Language is land, land is language: The importance of Indigenous languages

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Abstract
This collaborative opinion piece, written from the authors’ personal perspectives (Anishinaabe and Gàidheal) on Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe language) and Gàidhlig (Scottish Gaelic language), discusses the importance of maintaining and revitalizing Indigenous languages, particularly in these times of climate and humanitarian crises. The authors will give their personal responses, rooted in lived experiences, on five areas they have identified as a starting point for their discussion: (1) why Indigenous languages are important; (2) the effects of colonization on Indigenous languages; (3) the connections/responsibilities to the land, such as Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), embedded in Indigenous languages; (4) the importance of land-based learning and education, full language immersion, and the challenges associated with implementing these strategies for Indigenous language maintenance and revitalization; and (5) where we can go from here.

Keywords
colonization, Gaelic, Ojibwe, revitalization, Traditional Ecological Knowledge

Introduction
Languages do not exist within a vacuum and languages do not simply “die.” With the advance of colonialism, capitalism, and colonial languages (e.g. English), Indigenous languages have been subjected to genocidal processes, governmental policies entrenched in linguistic imperialism, epistemological and cognitive supremacy, and continued practices of linguistic and humanistic crises. The authors will give their personal responses, rooted in lived experiences, on five areas they have identified as a starting point for their discussion: (1) why Indigenous languages are important; (2) the effects of colonization on Indigenous languages; (3) the connections/responsibilities to the land, such as Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), embedded in Indigenous languages; (4) the importance of land-based learning and education, full language immersion, and the challenges associated with implementing these strategies for Indigenous language maintenance and revitalization; and (5) where we can go from here.

These five areas have been made into questions, or prompts for the discussion, which the authors have answered in their own words. The authors then give some concluding remarks. It is also important to note that the authors are not “fluent” language speakers, but learners. They wish to express their opinions as to why Indigenous languages are important and, in particular, why language is land and land is language.

Positionality
Susan: Aniin, Boozhoo, Susan Chiblow nizhnikaa. Ogamah annag indigo. Ajijaak nidoonem. Ketegaunzeebee nidoonjibaa. Ketegaunzeebee nindaa. I have been told that is very important to always introduce yourself in Anishinaabemowin (Anishinaabe language), so your ancestors, the lands, your spiritual helpers, and all beings will

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recognize you. When you are recognized, you will be helped and guided in whatever it is you are doing. I believe what I was told so I introduce myself with my spirit name, my clan, where I am from, and where I live so that I can be guided.

**Paul:** Halò a chàirdean. Is mise Pòl Miadhachàin-Chiblow. ‘S e Gàidheal a th’annam. Tha mi à Glaschu, ann an Alba. Hello, friends. My name is Paul Meighan-Chiblow. I’m a Gael from Glasgow, Scotland.

I grew up in Glaschu (Glasgow, or “Dear Green Place” in Scottish Gaelic), and a huge part of me, of my mother’s side of the family, finds home in the remote north-western island of Uibhist a Deas (South Uist) in Na H’Eileanan Siar (Western Isles). I remember hearing Gàidhlig (Scottish Gaelic) all the time around my grandmother, who was a huge part of my upbringing. However, Gàidhlig was not offered as a subject of study in the educational system when I was at school. Older generations recall schoolchildren were beaten for speaking it, and the language, spoken for more than 1500 years in Scotland, is still not recognized as an “official” language in the United Kingdom. It’s only now, 25 years or so later, that I’m starting to reclaim my language and learn more about the Gaelic culture and language. I’m also more determined than ever lately because some argue that Gàidhlig, as a community language, could “die out” within 10 years.

I’ve also continued to learn more about the devastating impacts of colonialism on the Indigenous peoples and languages of Turtle Island after meeting my Anishinaabe husband in Scotland five years ago and from frequent discussions with my Anishinaabe family. This journey and motivation for our children and future generations to speak our own languages has flowed to this opinion piece and to my current research in Indigenous language revitalization. I’d like to acknowledge the waters, animals, plants and all more than human entities of Turtle Island and our responsibilities to them. Miigwetch and tapadh leibh.

**Why are Indigenous languages important?**

**Susan:** It is often said by language speakers that, when you introduce yourself in your language, other language speakers know something about you just from your name, clan, and where you are from. Your name is who you are and how you are. Your clan positions you in society with specific responsibilities. Where you are from provides information on your connections to the world. Introductions for Anishinaabe peoples are more than a courtesy.

Anishinaabemowin is the language of the Anishinaabe peoples, which include the Ojibway, Ottawa, Pottawatomi, and Algonquin (Johnston, 2011). I have heard numerous times from Elders and Anishinaabemowin speakers the importance of learning our language. These Elders and speakers have stated that minobimaadiziwin (the good life), our laws, our governance, and g’giikendaaswinmin (our knowledge) is embedded in Anishinaabemowin. It is who we are and how we convey our worldview.

**Paul:** Indigenous languages are important for many reasons. One major reason that I think about frequently is a unique, relational way of naming, seeing, and relating to the world, which is particular to a specific area, land, and ecosystem. Indigenous languages are like ecological encyclopedias and ancestral guides with profound knowledge cultivated over centuries. If these languages are not passed on, then this wisdom is lost to humanity and the generations to come. For instance, in Gàidhlig and in my home islands of Na h’Eileanan Siar, there is a stretch of water named Caolas bogadh na mara, which translates as “the dipping narrows of the sea” and guides fishermen in their day-to-day work (MacKinnon and Brennan, 2012: 15).

On the other hand, dominant, non-endangered languages, such as English, carry legacies of imperialism, assimilation, and colonialism, and can be easily decontextualized or disembodied from historical context, land, and place. Although some could argue dominant languages like English are useful for international communication or for the “global economy,” the disembodiment of language can make it easier for land and the earth to be exploited. For instance, land can be labelled as “wasteland” or considered a mere resource for capitalist agendas if there is no deep and meaningful connection or relationship to place. Given our current climate and humanitarian crises, Indigenous languages and knowledges are needed more than ever.

**What are the effects of colonization on Indigenous languages?**

**Susan:** The colonizer’s goal was to erase Indigenous peoples (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). With the erasure of Indigenous languages, governance, teachings, and worldviews are diminished or lost. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015: 154) states, “Many of the almost ninety surviving Aboriginal languages in Canada are under serious threat of extinction.” Statistics Canada (2011) reports in the 2011 Consensus of ~33 million people that ~28 million can speak English, ~10 million can speak French, and 213,400 speak an Aboriginal Language. It is apparent that in Canada, Indigenous languages have been nearly wiped out. In my community, there are only a few original language speakers. This has caused the near loss of our original governance systems, our teachings, and our worldview.

The loss of language on our original governance systems has caused division in many communities. We now have elected systems compared to clan governance. Many people live based on the principles of the English language, such as rights. I have asked language speakers how to say rights in Anishinaabemowin, and it can’t be simply translated to English. Anishinaabek peoples did not have rights in the sense of the English word; we had responsibilities to ensure the survival of our communities. With the loss of Anishinaabemowin, the important teachings of our governance systems have been minimized, causing self-gain...
and division. Colonial systems imprison Indigenous peoples and attempt to eliminate our languages.

With colonization and the imposition of the English language, our teachings and worldview, which are embedded in Anishinaabemowin, have been dismissed as folklore. Anishinaabek teachings and worldview are left out of important spaces such as educational institutions. Indigenous languages are seen as an impediment to capitalism because it is based on wholistic approaches such as reciprocity, connections, and responsibility to the lands. Capitalism is based on taking for gain. The structural violence in colonial systems hinders Anishinaabemowin’s continued survival.

**Paul:** The effects of colonization on Indigenous languages have been disastrous. Hundreds of Indigenous languages have gone extinct and continue to be critically threatened and endangered today. As the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (2018) remarks:

> It is estimated that one Indigenous language dies every two weeks ... The threat is the direct consequence of colonialism and colonial practices that resulted in the decimation of Indigenous peoples, their cultures and languages. Through policies of assimilation, dispossession of lands, discriminatory laws and actions, Indigenous languages in all regions face the threat of extinction. (para 1-4)

Some could argue or assume that language loss or death is a “natural process,” but this is simply not accurate or true. Languages do not exist in a vacuum and languages do not simply “die” of natural causes. Imperial and colonial governments have sought to either displace, replace, or deliberately exterminate Indigenous languages and cultures by means of linguicide, historicide, and genocide (e.g. residential schools in Canada, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Languages also stop being spoken when parents no longer speak them or pass them on to their children. In the case of Indigenous languages, this transmission process has been interrupted due to covert and overt colonial trauma and violence. Families may not find it easy to speak and or reclaim a language that has been subjected to tolls of abuse and mistreatment. In Canada, for example, in the 2011 Census, “14.5% of the Aboriginal population reported that their first language learned was an Aboriginal language ... nearly a 50% drop in the fifteen years since the last residential schools closed” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015: 154). Colonization continues to this day. We are not in a “post-colonial” era. Indigenous languages, for example, are not afforded “official language” status alongside English in the United Kingdom or alongside English and French in the settler colonial nation-state of Canada. And colonial genocidal practices are, more often than not, not taught or ignored in mainstream education or curricula.

**What are the responsibilities and connections to the land embedded in Indigenous languages?**

**Susan:** Anishinaabek connections, reciprocity, and responsibility are embedded in the language along with Anishinaabek ways of knowing and being. The ways of knowing and being are often referred to as TEK. TEK may also be referred to as Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge. TEK has been described as a knowledge system, part system of practice and part belief system. It is fundamentally about relationships, reciprocity, and responsibility (Whyte, 2013). Anishinaabemowin actions relationships, reciprocity, and responsibility to the lands. The links between Indigenous languages and environmental knowledge are well documented and are necessary for sustainability.

**Paul:** To me, Indigenous languages and the land are one and the same. This symbiotic relationship encompasses so many levels: the mental, emotional, the spiritual, the physical. The relationship also goes beyond into some form of responsibility to the land and to living sustainably. For example, Dùthchas is a very old Gàidhlig word, which is difficult to translate into one word or reduced concept in English. A Gàidhlig dictionary will give some definitions, such as birth tie, hereditary homeland, or connection to place. Dùthchas is an intrinsic part of the Gaelic worldview and stresses an ecological balance among all inhabitants and entities, human and more than human. MacKinnon and Brennan (2012: 9–10) remark,

> Dùthchas is a word of the land—it is derived from the Gaelic word ‘dù / duth’ which can mean ‘earth’ or ‘land’—[with] the emotional energy of belonging and responsibility the word conveys ... As MacInnes [2006: 29] explains it, to the Gaelic mind, dùthchas is a total field of understanding, encompassing ‘not so much a landscape, not a sense of geography alone, nor of history alone, but a formal order of experience in which all these are merged’.

An intimate knowledge of the land is embodied in Indigenous languages. For example, in Scotland, there are places in Gàidhlig that speak to the landscape and what can typically be found or encountered there: Alltan Èisg (“small burn/stream of fish”), Feith Gaineimh Mhòr, (“the big sandy bog-stream”), or Loch nam Breac Mòra (“loch of the big trout”). There are even words that also speak to history and the Viking influence on Gàidhlig in my home islands, such as Clett na Cairidh (“rock of the weir”) to denote a place to catch fish in Uibhist a Deas) from the old Norse klettr (“a rock, a cliff”). These are just some examples of the responsibilities and connections to the land from a Gàidhlig perspective I’ve come across at the beginning of my learning journey.
Why is land-based learning and full language immersion important for Indigenous languages, and what are the challenges in implementing these strategies?

Susan: Elders have stated that everything comes from the land, our foods, our medicines, our knowledge, and Anishinaabemowin. In our worldview, the land already produces what we need. Since Anishinaabemowin is action based, learning from activities on the land is paramount for understanding the language. Regular participation in the land-based activities keeps connections, ways of knowing and understanding, ways of being, and relationships strong.

Many Anishinaabemowin teachers have indicated that full language immersion is needed to understand and fully grasp Anishinaabemowin. Taking language classes online or in person does not enable participants to become fluent speakers. Hearing Anishinaabemowin through full immersion helps participants to understand day-to-day activities making it easier to learn. Unfortunately, full language immersion is expensive and time consuming. Governments do not allocate the appropriate funding needed for full immersion, and many people can’t afford to take time away from their daily lives to participate.

Paul: Indigenous languages and the land are inseparable, and for this reason it is important that language learning and transmission takes place on the land, in the home community, and in the language. For me, it’s also extremely important that the learning is immersive. In other words, in the Indigenous language that is being learned. One reason for this is to avoid reducing Indigenous worldviews and ideas into ill-fitting English words, binaries, or colonial mindsets (such as viewing the land as a resource). Much can also be lost in translation, such as TEK and Indigenous teachings.

To enable land-based and immersive language learning, it’s important to support the few existing proficient speakers there are (such as Elders) in fostering an emerging speaker base who can then teach the language to future generations. There’s also a need to implement strategies that best nurture the local communities in encouraging use of the language at home. These strategies would also entail having support mechanisms in place to address legacies of trauma, linked to colonization, in learning and reclaiming Indigenous languages that have been forcefully taken away.

Where can we go from here?

Susan: The colonizers, since the time of their arrival, have forced their language onto the Indigenous peoples. Canada has been created and sustained from the benefits of Indigenous lands such as forestry and mining. Indigenous peoples agreed to share with the settlers, with the understanding that all benefits would be shared. It is not a new recommendation for Indigenous peoples to insist that the Canadian government share the monies generated from the lands. A portion of these monies would benefit Indigenous language revitalization strategies.

The development of revitalization strategies based on region would assist in language revitalization. Language strategies are not new and have worked in other countries such as New Zealand. The difference between Canada and New Zealand is that Canada has many Indigenous languages and New Zealand has one. The development of regional Indigenous language strategies would address the multiple Indigenous languages in Canada.

Indigenous worldviews and ways of being have been recognized internationally as vital to addressing humanity’s environmental crisis. With the Indigenous worldview embedded in the languages, the revitalization of the Indigenous languages in Canada will benefit all life’s beings in addressing the crisis.

Paul: The validation and full support of Indigenous languages at a federal and provincial level is important, such as increased funding allocated to Indigenous Nations and communities to enable self-determined, culturally responsive education, and “official language” recognition. These concrete measures would help ensure that language education policies, for example, go beyond performative words, actions or short-term “commitments.”

Grassroots, local community led-, and land based-initiatives, led by Indigenous peoples and in Indigenous worldviews, would also be key. These Indigenous community-led and -based programs would ensure the revitalization initiative is not just a “copy-paste” from other successful initiatives, is truly responsive to specific community needs, language dialects and use, and fosters community capacity building and healing to address the harms of colonization.

More spaces for Indigenous communities and peoples to converse and share strategies for language revitalization and reclamation could also assist in knowledge sharing and in building a sense of wider community and support networks for trauma-based language learning barriers linked to colonization.

Concluding remarks

Language is land and land is language. Indigenous languages transmit unique ways of understanding and relating to the world. Safeguarding Indigenous languages and knowledges is vital for addressing the current climate and humanitarian crises.

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Author biographies
Ogamaunw annag qwe (Susan Chiblow) is crane clane born and raised in Garden River First Nation. She has worked extensively with First Nation communities for the last 30 years in environmental related fields. Sue is a PhD candidate at York University with a focus on N’bi G’giikendaaswinmin (Our knowledge of water) exploring humanity’s relationship to N’bi and how improving this relationship can support the well-being for N’bi and all life. Sue is the recipient of the Vanier Graduate Scholarship and is in the Pre-Doctoral Fellowship in American Indian and Indigenous Studies Program at Michigan State University.

Pòl Miadhachàin (Paul J. Meighan) is a Gàidheal (Scottish Gael) from Glasgow, Scotland. He is a PhD candidate and SSHRC Joseph-Armand Bombardier scholar at the Department of Integrated Studies in Education, McGill University, Montréal, Canada. Paul is the recipient of the AAAL 2021 Multilingual Matters Graduate Student Award. His research focuses on Indigenous language revitalization and decolonizing language education. Paul’s work has been published in TESOL Journal, ELT Journal, and the Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education journal.