Digital Stewardship and Survivance

By Jennifer C. Stone, University of Alaska Anchorage

As a scholar of digital literacies and language diversity, I have been observing the impact of digital, networked, and handheld technologies in Alaskans' lives. Although historical legacies of English have created extensive language shift and loss (Krauss, 1980), digital and online advances have opened new opportunities for language reclamation. Alaska Native communities, foundations, educators, and linguists have started to tap into the potential of such technologies for supporting access to Indigenous language resources.

Here, I describe some of the ways that technologies have been used to support Alaska Native language reclamation. Although a wide range of technologies are currently being used, I focus on video games, Facebook groups, and smartphone apps. I also discuss how technologies can function within larger sociomaterial networks to support language learning. Although my examples are from Alaska, they are relevant to other contexts where Indigenous communities are working to reclaim their languages and cultural practices.

Technology and Indigenous Language Reclamation

Galla (2016) describes technology as a "double-edged sword" for language revitalization. On the one hand, technology has been a tool for colonization. Language activists and scholars (e.g., Holton, 2015; Krauss, 1992; Twitchell, 2012; Wiburg, 2003) describe media and technology as, at best, distractions and, at worst, colonial tools. They argue that such technologies have interrupted the transmission of languages between generations and continue to support the marginalization of Indigenous languages. Krauss (1992) even went so far as to describe media and technology as "cultural nerve gas."

On the other hand, scholars have pointed to the potential of technology for supporting decolonization and language revitalization. Technology can make language reclamation relevant to current and future generations (Galla, 2016; Hornberger, 1998; Warschauer, 1998). It can create new contexts for using and shaping

language (Holton, 2014). And it can create opportunities for communication between Elders and youth, preserve and document languages, and develop and disseminate materials (Galla, 2009, 2012, 2016).

Stewardship & Survivance

To conceptualize how digital resources contribute to the reclamation of Alaska Native languages, it's helpful to consider theories of stewardship and survivance. Stewardship highlights agents who support Indigenous, community-based literacies, along with the revitalization of Indigenous languages and cultural practices (Frost, 2011; Stone, 2016). Stewardship illuminates the many agents who persist in spite of pressure to adapt fully to the English language and dominant culture. Stewards work toward what Vizenor (2008) and Wyman (2012) call survivance (a blend of survival and resistance), which emphasizes how communities resist narratives of dominance, absence, and victimhood. Instead, survivance illuminates how Indigenous communities assert an active presence, where world views, languages, stories, and cultural knowledge actively resist colonial legacies. In short, whereas stewardship emphasizes agents who work to reclaim Indigenous languages, survivance foregrounds the productive work in which stewards engage.

Technologies of Language Reclamation

Video Games

Video games have started to be used to support Indigenous language reclamation in Alaska. *Kisima Inŋitchuŋa (Never Alone)*, for example, engages players in several Iñupiat values, including language, cooperation, spirituality, humility, and respect for nature. It also teaches players about several Iñupiat literacy practices, including scrimshaw carving, drumming, and storytelling (see Stone, 2018). The game was created through a collaboration between Iñupiat community members and game developers, so it is both well designed and accurate. Although it appeals to a broad audience, many of whom are not Iñupiat, within Iñupiat communities the game has provided an opportunity for extended engagement with Iñupiaq language. Since many parents did not have access to their language due to colonial disruption, games like *Kisima Inŋitchuŋa* hold great potential for

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reconnecting children to their language and cultural heritage.

Facebook Groups

Another set of digital stewards of Alaska Native languages that I have observed are social networking sites, specifically Facebook groups and communities. As a learner of Central Yup'ik, such groups help me to regularly read, write, hear, and connect socially with other speakers. The groups also engage in discussion of relevant issues and news stories, answer language-related questions, crowdsource translations, and celebrate Yup'ik culture. Such groups create opportunities for language learners to read and write multimodal and multilingual texts, learn new vocabulary, connect with other language learners, and critique misinformation. These communities of stewards support playful engagement with language outside of formal contexts. They also support collaborations among native speakers, partial speakers, and linguists.

Smartphone Apps—Interactive Dictionaries and Children's Books

In addition to games and social networks, digital stewards have started to take advantage of smartphone technologies. Although broadband Internet access is challenging in remote communities, mobile telecommunications have provided more ubiquitous access. Common types of apps include word- or phrase-of-the-day, dictionaries and phrase collections, and interactive books. For example, *Iñupiat Word Finder* features a daily word and a searchable Iñupiat/English dictionary. Entries include definitions in English, and some include sample sentences, alternate spellings, grammatical explanations, and audio samples. Another example, *My Friend and I Are Boating* allows readers to listen to an audio narration in Alutiiq that highlights each word as it is read. Readers can also record themselves reading the book aloud and play back their recordings. A translation into English is included at the end of the book. Apps like *Iñupiat Word Finder* and *My Friend and I Are Boating,* provide portable, interactive resources to support language learning.

Assembling Resources

Digital stewardship is more complicated, though, than individual games, Facebook groups, and apps. Indeed, learners assemble resources produced by digital stewards and combine them with other language

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learning opportunities to further their own language development. For instance Rodney (pseudonym), age 25, described his Tlingit language learning to me during an interview. Like many Alaska Native people, Rodney's family lost fluency in their heritage language over the past few generations. Rodney described his family as primarily English speaking, with "tiny fragments of words" that his family still used from Tlingit.

Rodney's case illustrates the potential roles that networked technology can play in accessing linguistic and cultural resources, supplementing existing face-to-face experiences both in and out of school, and revitalizing language and culture. In our interview, Rodney described a number of in-person school-based language courses, after-school programs, community events, summer camps, and internships that enabled him to learn about and participate in Tlingit language, traditional practices, and art forms. However, he pointed out several gaps in the ability of these stewards to support his learning. He described ways in which online technologies filled these gaps for him, and provided stewardship where none was available locally. For example, he regularly used online resources made available through the Sealaska Heritage Institute (SHI), to listen to recordings of stories, practice everyday interactions, refine pronunciations, and develop new vocabulary. Rodney also described social networking sites, like Facebook, as key to his own stewardship of Tlingit language and art. As an artist, he relied on social media for publicizing his artwork, as well as articulating its cultural significance. Rodney's case illustrates how individuals might recruit online resources and social networks—in relation to in-person formal and informal educational opportunities—to provide stewardship for Indigenous languages and cultural practices.

Benefits and Challenges for Digital Stewards

As these examples of digital stewardship illustrate, emergent technologies like video games, Facebook groups, apps, and other resources provide new forms of access to language and literacy. These technologies create opportunities for people to access language who might otherwise lack regular access in their local contexts. In so doing, they create "translocal" (Wyman, 2012) connections among stewards and language learners. Such connections also can provide new insights into language and literacies that might not happen in local contexts.

These examples of digital stewardship also raise a number of challenges for language learners and stewards. One of the largest roadbloacks is access to technology and infrastructure. Another challenge raised by these examples is that many of these digital stewards operate with limited resources.

Despite these limitations, young people like Rodney have figured out ways to recruit online resources, participate in online communities, and reclaim their languages. Digital stewards have started to produce a range of options for supporting Alaska Native language reclamation and engaging in the work of survivance.

Acknowledgements

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