

Collaborative Language Planning Project in Montana

Mizuki Miyashita, Richard Littlebear, Susan Penfield,
Alyce Sadongei, Leora Bar-el, Irene Appelbaum

This paper describes a collaborative language planning project held from Fall 2017 to Spring 2018 with the goal of organizing CoLang 2020.¹ Almost three decades ago, non-Indigenous linguists and academics began to promote language documentation and revitalization (Krauss 1992; Hale 1998; Watahomigie and Yamamoto 1992). While connections and collaborations between non-Indigenous communities and Indigenous communities have been increasingly reported in numerous articles (Bischoff and Jany 2018), inclusion of tribal colleges, to our knowledge, is still rare in the literature. The recently launched Collaborative Language Planning Project (CLPP) — a team consisting of tribal language activists and non-Indigenous linguists — aims to build on these connections to strengthen ties between individual tribal colleges and their respective reservations and/or tribal groups in order to jointly promote language activities. This project started from the opportunity for the University of Montana and Chief Dull Knife College to co-host the Institute on Collaborative Language Research, known as CoLang, in summer 2020. In this paper, we report on this project: its background, aims and organization, as well as the first implementation of the CLPP project.

Background

Prior to the CLPP project, there was an ongoing discussion among linguistics researchers at the University of Montana (UM) as well as several community scholars and students in the state of Montana about collaboration between Chief Dull Knife College (CDKC), the American Indian Language Development Institute (AILDI), and the UM. The CLPP project was set in motion by the National Science Foundation (NSF) grant opportunity available to tribal colleges and the opportunity to host the Institute on Collaborative Language Research (CoLang) in 2020. In this section, we will provide background information on the Indigenous reservations and languages of Montana and a brief discussion of the history, structure, and goals of CoLang in general and CoLang 2020 in particular to illustrate the circumstances of the co-authors.

Indian Reservations and Languages of Montana

The U.S. state of Montana is home to seven Indian reservations. These reservations are listed in Table 1 below, along with the groups who live in each and the languages spoken in them. In addition to these, the Little Shell Chippewa Tribe, who speak Chippewa, is a state-recognized tribe.

Table 1. Names of reservations and languages spoken in Montana.²

Reservation	Groups	Language
Blackfeet	Blackfeet	Blackfoot
Crow	Crow	Crow
Rocky Boy's	Chippewa-Cree	Chippewa, Cree
Flathead	Kootenai, Montana Salish, and Pend d'Oreille	Kutenai, Salish, Pend d'Oreille
Fort Belknap	Gros Ventre & Assiniboine	Gros Ventre, Nakoda
Fort Peck	Assiniboine and Sioux	Dakota, Nakoda
Northern Cheyenne	Northern Cheyenne	Cheyenne

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The CoLang Institute

The UM applied and was accepted to host CoLang to be held in summer 2020. CoLang, previously called InField, began at the University of California, Santa Barbara in 2008. Since then, it has been offered biennially at various universities around the U.S. The University of Oregon was the host in 2010. Beginning with the 2012 institute held at the University of Kansas, the name CoLang replaced InField to reflect the Institute's focus on encouraging community-based research (Czaykowska-Higgins 2009; Rice 2011), rather than fieldwork carried out by academic linguists. CoLangs 2014, 2016, and 2018 were held at the University of Texas-Arlington, the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, and the University of Florida, respectively.

Anyone interested in the field of collaborative research in language documentation and revitalization is welcome to attend the institute, including language activists, teachers, linguists, and students. CoLang typically offers two weeks of intensive workshops followed by three to four weeks of practicum.³ It offers various hands-on trainings, allowing participants to obtain basic linguistics skills and cutting-edge skills in technology and to learn about various language documentation and revitalization practices. Recurring workshops include, but are not limited to: language survey, community work, archiving, grant writing, orthography design, interdisciplinary documentation, collaborative research, project planning, language and well-being, language pedagogy, and teaching material creation. The participant-friendly environment creates multi-dimensional networks among community language workers, language teachers, academics, and students. In addition, participants are invited to carefully reflect on what it means for language projects to be community centered and/or community based. Large-scale institutes like CoLang undertake “an increasingly important role in national and international contexts” (Fitzgerald 2018, 95).

While CoLang is an international event, the location of the hosting university often contributes local themes and strengths. For the CoLang to be held in Montana in 2020, we have set the following goals:

- 1. Build on previous CoLang Institutes*

CoLang has been successful in providing opportunities for community scholars, teachers, and linguistics researchers and students. We will work closely with the CoLang Advisory Circle (AC) consisting of students, linguists, and activists from various backgrounds: international (U.S. and non-U.S.) institutions and Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. CoLang AC members are experienced “CoLangers,” and their advice helps ensure that every CoLang sustains its spirit — collaborative language research.

- 2. Incorporate Native perspectives*

The state of Montana is home to 11 Indigenous languages. The land and the environment we live in are surrounded by rich culture and traditions. The collaborative team is working toward bringing this cultural and environmental richness into the field of language study to expand the awareness of and increase opportunities to discuss and incorporate the concept of language reclamation (Leonard 2017).⁴

- 3. Increase Native scholar instructors and participants*

One way to successfully reach the above goals is to bring as many Indigenous scholars and participants possible. CoLang has been a place where all learn from each other rather than a place to be taught something. To further develop this atmosphere, the institute welcomes increased participation from Indigenous communities, who have been underrepresented in previous CoLang Institutes.

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In order to reach these goals, the following efforts have been undertaken. First, the UM and CDKC (a tribal college on the Northern Cheyenne reservation in Montana) have committed to co-hosting the Institute to demonstrate collaboration at the level of the organizers. Second, a leading member of the organizing committee participated in the Natives4Linguistics initiative, a satellite workshop at the annual meeting of the Linguistic Society of America in 2018 organized by Wesley Leonard (Miami Tribe of Oklahoma), Megan Lukaniec (Huron-Wendat Nation of Wendake, Québec), and Adrienne Tsikewa (Zuni Pueblo, New Mexico). The goal of the initiative is to expand the field of linguistic by increasing Native American participation, emphasizing that Native American intellectual traditions, needs, and epistemologies can guide the research questions, methods, products, and protocols of the linguistic science (Leonard 2018). Third, members of the organizing committee reached out to tribal colleges in Montana to learn about their current activities and needs.

Collaborative Language Planning Project

In order to successfully reach out to Montana tribal colleges, we developed and launched the Collaborative Language Planning Project (CLPP). While contributing to the success of CoLang 2020, CLPP is expected to continue developing relationships among Montana tribal colleges and the UM even afterward.

The co-authors are the core members of CLPP: Mizuki Miyashita and Susan Penfield (PI and co-PI at the UM), Richard Littlebear (PI at CDKC), Alyce Sadongei (a project coordinator at AILDI), and Leora Bar-el and Irene Appelbaum (linguistics faculty members at the UM). The project's two-year funding period began in Spring 2018. Central activities of the project include two meetings on the UM campus with core CLPP members and representatives from tribal colleges in Montana and on-site meetings at tribal college campuses around the state.

The first meeting of CLPP organizers and tribal college representatives took place in May 2018. It required quite a bit of thought and planning. We aimed to invite one person from each of the seven Montana tribal colleges—a language teacher, coordinator, or activist affiliated with the college. During the process of identifying language activists at the tribal colleges, we consulted various Indigenous scholars, employees, and students at the UM as well as individuals on the reservations by email and social media.

We were also aware that there are various language revitalization activities and efforts happening statewide, outside of tribal colleges. We wanted to hear the voices of people involved with immersion schools, such as the Cuts Wood School Blackfoot Immersion Program (Kipp 2000; 2007), Nkwusm Salish Immersion School, White Clay Immersion School (Umbhau 2009), Cree Language Nest Planning Project (Paskus 2013), and Northern Cheyenne Language Immersion Daycare (Paskus 2013). However, because of funding restrictions of TCUP and because CoLang targets and benefits language researchers and documenters who are affiliated with a college, we limited participation in CLPP meetings to individuals affiliated with a tribal college.

CLPP Implementation: The First Meeting

The first meeting was held on the UM campus on May 17, 2018. We were able to bring seven representatives from six tribal colleges: Sean Chandler (Aaniih Nakoda College), Iva Croff (Blackfeet Community College), Aspen Decker (Salish Kutenai College), Helen Parker (Stone Child College), Michael Turcotte (Fort Peck Community College), Mina Seminole (CDKC), and Steve Small (CDKC).

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This one-day meeting consisted of three sessions: I. Introduction and Overview of CoLang and AILDI; II. Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCU) Language Activities Conversation; and III. Making a Wish-List. Among these, the TCU Language Activities Conversation session proved to be the most significant part of the event and the one that generated the most enthusiasm. The session was facilitated by an initial posing of possible topics on the screen in modules. Figure 1 shows the topics that were shown and their organization, designed to encourage participants to talk about whatever they wanted, without being bound by an agenda or order. Figure 2 is a photo taken during the conversation session.

Figure 1. Conversation topics posted during a session.

Language endangerment stage? Number of speakers?	What languages are taught: at TCUs? at UM?	Position of languages at TCUs and UM?
Goals of language classes?	Resources?	Language teacher trainings?
Current/future language activities – besides courses?	Connection to communities' language activities?	Other activities? Other issues?

Figure 2. A scene during the conversation session.



Meeting Outcomes

In this section, we outline the outcomes of the first meeting, including feedback we received from the participants following the meeting. The participants represented six of the seven Montana tribal colleges, and their positions and experience varied. These included: college president, language teacher, program coordinator, project coordinator, recent graduate, elderly native speaker, young speaker, second-language learner, and language researcher. (Some participants had multiple roles.) The central positive outcome was that all participants and the CLPP core members were able to meet in person, to talk and listen to each other, and to learn that we had similar goals regarding language documentation and revitalization. As it was expressed in a feedback comment, “the best experience of the CLPP meeting was that it was very open, and that everyone had a chance to discuss their successes, set-backs, and frustrations. It was truly one of the better conferences I’ve attended.” CLPP core members also strongly feel that this was the main success of the first meeting.

Language Classes at Tribal Colleges

We learned that tribal colleges in Montana offer local language classes. However, on the reservations where multiple linguistic communities reside, not all languages are necessarily taught or equally offered. At colleges on these reservations (i.e., Stone Child College, Aaniiih Nakoda College, Salish Kootenai College), one language tends to be taught more often than the other. We also learned that language courses are required for students at tribal colleges, and, interestingly and surprisingly, more than one college has experienced pressure to waive the language requirement for students who are majoring in professional degrees. We did not explore possible solutions for this issue at the meeting, but we are aware that more discussion needs to be done to encourage these colleges to start offering more language courses, or exploring other ways to ensure that all students are exposed to the reservation’s Indigenous language(s).

Available Resources: Funding

The State of Montana offers funding for language revitalization activities among the tribes in Montana through the Montana Indigenous Language Project (MILP). The funds are distributed to tribes, who in turn handle distribution within the reservation. A concern was voiced that not all colleges receive MILP funds from their tribes. Moreover, even for those that do, there is no guarantee that the college will receive MILP funds in the year following their disbursement from the state. This situation makes planning stable projects more difficult. Therefore, it seemed prudent for colleges to explore other funding sources, such as federal Administration for Native Americans (ANA) funding through the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). It was also acknowledged that finding funding for sustained plans is a very challenging task. Future CLPP activities may include discussion regarding grant writing, which is also a workshop regularly offered at CoLang.

Licensure and Training (“Class 7”)

The one topic that all Montana tribal college participants felt both similarly and passionately about was the Native American Language and Culture Educator Licensure (“Class 7”), which is based on an agreement between the State of Montana and each of the American Indian language groups and their tribal councils. The Montana Office of Public Instruction supported the Class 7 Indian language and culture specialist license in 1995 (Littlebear 2017). Standards for Class 7 certification are developed and implemented by each tribal group in Montana, including administering an oral language fluency examination. Class 7 requesters follow their own tribe’s standards and then submit the application to the Montana

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Office of Public Instruction. This enables a knowledgeable, experienced native language speaker to be certified to teach courses based on their knowledge of the language and culture, in the absence of formal education training.

On the one hand, for fluent speakers who were not likely to return to school to obtain a teaching license, this was seen to be effective. On the other hand, since standards are dependent on each tribe's officials, there are severe challenges regarding quality control and oversight. This could vary depending on the tribe in terms of expectation, required fluency level, and level of the language's "health" (Silverthorne 1997). This system has been in operation for more than 20 years, yet language health has drastically declined in some tribes during this period. Participants agreed on the need to continue discussion regarding the Class 7.

Documentation Training

An eye-opening development for the members of the CLPP core group who are linguists (i.e., more than half) was that language teachers, coordinators, and activists from Montana tribal colleges did not focus their immediate needs on language documentation or linguistic training. Non-linguist core members are aware that linguistics and documentation training can lead to capacity building toward language research and training that can be connected to language revitalization activities. The discrepancy between the linguists' and community members' views might come from the unavailability of training venues for community activists. For example, one of the follow-up comments on linguistics training stated: "as for linguistics, I have mixed feelings, simply because I don't know enough about linguistics."

This comment also provides a key to a solution. CLPP can develop teacher training opportunities to learn about the field of linguistics and documentation on-site. The CLPP core members include representation from AILDI, at the University of Arizona. AILDI, which has been in operation for 40 years, provides linguistic and language education opportunities for Native language teachers and learners. AILDI has gained a reputation for being one of the leading organizations that demonstrates community-university collaboration (McCarty et al. 1997, 2001; Ozbolt 2010; Penfield 2010; Galla et al. 2010). Having AILDI on the project provides CLPP with access to expertise on this issue.

Conclusion

CLPP was formed as part of the effort to plan CoLang 2020. Its immediate goal is to increase the participation rate from Indigenous language communities to, in turn, raise awareness of language reclamation and implement Native perspectives. One way to achieve this is to determine the best way to share materials and ideas with others outside of these meetings. The May 2018 meeting revealed that more communication needs to be taken place to advertise the Institute. Also, an effective narrative about training in language documentation and revitalization must be developed so that those who attend the Institute will genuinely want to be there.

We hope the next tasks—videoconferencing, on-site visits, and another meeting—will close the gap in understanding the role of language documentation in language revitalization as much as possible. Also, as we understood from the May 2018 meeting, language teaching and licensure are very important issues among the communities, and incorporation of Class 7 must be addressed in CoLang 2020.

Though the initial step was taken because of the opportunity to host CoLang 2020, community-academic collaboration is a long-term process which we expect to continue long after the summer of 2020. From the beginning, we

were envisioning a continuing relationship between the UM and CDKC as well as with other tribal colleges, and the first meeting helped us feel confident that we will reach this goal as long as we continue to work together on our similar goals and interests.

Notes

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² Note that the list does not include autonym, although one of the aspects that Natives4Linguistics (see next section) advises is to use autonyms for languages and linguistic communities. The team plans to do more research and receive consultations on autonyms of Montana tribes as there are multiple versions for many of them.

³ The practicum period was three weeks in 2016 and 2018. CoLang 2020 plans to follow this format.

⁴ Leonard (2017) promotes the idea that language reclamation is an incorporation of language revitalization and decolonization

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