A’tsotsspommootsiiyop
Niitsitapi’powahsin

“We help each other together with the Blackfoot language”

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Acknowledgements


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University collaborators: Inge Genee (University of Lethbridge), Marie-Odile Junker (Carleton University), Leslie Saxon (University of Victoria), Delasie Torkornoo (Carleton University), Martina Wiltschko (University of British Columbia)

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Sta’aipokaa

Siksika

Ghost Girl
This is the story of a little ghost girl that Fred saw at his home.

O’takssinskiwoo

Siksika

https://stories.blackfoot.atlas-ling.ca
Outline of the talk

• The Blackfoot Stories Database

• Youth engagement initiatives

• Impacts

• Future directions
The Blackfoot Stories Database

• Background
• Methods
• Outcomes
History of the database

• Collaborations on language projects dating back to 2005
  • e.g., Bliss 2005, 2013; Bliss & Breaker 2015; Gick et al 2012; Ritter & Rosen 2010; Ritter 2015

• The idea for the stories database was borne of mutual interests
  • Linguistic research
  • Language documentation and preservation

• Established in 2016 through a postdoctoral fellowship to Heather Bliss

• Digital platform, infrastructure, tech support, and server space
  • provided through the Algonquian Dictionaries Project (Junker et al. 2005-19)
Group Storytelling Sessions

• 2-10 storytellers gather to tell stories
  • usually around a particular theme (e.g., floods)
  • sometimes at locations of interest (e.g., the river)

• Synergy in groups
  • Group sessions are fun & engaging
  • Create a natural environment for storytelling
  • Yields different kinds of data than individual sessions, which may be more formal or more one-sided (e.g., Bliss & Wiltschko 2018)
  • Spark creativity - one story leads to another
  • Corpus grows quickly
Outcomes

• 21 storytellers

95 stories (... and growing)
Storytelling across generations

“The stories teach the kids how to be, how not to be, how to live their lives, how to raise children, how things are in the world. They are entertaining too. Young kids get something out of it, older kids, young adults who are married and raising their kids, they all get something out of it. All of these stories have a meaning; they are told to teach. If an Elder wants to teach a child, he doesn’t just sit him down and say things; he will tell a story. The stories have meaning.”

– Natóóhkitopi Fred Breaker, Siksika Elder and Horn Society member

Focus of this talk:

• Ways in which the project is evolving to include and engage community members of various ages and linguistic abilities in Blackfoot language revitalization through the creation and curation of the stories database
Youth engagement

• Inviting young people to storytelling sessions
• Mentoring students in database development
Inviting young people to storytelling sessions

- **The original plan**: Document fluent L1 speakers

- **An organic change**: L1 speakers started bringing their (adult) children to storytelling sessions
  - Initially, most are observers
  - With increasing frequency, they are telling stories of their own – sometimes in English, sometimes in Blackfoot, sometimes a bit of both
  - Elders assist when they “get stuck” and help translate English passages into Blackfoot
Connecting students & storytellers

• **Objective:**
  To engage Blackfoot students at the University of Calgary who are living off-reserve and away from their Blackfoot-speaking communities

• We are providing training and mentorship on how to record, edit, and archive stories for the database

• We are creating opportunities for students
  • to learn principles and practices of language documentation
  • to work with the Blackfoot language in an immersive and concentrated way
  • to develop technical skills in audio/video recording and digital editing and archiving
Impacts

• Bearing witness
• Addressing the fluency bias
• Breaking down barriers
• Bridging the gaps
Bearing witness

“When I was young, I used to always go with my mother, go all over the reserve, and everywhere we went there were Elders, and I just had to sit and listen to their stories. That’s how I learned.”

-- Apohyaki Trudy Axe

Youth involvement in the database provides opportunities for young people:

• to listen to their stories
• To hear their language, and
• to witness their Elders engaging in language preservation
Addressing the fluency bias

• The language of older generation L1 speakers is often privileged:
  • Native speaker bias in linguistic research and language pedagogy (e.g., Cook 1999)
  • “New Blackfoot” often regarded by community as “slang” or “broken” (Genee & Junker 2018)

• Should fluency be privileged?
  • Uran 2012 (on Ojibwemowin):
    “Since the language is seen as a living thing, to apply a measure of fluency would be a container, a sort of cage, or perhaps a limit to the language itself. To attain fluency is to conquer or own the language.”

    “Since the language is seen as a precious connection to heritage, even minimal, emblematic use becomes a claim to authenticity as an Ojibwe person”
Addressing the fluency bias

• By inviting self-reported non-fluent or semi-fluent speakers to share their stories – and by including these stories in the archive – we can help to:
  • Promote varied expressions of the language
  • Destigmatize “new Blackfoot”
  • Encourage other young people to continue learning and using the language, regardless of perceived “fluency”
Breaking down barriers

• Siksika is home to many people who were raised with their language and may have significant passive knowledge of it but do not often speak it (see also Genee & Junker 2018)
  • semi-speakers, latent speakers, fluent listeners, silent speakers
    (e.g., Basham & Fathman 2008; Boltokova 2017; Dorian 1977)

• Due to negative past experiences or trauma, some of these people may face psychological and/or social barriers in speaking their language (e.g., Dauenhauser & Dauenhauser 1998; Juuso 2015)

• Group storytelling sessions pair fluent and non-fluent speakers in a safe and supportive atmosphere

• These experiences may be healing, and may contribute to breaking down barriers preventing people from speaking and sharing their language
Bridging the gaps

“When I was younger, I wasn’t really involved in my community. As I get older, I’ve learned more about Indigenous history and colonialism, and I’ve been going back into the community and learning more from both perspectives ... Now I am writing an Indigenous comic; this is one of the ways in which I am trying to connect these pieces. I like stories. I like the idea of telling stories and how it bridges those gaps.”

--Charm Breaker (Siksika, University of Calgary student)

• Working on the database provides opportunities to connect and integrate different types of experiences and teachings (Indigenous and academic)

• Students’ unique perspectives will help shape the future of the database (e.g., including comics)

• This work may inspire further studies in linguistics and language revitalization for these or other Siksika students (see, e.g., Gerdts 2017)
Future Directions

- Intergenerational storytelling
- Language documentation skills training
Intergenerational storytelling

• Naatoopi Lee Breaker, Horn Society member, wants to document a traditional creation story

• As a semi-speaker and learner, he needs assistance to tell the story entirely in Blackfoot

• Lee and his mother, Noreen, will work together, reviewing vocabulary and expressions, and recording and analysing new versions of the story

• By working through multiple versions of the story together:
  • Lee can advance his Blackfoot language skills
  • We can observe and learn from Lee’s language learning journey
  • We can document this important story for future generations
Language documentation skills training

• Interdisciplinary collaboration to develop a workshop series on Blackfoot language documentation
  • Responds directly to community recommendations on how the University of Calgary can support language revitalization (Bliss & Breaker 2018)
  • Team comprised of Siksika community members (Elders, traditional knowledge-holders, educators, filmmaker), and academic allies (linguists, librarians)
  • Skills-based training program (audio/video recording and editing, digitization, transcription, orthography, archiving, grants-writing)
  • Siksika-specific, tailored to community interests

• Through the workshop series, younger community members can learn ways to connect their skills and interests in audiovisual and digital technologies with Blackfoot language and culture
Conclusions

• The Blackfoot Stories Database is
  • a repository of cultural and linguistic knowledge,
  • a tool for bringing people together through the language, and
  • a vehicle for engaging Siksika youth in Blackfoot language documentation and revitalization

“There is an emptiness when there is no language ... I miss speaking Blackfoot, and I would like to see it come back. I really feel that we need a change, and this is the starting point. Blackfoot is the language we can come together on, be social, tell stories.”

-- Katai’tsinopaakii Mildred Three Suns, Siksika Elder
References


Nitsiko’tahsi’taki!

Slides and references will be posted to www.sfu.ca/~hbliss
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