

Syilx Knowledges: A Decolonial Strategy

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Indigenous communities in Canada, such as the Syilx Okanagan Peoples have long been victimized by the hegemonic culture of the settler communities which has led to drastic linguistic erasure and extensive cultural dislocation. However, across the last few decades, significant strides have been collectively taken to redress the crisis as well. In over 30 years of work revitalizing Syilx Okanagan culture and language, achievements made

have been the result of implementing a decolonial strategy that privileges the knowledge of the Syilx Okanagan Peoples. The Syilx Okanagan Indigenous Peoples are one of 25 groups who speak the Salishan Language. As other neighboring Salishan groups, Syilx Okanagan is threatened by language and culture loss as a result of colonialist policy. Indigenous language and culture loss is not just the loss of the use of language in everyday communication, it is an erasure of Indigenous knowledge embedded in the language acquired over millennia and carried in the oral tradition of story.

The revitalizing of Indigenous languages reinvigorates communicating with one another, and, moreover, facilitates the reconstruction and recovery of the language into a modern framework. In a report for the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues by Lars Anders-Baer et al. (2008) the authors outline how dominant state language policies, whether by overt or covert means, result in language shift and loss and affect Indigenous peoples. They reiterate the position of an earlier expert paper by Ole Hendrik Magga et al. (2004) about the medium of instruction policies implemented by a dominant state and their extremely negative consequences. Anders-Baer argues that such colonial policies create linguistic destruction because they are directed toward rendering Indigenous languages to a state of being underdeveloped in formal knowledge areas and thus create linguistic, pedagogical and psychological barriers.

SALISH AND NEIGHBORING LANGUAGES



Fig.1 Salish and Neighboring Languages (Kuipers 2002, vii)

He holds that such policies affect rates of educational attainment, impacting income, and most critically, they contribute to high rates of depression and suicide among those subjected to such policies. Anders-Baer maintains that such policies result in social dislocation, psychological, cognitive, linguistic and educational harm. He characterizes such concepts as submersion education and, more importantly, framed the colonization of Indigenous languages through such biased education-

al policies as ethnocide, following Rodolfo Stavenhagen (1990, 1995), who framed such processes as forms of linguistic and cultural genocide. Anders-Baer uses such concepts as subtractive education to characterize the means by which Indigenous languages are erased through forced assimilation policies when the dominant official language is the sole medium of education. He makes clear that such policies are a form of force in the manner described by peace researcher Johan Galtung, who differentiates between three forms of force which he characterizes as power exerted by “sticks,” “carrots” and “ideas,” each with different effects (1969, 170).

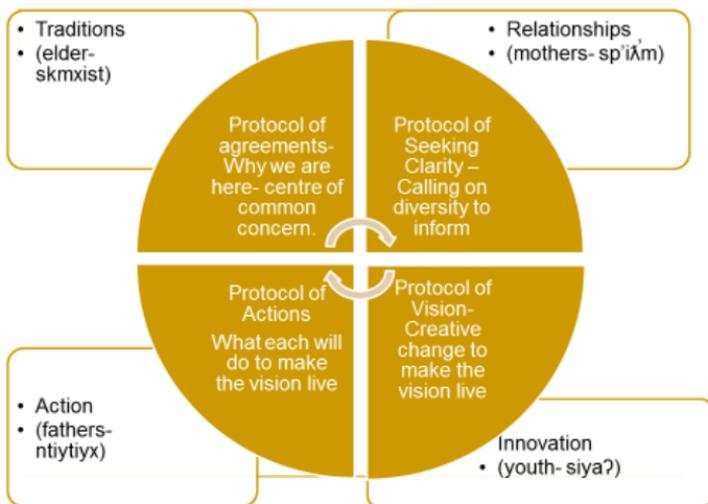
Canada’s policy of assimilation includes all three forms of power exertion. Sticks included the physical removal of children by force from the community of speakers to residential schools. Punishment for language use, which produced alienation from community and hatred of one’s culture, created mental and social dysfunction and rapid loss of language and Indigenous knowledge. Carrots included strategic economic reinforcements for colonizing language-use. Literacy, career and job training and higher learning, combined with negative reinforcements to dissuade Indigenous language use. Access to grants and programs for training in jobs only in mainstream society prompted mass relocations out of Indigenous communities. Proficiency and literacy in the colonizing language is promoted as the measure of success in the educational goal norm, producing profound

inter-generational language losses and cultural decline. The third form of force, through ideas embedded in schooling and academic study, is the continuous characterizations of Indigenous communities and individuals, who remain fluently unilingual in their own language, as “backward” “underprivileged”, “under-developed”, “illiterate”, “uneducated”, “disadvantaged” and “ignorant.” For example, Webster’s English dictionary, widely used in all educational institutions, defines “indigent” as “poor or needy”, clearly connecting the idea of poverty with being Indigenous. Such ideas psychologically produce negative attitudes in the public discourse toward Indigenous languages, Indigenous knowledges, their cultures, customs and ways of living. The external harm also becomes fostered internally, obstructing efforts in the work to rescue language and cultural rights, compounding the profound social, economic and educational barriers faced by Indigenous peoples. Whether overtly under the guise of the Indian Act (originally enacted in 1876) in past residential school policy or covertly in the non-recognition of the rights to instruction in one’s own language in the current forced public education policy, severe losses, declines and extinctions of Indigenous languages are the norm throughout Canada.

It is within this reality, in the context of every form of forced subtractive and submersion policy utilized in Canada, that the work of revitalization of the Syilx Okanagan culture and language was undertaken through

a decolonial strategy. Indeed, the work has not been without struggle. However, the purpose of this article is to focus on achievements of a decolonial strategy in the work going forward. It will also serve to provide insight into Syilx perspectives and approach. If the Syilx Okanagan strategy can be characterized, the central commitment is to rely on a Syilx knowledge method to engage the community rather than to focus actions on challenging the subtractive or submersion projects of government policy. The Syilx position was to transform the internalized effects of colonization by reinvigorating Syilx knowledge and language through the revival of the Syilx traditional governance process called *enowkinwixw* as a way of engagement. The *enowkinwixw* process is an excellent example of Syilx knowledge embedded in an Nsyilxcn story in the language. The word “*enowkinwixw*” describes a community dialogue protocol, embedded in the story, which seeks to include adversarial points of view in order to ensure a holistic strategy leading to actions that empower principles of collaboration. The process incorporates essential aspects of balancing divisive and polarizing views, into an empowering dynamic of solidarity in action .

The schematic below is a very simplified view of it as a four stage engagement procedure.



At the close of residential schooling, in the early 1970s, the Union of BC Indian Chiefs occupied and closed down all Indian Affairs district branch offices in the Province of BC. After that the Okanagan Syilx Chiefs and elders of the seven communities held planning meetings as to how to move forward to take control and implement changes. Their priority was to regain control over the education of their children. The dialogues introduced the idea that in order to reverse language loss the most critical actions were to recover the Syilx knowledge through engagement in Syilx cultural activities and normalize them into everyday life at the same time in order to implement education empowering language re-

vitalization and cultural revival. The En'owkin Centre, governed by the Chiefs and elders of the nation, was constituted to preserve and protect the Syilx language and culture. The long-term strategy is to revive Nsyilxcn. The knowledge of the Syilx is embedded in the Nsyilxcn language and is integral to Syilx cultural practice. Bringing the language back into the everyday norm within our communities required re-engagement in cultural knowledge practises within a modern life context. Although the work to decolonize education and promote cultural practice within our own communities was slow in the beginning, there are many outcomes that have evolved through persistence. Each of the seven communities now has robust culture and language programs and their own community operated schools. Traditional food harvesting has significantly surged and with it the culture and language practices are increasingly becoming a part of the everyday life of the Syilx. Many new young Nsyilxcn learner speakers are applying their knowledge in a variety of areas of work. Syilx knowledge embedded in the language is being sought by the leadership to help in the process of healing and reconciliation.

An example of Syilx knowledge embedded in the Nsyilxcn language can be demonstrated in a few words in common Syilx use. The word “tmix^w” for “all living things”; the word “tmx^wulax^w” for “land”; the word “syilx” for “Indigenous people of the Okanagan”; the word “yilmix^wm” for “Chief”; and the word “sqyilx^w”

for “human being”, each contain knowledge essential to being Syilx. These examples display the polysynthetic nature of the way Nsyilxcn words form knowledge. Root parts of the words carry essential meanings in the language and can be assembled in many different ways to construct words. Salishan linguists such as Aert Kuipers (2002) identified the root parts of words common in all 25 modern Salishan languages, including Nsyilxcn. The root parts in the example words are in fact common to all 25 and to the Nsyilxcn language. The examples show how the root parts are embedded and construct Nsyilxcn meaning evolved through thousands of years as Indigenous Salishan knowledge. They also show the difference of meaning from their common translations into English.

Root Parts

- mix^w (many spreading out from one source)
- ul (cyclic movement)
- ax^w (here place)
- yil (coil)
- qys (dream)
- Nsyilxcen words
- mix^w —common English translation: all living things—(mix^w - meaning above)
- tmx^w ulax^w —common English translation: the land—(mix^w and lax^w - meanings above)
- syilx—common English translation: Okanagan Na-

- tion—(yil - meaning above)
- yilmix^w m—common English translation: Chief—
(yil and mix^w - meanings above)
 - sqyilx^w —common English translation: human—
(qys and yil – meanings above)

One can appreciate the profound meanings of the words through the knowledge embedded in the root parts forming a whole word. For example the word for “Chief” actually means “one who coils (the people) with all living things” – “coils” referring to the yearly cycles of nature, while “sqyilx^w ” actually means “the ones coiled (in yearly cycles) around dreaming.”

As was stated in Nsyilxcn language by elder Tommy Gregoire in 1973 at a Syilx Chiefs and Peoples gathering in Penticton “Our language is who we are, everything that is known on our land is known by us in our language, all of our stories are like books, telling us how to live right as people as part of our land.” His talk was focused on the importance of the knowledge in our language and the knowledge in stories we call captik-wl. The Chiefs’ and Elders’ strategy was to assert that our language is essential to our Indigeneity and that our knowledge is essential to all aspects of our communities’ processes toward recovery. The En’owkin Centre was an outcome of the directive by the Chiefs and Elders of our nation, to rely on our knowledge in order to bring us out of the darkest of times.



Fig. 2 Interior of En'owkin Centre: Four Chief Poles © Jeanette Armstrong

Essential to the strategy, which is aligned with the rights of Indigenous people and universal linguistic rights (see appendix), was to develop a Syilx knowledge research process with an Elders' council, who guided the research in the language. The En'owkin project was created to

house and direct research and education activities in language, story and art as well as to incorporate culture, song and ceremony as a natural outcome of learning in the thirst for Syilx knowledge. An Nsyilxcn teacher training program was developed and has resulted in the certification of Nsyilxcn Language teachers, who now teach cultural and language curriculum centered in Syilx knowledges. Syilx teachers are employed in the cultural and immersion schools that are now a reality in all Syilx communities. Another essential component in the decolonial strategy was to research and develop a community-based adult language learning and culture program as foundational knowledge programming at the En'owkin Centre and delivered to the seven communities of the Syilx Nation. The program is currently adding many new knowledge keepers and speakers annually, who work in a variety of capacities in their communities in leadership, management, health and social services as well as in the assertion of the Syilx land caretaking.

A new initiative in the strategy is to support the Syilx Communities Chiefs' advocacy of language as an everyday practice and as essential for relying on the knowledge of language as an assertion of rights and title and legal protection of our sovereignty as Syilx Peoples. An excellent example is the successful collaborative effort of the planning and implementation to return sockeye salmon to the Okanagan river system. The Okanagan Nation Alliance fisheries program (2020) relied on tra-

ditional knowledge related to salmon held in the stories and in the language as a core component of planning and decision-making. The use of an enowkinwixw-style of consultation and collaboration ensured one of the most successful models of Syilx traditional knowledge. The En'owkin strategy is currently part of leading a province-wide initiative for an undergraduate degree in Aboriginal Language Fluency for all Aboriginal language groups in British Columbia in collaboration with the Indigenous Higher Learning Association, a province-wide organization of Indigenous-controlled adult education centers. That initiative has blossomed into a full program of adult learning in Nsyilxcn, through a partnership with the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology for the first two years of a certificate and a diploma of Nsyilxcn, which then transfers to the University of British Columbia Okanagan Bachelor of Nsyilxcn Language Fluency. The courses are structured to gain full proficiency of the Nsyilxcn language and fluency in the Syilx knowledge embedded in the language. The approval of this degree by the Ministry of Advanced Education in October of 2020 represents the success of a strategy which centers on decolonizing both knowledge and cultural practice through the revival of language use in the everyday norm and its incorporation into the modern context of everyday life.

One of the Nsyilxcn prophesy stories speaks of Indigenous people as an older brother on this land and non-In-

digenous peoples as a younger brother. In the story the older brother is the teacher of good ways of being on this land. The story in the language has profound meaning in the work to transform the Syilx identity from the colonial “ideas” of self being “backward”, “underprivileged”, “under-developed”, “illiterate”, “uneducated”, “disadvantaged” and “ignorant” to the decolonial certainty of being a Syilx knowledge holder and teacher to those responsible for destruction to lands and peoples. Such stories in the language are now at the center of the idea that the Indigenous knowledges are vital and necessary to all new generations to connect peoples on how to live in balance with nature toward creating better ways of being together.

Appendix

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples:

Article 13

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.

Article 14

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.

(Adopted by General Assembly Resolution 61/295 on September 13, 2007)

The Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights:

General Principles: Article 7

All languages are the expression of the collective identity and of a distinct way of perceiving and describing reality and must, therefore, be able to enjoy the conditions required for their development in all functions.

Section II, Article 24

All language communities have the right to decide to what extent their language is to be present, as a vehicular language and as an object of study, at all levels of education within their territory, pre-school, primary, secondary, technical and vocational, and adult education.

(Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights, Barcelona, June 1996)

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