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Legacy materials and cultural facework: Obscenity and bad words in Siouan language documentation

Saul Schwartz 

Abstract

There is a tension in language documentation between the goal of producing: (1) a comprehensive record of endangered languages; and (2) a selective record that displays consciously curated images of indigenous cultural heritage. Drawing on ethnographic and archival research on how community linguists handle obscenity and bad words in Siouan language documentation, I reframe the problem of “thoroughness versus prudishness” (Hinton & Weigel 2002: 166) as a process of cultural *facework* (Goffman 1967), strategies that participants use to manage their social self-presentation in fieldwork as well as in the representations of culture circulated in the resulting documentary materials. Cultural facework requires participants in language documentation projects to be strategic in order to “project a good image of the speakers and their culture” (Mithun 2014: 27). In Siouan language documentation, three factors complicate cultural facework: (1) extensive collections of legacy materials; (2) the cultural value attributed to potentially obscene and therefore censored or concealed material; and (3) social conflict over how sensitive material should be handled. There is no solution to or escape from the process of facework, there is only further facework, i.e., additional and potentially controversial acts of censorship or disclosure designed to present a particular social image of a community and its culture.

1. Introduction

The goal of a language documentation has been defined as “a comprehensive corpus of primary data which leaves nothing to be desired by later generations wanting to explore whatever aspect of the language they are interested in” (Himmelman 2006: 3). The desire for comprehensive collections of data is perfectly understandable given rates of language shift around the world. Current documentation projects may be the last opportunity to create robust

records of many endangered languages for future scholars and community members. Since the needs of future generations are unknowable, it makes sense to try to provide them with as much information as we can.

However, comprehensive documentation is a goal that may conflict with a community's desire to keep some information about their language and culture out of the public record. Since documentary linguistics is motivated not only by the problem of language loss and the needs of future generations but also by a social and moral imperative to work collaboratively and ethically with marginalized communities today, linguists may experience a tension between wanting to preserve as much data as possible and wanting to respect current community members' wishes for a selective rather than comprehensive record.

From a broad perspective, it may make sense to group together as "sensitive material" content that is "sacred, embarrassing, or even dangerous to others" (Henke & Berez-Kroeker 2016: 422), or to speak of "limits to documentation" stemming from a community's desire "to prevent the exploitation, ridiculing, or improper portrayal of its [...] culture" (Himmelmann 1998: 173). But whereas I would imagine that a relatively broad consensus exists within scholarly and language communities against cultural exploitation or disclosing sacred and spiritually dangerous secrets (e.g., Debenport 2010; Innes 2010; Macri & Sarmento 2010), material that is sensitive because it is potentially embarrassing or improper seems more difficult to know what to do with, especially when it could be considered obscene, involves swearing, or relates to bodies and sexuality.

Take, for example, the problem of "bad words". The goal of comprehensiveness is one way that the current documentary linguistics paradigm distinguishes itself from earlier philological traditions, since it broadens the scope beyond "culturally or historically 'important' documents" (Himmelmann 2006: 15) to include "greetings, leave-taking, scolding, swearing, and the many other things that tend not to show up in traditional texts" (Rhodes & Campbell 2018: 112). However, Rehg (2018: 315), for example, recommends that researchers "determine if it is permissible to include swear words" in a dictionary, raising the question of whether a dictionary should seek to comprehensively include as many words in the language as possible, or whether a dictionary should censor bad words so that only a more polite subset of the language is included. According to Hinton & Weigel (2002: 166), "modern-day Indians usually share the more conservative values of other Americans", and so they frame the dilemma of whether dictionaries should include terms for genitalia or swear words as one of "thoroughness versus prudishness". They propose that documentation projects create multiple dictionaries, some with bad words and some without them, to meet the needs of different audiences. In a similar vein, Mosel (2011: 343) notes that "obscene and other taboo words are a [...] difficult issue" and suggests

that speech communities might be willing to “include them in a special scientific edition of the dictionary, or in a database with restricted access”.

The tension between comprehensiveness and selectivity is also evident in literature on the cultural content of grammars. Hill (2006) describes a number of ways in which linguists might incorporate cultural information into grammars, such as by highlighting culturally-appropriate usage in example sentences and analysis. Hill (2006: 613) advocates “a rich exemplification of actual usage about contexts that speakers do talk about, including the recitation of heritage texts that may constitute a very important cultural resource”. But Hill’s emphasis on actual usage and heritage texts is not always reconcilable with other linguists’ recommendations to use examples that project a positive image of the culture in question. Weber (2007: 201), for example, argues:

A grammar writer should bear in mind that the examples in a grammar will project an image of the speakers of the language and their culture, one that may be seen around the world (if made available on the web) and by speakers of the language, now and in future generations. So grammar writers should take care not to expose – or inadvertently perpetuate – prejudices and other aspects of the culture that might embarrass its speakers.

Taking up Weber’s point, Mithun (2014: 27) notes that examples should “project a good image of the speakers and their culture” and should not “embarrass particular individuals or groups” (see also England 1992: 31–33; Camp et al. 2018: 289). But this recommendation may require omitting some culturally-rich example sentences if they have the potential to reflect negatively on speakers and their traditions. For instance, two example sentences that Hill cites approvingly include: “He bet (it) together with his wife (i.e. staked his wife too)” (Sapir 1930: 222, quoted in Hill 2006: 612) and “‘I don’t like you Indians’, that cop said” (Dayley 1989: 380, quoted in Hill 2006: 613). The virtue of these sentences from Hill’s perspective is that they are drawn from culturally significant texts or exemplify actual usage. But if we read them in light of Weber’s and Mithun’s advice and focus on what messages they send about the community’s culture, it seems clear that they also have the potential to broadcast embarrassing prejudices or traditions, especially since they are detached from their original contexts of use when they appear as isolated example sentences in grammars.

The tension between comprehensive documentation and a selective approach that seeks to project a positive image of speakers and their language and culture is both an old and new problem in language documentation. Consider, for example, the efforts of Franz Boas and Tsimshian fieldworker Henry W. Tate to document Tate’s language and culture in the early 20th century. When Tate sent Boas his first group of Tsimshian Raven stories in

1907, his accompanying letter explained that some of the Raven stories were not included “for it is a very bad things so I did not put them down in my whole history For we are a live in the christian life” (quoted in Maud 2000: 37). In his reply to Tate’s letter, Boas (1974[1907]: 124) emphasized that his priority was to “preserve for future times a truthful picture of what the people were before they advanced to their present condition” and therefore “we ought not to leave out anything that shows their ways of thinking, even though it should be quite distasteful to us” or include “stories which to you and to me seem very improper”. Boas (1974[1907]: 124) continued:

It is just the same as with some of the horrid customs of olden times, like dog-eating and man-eating. You have no reason to be ashamed of what the people did in olden times, before they knew better: but if we want to give a truthful account of what there was, we ought not to be ashamed or afraid to write it down. I hope, therefore, that you may be willing to overcome your reluctance to write nasty things, since they belong to the tales that were told by your old people. For our purposes it is all-essential that whatever we write should be true, and that we should not conceal anything.

Tate was an interpreter, Bible translator, mission school teacher, preacher, and “an enthusiastic and proselytizing member” of both the Methodist church and the Salvation Army in Port Simpson, British Columbia (Brock et al. 2015: 183; see also Maud 2000: 12), and while we do not know as much as we would like about his life, it appears from his correspondence, the narratives he sent Boas, and his family background, that Tate saw working with Boas as an opportunity to revise the existing body of Tsimshian oral literature in a way that would make it compatible with his and his family’s relatively recent Christian identity. This led Tate not only to incorporate Christian references to “Creation” and “the lord in heaven” into his narratives (Brock et al. 2015: 187–188) but also to omit sexual incidents in the traditional Raven stories (Maud 2000: 35–36). For his part, Boas encouraged Tate to set aside his shame and fear that the traditional narratives would expose him and his community to negative evaluations in the interests of a complete record in which nothing was withheld.

A more recent example of the tension between comprehensiveness and selectivity in language documentation is provided by Jung & Himmelmann (2011: 210), who describe how a community member’s transcript diverged from the recording of a traditional narrative due to a desire to “avoid [...]

sexual explicitness”.¹ Reflecting on the experience, Jung & Himmelmann (2011: 219) write of:

a potential conflict here between scientific and community/speaker interests [...]. What if a speaker or the community at large actually rejects (parts of) an utterance as incorrect or inappropriate, for whatever reason? Under such circumstances, which version should be made available to whom and in what form? There is no straightforward and easy answer to this question.

The conflict Jung & Himmelmann identify between the scientific goal of comprehensive documentation and speaker/community interests in selectively presenting their linguistic and cultural heritage replicates in many ways the dynamic between Boas’s emphasis on a “truthful account” and Tate’s desire to omit “bad things” from his Raven narratives. And while I wholeheartedly agree that there are no easy answers to the questions they raise, I do question whether framing the conflict as between scientists, on the one hand, and speakers and communities, on the other, adequately captures the social realities of the situation. As we have seen above, there seems to be disagreement among linguists about whether swear words should be documented or whether culturally accurate example sentences should be included in grammars if they have the potential to reflect negatively on the community and their culture. And as we will see below, community linguists and language activists may disagree with each other about how to handle issues like obscenity in legacy texts and bad words in the heritage language.

In this paper, I seek to explore why tensions between comprehensiveness and selectivity when dealing with obscenity and bad words in indigenous languages is such an enduring and difficult problem in language documentation. Drawing on Goffman’s interactional sociology, I argue that language documentation consists of both face-to-face talk (for example, between researchers and consultants during an elicitation session) as well as culture-to-culture dialogue (since language documentation preserves a community’s cultural heritage and makes it available to broader audiences). Goffman uses the term *facework* to describe the strategies that participants in face-to-face talk use to manage their self-presentation and social identity, and I introduce the term *cultural facework* to describe the strategies that parti-

¹ In a similar vein, when Chelliah (2001: 153) checked recordings that her consultants had transcribed, she found that “consultants sometimes ‘cleaned-up’ texts by removing scatological or sexual references”, raising questions about how those materials should be archived that remain unresolved for her today (Shobhana Chelliah, personal communication, 2021-08-04).

cipants in language documentation use to manage the public image of the community's culture displayed in documentary materials.

Based on my ethnographic research on Siouan language documentation and revitalization, I identify three interrelated factors that complicate cultural facework for community linguists and language activists. First, for many Siouan languages, extensive collections of legacy materials dating back to the 19th century have already made sensitive material part of the record, but often in censored or otherwise marked forms. Second, material that may be considered obscene from a settler colonial perspective is not simply a potential source of embarrassment but is also culturally valued as a reflection of a traditional naturalistic attitude toward bodies and sexuality. Third, as in many societies, there are different opinions among community linguists and language activists about how potentially obscene material or bad words should be handled. While linguists often expect a technological solution (e.g., a digital archive with access restrictions) to the issues raised by material that community gatekeepers feel should not be open to everyone, my experience with Siouan language documentation suggests that there is not and will never be a solution to the tension between comprehensiveness and selectivity for material that is considered obscene or involves bad words. Rather, there is only further facework, that is, additional and potentially controversial acts of censorship and disclosure designed to uphold or undermine a particular social image of a culture.

2. Cultural facework

Language documentation is produced through a series of social interactions between researchers and consultants, in which participants send messages to each other and to broader audiences. A speaker, for example, may tell a narrative in response to a prompt from a researcher even as they may also be addressing the surrounding society or future generations of their own community. The full import of these messages may not be recognized by researchers at the time, but they can sometimes be recovered through textual analysis (e.g., Silverstein 1996; Moore 2009; Dobrin 2012; Nevins 2013: 113–151, 2015; Silverstein 2017; Schwartz 2019).

As social interactions, documentary linguistic encounters between researchers and consultants are shaped by the cultural conventions that structure communication. One such convention, developed by Erving Goffman, dictates that participants in an interaction seek to maintain their face. While the concept of face is often associated with research on politeness (Brown & Levinson 1987; Watts 2005; Bargiela-Chiappini & Kádár 2011), Goffman's concept of face does not just concern politeness but raises broader questions about social roles, statuses, and identities, and how they are interactionally constructed and contested (Mao 1994; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich

2013; Joseph 2013). *Face* is the “positive social value a person effectively claims” for themselves by presenting “approved social attributes” in interactions (Goffman 1967: 5). Face is therefore a kind of public image or social identity that takes communicative effort to create and sustain. Face-preserving efforts, known as *facework*, are “actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face” and “counteract [...] events whose effective symbolic implications threaten face” (Goffman 1967: 12). Facework involves “manag[ing] the relational anticipation of discursive disapproval” or approval by filtering the image or information available for social scrutiny and validation (Hall & Bucholtz 2013: 124).

Facework is visible in the social interactions surrounding language documentation. For example, in the case of Boas and Tate discussed above, Tate claims the identity of a Christian (“we are a live in the christian life”). He believes that identity to be incompatible with sharing Raven stories that contain sexual incidents, and so his omission of those stories can be understood as facework designed to support his claim to a Christian identity. For Boas’s part, as a scholar working within the paradigm of salvage anthropology and linguistics, he is committed to reconstructing as thorough a record of “olden times” as possible, even if it means disregarding consultants’ contemporary colonial realities and concerns. Part of why Boas problematizes Tate’s omissions and insists on a complete record is because he envisioned that ethnographic and linguistic documentation undertaken in his generation would serve as the foundation for future research on indigenous peoples. To let Tate’s edited narratives become *the* scholarly record of Tsimshian tradition would be incompatible with Boas’s commitment to furnishing other researchers with accurate accounts of indigenous traditions and narratives as they existed prior to Christian and other colonial influences. Just as Tate had his Christian identity to manage, Boas had his own scholarly agendas and reputation to uphold.

Boas’s reply to Tate also illustrates another important feature of facework: not only do participants in an interaction work on their own faces, they also work on each other’s faces, for example, by protectively helping another participant save face if they commit a gaffe or by aggressively trying to make another participant lose face by undermining their self-presentation. Despite Tate’s explanation that he did not want to share Raven stories with sexual incidents because of his Christian identity, Boas assumes that Tate withholds those narratives because Tate must be ashamed of them, and Boas engages in face-saving strategies intended to give Tate social license to share potentially embarrassing material (“we ought not to leave out anything”, “I hope that you may be willing to overcome your reluctance”, “for our purposes it is all-essential”) and to convince him that his fears of losing face are unjustified (“you have no reason to be ashamed”, “we ought not to be ashamed or afraid”, “what the people did in olden times [was] before they knew better”). While Boas does not directly question Tate’s probity, he also invites Tate to see how

withholding the information that Boas desires is at odds with a “truthful account” and encourages Tate to take up the role of a helpful and forthcoming consultant (“we want to preserve for future times a truthful picture”, “they belong to the tales that were told by your old people”, “whatever we write should be true”, “we should not conceal anything”).

Facework in language documentation does not only occur on an interpersonal level, however. Oftentimes, the messages that are sent in the documentary linguistic interactions as well as in dictionaries, grammars, texts, and other documentary products are messages about the language community’s culture. These messages about culture may be addressed to current members or future generations of the language community itself, as well as to broader publics, nonprofits, legal commissions, government agencies, etc.

From a community-internal perspective, the process of cultural reclamation that often accompanies language revitalization can bring to light information about a community’s cultural heritage that is difficult to reconcile with current sensibilities. Leonard (2012: 340, 350), for example, notes that “Miami language efforts require consulting and interpreting old ethnographic and linguistic documentation”, which sometimes results in essentialist ideas about “traditional” Miami gender roles that can be “disconcerting for those who do not identify with them”. Similar anxieties may be remediated through cultural facework. For example, Ahlers (2012: 332–333) describes how a Native California woman, who is a self-identified feminist,

was angry about the restrictions which prevented her from touching drums when she is menstruating, until the ideologies which link menstruation with power were presented to her. Her altered understanding of the cultural interpretation of that restriction changed her attitude toward it. As she put it, “it’s hard to be offended when I’m seen as powerful”.

In this case, a community member’s anger and offense about cultural traditions that could be perceived as misogynistic was mitigated by the disclosure of additional information explaining the reasoning behind restrictions on menstruating woman. The larger point is that the historical cultural information that language documentation and revitalization makes available is not always easy to accept or make sense of for community members today. As in the case of traditional attitudes toward gender, traditional narratives that contain sexual or scatological content may be disconcerting for tribal members today, and cultural facework may be felt

necessary to manage those situations and protect cultural heritage from negative evaluations by community members.²

Cultural facework may also be motivated by a desire to manage a culture's public image among audiences external to the community. Given that "civilizing" indigenous peoples was a prominent justification for colonization, one gloss on the concept of face with an unintended significance for indigenous communities is "the presentation of a civilized front to another individual" (Ting-Toomey 1994: 1). Speakers, transcribers, linguists, and other participants in language documentation projects who are aware that documentary materials will present a public-facing image of the community's culture may shape their discourse or documentary materials to conform to or resist external expectations and stereotypes of indigenous cultures held by the surrounding society. In this sense, documentary materials are often "boundary works" because by "recontextualizing local speech as cultural heritage, language documentation and maintenance programs cast local languages [...] as key terms of recognition in national and global arenas" (Nevins 2013: 3).

Stenzel (2014: 295–296, 302), writing about a collaborative project to document languages in the northwest Amazon, for example, mentions that while her own goals for the project related to the quantity and quality of the materials generated, her focus on production was not shared by community members, who saw the project as "an opportunity to create a bridge to the outside world, a way to become known and to share aspects of their culture", and they "shap[ed] the messages they wanted to convey through documentation" about their culture accordingly. Writing a bit tongue-in-cheek, Chelliah & de Reuse (2011: 371) refer to some consultants as "Culture Police" because "they reject anything that is ever so slightly culturally inappropriate" and "get into arguments with people who are more imaginative in abstracting from their own culture". While Chelliah & de Reuse do not speculate about what motivates such consultants, I would be surprised if consultants who take up a cultural gatekeeping or policing role were not acutely aware that language documentation generates a public record and want it to reflect a more traditional rather than "imaginative" rendering of their culture.

To take another example, when Nevins (2013: 131) prepared to return from her dissertation fieldwork, one of her Apache hosts and consultants,

² Native American Studies scholar Michael Dorris (1979: 153) mentions a controversy within a Native community over a collection of traditional stories being compiled for classroom use with children, in which "the elder, non-English speaking members of the community argued strongly for the inclusion of scatological and sexual allusions" on the basis that those elements of the narratives had never been withheld from children in the past; in contrast, "more 'progressive' tribal members, concerned with public image, wanted the book to include only 'proper' [...] language".

Rebekah Moody, told her, “When you write about us, don’t just talk about our trash. Be proud of us”. As Nevins unpacks the multiple meanings and complex implications of this statement, it becomes clear that in a historical context in which the surrounding society has made Apaches feel ashamed of their perceived poverty and ignorance, Moody invites Nevins to represent Apache culture in ways that reflect the pride Moody feels about traditional Apache moral teachings and family life.

In other words, not just individuals but cultures can be said to have face: public images and reputations that people attribute (accurately or not) to their own or others’ collective identities and use as a basis for evaluating them. As a result, facework in language documentation does not only occur interpersonally but also interculturally. Extending Goffman’s notions, I define *cultural face* as the positive social value some people may claim for their beliefs and practices as well as those of their ancestors. I define *cultural facework* as efforts to manage the public value, image, or reputation of a group’s past and present practices and beliefs. Just as individuals seeking to maintain face must carefully craft their self-presentation and ensure that socially available information is consistent with the face they are invested in upholding, maintaining cultural face also involves concealing or downplaying some information while revealing or foregrounding other information. One might defend one’s own cultural face by withholding information that would be inconsistent with the image one is trying to project, or one might aggressively introduce favorable facts about one’s own culture and unfavorable facts about another culture in an effort to recalibrate how they are socially evaluated (Goffman 1967: 16, 24–25). For example, drawing on Walker’s (2000: 232) distinction between *revealed culture* (“cultural knowledge that a native is generally eager to communicate to a nonnative”) and *suppressed culture* (“knowledge about a culture that a native is generally unwilling to communicate to a nonnative”), Brown (2011: 112–118) observes that media, educational institutions, and even linguistic research itself has promoted an idealized image of Korean language and culture by presenting honorifics as obligatory deference markers that reflect patriotic Confucian cultural values. Usage (or non-usage) of honorifics that does not conform to the idealized image of Korean language and culture are suppressed. They are ignored, dismissed as errors or mistakes, or blamed on westernization (Brown 2011: 118–121).

Because facework involves “standing guard over [...] events” (Goffman 1967: 8) and filtering the flow of information, cultural facework is not always traceable in the finished form of documentary materials themselves. Documentary materials make available a cultural face for public display but not necessarily the facework that went into crafting the image presented. In order to make cultural facework visible, ethnographic access to the backstage of the documentary process or archival research on the unpublished sources used in published work may be required. Goffman’s (1956: 69) dramaturgical

model of everyday life proposes that social interaction consists of a frontstage characterized by performance and impression management and a backstage “where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted”, or at least complicated. In the public-facing frontstage “some aspects of the activity are [...] accentuated and other aspects, which might discredit the fostered impression, are suppressed” (Goffman 1956: 69). In the backstage, where “illusions and impressions are openly constructed”, “suppressed facts” make an appearance (Goffman 1956: 69). By analogy, we might think of published language documentation as a frontstage, a performance of linguistic and cultural heritage that has been curated and managed to project a particular face to the audiences who access it. The process of creating the documentation takes place backstage, where data is filtered and shaped in accordance with the logic of cultural facework so that the documentary record makes the desired impression on audiences.

In what follows, I draw on my experience working on Siouan language documentation to describe cases in which community linguists and language activists grapple with the problem of obscenity in legacy texts and bad words in the language. My examples come primarily from Chiwere (ISO 639-3 *iow*), a heritage language for three federally-recognized Iowa and Otoe-Missouria tribes in Kansas, Nebraska, and Oklahoma, though I also incorporate relevant material from related Siouan languages and cultures, including Omaha, Ponca, and Lakota. In my research on Chiwere, I worked with a number of community linguists and language activists, particularly Jimm Goodtracks, who at the time I began my research was writing a Chiwere dictionary funded by an NSF-DEL grant to the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska. While Goodtracks is not a tribal member, he has Iowa and Otoe-Missouria relatives, and his authority as a community linguist derives from his close association with the last generations of Iowa and Otoe-Missouria elders who were native Chiwere speakers. Following the dictionary project, I continued my ethnographic research on Chiwere language documentation by helping Goodtracks (with funding from a second NSF-DEL grant) digitize and archive a collection of analogue recordings he made from the 1960s onwards with these elders. The last native speakers of Chiwere passed away in the 1990s, and the language is now considered dormant.

As we will see, three factors complicate cultural facework in Chiwere language documentation. First, extensive collections of legacy materials have embedded sensitive material into the historical record (albeit in marked or concealed forms), and so that information cannot simply be ignored, though it can be discounted, transformed, or creatively (re)interpreted as part of the process of cultural facework. Second, it is not always possible to simply elide potentially obscene material because it is also culturally valued as a reflection of traditional attitudes toward bodies and sexuality, leading to elaborate practices of veiling that seek to both preserve sensitive material and protect it from those who lack the context for understanding it in a proper manner

(Debenport 2015). Finally, there is disagreement among community linguists and language activists about how sexual and scatological incidents or bad words should be handled in documentary materials and whether it is necessary or appropriate to engage in cultural facework and other forms of gatekeeping to mediate access to sensitive material.

The next section describes how Goodtracks uses cultural facework to manage obscenity in traditional narratives, so that only those who can understand sexual and scatological content in its original cultural context will be able to access the material at all. I then turn to the issue of bad words. In order to illustrate how bad words are contentious, I outline Goodtracks's perspective and then introduce the views of two other community linguists and language activists, Lance Foster and Sky Campbell, whose opinions differ from those of Goodtracks. At the time of my fieldwork, Foster was the Tribal Historic Preservation Officer for the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska, where Foster is a tribal member and where he is now Vice Chairman of the tribal government. At the time of my fieldwork, Campbell, who has Ponca relatives by marriage, was the director of the Otoe-Missouria tribal language program. As a non-Native external researcher who is not a member of the Iowa or Otoe-Missouria communities, I do not explicitly endorse any of their views on obscenity and bad words in Chiwere, as my role in this context is not to take sides in the disagreements I outline below, but rather to accurately describe and compare the positions different actors have taken in order to give a realistic representation of the dynamics at play. To take a stance on what general approach is the right one would foster the false sense that these issues can be conclusively resolved, when in fact supposed solutions are often only further moves in an ongoing disagreement. I do not consider it my place to try to force a consensus about how obscenity and bad words should be handled. Nor do I think I (or maybe anyone) has the power to do so.

3. Sexual and scatological incidents in *weka*ⁿ

One day a few summers ago, I was listening to a recording from 1976 of two Otoe-Missouria elders, Irene Brown and Sarah Kihega, telling stories and singing songs in Chiwere. The recording was made by Jimm Goodtracks, who spent the 1960s–1990s recording Brown, Kihega, and other friends and relatives from among the last generations of native Chiwere speakers while also pursuing a career as a social worker. I have worked with Goodtracks since 2009, first on a Chiwere dictionary and then on a project to digitize, transcribe, translate, and archive Goodtracks's recordings with the eventual goal of producing an annotated Chiwere corpus or text collection.

As I listened to the recording of Brown and Kihega, I followed along on a transcript that Goodtracks had prepared. While Kihega was relating stories about children's games, adoption ceremonies, and rabbit hunting, what I heard

on the recording matched what I saw on Goodtracks's transcript. Suddenly, I came to a section of the recording that Goodtracks had not transcribed. My own transcript of that part of the recording follows in Transcript 1:³

Transcript 1

- 1 SK: starts ea(h)ting it [() *isjiⁿk[^] ag- ag-*] *araje(h)* [(laughter)]
 2 IB: [*arahanajeda*] [(laughter)]
 3 IB: let's see here
 4 *išjiⁿke re rigrak[^]iⁿna dause*
 5 *suⁿje(h)e regra(h)kuⁿheda dause*
 6 *hošga gašesga(h)*
 7 SK: [*hohgarara hohga* ((laughter))]
 8 IB: [() ((laughter))]
 9 (): No(h) () *pi škuñi(h)*

As I listened, I realized that the references to *Išjiⁿke* ‘Trickster’ (lines 1 and 4) indicated that the song (lines 4–7) Brown and Kihega perform on this clip was a *wékaⁿ* song. As with other Siouan-speaking communities, Iowas and Otoe-Missourias recognize a genre of mythic narratives known in Chiwere as *wékaⁿ* ‘something sacred’. Traditionally, *wékaⁿ* could only be told in certain seasons following a formal request and gift of tobacco to someone who owned the right to tell the story (Skinner 1925: 426). Some *wékaⁿ* include songs, “*wékaⁿ* songs”, which are performatively marked subtexts embedded within the mythic narratives. As the recording of Brown and Kihega suggests, *wékaⁿ* songs can also be performed on their own without telling the story with which they are associated.

When I told Goodtracks that I had found this song on the recording, he said that he did not transcribe it because he did not think that it should be included in the corpus that we were preparing. Goodtracks's concern is not that the song is too sacred to circulate, though *wékaⁿ* are indeed sacred. Rather, Goodtracks fears that the song could be construed, or misconstrued, as

³ The recording begins and ends in the middle of the participants' ongoing interaction. This is a result of Goodtracks's strategy of saving tape by trying to record only the performance of “the song” or “the story” itself rather than the discourse scaffolding its production. Transcript conventions employed in Transcripts 1 and 3 are as follows: a hyphen as in *wor-* indicates a truncated word; (h) as in *wo(h)rd* indicates a laughing word; italicized words are Chiwere; bold words are sung rather than spoken; [] indicates overlap; (): indicates an unidentified speaker or unintelligible speech; ((laughter)) indicates laughter. Glosses for Chiwere words related to the discussion are provided below when possible. Due to the quality of the audio recording and conversational overlap, neither Goodtracks nor I could be confident in glossing some words (e.g., lines 2 and 6 in Transcript 1).

obscene, not only by non-indigenous audiences but also by the many tribal members who, in Goodtracks's view, are insufficiently familiar with their linguistic and cultural heritage to interpret the song in a proper manner.

The song in question comes from the *wéka*ⁿ “Trickster and the Chipmunk”.⁴ In this story, Trickster is wandering along minding his own business when a chipmunk taunts him with the song, as shown in Transcript 2:⁵

Transcript 2

Išjiⁿke *re* *rigrak[^]iⁿna* *dause*
Išjiⁿke *re* *ri-gra-k[^]iⁿ-na* *ra-hu=se*
 Trickster penis 2.U-POSS.REFL-wear-CO 2.A-depart.coming=PROG.CL.2.A
 ‘Trickster, you’re carrying your penis on your back while you’re coming this way’

suⁿje *regrakuⁿheda* *dause*
suⁿje *ra-gra-kuⁿheda* *ra-hu=se*
 testicles 2.A-POSS.REFL-drag 2.A-depart.coming=PROG.CL.2.A
 ‘you’re dragging your testicles while you’re coming this way’

hohgarara *hohga*
hohga-ra-ra *hohga*
 hiccup-?-RDP hiccup
 ‘hiccup hiccup’

In order to understand the chipmunk’s taunt, it is important to note that while Trickster is divine and heroic, he is also physically and socially excessive, in that he takes liberties with rules and norms. One element of his physical excess is that he was born with a very long penis, so long that his grandfather had to make him a special raccoon-skin covering for it. When Trickster sets out on an adventure, he wraps his penis in the raccoon-skin and throws it over his shoulder, carrying it on his back as he goes along (Skinner 1925: 482, 485–486, 494–495). The chipmunk’s taunt highlights the resulting spatial

⁴ There is no single definitive text of this song, though the first two lines seem to be more stable than the final line across attested variants. Brown and Kihega sing different final lines on the 1976 recording (see Transcript 1, lines 6–7). Another version of the final line appears in Transcript 3, line 12 below, and another version still – translated “I’m going to bite your member, skididi!” – appears in Skinner 1925: 494.

⁵ This reproduces Transcript 1, lines 4–5 and 7 with morpheme segmentation, an interlinear gloss, and a free translation. Glossing conventions used in Transcript 2 are as follows: 2 – second person; A – actor; CL – clitic; CO – coordinator; RDP – reduplicated; REFL – reflexive; POSS – possessive; PROG – progressive; U – undergoer; ? – unknown.

disjuncture in Trickster's genital arrangement by contrasting the placement of his penis up on his back with that of his testicles down below.

Trickster, who is typically rather impulsive, manages to ignore the chipmunk's song three times. After the fourth time, however, he becomes enraged and attacks the chipmunk with his penis. As Trickster attacks him, the chipmunk bites off pieces until Trickster's penis becomes human-sized. Trickster collects and *araje* 'names' (see Transcript 1, line 1) the pieces, which become various plants: berries, grapes, plums, and acorns. Here, Trickster emerges in his culture heroic aspect, and the *wéka*ⁿ takes on a twofold etiological significance: it explains why male human genitals are the size that they are and accounts for the origin of fruits, nuts, berries, and the like.

When I have spoken with Goodtracks about the recording of Brown and Kihega singing the chipmunk's *wéka*ⁿ song, he has told me that Brown's and Kihega's reactions are representative of how the previous generations of Chiwere-speaking elders responded to bodies and sexuality in traditional Chiwere literature. Their reactions, according to Goodtracks, were "pure" and reflected "a traditional attitude" in which bodies and sexuality are "natural" and "comical" rather than the "missionary perspective" in which sexuality is "private" and "dirty". Goodtracks's interpretations of the *wéka*ⁿ songs he elicited thus contrast a morally enlightened pre-contact past in which bodies and sexuality are natural, comical, and public with a Christianized present characterized not only by language loss but also internalized shame about bodies and sexuality.

Goodtracks emphasizes in particular the "innocent" sound of Brown's and Kihega's laughter (see Transcript 1, lines 1–2 and 7–8). His description is:

Grace and Aunt Irene laughing and giggling, to me [there] was like a childhood innocence about it. That's the way I took it. That's the way it seems to me that sex certainly was not nasty, perhaps erotic, but at the same time more pure, innocent, and comical, and just simple, you know, just a fact of life.

Analytically, laughter strikes me as a highly ambiguous clue to footing, especially in a case like this where the speakers are elderly women animating a mythical chipmunk's sexual taunts for a mixed-gender audience and a tape-recorder (see also Danziger 2011: 133–134). Goodtracks argues that such doubt simply projects my own shame about bodies and sexuality onto traditional elders who felt no such thing, and he maintains that he hears in their laughter an innocent amusement at Trickster's misadventures that he contrasts with the dominant society's negative attitudes toward bodies and sexuality. I cannot claim to hear this quality in the laughter myself, but an observation from Radin's (1956: xxiv) classic study of the closely related Winnebago Trickster cycle may be pertinent: "Laughter, humour and irony", he writes, "permeate everything Trickster does. The reactions of the audience

in aboriginal societies to both him and his exploits is prevailingly one of laughter tempered by awe”.

The distinction between Goodtracks’s “innocent laughter” or Radin’s “laughter tempered by awe” and an alternative type of laughter untempered by innocence or awe may correspond to a difference in the object toward which the laughter is directed. While traditional audiences laughed at Trickster’s divine excess, Goodtracks worries that the laughter of today’s audiences will be directed less at Trickster than at the previous generations of Chiwere-speaking elders, since their sacred myths, carefully transmitted from generation to generation in accordance with elaborate protocols governing the proper curation of esoteric knowledge, turn out to be, by the standards of the dominant society, nothing but dirty stories. If the idea that indigenous languages and literatures lack bad words (see below) and obscene incidents seems to play into the “noble savage” stereotype of indigenous peoples, then perhaps this is because playing the “noble savage” is preferable to the alternative: being seen through the lens of the “savage savage” stereotype of cultural primitivism and moral degeneracy (Muehlmann 2008; Webster 2015). By deciding not to transcribe Brown and Kihega singing the chipmunk’s *wéka* song, Goodtracks positions himself as protecting Chiwere language, Iowa and Otoe-Missouria culture, and the traditional elders from negative evaluations, not only from non-Natives but also from community members who have internalized “the missionary perspective” that Goodtracks deplors.

Goodtracks’s decision not to transcribe the portion of the recording with the chipmunk’s *wéka* song is just one example of a broader repertoire of techniques that Goodtracks uses to manage who has access to sensitive material and how such material is received. Goodtracks often imagines that a double audience exists for his work, and he tends to present texts in ways that differentiate what audiences with and without some kind of prior knowledge will be able to recognize. In the case of the recording of Brown and Kihega singing the chipmunk’s *wéka* song, for example, Goodtracks did not go so far as to remove the song from the recording, he just decided not to transcribe it. The whole recording has still been archived and the song (in theory at least) will be publicly available. Since it will not appear on the transcript associated with the recording, however, only those who take the time to listen to the recording will be able to find it, and only those who are able to recognize what is being said and sung in Chiwere will know what they are listening to, shifting part of Goodtracks’s gatekeeping function onto Chiwere itself.

Presenting sensitive material in Chiwere rather than removing it outright is a strategy that Goodtracks often employs when he circulates *wéka* with sexual or scatological themes. For example, the version of “Trickster and Shell Spitter” that Goodtracks (2010: 106) includes in his dictionary under the lemma *shell* ends in this way:

[Trickster] kept on singing with his hands raised upward, his mouth open, while everyone looked upward. All at once, *ichⁿdoiñe Išjⁿki řⁿje ayéna inúhaⁿ maⁿgridaguⁿ git^aⁿàšguⁿ*. And indeed the servant continued to go on into the moon.

A reader of Goodtracks's dictionary might reasonably assume that the Chiwere sentence is from an original source text that Goodtracks chose not to translate. In fact, however, the Iowa and Otoe-Missouria version of this story is only extant in English texts (see Skinner 1925: 494). Goodtracks translated this line from English into Chiwere in order to obscure an incident that he worried modern readers would misconstrue.

He got the idea, he told me, from the work of the nineteenth-century Episcopalian missionary linguist James Owen Dorsey. Dorsey lived with (Siouan-speaking) Omahas and Poncas in Dakota Territory from 1871–1873 and 1878–1880 during which time he produced extensive documentation of their languages. In 1879, John Wesley Powell recruited Dorsey to be a Siouan language specialist at the newly founded Bureau of American Ethnology, where Dorsey remained until his death in 1895 (Hinsley 1981: 173–177). In his corpus, *The Čegiha Language*, Dorsey includes an Omaha version of “Trickster and the Chipmunk”. The part where Trickster wields his penis as a weapon and the chipmunk bites it down to size is presented in Latin in Dorsey's interlinear glosses and English translation (Dorsey 1890: 549–551).⁶

As Irvine (2011: 20) observes, the practice of “learnèd authors” code-switching into Latin when they wrote about “the naughty bits” restricts the audience by ensuring that “only those hearers who can be trusted to handle the information in a socially appropriate way can receive it all”. For nineteenth-century scholars, writing in Latin was a way to prevent women, children, and the lower classes from accessing material that only educated men were thought to be capable of reading responsibly (Kendrick 1987: 15–16). In a similar vein, Goodtracks assumes that those who can read Chiwere also possess the necessary cultural knowledge to understand what they are reading in its original context. His version of “Trickster and Shell Spitter” allows him to deflect his position as an active gatekeeper and make Chiwere itself responsible for controlling access to the text.

Even as Goodtracks self-consciously reproduces some of Dorsey's own methods, he is also intensely critical of Dorsey's techniques for presenting and censoring Siouan texts. He argues that by translating significant portions

⁶ Cumberland (2016: 123–124, n. 3) suggests that the Comstock Act of 1873 and cases such as *Dunlop v. United States* (1897) would have encouraged Dorsey and his contemporaries to switch from English to Latin when translating material that could be considered obscene by legal standards. See also Clements 2011.

of *wéka*⁷ like “Trickster and the Chipmunk” into Latin rather than English, Dorsey projected his own categories of obscenity onto languages and literatures that until that point had been curated by communities and cultures that did not recognize vocabulary or narratives pertaining to bodies and sexuality as obscene. As Goodtracks once put it to me, “what it tells us about the early day Christian missionaries is that they had a dirty, filthy mind and saw dirtiness where it didn’t exist”. Within a broader context of linguistic and cultural imperialism, Dorsey’s texts appear to overwrite Siouan speakers’ preexisting metapragmatic ideologies by recontextualizing Siouan words and narratives in ways that implied an equivalence between Native and settler colonial registers and regimes of obscenity. *Jé*, the Omaha word for ‘penis’, may not have been obscene from a traditional perspective, and if Dorsey had glossed it as ‘penis’ it may never have become obscene. But by glossing it in Latin as ‘*membrum virile*’ and thereby marking it as problematic or sensitive, Dorsey made it appear that there is something obscene about *jé*. In other words, part of the problem with Dorsey’s glosses and translations is the danger of metapragmatic transference from the Latin annotations onto the indigenous language tokens, giving the impression that there is something inappropriate that needs concealing even within the original narratives (see also Webster 2015).⁷

Goodtracks’s refusal to translate or otherwise circulate what could be (mis)construed as obscene in Siouan literature thus has a paradoxical effect: Goodtracks’s methods of concealing and obscuring sensitive material through selective transcriptions, partial translations, and codeswitching textually perform and reproduce the very view that he discursively contests. For language activists like Goodtracks, the problem or even paradox of obscenity in Siouan literature is that texts that are not obscene – but could be construed as obscene by the standards of the dominant society – cannot be circulated because they will be misread. In order to circulate Siouan literature, it is therefore necessary to censor part of what makes it culturally distinctive and valuable in the first place: the traditional view of bodies and sexuality expressed in the narratives.

⁷ Dorsey’s use of Latin for glossing and translating “Trickster and the Chipmunk” is one instance of a broader process by which Siouan language texts were both collected and censored by the Bureau of American Ethnology. Dorsey prepared at least four texts for publication in *The Cegiha Language* that were ultimately “withheld from publication by order of the Director” and shelved in the Bureau’s archives (Dorsey 1894). In two of these texts, Dorsey’s consultants described atrocities committed by soldiers and settlers and criticized the President and the Secretary of the Interior. These texts seem to have been withheld from publication for political reasons. The other texts, however, “Ictinike’s Adventure as a Woman” and “The Raccoon and the Coyote”, were prohibited from being published due to their sexual content (Dorsey n.d.).

These practices of censorship, however, only pragmatically reinforce what was denied by marking the material in question as problematic.

Practices of concealment designed to foreclose negative evaluations of Native languages, cultures, and communities replicate a longstanding historical dynamic. While activists may argue that Dorsey projected his own sensitivities onto the texts that he published, his texts in fact mirror his consultants' performative footing in a number of cases. For example, one of Dorsey's consultants told a version of "Trickster and the Chipmunk" in which Trickster does not attack the chipmunk at all. Rather, after the chipmunk taunts him, Trickster simply insults him back and then throws four sticks, which become sunchokes, potatoes, turnips, and plums. Another consultant gave Dorsey a version of the same story in which Trickster uses a stick instead of his penis to attack the chipmunk. "It is evident", Dorsey (1890: 550–551) writes, "that the last informant modified his language, not caring to tell the myth exactly as he had heard it". Given that these Omaha narrators were telling this story in the late 19th century in Dakota Territory to a government-employed missionary linguist, it is not difficult to imagine why they might be as circumspect in their tellings of "Trickster and the Chipmunk" as Dorsey is in presenting it.

The archival record generated by Dorsey's fieldwork offers a number of cases where Dorsey's consultants expressed concern that his research would encourage negative evaluations of Native communities by members of the dominant society. In 1889, for example, the Omaha anthropologist Francis La Flesche wrote to Dorsey to report that one of Dorsey's consultants, Wajaepa, would no longer work with him because he was worried that what Dorsey wrote "would make white people think worse of the Omahas". As La Flesche explained:

Much has been said and written reflecting upon the character, morality, and personal cleanliness of the Indians without distinctions or show of excuse. I myself sometimes feel injured when I hear and read what is said about them. Wajaepa has heard white persons call Indians *lousy dogs* and other vulgar names, and he feels hurt when lice and Indians are spoken of in connection, or indeed anything that seems to reflect upon the character of the Indian indiscriminately (quoted in Dorsey 1889).

Like Wajaepa and La Flesche, the Omaha narrators who gave Dorsey bowdlerized versions of "Trickster and the Chipmunk" were clearly concerned with what members of the dominant society, including perhaps Dorsey himself, would conclude about Omahas based on their traditional literature. In telling the story, they therefore preemptively censored the elements that they believed that the dominant society would judge objectionable and substituted less controversial alternatives. It is clear in these cases that

Dorsey’s consultants gave him versions of the story that had been crafted to evade negative evaluations. Read in this context, Dorsey’s texts do not so much project as replicate practices of self-censorship that Native narrators employed to manage their encounters with researchers like Dorsey (Clements 2011).

A similar circumspection in the performance of texts like “Trickster and the Chipmunk” is also evident in some of Goodtracks’s recordings of traditional Chiwere-speaking elders, such as the recording of Iowa and Otoe-Missouria elder Mary Irving presented in Transcript 3:

Transcript 3

- 1 JG: why don’t you sing us that little *išjiⁿki* song
 2 (): yeah
 3 JG: yeah
 4 ok we ain’t gonna
 5 we ain’t gonna let nobody else hear
 6 this is gonna be a family song
 7 MI: ((laughter))
 8 JG: this is gonna be a family song
 9 (): ok be quiet
 10 MI: *iš- išjiⁿke re regrak[^]iⁿa dase*
 11 *suⁿje(h)e regrakuhaⁿra dase*
 12 *skididi skadada skididi skada[^]iⁱⁱⁱ*
 13 JG: now sing it one more time
 14 MI: *i- šjiⁿke*
 15 () that song I [()]
 16 JG: [Oh no sing it one more time]
 17 MI: no that’s all I’m gonna sing it
 18 that’s all that’s all no- no more

The recording begins (lines 1–9) with Goodtracks prompting Irving to perform the chipmunk’s *wékaⁿ* song (the same one that Goodtracks also recorded Brown and Kihega performing). Irving obliges (lines 10–12), but when Goodtracks requests an encore (line 13), Irving starts to sing it again then suddenly stops (line 14). “That’s all, no more”, she says. When Goodtracks and I listened to this recording together, he attributed her reluctance to repeat the song to “influence from the good missionaries” (where “good” is meant ironically). If Brown’s and Kihega’s “innocent laughter” in Transcript 1 mark them as paradigmatic exemplars of a traditional attitude toward bodies and sexuality, Irving’s reluctance to repeat the song marks her as having internalized the contrasting Christian conception of bodies and sexuality as dirty, shameful, and private. As we have seen above, however, there is a rather long tradition of Siouan speakers being circumspect about having sensitive material recorded that may not reflect internalized

colonial attitudes but rather cultural facework of their own, specifically a desire to protect their culture from negative evaluations by employing some of the very techniques of censorship, omission, and veiling that Goodtracks himself employs. Some ambivalence is evident even in the recording of Brown and Kihega, when amid the laughter following the song, a speaker (who could not be identified) comments, while still chuckling, “No, *pi škuñi* [‘not good’]” (Transcript 1, line 9).

In this section, I have described some of the cultural facework that Goodtracks applies to documentary materials to project an image of Iowa and Otoe-Missouria culture that will be socially approved by the surrounding society as well as by tribal members who have, in Goodtracks’s view, internalized colonial ideas about bodies and sexuality. By not transcribing some parts of recordings or rendering some discourse in Chiwere instead of English (even if only English versions are attested) Goodtracks seeks to hold back sexual and scatological incidents in *wéka* that could lead to negative evaluations of the late elders and traditional Iowa and Otoe-Missouria culture. However, since sexual and scatological material in *wéka* also reflects culturally significant ancestral attitudes toward bodies and sexuality, attitudes that are thought to be superior to colonial ideas about bodies and sexuality as shameful and dirty, the material cannot simply be removed from the record; rather it must be preserved but veiled so that only those who are able to understand it in a proper way can access it at all.

However, Goodtracks’s methods of cultural facework are not accepted by other Chiwere community linguists and language activists, who question Goodtracks’s position as a “gatekeeper” and “arbiter” of sensitive material in Chiwere texts. They suggest that rather than concealing parts of texts, Goodtracks should make them available in their original forms. As Lance Foster told me:

I think that you have to respect the original. I know people have sensitivities now and maybe you can warn them. And for little kids, just pick the right story. Don’t try to edit or change it, you know. I’m just not comfortable with that.

There are different approaches to sensitive material in Chiwere texts, and the cultural facework that Goodtracks engages in to make the texts more palatable is considered unnecessary censorship in the view of some of the others involved in Chiwere documentation and revitalization.

4. Do Siouan languages have bad words?

At the 2012 Siouan and Caddoan Languages Conference, a distinguished scholar presented his translations of a list of Lakota *wiŋkte* names from the 1876 Red Cloud Agency surrender ledger (DeMallie 2012).⁸ The translations included terms like “shit”, “prick”, “cunt”, and other obscene words in English. Goodtracks strongly objected to these translations, arguing that since Siouan languages do not have “bad words” these translations were not only inaccurate, they erased an important distinction between Siouan languages and English and could lead people to think that Siouan languages also had obscene vocabulary referring to genitalia and defecation. A few scholars in the room rolled their eyes and sighed. Apparently, they had heard Goodtracks’s speech before and did not find it very persuasive.

This was my first introduction to the relatively widespread ideology among Siouan language activists that Siouan languages do not have bad words, a claim that has also been made for Lakota (see below) and Ponca.⁹ This pragmatic incommensurability between Siouan languages and English is used to project a positive image of indigenous cultures as both morally virtuous (since cursing, swearing, and obscenity were traditionally impossible) and liberated from harmful Western attitudes about bodies and sexuality.

Goodtracks promotes the idea that Chiwere lacks bad words in a number of ways. Just as he disputed the *wiŋkte* name translations at the Siouan conference, Goodtracks refuses translation requests that would create an – in his view false – equivalence between Chiwere words and vulgar English words. One time, a mother wanted Goodtracks to give her a list of Chiwere words referring to body parts and bodily functions so that she could use them with her children in public rather than English words. This would spare them the embarrassment of discussing such matters in public in a language that bystanders could overhear and understand. She made the mistake, however, of

⁸ *Wiŋkte* is the Lakota word for the gender identity typically referred to as “two-spirit” in English today. The term in older anthropological literature is “berdache”, and the Chiwere term is *mihxóge*. Lane Deer described *wiŋkte* names as “very sexy, even funny, very outspoken names” (quoted in Williams 1986: 38). There is, as far as I know, no evidence supporting or contradicting a tradition of *mihxóge* names among Iowas or Otoe-Missourias. However, there is a tradition of uncle names, which were described by ethnographers as “obscene” (Skinner 1926: 249; Whitman 1937: 67–68).

⁹ In Headman & O’Neill’s (2019: 193) Ponca dictionary, the word for “cuss, curse, or swear” is glossed as ‘bad white man words’. Elsewhere, Headman (2021: 429–430) states that “the elders indicated that there were no words of profanity in the Ponca language, like those used in the English language” and cites Dorsey’s nineteenth-century account that “when a Ponka wishes to curse or swear, he must do so in the language of his White neighbors”. For examples of this ideology in other Native American languages, see Muehlmann 2008: 42; Webster 2015: 83.

framing her request as wanting to know “the nasty words” or “the dirty words”, which led Goodtracks to decline her request since, as he told her:

There are no nasty words in Native language. Nasty words do not exist. There are words that describe bodily functions and activities, but they’re not nasty, they just describe what happens.

In other words, in Goodtracks’s view there is nothing shameful or dirty about discussing bodies or bodily functions in Chiwere. To have Chiwere terms for genitalia, urination, defecation, etc., be framed as “nasty” or “dirty” words and function as a secret code in the way that the mother was proposing would give the terms a negative connotation that Goodtracks did not believe was true to the language.

To take another example, Sky Campbell from the Otoe-Missouria tribal language department asked Goodtracks to translate the phrase “I ♥ Boobies” into Chiwere for tribal breast cancer awareness bracelets. Goodtracks refused to do this translation, he told me, because “I ♥ Boobies” involves a sexual innuendo and *boobies* is an erotically-marked word. If a text presented as a Chiwere translation of “I ♥ Boobies” were to circulate, it would give the impression that Chiwere has a licentious word for breasts when in Goodtracks’s view it only has a referential anatomical word with no erotic connotations. Such a translation, Goodtracks told me, “doesn’t respect the language”. By refusing to translate “I ♥ Boobies” and making his refusal known to his supporters, Goodtracks creates the idea that Chiwere and English are in some respects pragmatically incommensurable. Once presupposed, it then becomes possible for Goodtracks to position himself as policing and preserving this linguistic and cultural difference.

In general, Goodtracks refuses translation requests that assume that Chiwere has a register equivalent to the English category of bad words, a false equivalence that Goodtracks would argue was created by colonial and missionary influence. Goodtracks got tired enough of explaining why he refused to do these translations that he even decided to include an entry with the lemma “bad words; dirty words” in the current working version of his dictionary (Jimm Goodtracks, personal communication, 2017-01-22). The entry’s definition field is empty (i.e., it includes no Chiwere equivalents) and consists only of a long note explaining that “The notion of ‘dirty’ or ‘nasty’ words comes with English language and Anglo Saxon mindsets and world views. There are no such words in Ioway, Otoe language nor any of the related Siouan languages”. The note concludes with a long quotation from the Lakota community linguist Albert White Hat, Sr. (1999: 90), where in a pedagogical grammar prefacing a lesson on body parts, he writes:

Before Christian influence, we used our language to talk respectfully about our bodies. In order to describe ailments and health problems, people talked openly about even the sexual

parts of the body [...]. Children were told about the opposite sex [and] the sexual relationship that accompanies marriage. Early in life, children understood where they came from [...]. Christianity taught us to be ashamed of our bodies and that sex was evil [but] these are not traditional Lakota values [...]. This feeling of shame has effectively kept us from using our language. In order to bring back the value of the language, we need to openly discuss these issues in public [...]. By relearning the body parts and related philosophy, we will bring back the respect and the honor the human body deserves.

In presenting this material over the years to audiences that have included elders from other Siouan-speaking communities, I have heard them express similar sentiments: that their elders were not ashamed of their bodies, that they might shower without closing the bathroom door, and that children knew about sex and “where they came from”.

Goodtracks’s perspective is not the only one in the Chiwere context, however. Lance Foster’s view is that the bad words in a given society reflect what that society fears and condemns. Bad words in English are pragmatically obscene because their referential meanings focus on sex, genitalia, and defecation, all things about which Euro-American society is sensitive. In contrast, the Chiwere terms for similar referents are not pragmatically obscene because natural functions were not traditionally considered to be bad. As Foster explained to me, bad words in Chiwere reflect Iowa and Otoe-Missouria cultural values and include the Chiwere words for ‘thief’, ‘liar’, ‘coward’, etc., because nothing was more contemptible than being a thief, liar, coward, etc., in traditional Iowa and Otoe-Missouria society.¹⁰

For his part, Sky Campbell agrees that there are no “bad words” in the sense of English swear words in Chiwere and related Siouan languages, but he does believe that there are “vulgar” words. In part, he draws this term from Dorsey, whose slip file dictionary of Omaha and Ponca includes a number of words that Dorsey labeled “vulgar”. In some cases, “vulgar” is all that appears in the definition field. In other cases, perhaps when the word has potentially vulgar connotations, a nonvulgar definition is provided and a note is included that the word also has a vulgar meaning.¹¹ Campbell has confirmed these

¹⁰ This view has some historical precedent in a related Siouan language. Fletcher & La Flesche (1911: 603–604) list “Terms for Good Traits and Good Conduct” that “denote excellence of character and desirable social qualities” and “Terms for Bad Traits and Bad Conduct” that express “disapproval or contempt”, such as the Omaha terms for ‘a liar’, ‘a thieving person’, ‘a quarrelsome person’, etc.

¹¹ Some but not all examples can be found at <http://omahaponcaadmin.unl.edu/lexemes/search/vulgar> (accessed 2021-11-27). There are few examples that contain

vulgar meanings with a Ponca elder, which has convinced him that Chiwere also had words with vulgar meanings for genitals and sexual positions or techniques. Campbell uses this historical evidence as well as his conversations with current elders to contest Goodtracks's approach. As Campbell told me in an interview (2018-06-27):

One of the issues I have as far as [Goodtracks's] approach [is] whenever he gets sensitive about some things. I've spoken to a number of first-language speakers [of other Siouan languages]. And like for example there was the "I heart boobies" thing that I asked him a long time ago, and he's like, "No, they didn't talk like that". Yeah they did. [One of the first-language speakers I've worked with] tells me stuff, and he doesn't concern himself with what's considered vulgar or having prudish views. His view is the same as mine. It's in the language. If you censor that stuff, you are censoring part of the language. You are censoring the way people use it, whether it's somebody wanting to be vulgar, people were vulgar in the language, if they were wanting to be funny, if they were wanting to insult, all that stuff that could be considered negative, they did it.¹²

Goodtracks's rejoinder to this view is that the historical evidence reflects Dorsey's sensibility of what is considered vulgar, not his informants', and that elders today have internalized vulgar usages from the surrounding society. While Goodtracks's insistence that there are no bad words in Chiwere can be construed as creating a problematic communicative deficit between Chiwere and English (if it is only possible to be vulgar in the latter and not the former), it also creates a compensating sense of moral virtue by attributing to the traditional Chiwere-speaking elders a culturally distinctive and superior naturalistic attitude toward bodies and sexuality.

any information about the vulgar meaning or its usage. One is the slip file for the word for 'hole'. Dorsey provides an example sentence that he glosses 'you are a hole', which he describes as "a vulgar expression used by men in speaking to females" (see http://omahalanguage.unl.edu/dictionary_images/utsubx/opd.03.149.06c.jpg, [accessed 2021-11-27]). I am grateful to Sky Campbell for bringing this example to my attention.

¹² While Campbell does not cite the following source, Skinner's (1926: 252) ethnography of the Iowas records that humor between relatives in joking relationships "might be obscene in character".

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined some of the factors that complicate cultural facework in the context of Siouan language documentation. First, while legacy materials often contain cultural information that is easily incorporated into language revitalization and cultural reclamation movements, there is also the potential for legacy materials to include information that is upsetting or problematic for audiences today. But since the sensitive information is already part of the documentary record, it cannot simply be disregarded. Because relatively complete versions of some narratives have been documented, more selective versions that omit sexual incidents do not thereby prevent the sensitive content from being known; rather, they identify the narrator as someone who did not want that material to be known, at least by whomever they took to be their audience in the particular time and place in which they told the version recorded. As a result, community linguists and language activists are to some degree constrained by what has already been documented in legacy materials, even as they may creatively interpret and rework those materials in order to foreground the version or vision of the culture that they want to display.

Second, some community linguists and language activists insist that material that may appear obscene by settler colonial standards actually reflects a traditional indigenous attitude in which bodies and sexuality were natural, and perhaps comical, but never obscene, vulgar, “dirty”, or anything to be ashamed about. But since most audiences (both indigenous and non-indigenous) will not be familiar with the traditional attitude, there is a danger that the material will be (mis)interpreted and negatively evaluated as obscene. As a result, some community linguists and language activists believe that sexual or scatological material must be protected from critical judgements by censoring or concealing it, a form of cultural facework that only further serves to mark it as problematic and thereby paradoxically obscures its cultural value as a reflection of a traditional attitude toward bodies and sexuality.

Third, in Siouan communities, as in many societies, there is a considerable degree of conflict about obscenity, bad words, and sexuality as well as disagreement about how sensitive content should be handled. Sometimes these disagreements revolve around differing interpretations of legacy materials or different weights accorded to evidence in legacy materials. In other cases, they might involve evaluations of particular speakers and whether their attitudes are truly traditional or whether they reflect internalized colonial ideologies. Cultural facework is complicated, in other words, because it is socially contentious and uncoordinated.

Linguists often invoke technology, specifically digital databases with access restrictions, as a solution that will meet the needs of all stakeholders when it comes to issues of obscenity and bad words (Hinton & Weigel 2002: 166; Mosel 2011: 343; cf. Woodbury 2011: 173). Jung & Himmelmann (2011:

219) optimistically conclude that “layered access levels in a digital archive usually make it possible to accommodate the interests of all parties concerned”. But it is unclear how such archiving practices might apply to the situation they describe, in which a community member produced a bowdlerized transcript in order to avoid transcribing a sexually explicit incident included in a recording of a traditional narrative. The transcriber was a woman, but the speaker on the recording was a man. Should the material in question only be able to be accessed by men? To what extent are the transcriber’s sensitivities about sexual content shared with other members of the community? Who was included or excluded from the traditional audience for these narratives, and to what extent should those factors inform decisions about layered access today? What are our obligations toward the speaker on the recording, who could have chosen to omit the sexual incident in his telling but included it instead? Since the transcriber is, in effect, censoring the speaker, layered access seems less like a way of accommodating everyone’s needs than a way of taking sides, replicating in an institutional context the conflict between the speaker and transcriber over the display vs. censorship of the information in question.

While the examples I have discussed here only scratch the surface of cultural facework practices in Siouan language documentation, they suggest that facework and accompanying tensions between comprehensive and selective documentation are not a problem that can be solved. Rather, facework is a pervasive feature of language documentation because it is an inherent feature of all social life, including the interpersonal and cross-cultural interactions within which language documentation takes place. In other words, there is no escaping facework. Restricting access to archival materials may be an effective way to mediate access to cultural heritage that is considered sacred or dangerous or to knowledge that is clearly owned by some subgroup within an indigenous community, such as members of specific clan or those who have undergone a particular initiation ritual (e.g., Christen 2019). But creating both censored and uncensored versions of documentary materials for different audiences or digital archives with access restrictions will replicate rather than resolve tensions between “thoroughness” and “prudishness” by formalizing restrictions on the flow of information available to different users. Layered access that makes sensitive content available to some but not others is not so much a solution to the social issues raised by obscenity and bad words in language documentation as it is a continuation of the social conflicts surrounding access and censorship raised by the sensitive material in the first place. They represent the institutionalization and extension of facework rather than an alternative to it. The impulse to seek a solution that will somehow satisfy all stakeholders is understandable but misplaced, since facework is an inescapable feature of social life.

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