HOW THE PAST SHAPES THE FUTURE: COLLECTIVE MEMORY'S ROLE IN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION

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Abstract. Language motivation research traditionally emphasizes future-oriented goals and ideal future selves, but this framework may inadequately capture motivation in Indigenous language revitalization contexts. Based on interviews with 28 language revitalization practitioners from eight language communities, Allison Taylor-Adams demonstrates that collective memory—shared community histories, experiences of trauma, and ancestral legacies—powerfully shapes individual learners' motivation to learn and teach their languages. The research identifies three functions of collective memory: identity (connecting individuals to their heritage), directive (providing guidance from past experiences for present action), and continuity (establishing practitioners as links between past and future generations). The findings reveal that revitalization practitioners are motivated not only by imagined future selves but by their roles as carriers of historical memory and agents of decolonization. This research challenges individualistic, future-focused motivation theories and calls for greater attention to historical context, trauma-informed approaches, and diverse language learning contexts in applied linguistics research.

Introduction. Language motivation research has long focused on the future. Educational psychologists and applied linguists emphasize how learners envision their ideal future selves, how they imagine their goals years ahead, and how these forward-looking motivations drive their efforts to learn. Yet in studying Indigenous language revitalization practitioners—individuals working to bring ancestral languages back into active use—researcher Allison Taylor-Adams discovered

something crucial that current motivation theories overlook: the power of collective memory. These practitioners aren't motivated solely by visions of their future selves. They are deeply driven by the weight of their past, the histories of their communities, and the experiences of their ancestors. This finding, published in The Modern Language Journal, challenges fundamental assumptions about what motivates people to learn languages and suggests that comprehensive theories of motivation must account for temporal dimensions beyond the future.

Beyond the Forward-Pointing Self. Traditional motivation frameworks in second language acquisition focus on what researchers call the "L2 motivational self-system." Developed by Zoltan Dörnyei, this influential theory emphasizes the ideal L2 self—the image of who learners want to become—and the ought-to L2 self—the version of themselves they feel obligated to become. Both of these constructs are fundamentally future-oriented. They ask: who do you want to be? What goals are you reaching toward? This framework has proven useful for understanding many language learners' motivations. However, Taylor-Adams's interviews with 28 Indigenous language revitalization practitioners from eight language communities revealed that this forward-looking lens captures only part of the story. For these practitioners, motivation is inextricably tied to the past—not in a nostalgic or recreational sense, but as a powerful force shaping present and future action. As one Lushootseed language learner explained, learning traditional modes of self-introduction in the language meant learning to invoke her lineage "back several generations." This linguistic practice wasn't merely a language exercise; it reinforced her personal connection to community history and to "every bit of it"—the people, the land, the continuity of her people across time.

The Weight of Historical Trauma. Taylor-Adams's research makes clear that for Indigenous language revitalization practitioners, confronting the past often means confronting profound historical trauma. Language endangerment and shift didn't happen by accident; they resulted from deliberate policies of suppression, colonization, and forced assimilation. Many of the practitioners interviewed described learning their languages while carrying awareness of what their communities endured. One practitioner described this viscerally: "when you start to learn, you come into contact with how much you've lost." Another spoke of the "enormous pressure" of knowing her language had "survived tens of thousands of years" and was "down to your generation." A third shared a devastating family story spanning 100 years—her great-great-grandmother refusing to teach the language because "if you speak this language that means you're an Indian. And if you're an Indian you're as good as dead." These are not abstract historical facts. They are living

realities that reverberate across generations, affecting individual learners' emotions and their capacity to sustain motivation. One language teacher reflected on the challenge: "There's trauma built into the language. There's trauma built into bringing back the language." Yet Taylor-Adams notes that many practitioners, rather than being paralyzed by this trauma, transform it into motivation for healing, resistance, and reclamation.

Three Functions of Collective Memory. Rather than viewing collective memory as a monolithic force, Taylor-Adams identifies three distinct ways that collective memories function to shape individual motivation. These three functions emerge from psychological research on autobiographical memory and are adapted to account for how communities, not just individuals, invoke and transmit memory. **Identity function**: Collective memories reinforce individuals' sense of who they are. One practitioner described learning her language as a way to "connect" to missing parts of her identity and to "hear and understand the meaning that my ancestors held in how they spoke." Another noted that "when you know your language that's a piece of who you are. And when you know who you are, you stand taller and stronger." For many learners, language learning becomes intertwined with self-discovery and belonging. **Directive function**: Collective memories guide present and future behavior. Stories from elder community members about what caused language shift offer practical guidance for how to reverse it. When one practitioner heard that radio consumption had contributed to reduced visiting and language use, he "envision[ed] that as being the case in the future" and worked to rebuild community gathering practices. Past examples—of both successes and failures—become roadmaps for action. **Continuity function**: Collective memories motivate individuals to establish themselves as links between past, present, and future community members. Many practitioners frame their language work in terms of bridge-building. One learner described wanting to "bridge that gap of two generations" so her future family members could "look back later down the road and say, 'we have been Lushootseed speakers for years.'" Others imagined themselves as future ancestors, envisioning their great-nieces and grandchildren fluently speaking the language and thinking their elder's accent charming rather than shameful. What is striking about this continuity function is how practitioners collapse temporal distance. They simultaneously situate themselves in the present, envision the distant past, and imagine a future several generations away—all as a unified temporal landscape. One practitioner even invoked the spiritual dimension of this continuity, suggesting that after death, she would want to communicate with her ancestors in their language, imagining a reunion beyond this life inscribed by language itself.

Implications for Motivation Theory and Practice. Taylor-Adams's findings have significant implications for how researchers conceptualize and study motivation. Current theories, developed primarily through research on learners of English and other global languages, may not capture the full complexity of motivation in other contexts. By focusing almost exclusively on future-oriented goals, these theories miss how people's connections to community, history, and ancestors drive behavior. More broadly, the research suggests that L2 motivation cannot be adequately theorized as purely individual or purely future-focused. Learners bring their histories with them—personal histories, family histories, community histories, and histories of collective trauma and resilience. These pasts are not separate from motivation; they are constitutive of it. For educators and program leaders working in language revitalization contexts, this means that motivational strategies must engage with history. One practitioner shared how a teacher opened class by saying, "Take back your language, it was stolen, and every time you use the language, the ancestors cry." While the teacher admitted this might "come off as a little bit corny," such strategies that invoke collective memory and historical awareness can be remarkably powerful for adult learners navigating complex emotions about their communities' pasts.

A Call for Diverse Research Contexts. Taylor-Adams also emphasizes the importance of conducting language motivation research beyond English and mainstream educational contexts. The field's predominant focus on English learners has created significant theoretical gaps. Language revitalization practitioners' experiences reveal dimensions of motivation that might remain invisible if researchers only study learners of global languages in institutional settings. At the same time, Taylor-Adams asks important questions about generalizability: Is language revitalization an entirely unique context, or do the insights about collective memory and historical awareness apply more broadly? She suggests that while revitalization contexts are indeed unique in many ways, the transformative and historically conscious dimensions of language learning that practitioners exemplify may offer insights valuable for all language learners. After all, as applied linguist Bonny Norton has argued, all language learning involves identity work and the navigation of social relationships and power dynamics.

Conclusion. Allison Taylor-Adams's research fundamentally challenges how researchers and educators think about language motivation. By centering the voices and experiences of Indigenous language revitalization practitioners, she reveals that motivation is not a story about moving forward into an imagined future. It is also a story about carrying the past forward, about honoring ancestors, about healing from historical wounds, and about establishing oneself as a conscious link in the chain of

continuity between generations. As one practitioner eloquently put it, language revitalization is "a political attitude" rooted in the understanding that "the polis, the city, is not made of only wood, stones, and politicians. It's made of people, language, and history." Understanding motivation requires understanding all three.

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