

Rethinking the “Semi-speaker”: Proficiency Labels, Speaker Identity, and Language Revitalization

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ABSTRACT

In many modern language revitalization efforts, linguists use proficiency labels such as “native speaker,” “semi-speaker,” and “new speaker” to classify users of Indigenous languages into different categories based on their supposed language fluency. However, these labels may have the unintended consequence of affecting a speaker’s motivation to continue learning their heritage language. This paper proposes a new view of language revitalization through the lens of language identity that incorporates all versions of language (e.g. traditional and modern) into revitalization efforts. By first analyzing the relationship between proficiency labels and both speaker motivation and language identity, this article aims to demonstrate the importance of “semi-speakers” to language revitalization efforts. Paired with interviews with four current speakers of different Native American languages, this paper pushes for a shift in the focus of language revitalization.

INTRODUCTION

Currently, a major part of language revitalization efforts surrounds classification and documentation. In 1992, Michael Krauss wrote in his cutting-edge article that approximately 90 percent of the world’s current languages might go extinct by the end of the 21st century (Krauss, 1992). While this conclusion may have been exaggerated, it certainly served as a warning that time was ticking. As a result, linguists have worked tirelessly to capture the nuances of minority languages across the world, in hopes of extracting as much information about them as possible before the language eventually dies out. This process to record and analyze endangered languages often requires fieldwork with language informants—people who are familiar with the language at hand. Since the goal is often to formulate a model version of the endangered language and store it in a system such as a corpus, linguists tend to selectively work with only those who they believe are “native” speakers, sidelining the rest of the language’s users. In this process, linguists tend to assign speakers labels such as “native speaker” and “semi-speaker.” However, while using these proficiency labels are helpful to keep track of variability in the facility with a particular language, they may unintentionally also demotivate a young speaker from continuing to learn their heritage language.

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Over the past few decades, linguists have utilized terms such as “native speaker,” “new speaker,” and “semi-speaker” in order to quickly identify the language informants they wish to speak with and gather information from. Despite being commonly-used terms in language revitalization, their definitions are still rather underdeveloped. Many linguists seem to have slightly different understandings of the meaning of each of these terms, resulting in disparities during revitalization work (Dorian, 1977; Holliday, 2006; Boltokova, 2017). When corpora and other linguistic tools are not present, linguists primarily rely on instinct and observation to identify native speakers. They conduct interviews with speakers—asking questions about their language usage and their parents’ language usage—to gauge their comfort with the language and their usage amount.

The difficulty comes in providing a quantitative definition for “semi-speaker.” Simply put, it is nearly impossible to create a scale that can accurately and unequivocally balance the numerous skills that come with language fluency (e.g. listening and reading comprehension, translation, narration) to determine the relative language abilities of “semi-speakers.” A common tell that has been used to identify “semi-speakers” is if a speaker claims to understand a language better than they can speak it. However, this determinant only covers one scenario and is not enough of a definitive metric for quantifying what a “semi-speaker” means.

An even newer concept than “native speaker,” “new speaker” generally refers to regular and fluent users of a language that is not one’s primary language of socialization (Loingsigh & Mozzon-McPherson, 2020). Oftentimes, they acquire it through immersion programs or bilingual educational programs, rather than home or daily exposure (O’Rourke et al., 2015). Taking these soft definitions into account, many linguists equate “new speaker” with the term “non-native speaker” (O’Rourke et al., 2015). Nonetheless, given the aforementioned ambiguity regarding the meaning of “native speaker,” this associated definition of “new speaker” is even more vague because it is once again on a continuum, where the “magical point” when one becomes competent enough to be considered a speaker is not quantifiably defined.

Although their definitions are not precise, there at least exists an agreement that the terms “native speaker” and “new speaker” do not refer to the same people. However, the lines blur significantly when the label “semi-speaker” is added to the discussion. First used by Nancy Dorian in 1977, a “semi-speaker” is an individual with an incomplete command of a particular language (Seibert Hanson, 2021). While some linguists argue that this term lies between “native speaker” and “new speaker” in terms of proficiency, others argue that it rests on a completely different spectrum—one more centered around usage quantity and style, rather than competency. That is to say, while “semi-speakers” can be skilled bilinguals, they may also show more departure from the linguistic norm of the language (Dorian, 1977, p. 26). The biggest problem about dealing with “semi-speakers” in language revitalization is that while they speak a version of the language, this version tends to differ from traditional standards. As such, despite their comfort with speaking the language in their way, they are often brushed aside in language documentation.

Despite the equivocality that comes with these terms, most linguists engaging in language revitalization still opt to use them. When working with endangered languages, time is often the main concern. Consequently, assigning these labels is a quick means of identifying the key language informants that they deem to be most useful. Regarding this act, there are two levels of disagreements among scholars. The first discussion is about whether these labels should be used at all. Especially considering that many “semi-speakers” view themselves as real speakers of the language, the different judgements made by linguists can cause misinterpretation and miscommunications (Boltokova, 2017). The second layer concerns who to include in language revitalization efforts, under the assumption that proficiency labels are being used; several scholars argue that the inclusion of “non-native speakers” are critical to capturing the entire image of the language, while others tend to privilege “native-speaker” norms as the sole benchmark for revitalization.

Rather than solely relying on labels that may affect speakers’ motivation to continue learning their heritage language and reinforce language power dynamics, I am proposing to view language revitalization through the lens of language identity and to incorporate all versions of the language into these efforts. Doing so requires two key mindset changes—patience for the process and acceptance of language change. In this paper, I first provide more background on the problem with utilising proficiency labels from both the perspective of individual learners and Indigenous tribes. Then, the paper analyzes many case studies—personally-conducted discussions with individuals who either grew up in Indigenous communities or have worked closely with them—to support the main argument, which contains four subsections. First is the idea of prioritizing language identity and how we must respect the environment of those who we intend to help. The second section focuses on highlighting the effects of using proficiency labels—namely, loss of motivation and solidification of language hierarchies. Then, the focus shifts to discussing valuing a greater group of speakers when documenting languages. Lastly, the idea of accepting language change is brought up, broadening to encompass a new view of language revitalization that could allow for a more holistic view of the minority languages linguists are trying to help.

Ultimately, this paper serves not only to inform linguists on potential reconsiderations regarding their current approach to helping endangered languages but also shines light to a different perspective of language revitalization. This mindset shift is critical, as we need to put ourselves in the shoes of those we are trying to help; though these labels were created in hopes of helping language revitalization efforts, the impact needs to be valued over the intent. The matter discussed in this paper may point future language revitalization for indigenous languages in a more community-based direction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Speaker Proficiency

Research on “new speakers” is a relatively new area of applied linguistics. Before the term “new speaker” was popularized, language revivalists evaluated learners of a second language with many different titles, including “L2 speaker,” “emergent bilinguals,” and “conductors of translingual practice” (O’Rourke et al.,

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2015; García & Kleifgen, 2010; Canagarajah, 2013). However, due to the disparities between these previously-used labels, “new speaker” was brought in to try to move away from the former confusion. Additionally, the term “new speaker” is more geared towards Indigenous or heritage languages, where it refers to someone who learns the language later in life, rather than acquiring it during their childhood.

Linguists have long evaluated a speaker’s proficiency by comparing them with other speakers; if one individual appears more fluent than another to a non-speaker, they may be deemed as “more native” (Dorian, 1977). However, while this may have worked for languages with a larger speaker population, more refined judgments would need to be made for languages spoken by very few people. This is why the term “semi-speaker” was created. Intended to represent speakers with more departure from the linguistic norm of a particular language, “semi-speaker” does not necessarily lie on the linear scale of “nativeness.”

The Problem with Proficiency Labels

Some linguists argue that using language proficiency classifiers may come across as shallow to Indigenous cultures, especially to those that encompass intergenerational and holistic worldviews. For example, the Anishinaabe worldview believes in the interconnectedness of values, belief systems, and Indigenous community lifeways. For them, helping others, having deeper understandings and beliefs, embracing their identity, and having healthy relationships leads to community connection (Gonzalez et al., 2023). In particular, this includes the connections and relationships built through language. If this link is weakened by language labels, the ripple effect may loosen the cultural structure of the community.

Thanks to the reclamation and revitalization efforts of late, certain Indigenous communities have seen an increase in newly bilingual or multilingual speakers. Some North American scholars view language reclamation as a decolonizing social practice, viewing “new speaker” according to primary language learning background (Palakurthy, 2022). Most of the time, these “non-native” speakers of Indigenous languages display high levels of commitment to learning the language and its cultural connections. Therefore, we could have so much more data on specific linguistic features of learners of North American Indigenous languages and emergent varieties of those languages if we didn’t brush aside the “new speakers,” since their innovations and learning strategies are valuable to keep in mind as well.

Some scholars argue that the categorization of speakers using the term “non-native” has become increasingly toxic (Dewaele & Leung, 2022). They state that it is unrealistic and discriminatory to expect L2 learners to attain “native” levels of fluency. As a workaround, they proposed using “L1 user” and “LX user” as terms for speakers of the language who acquired it as their first language and those who acquired it after the age of three, respectively (Dewaele & Leung, 2022). When using this labelling format, “LX users” may understand that they have varying proficiency levels but are still seen as legitimate users of the language.

Something else that is important to consider is that mastery of multiple languages can allow ethnic minority students to construct more powerful multilingual and multicultural identities. Part of this development of an individual’s ethnic identity includes language attitude (Hua et al., 2023).

When a linguist gets involved with a community, the ideologies of language and identity sometimes conflict with each other (Hornberger & Korne, 2024). Even with good intentions, disruptions will cause ripples in the current status of the language and culture of the community. Given that languages are intrinsically linked to identity, linguists should at least attempt to make these group identities more inclusive and fluid, and more in line with the conceptualisations of identity and belonging. Speaker identity is valuable to users of minority languages, regardless of their proficiency (Augustyniak, 2021). If scholars state that only usage of particular linguistic forms and possession of particular linguistic repertoires validate speaker identities, users of the language may become disheartened. The fact of the matter is that everyone’s different inherent understanding and perception of these definitions cause miscommunications that are not solved by persistent usage of such labels from these lenses.

Speakerhood and Identity

Historically, language was framed as a maternally transmitted trait ("mother tongue"); over time, discourse shifted to frame language as a broader form of cultural or patrimonial inheritance (Birkland et al., 2022). Some scholars have placed a stronger emphasis on shifting the perspective towards these terms, rather than changing the terms themselves. For example, considering the term “new speaker,” some scholars have suggested framing it as a social category subject to social negotiation and variation delineated by “new speakers” themselves, rather than neatly formulating a precise definition (O’Rourke et al., 2015). This recommendation stems from concerns that clinical terminology like “semi-speaker” delegitimizes non-native learners (O’Rourke et al., 2015). These categories have been constructed to map the effect of language shift left on speakers’ performances and competencies (Jaffe, 2011). Unfortunately, this represents a language shift which documents linguistic disembodiment through various forms of tainted and corrupted language practices of more “correct” linguistic models (Jaffe, 2011). As a result, a proposed approach that gives new speakers recognition as linguistic models, moving away from clinical labels, is viewing these terms as a reembodiment of the language that is not dependent on alignment with existing speaker models. One of these methods was the Fishmanian approach to reversing language shift, which drew on the principles of positivist sociology and social psychology to emerge at the central idea that languages defined group belonging (O’Rourke et al., 2015).

In the past, those who were regarded as “native speakers” would have been at the core of linguistic revival efforts, since they would have been viewed as speaking the traditional form of the language. However, the selection for “native speakers” has become increasingly harder to explain, especially when considering the apparent deviations from the recorded “status quo” as displayed by newer speakers of the language (O’Rourke et al., 2015). By placing authenticity as the primary requirement for language studies, scholars designate certain users as illegitimate representatives of a given community (Bucholtz, 2003). Interestingly but unexpectedly, the contradictions have implications beyond sociolinguistics itself. Oftentimes, older generations living in more rural areas are associated with “nativeness,” while middle-class urban dwellers are generally classified as “new speakers” (O’Rourke et al., 2015). Given that these classifiers have different implications amongst various communities, scholars are starting to question why we aren’t letting the community decide how to deal with their language identity.

In cases where the language experienced a significant shift intergenerationally, there may not be as many native speakers in the younger generations. For instance, the grandchild generation (grandchildren of current community elders) may have previously had exposure to the language, but may not feel comfortable enough to be considered or consider themselves as native speakers. In communities facing this situation, there may also be significant fluctuations in language ability. Those of the younger generations who feel a stronger desire to learn the language will develop more fluency in it, while those who view it as unimportant may become less proficient.

As previously mentioned, the practices of “native speaker” enumeration are often rooted in the premise of linguistic purism. Consequently, the heterogeneous linguistic practices of “semi-speakers,” who actually make up most of the young speakers in endangered language communities, are not captured. Especially in the context of endangered languages, fluency should not be categorised and measured so loosely. To reverse this, the discussion should be shifted towards language vitality, so that semi-speakers can be acknowledged and counted as rightful speakers of endangered languages (Boltokova, 2017). Language vitality mainly looks at two factors: the people who are using the language and how often the language is being used. For instance a language that is sometimes used by older generations and rarely used by younger generations would not be considered very vital. On the other hand, a language that is actively being spoken by people in their teens and twenties would be considered quite vital.

Alternative Approaches to Proficiency Labels

One reason linguists have argued for the exclusion of semi-speakers from documentation is to prevent the creation of a distorted perception of a given language’s overall health: if all semi-speakers are counted as native speakers, then the language may appear less endangered than it actually is (Boltokova, 2017). Furthermore, linguists are worried that semi-speakers may misrepresent a language’s features due to their blending of elements from multiple languages through language contact. In language endangerment situations, this occurrence is more common, with the lesser used language borrowing more grammar and vocabulary from the dominant language because it is being used simultaneously. However, if only the new changes are documented, then there will be no old materials to look back on. Consequently, the difficulty comes in balancing multiple versions of the language in a way that doesn’t require documenting everyone’s speech, as that would take a significant period of time.

Rather than isolating these differences, we should be exploring these ambiguities. The personal beliefs and unique perceptions of languages that semi-speakers bring play just as important a role in language documentation and revitalisation as “native speakers” do; the inclusion of these contradictory ways of speech can better set up the revitalisation direction for the language moving forward. Considering that language revitalisation serves to ensure that future generations will continue speaking the language, generational language shift is definitely an element to consider when working with these endangered languages.

With that being said, it is true that simply counting the number of self-identifying speakers may yield drastically different results from only considering the “native speakers.” Therefore, local perceptions of language use and vitality are pivotal and should also be incorporated into studies and efforts. Especially given that some of the people linguists may classify as “semi-speakers” perceive themselves to be “real speakers,” drawing sharp lines between fluent and partially fluent speakers can profoundly affect the beliefs and attitudes of younger generations towards speaking their heritage language (Boltokova, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

The methodological framework for this project are as follows. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with speakers of different Native languages currently living away from their community. Their thoughts and opinions were then organized and analyzed thematically to form a shared narrative.

To collect data for this project, I interviewed speakers of the Hawaiian, Dakota, and Navajo languages. These speakers are current and/or former students of Dartmouth College, who offered to help out after Professor Lindsay Whaley—whom I worked on this research paper with—reached out to them. Their ages range between 20 and 30, and they all grew up in their respective indigenous communities. The interviews were conducted both virtually on Zoom and asynchronously through email. For all cases, the interviewee gave consent for their words to be anonymously quoted and referenced in this paper. Zoom interviews were recorded using Zoom’s built-in recording feature and later transcribed by hand for accuracy. The shared thoughts were then organized and analyzed thematically, leading to the formation of four subsections in the Results and Discussion section.

My own experiences and linguistic background inevitably shaped my approach towards the data collection and analysis process. As someone who has learned and encountered multiple languages in educational environments, I am familiar with the use of proficiency labels in those contexts. However, since I am not a member of an indigenous community, my analysis approached this topic through an outside perspective. The purpose of the interviews with members of these indigenous communities was thus to gather an inside perspective on the situation, which I used to guide my thinking and analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Proficiency Labels and Speaker Motivation

One of the most immediate and consequential effects of using proficiency labels in language revitalization contexts is its behavioural impact on speaker motivation (Dewaele & Leung, 2022). Although linguists introduced terms such as “semi-speaker” to categorize varying levels of language fluency, their usage in practice can lead to unintended psychological consequences when it comes to learning the language, especially for the younger generations.

In some cases, linguistic categories may exceed being merely descriptive and may affect social hierarchies and relationships. Scholars have discussed how many Indigenous communities tend to show resistance towards rigid classifications such as “native speaker,” as they set standards of language use from an external standpoint (Devaele & Leung, 2022). In reality, fluency alone cannot dictate one’s language capabilities, for proficiency should also account for a multifaceted evolving relationship with the language (i.e. including cultural and identity aspects).

The interviews conducted for this study illustrate how these abstract concerns affect lived experience. Several participants noted how labels like “semi-speaker” shaped their perceptions of their own linguistic abilities, often limiting their confidence and sometimes even hindering their desire to keep learning the language. One interviewee learning Dakota mentioned that they, despite ongoing progress, felt restricted by the “semi-speaker” category and that they didn’t feel like they would ever be able to move beyond it, especially when being compared to their elders. This sentiment suggests that the seemingly innocuous label “semi-speaker” may actually affect a learner’s self-confidence and approach towards learning their language moving forward. In cases like these, proficiency labels risk turning a theoretically enthusiastic journey of learning a heritage language to a path filled with psychological hindrances.

This phenomenon is reinforced by social dynamics within communities. A Navajo learner described how younger speakers often feel embarrassed to use the language due to fear of mispronunciation or criticism, leading them to opt to using English instead. Here, the issue stems from the social consequences attached to “imperfect” language use. While this idea of linguistic purism exists in most languages, the stress placed on formal language education in language revitalization efforts adds a layer of complexity to what counts as authentic language. When language ability is consistently measured against a traditional benchmark, learners may become more reluctant to practice the language at all. This aligns with existing research suggesting that language attitudes play a critical role in shaping both motivation and identity formation among language-learners (Hua et al., 2023). As another interviewee observed, the dominance of “academic language” in educational settings has the potential to distance learners even further from their heritage language, reinforcing the negative perception that their existing linguistic practices are inadequate.

With that being said, it is not the case that all forms of proficiency labelling are inherently harmful. In certain contexts, such as educational assessment or program evaluation, these labels can be seen as benchmarks for tracking progress. However, when their purpose leans more heavily on rigid classification rather than language growth, they can inadvertently obscure the primary goal of language revitalization: increasing Indigenous language use within a community.

This tension points to a key disparity between Indigenous languages and contemporary revitalization goals. Historically, linguists have prioritized identifying and preserving the most “authentic” or “complete” forms of endangered languages when it comes to language documentation, often relying solely on “proficient speakers” for data (O’Rourke et al., 2015). Admittedly, this method has produced many valuable records. However, it is important to keep in mind that doing so may unintentionally

marginalize the younger and “less fluent” speakers of these languages, the very demographics who are most crucial to the language’s future vitality. Consequently, by overemphasizing fluency as a benchmark through the use of proficiency labels, linguists may actually be discouraging participation, rather than fostering it.

Proficiency Labels and Language Identity

In addition to their effects on individual motivation and language-learning behaviour, proficiency labels may also have implications on the connections between a language and its Indigenous community’s identity. For many communities, their language is more than just a means of communication; it is a central component of their collective culture (Boltokova, 2017; McCarty et al., 2006). Consequently, this categorization of speakers through proficiency labels may weaken the connection between the language and the community’s cultural identity.

Once again, this tension reflects on a slight disparity between western linguistic frameworks and Indigenous understandings of language. Traditional linguistic models tend to treat language as an object that can be measured, documented, and evaluated according to standardized criteria. On the other hand, Indigenous worldviews often emphasize the interconnectedness of language with land, culture, and relationships. As numerous scholars have explained, Indigenous language practices are deeply embedded within a community’s values (Hornberger & Korne, 2024; Hua et al., 2023). In other words, speaking the language is often inseparable from engaging in the culture itself. Thus, by only categorizing individuals based on proficiency, linguists risk oversimplifying the complex cultural ties between these languages and their communities’ identities.

The interviews I conducted highlight how these sentiments may come out in practice. For instance, one Hawaiian speaker emphasized how their connection to their culture is inseparable from their knowledge of the language. Specifically, they explained how understanding songs, chants, and stories allowed them to more meaningfully experience the culture of their environment. This perspective directly highlights that language proficiency cannot be sufficiently captured through only standardized measures, for one’s relationship to the language may be deep and significant even if it does not align with externally defined benchmarks of fluency.

In addition, participants pointed out the ways in which proficiency labels can unintentionally create divisions within communities. A Navajo learner explained that academic and linguistic frameworks tend to distance learners from the language because of their prioritization of “correctness” over participation. Likewise, a Dakota learner noted how external comparisons between their use of their language and their elders’ uses of them reinforced a hierarchy where younger speakers feel “less legitimate.” From these examples, it can be inferred that proficiency labels also contribute to the forming of conflicting internal dynamics.

However, the Navajo speaker also shared that there were some elders and adult community members that did support their journey with the heritage language. In those scenarios, they felt satisfied with being a

“semi-speaker” who still has room to grow. The Dakota learner presented another perspective. They talked about how they realistically accept that they are not as “proficient” in the language compared to the elders. They stated how since they don’t yet have the confidence to identify as a “fluent speaker,” the label “semi-speaker” does not feel discouraging at this stage.

It is pivotal to remember that the relationship between language and identity is not uniform within a community; each individual has their own connection between language and identity. Everyone has different experiences, motivations, and expectations in regards to language use, and individuals’ perspectives should not be mistakenly homogenized. While some speakers may actually find labels useful for expressing their current level of ability, others may perceive them as restricting. This variability is exactly why the usage of proficiency labels must be approached with caution, for their effects may vary significantly based on communal and individual values.

Taking these complexities into mind, reconceptualizing speaker identity by accepting different speakers’ individual relationships with their language and culture may be more productive when it comes to language revitalization. This would allow linguists to support a wider range of speakers, fostering more engaged and comfortable community efforts towards revitalization.

The Importance of “Semi-Speakers”

In many language documentation and revitalization frameworks, so-called “semi-speakers” are treated as “insufficient” users of a language (Birkeland et al., 2022). Fundamentally, this process stems from implicit comparisons to standards of “native fluency.” Unfortunately, this approach tends to both oversimplify the Indigenous language itself and overlook the critical role that these “semi-speakers” can actually play in ensuring the survival of these endangered languages.

In many communities in which fewer and fewer people were speaking the Native language, language revitalization efforts were put into place to document and hopefully reinvigorate the language (Boltokova, 2017). This process came alongside the categorization of Indigenous language speakers into labels such as “semi-speaker.” Unfortunately, in doing so, linguists introduce hierarchical frameworks where certain manners of speech were valued over others. As a result, while terms like “semi-speaker” arose from attempts to describe linguistic variation in declining languages, they quickly became associated with a reduction in competence and the ability to expand one’s linguistic repertoire in the target language. Ideally, they should be used as a recognition for speakers that are actively participating in the dynamic linguistic system through other means.

Fortunately, recent scholarship has begun to challenge this interpretation, with linguists arguing that the use of such categories and labels cannot in fact capture the heterogeneous nature of language use, especially in these complex Indigenous societies (Boltokova, 2017; Palakurthy, 2022). As a matter of fact, within most endangered language communities, these supposed “semi-speakers” make up a majority of the younger speakers.

Growing up with English (or some other regionally dominant language) having a significant presence in their lives, this younger generation of speakers holds experiences of bilingualism, cultural influences, and language shifts that the older generations do not have. One interviewed Hawaiian speaker shared that many young members of their community grow up simultaneously learning English and Hawaiian, bringing a new bilingual perspective to their heritage language. Consequently, even though their language usage may vary from the culturally purist standards of the elders, their speech should not be regarded as a degraded form of the language, but rather as evidence of its continued adaptation, for languages naturally evolve.

Other interviewees from this study also strongly support this proposed re-evaluation, sharing insights on how the members of their community who have been labelled as “semi-speakers” in fact have deep personal connections with their language and culture. For example, a Navajo learner, who would conventionally be regarded as a “semi-speaker,” spoke about how they have continuously sought to learn and reconnect with their community. Instances like these demonstrate how linguistic ability cannot simply be reduced to several discrete buckets of competence; rather, language-learning is multifaceted and multidimensional.

As previously mentioned, designation of the label itself can affect speakers’ perception of their own role within their communities. An interviewed Dakota speaker shared that they believed “one’s confidence in language proficiency will always be held back by a label.” This included how they viewed their role as a speaker of their heritage language in their community. Consequently, it is necessary to reframe “semi-speakers” as valuable contributors in the language revitalization process. Doing so has numerous benefits: it shifts preservation to contemporary statuses, involves a wider group of speakers, and addresses the cross-generation differences when it comes to Indigenous languages.

To start, by shifting the focus from preserving a longstanding traditional form of the language to supporting its active use in evolving contemporary contexts, efforts more closely approach increasing the number of fluent speakers, as it accepts the language’s natural evolution over time. In doing so, individuals who may only have partial proficiency in a language still play a critical role in the overall conservation efforts, as they are the ones who are most actively leading the natural transformation of the language, including new communication methods, language blending, and adaptive linguistic structures. From this lens, these “semi-speakers” are active agents who are aiding the continuation of the language. This is arguably the most important point behind this shift in perspective. Elder speakers will only continue to age, meaning the future of endangered languages will depend on younger generations. They may not have had access to complete immersion environments, but completely marginalizing them due to their language proficiency risks undermining revitalization efforts in the long term. Instead, language revivalists should aim to embrace a broader range of speaker profiles, which includes “semi-speakers,” so that they can foster an increased sense of ownership and belonging amongst younger community members, who represent the future of the language.

Once again, these complex considerations converge to suggest a shift to recognize the diverse ways in which "semi-speakers" can aid revitalization efforts. By adapting old frameworks and choosing to include more community members, Indigenous communities may feel more direct involvement with ensuring the continuation of their language.

Shifting the Focus

The previous discussions on motivation, identity, and the role of “semi-speakers” lead to this final section that addresses a need to shift the mentality when it comes to language revitalization. Traditionally, revitalization efforts have been closely linked to preserving traditional forms of endangered languages. However, this constant emphasis on proficiency, as done so through the use of labels like “native speaker” and “semi-speaker,” may inadequately reflect the contemporary reality of language use in these Indigenous communities.

To address this proposed change, the historical foundations of endangered language documentation must first be revisited. Early revitalization efforts tended to be driven by a sense of urgency, especially with Krauss’s dramatic statement that 90 percent of the world’s languages were predicted to go extinct by the end of the 21st century (Boltokova, 2017; Krauss, 1992). In this context, prioritizing highly fluent speakers was practical and, arguably, necessary, for they were the ones who could bring what was then the most reliable linguistic data for these endangered languages. While this approach has brought around invaluable documentation, it has also raised the benchmark of fluency. Consequently, many contemporary efforts have attempted to match this previous standard, rather than looking ahead to evolving contexts. Furthermore, with many linguists shifting their focus from documentation to revitalization, this old model’s limitations become even more apparent. Fundamentally, revitalization is not merely about preserving a language as it once was; rather, it also encapsulates enabling the language to function within the ever-changing community. Through this lens, the primary goal of these modern-day efforts is not to produce a small number of highly fluent speakers. Instead, the purpose is to expand the opportunities for these languages to be used by a wider range of speakers in different contexts.

Linguistic competence is inherently multidimensional, and each speaker contributes to the language differently. For instance, some individuals may excel in understanding the language but struggle with pronunciation, while others may have unique cultural ties to the language. Either way, the overall vitality of a language cannot be captured by a linear metric of fluency; it must be viewed and understood through diverse lenses.

It is important to note that this proposed shift in perspective and approach does not invalidate the relevancy of proficiency in language revitalization. In fact, proficiency is a vital component of these efforts. What I am suggesting is that proficiency should be considered within a broader framework that prioritizes, access, inclusivity, and identity.

The interviews conducted in this study provide support for this suggested reframing. Multiple participants stressed the importance of their heritage languages in everyday conversations. For instance, a Navajo

speaker shared that the Navajo language is “a language that can be felt,” as words tend to have more than just a descriptive meaning and cannot be easily translated to English. A Hawaiian speaker also expressed how they felt most comfortable using their language around people who supported their language journey and recognized that the next generation wants to carry on the language and identity in their own way. In the modern day, these daily interactions are inevitably colloquial and will be characterized by non-standard forms of these languages. Nonetheless, these practices still represent meaningful contributions to the language’s vitality. In fact, these hybrid practices can be seen as stepping stones towards higher proficiency, as long as they are openly accepted and appreciated.

Ultimately, this proposed reorientation of language revitalization builds upon existing efforts. It does not eliminate the need for linguistic analysis and/or documentation; instead, it opens up the doors to the broader goal of supporting evolving language practices. As such, proficiency labels can indeed still play a role, so long as they are applied with caution. When used correctly, they can be a means of efficiently describing linguistic diversity that genuinely reflects and acknowledges the complexity and evolution of Indigenous communities.

CONCLUSION

Through speaking with individuals from Navajo, Dakota, and Hawaiian communities, I have gathered opinions and statements that highlight the impacts of using proficiency labels such as “semi speaker”: motivation loss, identity fragmentation, and internal hierarchy.

It is worth noting that this study has several limitations. First, the small sample size and narrow range of represented communities may have limited diversity in opinions regarding this topic. Additionally, there may have been some bias in my position as a researcher when organizing and analyzing the data. Lastly, the distribution of evidence was uneven across sections, resulting in some claims being more sufficiently corroborated than others. Nonetheless, the ideas presented can still serve as key insights for linguists who wish to conduct acts of language revitalization.

Currently, this field is still quite centered around documentation, which comes with the assignment of proficiency labels towards speakers of these minority languages. When terms such as “semi-speaker” are used to describe the younger generation of heritage-language speakers, the once-interested learners may be deterred from continuing to engage with the language. Especially for groups where language is regarded as essential to their way of life, this interference may even cause separations from their heritage culture.

When contributing to a language’s revitalisation, I believe the focus should be placed on language identity and language vitality, rather than language documentation through the lens of linguistic purism. This means valuing not only the older generation of speakers, who may have been speaking their heritage language from birth, but also the younger speakers, many of whom are also passionate about their

language and culture. Although the younger generation’s “version” of the language may differ from the Elders’, their contribution to the language’s evolution is critical and paves the path for the next generation of learners. Most importantly, the future of these languages depends on the younger generation, as they are the ones who will be passing it down to their children.

Therefore, it is suggested that we refrain from assigning proficiency labels that isolate the “non-native” speakers and instead encourage the use of the language through a variety of means that accept all forms of the language. In practice, this may take the form of community-based revitalization approaches with more flexible frameworks that acknowledge the various forms of language use across age ranges and proficiency levels. These frameworks can also be developed in discussion with community members, allowing them to play a role in determining how they wish for their communal language to be represented. Moving forward, researchers may also consider conducting comparative language studies across communities and examining the effects of proficiency labels on speaker motivation and language use over time. Such work would further move the discussion towards developing approaches that more effectively support language revitalization.

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