documentation theory and practice, particularly to the much-discussed notions of *how* research projects are developed, *who* is involved in that process and *when*, and *what* and *who* should be documented (Bowern & Warner 2015; Crippen & Robinson 2013; Gippert, Himmelmann & Mosel 2006; Leonard & Haynes 2010; Rice 2011).

Some of the master speakers' concerns related to their roles and levels of agency in the project, and to their relationship to the project staff. Others focused on their feelings, desires, and experiences with the language, and to some extent emerged from their level of experience with LR. These revealed an important collection of needs related to the language, most of which came as a surprise to me as project director. Foremost among these was an increased level of agency in the project. This agency was followed, or perhaps simply manifested, by a desire for opportunities to talk in the language, rather than explain or perform it, both for the master speakers' own enjoyment and to re-accustom themselves to using Karuk. The humility felt by some speakers about their language skills both illustrated these individuals' deeply personal relationship to the Karuk language, and highlighted the complexity of language competence(s) in language endangerment situations. In addition, the master speakers needed to feel that their energies were creating real benefit for the LR effort, in the form of producing new speakers of the language.

Their linguistic needs, which could be thought of as their *language revitalisation* needs, were closely tied with a number of very personal needs, which connect strongly with *language reclamation* as described by Leonard (2012). Some of these needs, such as their concerns that their energies were having a discernable effect on language learning, were specific to their status as some of the last speakers of Karuk and the anxiety this situation caused them. Their lack of opportunity to use the language with other speakers, while also due in large part to this situation, also reflected to some extent the boredom, loneliness, and physical and social isolation commonly experienced by elders in the United States. Due to the great physical distances between them, infrastructure and transportation difficulties, and the overwhelming prevalence of English within their community, the master speakers rarely conversed with or even saw each other, or other Karuk speakers and learners. There were no longer spaces or times dedicated to Karuk, and the links the language provided to their own pasts and to Karuk history, culture, and traditions were increasingly fragile.

These concerns had for the most part not been anticipated by me and other project developers and staff, and challenged the methods and objectives of the project in a manner that was acutely stressful but also transformative. They revealed the unspoken assumptions of the planners and staff of the project, which are reflected in much of the discourse around language revitalisation in academic and community circles. Master speakers

had been viewed as project participants who were not expected to contribute substantially to the project aside from their language knowledge. This was to some extent intentional, as we were worried about placing too many burdens on the master speakers both due to their advanced age and to their many existing tribal and family responsibilities. More telling, and troubling when considered in retrospect, is that they were not expected to benefit linguistically from the documentation process.

The issues raised by these individuals forced a re-examination of these assumptions and of the goals of Karuk language restoration, and also problematised what could have become a fairly mechanistic approach to LR, in which the creation of documentation materials would support language pedagogy and learning and help produce new speakers. Instead, the importance of the participants' experience of language, and the social and emotional context of language loss and revitalisation, were placed front and center.

It was notable that many of the common barriers to elder speaker participation discussed above, such as placing low value on the language or feeling discomfort with the way the language was being spoken or disseminated by learners, were not mentioned by any of the participants. Their enthusiasm to participate in the project was clear, but they had their own ideas about what form that participation should take. I do wonder if, absent the opportunity and willingness within our group to get to the bottom of and respond to these concerns, they might have been misinterpreted as stemming from general opposition to the project, disinterest in the survival of the language, or another of the oft-reported barriers to elder participation.[9]

What is clear is that these master speakers were not interested in serving as mere founts of knowledge, to be interrogated and recorded. They had a wealth of linguistic and non-linguistic expertise to contribute to the project, as well as ideas for how to share that knowledge with their community. They needed their roles and relationships within the project to reflect their status and potential to contribute, in ways that were culturally appropriate. The project needed to make space for both the masters and apprentices to guide the methods, and shape the content produced.

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[9] See McCarty, Romero & Zepeda (2006) and Leonard (2012) for in-depth discussion of how misunderstandings of this sort can arise and profoundly influence LR efforts and outcomes.

5. Conclusion

The Karuk master speakers did the project a great service by articulating and advocating for their own needs as speakers of the language, and helping to guide the project in a direction that addressed those needs. These actions not only benefitted their own language abilities and allowed them to feel comfortable with the project, they enriched the documentation materials produced by the teams, and also ensured that the revitalisation community had a strong foundation to support ongoing efforts to teach and use the language. By drawing attention to these issues, and compelling project staff and participants to respond to them, they also drew attention to a key aspect of LR, that of nurturing the speech community. They also highlighted the need for 'ideological clarification' as a crucial step in the development of any collaborative LR project (Kroskrity 2015). As LR shares many methods and faces similar challenges with language documentation, theoretical and methodological advances in either field are likely to benefit the other.

The creation of new speakers, ideally through the support and contribution of elder speakers, is often the (explicit or implied) primary goal of LR (Fishman 1991, Hinton 2001a). However, while the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and developing language competence are undeniably important aspects of language vitality, the speech community is ultimately where the language lives. The dynamics of interaction and communication within a society – impacted by historical, political, economic, social, and cultural factors – are central to language endangerment as well as revitalisation. When people stop using a language with each other, or stop speaking to each other entirely, the language starts to become endangered. It follows that LR involves not just the creation of new speakers, but the re-creation of a speech community, including spaces and times for the language to live, and relationships between members of the community that are built and maintained through the language.

The *Karuk Master/Apprentice Language Documentation Project* was developed and funded to create and disseminate audio and video recordings of the Karuk language. Although this documentation-oriented goal was met, to the project participants and the Karuk community it was perhaps the least significant outcome of the project. More important for the long-term viability of the language, and to the individual people involved in the project, was the development of ownership of the project by master speakers and apprentices; strong partnerships between project participants, linguists, and others outside the Karuk community; language and technical skills to support ongoing teaching and research; and agency among the project participants to shape their reclamation efforts moving forward. In this sense, the project was an example of *language reclamation*, a set of 'place-specific actions through which individuals and/or groups are countering forms of marginalisation experienced by minority language speakers and communities' (De Korne &

Leonard 2017:5). Throughout the project, participants identified and addressed the ways their linguistic, administrative, social, and physical realities contributed to the marginalisation of themselves and of the Karuk language, and how this impacted their individual and community well-being and the vitality of the language.

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