

HKU Linguistics Seminar Series

The Sounds of Indigenous Language Revitalization

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Room 4.04, 4/F Run Run Shaw Tower, Centennial Campus, HKU

#### Abstract

The foundation of American linguistics would not be possible without the significant intellectual contributions made by speakers of Native American languages in collaboration with linguists and anthropologists starting around the turn of the twentieth century. More than a century later, speakers of these languages are engaged in Indigenous language revitalization, reclamation and documentation and now partner in new collaborative ways with linguists.

In language revitalization, communities often focus on learners sounding "right," achieving an accent that closely approximates fluent first language speech and minimizes "accentedness" (Munro and Derwing 2015). This puts phonetics and phonology, that is, sound, front and center in Indigenous language reclamation. Drawing from examples in my own research projects, I demonstrate ways to integrate phonological documentation and linguistic analysis into language revitalization, reclamation and renewal. Such examples guide data collection to prioritize documentation of those materials often of most value to speaker communities: verbal arts, narratives, conversation, prayers, among others. Collection of these genres provides insights that sustain Indigenous communities in reclaiming their languages and also leads linguists to deeper scientific understandings of these languages, of language itself, and of how sound systems are organized and operate.

Finally, I outline one model of tribal-academic partnership, a model that maximizes the kind of work that can be accomplished in a world of limited resources: too little funding, too little time, too few fluent speakers, too few people trained to document so many languages. Training plays a fundamental role, for students, Indigenous community members and seasoned linguists. Innovative advances come as we integrate linguistic theory – in my case, phonology—into collaborative, community-based language

documentation and language revitalization. I show that the science in this kind of endeavor asks new and exciting questions, thereby transforming the landscape of what we know about language, the methodologies by which we investigate language, and the way in which we nurture alliances between linguists and language community members.

ALL INTERESTED ARE WELCOME!