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#KeepOurLanguagesStrong: Indigenous Language Revitalization on Social Media during the Early COVID-19 Pandemic

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Indigenous communities, organizations, and individuals work tirelessly to #KeepOurLanguagesStrong. The COVID-19 pandemic was potentially detrimental to Indigenous language revitalization (ILR) as this mostly in-person work shifted online. This article shares findings from an analysis of public social media posts, dated March through July 2020 and primarily from Canada and the US, about ILR and the COVID-19 pandemic. The research team, affiliated with the NETOL-NEW “one mind, one people” Indigenous language research partnership at the University of Victoria, identified six key themes of social media posts concerning ILR and the pandemic, including: 1. language promotion, 2. using Indigenous languages to talk about COVID-19, 3. trainings to support ILR, 4. language education, 5. creating and sharing language resources, and 6. information about ILR and COVID-19. Enacting the principle of reciprocity in Indigenous research, part of the research process was to create a short video to share research findings back to social media. This article presents a selection of slides from the video accompanied by an in-depth analysis of the themes. Written about the pandemic, during the pandemic, this article seeks to offer some insights and understandings of a time during which much is uncertain. Therefore, this article does not have a formal conclusion; rather, it closes with ideas about long-term implications and future research directions that can benefit ILR.

1. Introduction For decades, Indigenous communities, organizations, and individuals have been working to #KeepOurLanguagesStrong by reclaiming them and normalizing their everyday use. The COVID-19 pandemic that took hold in what is currently Canada and the United States in March 2020 was potentially detrimental to these efforts. Prior to the pandemic, most Indigenous language work occurred in person and therefore had to halt immediately for the safety of Indigenous communities. Language speakers, teachers, and learners paused momentarily to regroup in the face of rapid changes, new dangers, and overwhelming uncertainty. Then many did what Indigenous peoples have always done in the face of danger and hardship: persist. With community members social distancing and isolating at home, social media quickly became a key space for both documenting and facilitating shifts, adaptations, and persistence.

This article shares findings from an analysis of public social media posts, dated March through July 2020, about Indigenous languages and the COVID-19 pandemic.



These findings are part of a larger in-progress mixed-methods study by a research team affiliated with the NETOLNEW “one mind, one people” Indigenous language research partnership housed at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.¹ NETOLNEW is dedicated to supporting language revitalization efforts in Canada but also recognizes that borders between nation-states are colonial constructs. Therefore, this study focuses on Canada and also includes examples from the US and other parts of the world. In addition to social media analysis, the larger study includes interview and survey data about the impacts of COVID-19 on Indigenous Language Revitalization (ILR) as a “field of study and action” (Hinton et al. 2018: xxii). Early results of this study indicate a 64% increase in the use of technology and the Internet to support ILR (McIvor, Chew, Stacey, et al. 2020). Most of this online work occurred in the form of shifting in person learning and teaching to virtual spaces and creating and sharing resources on social media. An investigation into social media activity is thus critical to understanding the ways in which Indigenous language workers in Canada and the US are responding to the pandemic.

Following a review of existing literature about ILR and social media use during the pandemic, the research team’s methods for collecting and analyzing relevant social media content are described. The research team identified six key themes of social media posts concerning ILR and the pandemic, including: 1. Language promotion, 2. Using Indigenous languages to talk about COVID-19, 3. Trainings to support ILR, 4. Language education, 5. Creating and sharing language resources, and 6. Information about ILR and COVID-19. Enacting the principle of reciprocity in Indigenous research, part of the research process was to create a short video to share research findings back to social media. This article presents a selection of slides from the video accompanied by an in-depth analysis of the themes. Written about the pandemic, during the pandemic, this article seeks to offer some insights and understandings of a time during which much is uncertain. The research team acknowledges that each community has experienced the pandemic differently, at different points in time. We grieve the immense losses we have all experienced, including of Indigenous language speakers and community members. Sapién and Thornes (2017: 260) remind us that “the experience of grief and loss” of our Old Ones or Elders is always a part of language work, and this is true now more than ever. For the research team, this study offered an opportunity to process some of what was happening in the world around us and, importantly, to celebrate the ways in which our communities persist to keep Indigenous languages strong. This article does not have a formal conclusion; rather, it closes with what our team sees as some implications and future research directions that can benefit ILR in the long-term.

¹The author wishes to acknowledge the support and contribution of the research team. In addition to the author, the team includes: Onowa McIvor (University of Victoria), Kahtehrón:ni Iris Stacey (Kahnawà:ke Education Center; McGill University), Alikì Marinakis (University of Victoria), Barbara Jenni (University of Victoria), and research assistant Melpatkwa Matthew (Chief Atahm School). This paper was developed while working on research supported by grant funding from the University of Victoria’s Faculty of Education (Faculty of Education COVID-19 Emergency Research Fund) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (895-2017-1021). The University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board approved this research (Certificate No. 20-0304).

2. ILR and social media use during the COVID-19 pandemic Prior to the pandemic, Indigenous social media users were engaging in self-expression, (re)connecting with family and community, building networks of care, and learning ancestral languages (Carlson & Frazer 2020; Cru 2015; Lhawa 2019). Social media was an important place to share and find inspiration and new ideas, both within and beyond one's community, to advance Indigenous language work (Cassels 2019). These practices continued following the onset of the pandemic and also shifted and expanded in new ways. Literature exploring the impacts of COVID-19 on Indigenous communities, ILR, and social media use is limited at this time. This brief survey draws primarily on two key sources capturing early literature about Indigenous communities and about social media use during the pandemic: 1) a combined call by *AlterNative Journal* and *MAI Journal* for short 'situation reports' about COVID-19's impacts on Indigenous communities and 2) a special issue of *Social Media + Society*: 2K about COVID-19 and the media. Together, these two collections provide early foundations and helped the research team make meaning of our own observations of ILR and social media use during the pandemic.

In the early months of the pandemic, research by medical doctors, epidemiologists, and other scientists aimed at curbing the spread of the virus and ensuring public safety was rightfully prioritized. Several months into the pandemic, additional need to understand the social impacts of issues related to the pandemic emerged (Ward 2020). Due to home isolation and social distancing requirements, social media became an important space to explore some of these impacts. Notably, social media use increased during the early months of the pandemic. A study of US-based adults revealed a 35% surge in social media use and an overall boost in use of other digital communication tools including voice and video calls, text messaging, and email (Nguyen et al. 2020). This research team's preliminary survey findings showed that among the ILR community, the increase in digital communication was even more pronounced at 64% (McIvor, Chew, Stacey, et al. 2020). Indeed, the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic "have seen the emergence of more online [Indigenous] language programming than one can keep track of" (Sinclair 2020).

While the reasons for this significant increase in social media use to support ILR are not fully known at this time, preliminary research reports some insights. In a situation report, researchers attribute comparatively low Māori infection and mortality rates during the pandemic to a "self-determination social movement that was iteratively maturing before COVID-19, which the pandemic response both unveiled and accelerated" (McMeeking et al. 2020: 395). Similarly, the strong support for Indigenous languages during the pandemic is built on momentum from ILR movements which have grown and strengthened over decades. The increase in social media use by the ILR community likely reflects an increase in digital communication among those already experienced with these technologies, but these numbers may also include many individuals who logged on for the first time. In the study of US-based adults, 63% of survey respondents with lower Internet skills reported an increase in digital communication use due to "a 'push' to connect online" from family, friends, and colleagues (Nguyen et al. 2020: 4). In considering ILR responses to COVID-

19, this finding is particularly relevant as older generations of speakers seem to have made their way onto social media for the first time in a push to share their languages with others (McIvor, Sterzuk, & Cook 2020).

As social media became more-widely used by members of different generations to engage during the pandemic, Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities alike connected around shared experiences. Researchers observed that culturally specific forms of humor became one catalyst for building connection (McIvor, Chew, Stacey, et al. 2020; Vicari & Murru 2020). In the early days of the pandemic, Indigenous language learners asked speakers how to say “toilet paper” in their languages and shared these recordings online. Vicari and Murru (2020) observed a similar phenomenon among Italian social media users who turned to irony as a collective cultural ritual which created space “to breathe before grieving” (1). Irony served to evoke “a communal space” to share emotions and to playfully react to “symbolic ruptures caused by the pandemic” (3).

For Black, Indigenous, and Peoples of Color communities, these ruptures were more than symbolic. Racism and xenophobia surfaced around the globe (Abidin & Zeng 2020). Social media acted both as a space where racism spread and a place where communities could vent, heal, address, and organize. For an online Asian community, a Facebook group became a shared space to “engage in cathartic expressions, mutual care, and discursive activism amid the rise of anti-Asian racism” during the pandemic (Abidin & Zeng 2020: 1). Indigenous peoples also turned to social media to engage in community resurgence (Corntassel et al. 2020), as well as to mobilize response to the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on communities and lack of resources allocated to address these disparities (Cram 2020). In the US, Canada, and beyond, the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and too many others ignited movements on social media and in the streets. Within the ILR community, language learners shared posts expressing solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter by translating the phrase into their languages (melanin mvskoke 2020). Illuminating the need to understand the pandemic and social justice movements as occurring amid the “persistence of colonialism”, Kwakwak’awakw artist Carey Newman poignantly states, “Until there is a vaccine for colonialism . . . i’axalatlan (I will be working)” (Corntassel et al. 2020: 405).

Though Indigenous peoples worldwide are disproportionately affected by the pandemic (Millalen et al. 2020), deficit-oriented narratives – which frame Indigenous communities in terms of vulnerability to the pandemic – overlook the ways communities have demonstrated “collective innovations and resilience” (Enari & Matapo 2020: 7). A news article reported that “the push to keep language revitalization going under lockdown is a symbol of cultural resilience – and, for many, an opportunity to build national and international solidarity among [I]ndigenous peoples around the world” (Eisen 2020). While many have framed Indigenous responses to the pandemic as examples of resilience, this term can be problematic when employed to frame resilience as an individual attribute and responsibility (Thomas et al. 2016) and as being “concerned with those deemed most vulnerable” (Evans & Reed 2013: 92). Thomas et al. (2016) offer a useful conceptualization of the term “cultural resilience”

as “the strength and power of the collective cultural knowledge” (116), which is carried through language, lives in relationships, and is intricately connected to wellbeing (McIvor, Chew, & Stacey 2020: 411). As previous studies have demonstrated, there is a vital link between cultural knowledge, language, and wellbeing (e.g. Dinku et al. 2020; Jenni et al. 2017; Taff et al. 2018; Walsh 2018). As part of a study of the effects of Mentor-Apprentice on participants’ wellbeing, PENAWEN Elliott, an emerging speaker of SENĆOŦEN, stated that during times of witnessing chaos in the world, “you think, ‘I’m sure glad we have our language, to keep us grounded, to keep us knowing’” (quoted in Jenni et al. 2017: 32). In this way, Indigenous languages can support language learners and speakers to maintain a sense of wellbeing during difficult times such as the pandemic.

Indigenous peoples acted in accordance with ancestral teachings of how to be in good relation to each other while interacting on social media during the pandemic. Cram (2020) reports that the pandemic lockdown in Aotearoa demonstrated Māori capacity for mahi aroha – the “essential work undertaken out of a love for the people” (4). Social media became a way to “broadcast karakia, messages of encouragement and hope, and exercise, cooking, educational and general survival tips to whānau [extended family]” and to offer personal messages of “help and support” (4). Enari and Matapo (2020) observe a similar phenomenon of Pasifika peoples enacting the *vā*, or “respect[ing] the importance of space and relationship”, and “draw[ing] upon the teachings of their ancestors” in both in person and digital spaces (7). The authors affirm that online platforms provide new ways for knowledge holders and learners to “reconstitute a relational space between one another, where the relational *vā* becomes entangled in the digital *vā*, generating new modes for engagement and connection. The digital *vā* is a form of indigenising the digital environment to embed cultural ways of being and knowing” (8).

Language is at the center of these online practices, as “a number of language revitalization professionals report that their projects are not just continuing under quarantine – they’re expanding” (Eisen 2020). *nēhiyawēwin/nīhithawīwin* (Cree) language advocates use the phrase “*i-kiyohkātoyāhk* (we visit)” to describe the “experience of trying to recreate an online version of our way of life, being together in the language” (McIvor, Sterzuk, & Cook 2020: 413). Prior to the pandemic, most *nēhiyawēwin/nīhithawīwin* learning activities took place in person in communities. While the language had a presence on social media, most content took the form of meta-language discussions *about* rather than *in* the language. With the onset of the pandemic, in person language teaching shifted online mostly in the form of synchronous video conferencing and pre-recorded video language lessons. This shift online presents both challenges and opportunities for language work. Working online may not be what the ILR community is used to, but we “must find ways to continue our work in the new reality – mainly that of digital connection [...] Our languages will benefit most if we embrace ‘what is’ and find a way to harness the realities before us – then share with each other what we have learned so that we can continue to strengthen and shift our movement to continue Indigenous languages into time immemorial” (McIvor, Chew, & Stacey 2020: 412).

While the Internet has been a critical tool for connecting communities during COVID-19, it is unknown whether people will continue to engage in online language work at the same scale after the pandemic ends. On the one hand, ILR was already seeing an increase in innovative work about learning and teaching Indigenous languages online prior to the pandemic, with Indigenous communities, organizations, and individuals creating online language courses, materials, and apps. It is likely that some of the work will be sustained online. On the other hand, researchers are identifying COVID-19 as a “unique type of crisis” characterized by home isolation (Kligler-Vilenchik et al. 2020: 5). A survey of Jerusalem-based Twitter users showed that the primary motivation for using the platform was to share information and maintain social connections (Kligler-Vilenchik et al. 2020). It is possible, as Nguyen et al. (2020) note, that patterns of digital communication may “revert back” once it is safe to fully resume face-to-face communication or “motivations unique to the time of the pandemic may result in habits that outlast the outbreak itself” (5). As associate director of the Northwest Indian Language Institute Robert Elliott puts it, “We’ve been playing around with online learning for a while [...] The pandemic has forced us to go into the deep end – no more sticking your toe in the water and trying this out. ...Now that we’re in the water, there’s no going back to the way it used to be” (quoted in Eisen 2020).

3. Methodology This research took a decolonizing, collaborative approach to understanding the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on ILR. A key consideration for the study was how to ensure rigorous, Indigenous-led inquiry that was both timely and practical in terms of offering support and sharing knowledge back to Indigenous communities. The research team included the author who is Chikashsha (Chickasaw), Onowa McIvor who is maskēkow-ininiw (Swampy Cree), Kahtehrón:ni Iris Stacey who is Kanien’kehá:ka (Mohawk), Aliko Marinakis, Barbara Jenni, (both settler-Canadians) and research assistant Melpatkwa Matthew who is Cstélen and Simpcw (Secwépemc). Because several members of our team were actively involved in ILR, we were not merely investigating this phenomenon; we were living it, too. From this lived experience, we started with the observation that, in facing this pandemic crisis, Indigenous language activists, speakers, and learners continue to turn to their languages for comfort, guidance, and direction. From this observation emerged our research questions:

1. What shifts are Indigenous communities, organizations, and individuals making in their language work in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What efforts and innovations might sustain ILR during the pandemic?

Our in-progress study uses several methods to explore these questions, including a survey, interviews, and a scan of social media. The initial findings from the social media scan are the focus of this article.

3.1 Data collection methods The research team documented social media posts which shared responses to the pandemic from individuals, communities, and organizations involved in ILR. We limited our search to public posts from March to mid-July 2020 on Twitter and Facebook. While there was ILR-related content on other platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, users tended to cross-post content in order to share their language work with a wide audience. For example, videos on TikTok and YouTube were often also posted on Facebook and Twitter. While we focused on social media accounts based in Canada, we recognized that the borders between nations like Canada and the US are imposed by colonization and so we also included posts from individuals, communities, and organizations in the US and, to a lesser extent, other countries. The scope of the study reflected the positionalities of our small research team, while undertaking robust methodologies, and was not intended to erase or diminish the experiences of Indigenous peoples around the globe who have all been impacted by the pandemic.

We used Padlet² – a web application that allow users to post and organize notes on a digital wall – to document social media posts (see Figure 1). Padlet provided a digital workspace where the research team could collaborate asynchronously and gather posts from different platforms in one space. Whereas tools like the website *IndigenousTweets.com*, created by Kevin Scannell, are designed to systematically scan social media platforms for Indigenous language content, our research team relied on our existing relational networks. Team members began by sourcing public posts from accounts they already followed. This approach was appropriate because our team members, as ILR scholars and practitioners, already had a strong sense of what was happening in the communities where they lived and with whom they worked. We were able to identify examples of efforts that may not have been captured by an automated search of an entire social media platform. In order to ensure that posts reflected a variety of geographic locations and types of experiences, we then followed leads from the accounts with which we were familiar as well as additional key national and international accounts. Our goal was to capture a breadth of examples rather than do a deep dive into the same few social media accounts. Padlet allowed the team to create in-app posts with links or screenshots of social media posts so that we could easily see everything in one place. For each Padlet post, team members created a title with the name of the language, program, or resource. In parenthesis, we listed the platform, location, and a brief description for the post. We then included a link or screenshot image of the social media post.

3.2 Data analysis methods Data collection and preliminary analysis of social media posts occurred simultaneously. The research team organized our Padlet workspace into columns that enabled us to categorize posts around emerging themes. These themes included: 1. language promotion, 2. using Indigenous languages to talk about COVID-19, 3. trainings to support ILR, 4. language education, 5. creating and language sharing resources, and 6. information about ILR and COVID-19. We also created a column for posts that did not fit into these categories or that we were unsure

²<https://padlet.com>

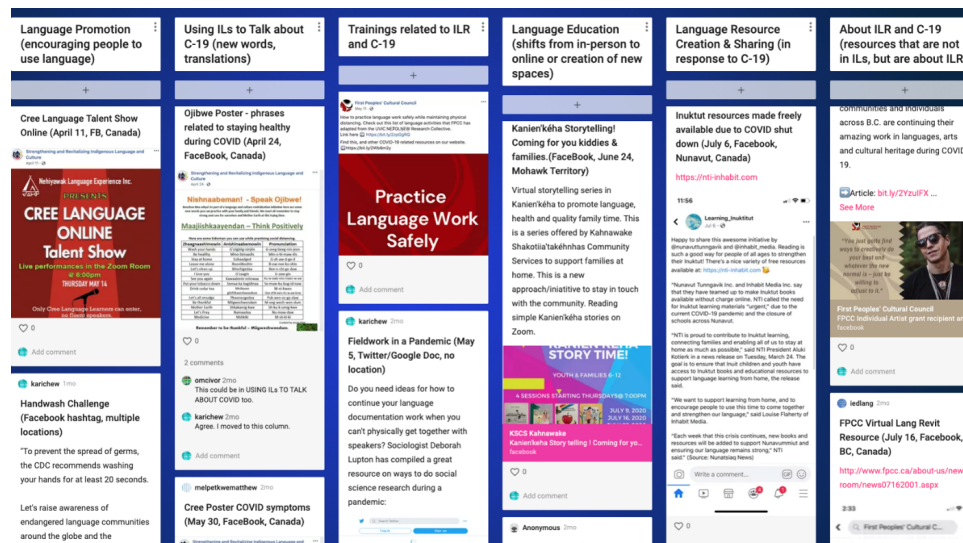


Figure 1. Screenshot of Padlet during the research process.

about at first. As we gathered posts, we arranged them within columns. Padlet was an important tool for categorizing because we could visualize posts across multiple platforms without leaving our Padlet workspace. Padlet also allowed us to drag and drop posts into different columns when necessary and as we refined our understandings. After posts were gathered, we continued the analysis process. At the next stage, we created a Padlet post titled “Analysis” at the top of each column. After individual team members spent time exploring the posts within each column, they commented on the analysis post to share their insights. Once we had collectively commented on each individual theme, our team then met to discuss next steps for how we would share what we were learning with others.

Reciprocity is an important principle of Indigenous research (Wilson 2008). Because we gained knowledge from Indigenous language advocates who posted on social media, we wanted to create something that could be shared back on social media. Our data analysis continued as we worked to distill our beginning analysis into a short story. We used Canva³ – an easy-to-use graphic design platform for creating social media graphics, videos, and other designs – to tell this story across several slides that were rich in visuals. One of the main reasons we used Canva was to create a visually coherent story without sharing screen captures of original individual posts. While the social media posts were public, we felt that the spirit of the people who posted was to support ILR work and not for their actual images, videos, and voice recordings to be collected and shared as part of our research project. The graphics available through Canva allowed us to celebrate different examples without extracting multimedia from the posts themselves. The following section of the paper shares still images of a selection of slides accompanied by a more in-depth analysis than was

³<https://canva.com>

possible to convey in the short video. The posts referred to on the slides and in the analysis are included in the reference list. Posts are cited by the account handle.

4. Discussion of themes This discussion of themes offers both analysis and questions for continued research. Woven into this discussion are the graphics created by the author using Canva. These graphics are part of a video, composed of the animated slides, which shared research findings back to social media platforms along with the hashtag #KeepOurLanguagesStrong. An archived version of the full video is available to view.⁴ The following sections present six categories emerging from the thematic analysis of social media posts (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Thematic analysis of posts.

4.1 Language promotion Posts falling under the theme of Language Promotion encouraged the use of Indigenous languages through contests, games, and hashtag campaigns (see Figure 3). These posts were not intended to teach language but rather to get learners to *use* their Indigenous languages. In April, Nehiyawak Language Experience Inc. hosted a Cree language talent show specifically for language learners (Nehiyawak Language Experience Inc. 2020). The talent show was promoted on social media outlets and held live on Zoom. Other community organizations also held events promoting their languages for learners. In May 2020, the Iakwahwatsiratatie Language Nest, located at Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Territory, encouraged families to continue using language at home during the pandemic by hosting Kanien'kéha

⁴<http://hdl.handle.net/1828/12210>

(Mohawk language) scavenger hunts with prizes (Iakwahwatsiratatie Language Nest Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Territory 2020a). Scavenger hunts were one of several initiatives to encourage families to stay engaged with language even though they could not gather at the time. This example is significant because the scavenger hunts encouraged families to use the language together in the home rather than independently online. Overall, social media users were quick to share COVID-19 related content to keep people thinking about their Indigenous languages, and most efforts focused on promoting language awareness among particular communities.



Figure 3. Language promotion.

One effort to promote Indigenous languages on a larger scale was the #2020IndigenousLanguageChallenge hashtag campaign on Facebook. This campaign was an example of an immediate reaction and mobilization of the ILR community on social media (see Figure 4). The hashtag was created on March 23, 2020, by user Raymond Braveowl (Chumash/Cahuilla) on Facebook (Braveowl 2020). The original post included a video demonstration of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended handwashing techniques with narration in the Indigenous language. The video was accompanied by a call to action:

To prevent the spread of germs, the CDC recommends washing your hands for at least 20 seconds. Let's raise awareness of endangered language communities around the globe and the challenges they face in safeguarding their language during these challenging times. Instructions: Post a video of yourself washing your hands while counting to 20 in your indigenous language. Tag a friend to issue the challenge to them with

the hashtag #2020indigenoulanguagechallenge. Let's make this go viral!
(Braveowl 2020)

Facebook users began creating their own videos and spreading the word in Western Mono, Serrano, Comanche, Chickasaw, and other Indigenous languages. It is notable that the ILR community has mobilized to promote Indigenous languages on social media in the past. In 2014, the Indigenous Language Challenge emerged soon after the Ice Bucket Challenge, which raised awareness for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. The Indigenous Language Challenge gained traction on Facebook as language learners, speakers, and activists posted short video clips to raise awareness of Indigenous language revitalization efforts (Fitzgerald 2014). The #2020IndigenousLanguageChallenge can be seen as a continuation of this earlier movement.



Figure 4. Indigenous Language Challenge.

The theme of Language Promotion captures ways that individuals, communities, and organizations took to social media to connect and encourage one another to keep Indigenous language work a priority during challenging times. The research team observed that some initial language promotion efforts decreased, seemingly as the novelty of social distancing and self-isolation wore off and the demands of balancing work and family increased. For the most part, #2020IndigenousLanguageChallenge posts did not continue beyond March, 2020. The contests, talent shows, and scavenger hunts seemed to be attempts to promote language in more meaningful and sustainable ways. In addition to promoting language, each activity created space for camaraderie in language advocacy, teaching, and learning. Some of these efforts developed into more sustainable examples of Language Education (discussed in Section 4.4).

4.2 Using Indigenous languages to talk about COVID-19

A second theme was Using Indigenous Languages to Talk about COVID-19 (see Figure 5). Across social media platforms, Indigenous language learners and speakers shared translations and new terms for talking about the pandemic. Many of these posts shared a “Word of the Day” or “Phrase of the Day”. Some were lighthearted, offering translations for Zoom or toilet paper, while others focused on leveraging social media to communicate health and safety information to as many people in their community as possible. The most common types of words and phrases shared were names for COVID-19 and translations for public health advice about social distancing, mask wearing, and handwashing. Some of these posts, which reflected a diversity of Indigenous languages, were text-only, while others included video clips or audio recordings to assist learners with pronunciations.

A Facebook user in New York offered a text-based language lesson to help Onondaga language learners talk about the pandemic, including “ahya’k niyohsi’dagéh tsha’ na’deja•de•k” meaning “You keep 6 feet apart an [sic] other” (Meacham 2020). An organization in Nunavut shared word of the day posts on Twitter, including “ᐃᓄᑦᐱᑦᐱᑦᐱᑦᐱᑦ ᐅᓄᑦᐸᑦ / Uummattiarittut nunaliit” meaning “healthy communities” (Qikiqtani Inuit 2020). From Ontario, a Twitter account shared a video and text in the Munsee Lunaape language saying “Nii ngishiilinjee” or “I am washing my hands” (McCallum 2020). From Unama’kik, Mi’kma’ki (in what is currently Nova Scotia), a Twitter user shared a video and text of the Mi’kmaw word of the day “Ksnukowaqan (êk sê nu go wa hgan) (virus / illness)” (Bryson the Gaytive 2020). A Chickasaw language account based in Oklahoma posted an audio recording and text to say “abikoppolo” or “pandemic, epidemic, really bad disease” (Chikashshanompa’ 2020).

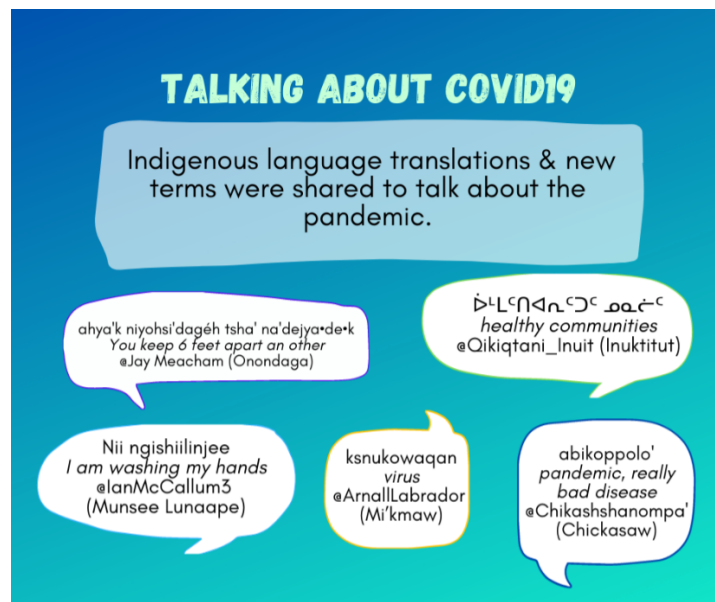


Figure 5. Talking about COVID-19.

Additionally, social media accounts shared Indigenous language songs, posters, databases, and even a puppet show about COVID-19 (see Figure 6). In mid-March, the Endangered Languages Project (ELP) turned to social media to solicit translations of public health information in Indigenous and other under-resourced languages (Endangered Languages Project 2020). The outcome of this solicitation was a database, also shared on the ELP's social media, with over 500 languages represented. Twenty-six of the languages in the database were Indigenous languages from what is currently Canada and the US. Bringing much needed humor to the ILR world, between April and June, the newly created *Covid-19 Indigenous* Facebook page released a six-episode video called “Kahkakiw’s Straight Talk on Coronavirus” (Covid-19 Indigenous 2020). The series stars Kahkakiw, a Cree-speaking raven puppet from Northern Manitoba, and puppeteer Samson Hunter. Episodes are in Cree with English subtitles and share Health Canada advice on COVID-19. Kahkakiw talks with kids, Elders, and others about COVID-19. Some episodes have also been translated to Dene.



Figure 6. Indigenous language songs, posters, and puppet shows.

Posts which used Indigenous languages to talk about COVID-19 are important examples of ways that ancestral knowledge and experience lives in Indigenous languages and can speak to the present. The Chickasaw noun *abikoppolo*’, for example, is an existing word that means “epidemic, plague, really serious disease” (Munro & Willmond 1994: 4). The term comes from the nominalized verbs *abika* (to be sick) and *oppolo* (to be broken, ruined, no good). When using this word to describe COVID-19, Chickasaws are reminded that the ancestors also experienced the grave consequences of disease in their communities. Posts under this theme further reflect that ILR is innovative work that must respond to current situations and times. While

some Indigenous languages may already have had words to describe the virus itself, it is unlikely that language learners and speakers had described concepts like social distancing, wearing masks, and other public health protocols in their languages prior to this pandemic. While it is beyond the scope of this study to measure precisely the impact of translating public health information into Indigenous languages on health outcomes for those communities, any efforts to protect Elders and language speakers are worthwhile. Overall, this theme reflects an emphasis on safety through work to use Indigenous languages to reach Indigenous communities about issues that directly affect them.

4.3 Trainings to support ILR A third theme of social media posts was Trainings to Support ILR during the pandemic (see Figure 7). Posts promoted recently created resources for doing language work in the COVID-19 context. These resources shared ideas for how to do language work in a variety of contexts, including with a lack of Internet access. One notable example shared via social media was the British Columbia-based First Peoples' Cultural Council's (FPCC) short guides to practicing language work safely while maintaining physical distancing (First Peoples' Cultural Council 2020a). In addition to connecting via social media and video calls, the guide included offline activities like completing a language resource inventory, developing a language plan and materials, and finding ways to increase language use in the home. First Peoples' Cultural Council later updated its website with a special page devoted to ILR and COVID-19 resources that includes current guides and COVID-19 updates as well as funding opportunities for communities (First Peoples' Cultural Council 2020b). Another type of training was for a wide audience who may not have previously been engaged in language work but might be looking for language as a source of comfort and guidance now. The Chickasaw Nation Workshops and Trainings Facebook page was established in response to COVID-19 to connect community members. While the page was not language-focused, language and culture featured prominently. In one session, a language learner delivered an online language immersion lesson telling the Chickasaw creation story fully in the language (Chickasaw Nation Workshops & Trainings 2020).

Several regional institutes that support ILR and typically have programming in the summer also made shifts. The American Indian Language Development Institute (AILDI) at the University of Arizona pivoted to run already scheduled in person summer courses online (American Indian Language Development Institute 2020). The Northwest Indian Language Institute (NILI) at the University of Oregon moved forward with an alternative version of their summer program called Language Revitalization Learning Series (LRLS). Over a two-week period, NILI held free one-hour classes on Zoom on topics like curriculum development, archival research, and planning as well as how to stay connected and do online work during the pandemic (University of Oregon - Northwest Indian Language Institute 2020).

The shift online made previously less accessible spaces highly accessible to a wider audience. NILI, for example, is typically hosted in person on Kalapuya ancestral territories. The cost of tuition in 2019 was US\$2,150, not including room and board or

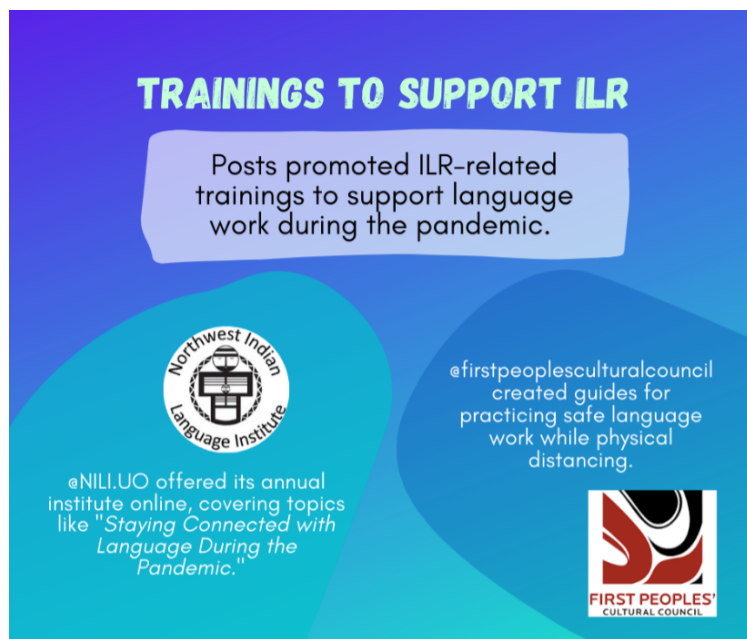


Figure 7. Trainings to support ILR.

travel to the University of Oregon campus in Eugene, Oregon. NILI typically has over 50 participants. Offered at no cost and online, the Language Revitalization Learning Series reached maximum capacity at 450 participants from around the world. With up to 130 people participating in live Zoom classes and the others accessing content and recordings asynchronously, NILI saw “the largest and most linguistically diverse Summer Institute in [its] history” (Northwest Indian Language Institute 2020b). Notably, NILI was awarded National Endowment for the Humanities CARES funding to build on the LRLS and expand online training opportunities in the future (Northwest Indian Language Institute 2020a). The example of NILI demonstrates that online trainings for ILR are highly sought after by a global audience. Offering free or low-cost training online can help meet the needs of communities on an international scale.

Not all trainings and institutes typically held in person were able to shift fully online. The 2020 Institute on Collaborative Language Research (CoLang), to be hosted by the University of Montana in collaboration with Chief Dull Knife College, cancelled its summer program and rescheduled for 2022 (CoLang2020 2020a). In lieu of the planned summer program, CoLang instead offered a three-day “CoLang 2020 Presents Web Series” which included a day focused on the impacts of the pandemic on language work and communities (CoLang2020 2020b). While CoLang offered some online programming, the Native American Language Teacher’s Institute was cancelled altogether (Lewin 2020). This one-week institute serves speakers of Indigenous languages seeking training to teach in language programs and school settings. While there are many reasons that ILR trainings and institutes may have been can-

celled, one which must be considered is an ongoing issue of digital inequity (Adcock 2014). Due to issues of lack of Internet connectivity and of resources and infrastructure, some organizations may not have had the ability to offer online programming. For similar reasons, some participants who typically participate in trainings and institutes in person may not have been able to access the online versions.

The shift online made language trainings more accessible to some, but not others. It is important to consider not just who gained access to trainings to support ILR, but who lost access in the shift online as well as in the postponements and cancellations of programming. Some trainings and conversations directly addressed questions of inequity and Internet access. Rising Voices hosted a series called “Exchanges: Mexico-Canada” featuring language workers from both countries in dialogue with each other about topics including the future of language work online in the context of the pandemic (Rising Voices 2020). Conversations, accessed via Facebook Live recordings and the Twitter hashtag #ExchangesCAMX, openly discussed inequity in terms of access. These inequities have increased as people have moved home to more rural areas due to a lack of work opportunity now in the cities. There is little connectivity in rural areas and so the language work is continuing there face-to-face in a new/old way with this return of diaspora.

Overall, social media posts revealed that, in the early months of the pandemic, language learners, teachers, and other advocates made changes in their lives and their ILR work due to COVID-19. Social media posts further document that organizations which support ILR work, such as AILDI, CoLang, FPCC, and NILI, pivoted immediately to respond to these changed circumstances and the needs of the people and communities they serve. These trainings played a critical role in helping participants to move their language work forward. Social media illuminated the ways the shift online made learning opportunities more widely available, but it is necessary to acknowledge that the posts did not fully capture the ways in which connectivity and other issues of digital inequity limit accessibility. Further research will be required to more fully understand the short-term and long-term impacts of shifts, postponements, and cancellations of ILR trainings on individuals, communities, and the field of ILR as a whole.

4.4 Language education Posts under the theme of Language Education, which included a range of school-, home-, and community-based programs for youth through adults, showed innovations to sustain language learning and teaching through and beyond the pandemic (see Figure 8). This theme included several examples that reflected three emerging phenomena: 1) in person classes shifting partially or fully online, 2) the creation of new online opportunities to learn language during the pandemic, and 3) the cancellation of learning opportunities. Evidence of these activities on social media included notifications of events and cancellations, pictures (such as screen captures of Zoom screens), and news articles about the impacts of the pandemic on ILR and education. Most of the actual language learning and teaching activities happened in other virtual spaces, like Zoom.

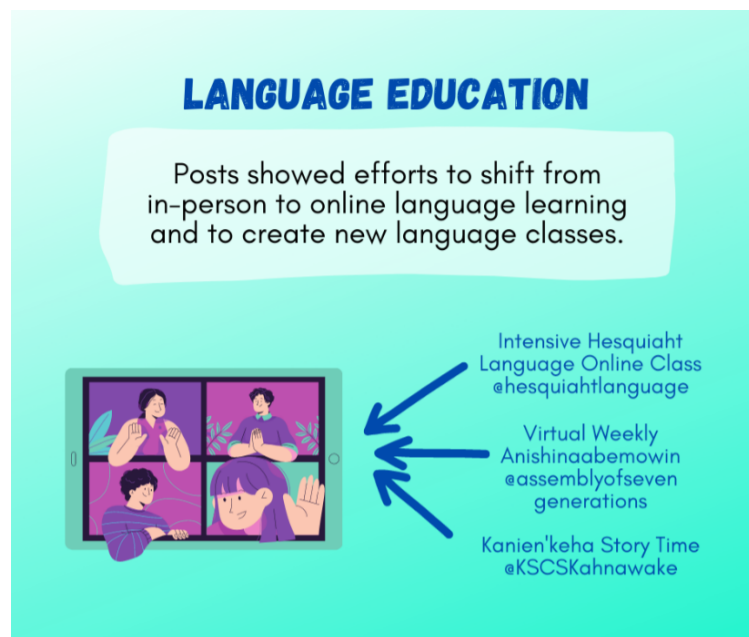


Figure 8. Language education.

The shift from in person to online language classes began in March and April and continued through the summer months. In March, the Assembly of Seven Generations (A7G), an Ottawa-based Indigenous owned and youth-led, grassroots non-profit organization, announced on Facebook that their weekly Anishinaabemowin community classes would move to virtual format (Assembly of Seven Generations 2020). On April 15, the Tla'amin Child Development Resource Center (CDRC) in British Columbia created a Facebook page to offer content, including Ayajuthem (Tla'amin) language lessons (CDRC Outreach 2020). Language teachers shared short video lessons for young children, usually featuring a story or song, regularly on the page. While the transition online was not easy for anyone, organizations already offering language classes and lessons seemed especially able to make an immediate pivot online.

On the other hand, full immersion programs were particularly challenged to sustain an intensive learning environment in a virtual format. The Osoyoos Indian Band (OIB) Language House offers a four-year program for a cohort of Nsyilx̓n learners that, prior to the pandemic, was meeting six hours per day, two days per week. On April 7, 2020, the program moved fully online (OIB Language House 2020). The program's Facebook page documents the experiences of learning during the pandemic through regular updates. In a news article, also circulated on social media, Sheri Stelkia discussed the challenges of offering an intensive program leading to fluency via Zoom (Bonneau 2020). Instructors and students struggled with WIFI connections and inadequate audio for ensuring precise pronunciation. Despite the challenges, the

program has persisted. In May, the group did socially-distanced root digging – an example of learning on the land continued in some ways during the pandemic.

Beyond the shift from in person to online language education, there was an influx of new opportunities to learn language online. An advertisement on social media announced that the Hesquiaht Language Program created its inaugural online language immersion class, scheduled to meet two nights per week from September 2020 to March 2021 (Hesquiaht Language Program 2020a). The course, led by an experienced language instructor in collaboration with fluent speakers, includes 150 hours of language learning via Zoom for thirty-seven language learners (Hesquiaht Language Program 2020b). For Kanien'kéha learners, Kahnawake Shakotia'takéhnhas Community Services offered a new virtual storytelling series in the language to promote language, health, and quality family time at home (KSCS Kahnawake 2020). Short stories were read on Zoom.

Social media posts tended to share positive developments in ILR work; however, not all communities wanted or were able to move their efforts online. A smaller category of posts documented cancellations and postponements of learning opportunities. In March, the ᐱᐦᐦᐦᐦᐦᐦ – Pirurvik Centre posted that in person courses would be postponed indefinitely for the safety and wellbeing of families and the community (ᐱᐦᐦᐦᐦᐦᐦ - Pirurvik Centre 2020). Notably, a research team member who works closely with the community provided additional insight that the program plans to eventually transition online.

In addition to the full postponement of ILR work, some communities opted to forego new programming and focus on supporting programs already in-progress. In June at Kahnawà:ke, the Kanien'kehà:ke Onkwawén:na Raotitíohkwa Language and Cultural Center announced that the Kanien'kéha Ratiwennahní:rats Adult Immersion Program would not accept a new cohort for 2020–2022 due to COVID-19. A letter shared on Facebook stated, “During this time, the teaching staff will focus on the successful learning, tutelage and graduation of our present students, as well as an evaluation of the program, revamping and creation of resources that complement online learning” (Phillips 2020). It is important to recognize that, while difficult, decisions, cancellation, postponement, and decreasing of language programming are all valid and, in many cases, necessary responses to the pandemic. In both ᐱᐦᐦᐦᐦᐦᐦ – Pirurvik Centre and the Kanien'kéha Program, the communities and organizations did not end commitments to ILR altogether but rather refocused energies into other language-related activities like program evaluation and design. Through our own language work in other spaces, our research team observed that this phenomenon is more widespread than social media alone suggests. A question for further exploration is whether these interruptions to language programming may have been due to overwhelmed programs that were already at capacity in their efforts.

Considered holistically, the theme of Language Education offers hope in the face of adversity. Posts under this theme show that many Indigenous communities, organizations, and individuals had the capacity, experience, and expertise to make the shift from in person to online programming. While other communities had prior experience sharing language online, social media posts revealed a notable increase in syn-

chronous online language learning opportunities, especially. Video-conferencing services like Zoom supported language education in a multitude of spaces, from school- to home- and community-based learning. Interestingly, social media posts suggested that some new language learning spaces may have been created and accessed by people who were new to or previously less active in ILR efforts. Further research may explore the extent to which the pandemic drew new people into language revitalization activities and whether new interest and involvement will be sustained over time.

4.5 Creating and sharing language resources The theme of Creating and Sharing Language Resources is connected to the theme of Language Education, as these resources support the work of language education (see Figure 9). Included under this theme are posts related to the creation of new resources for language learning as well as the “dusting off” of existing resources to sustain language education and other ILR efforts through the pandemic. Notably, some resources were created by individuals without an established social media platform. In some cases, Elders and other community members grabbed their phones and recorded videos to share songs and stories. These videos were then shared and promoted by others.

In March, a Twitter account promoting a Gwich’in language revival campaign #SpeakGwichinToMe posted short video clips demonstrating how to say words and phrases in the language to boost morale during early days of self-isolation (# Speak Gwich’in To Me 2020). In the summer, St. Paul Education in Northern Alberta began a Cree Language Resources project which involved creating videos and sharing them via Facebook and Google Drive so that people could freely download and use them (St. Paul Education 2020). Similarly, the Ojibway and Cree Cultural Centre Facebook page launched a weekly language video series called *Cree Lessons with Angela* (Ojibway and Cree Cultural Centre 2020).

In addition to the creation of new resources, a number of already existing resources for online learning were recirculated and repurposed to support the increase in virtual language education spaces. In some cases, programs generously made their internal resources available for free to the public, for the benefit of the language and learners. Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. (NTI) shared that it was partnering with Inhabit Media Inc. to make Inuktitut books and educational resource packages openly available to Inuit children and youth to support language learning at home during school closures in Nunavut (Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. 2020). Between March 18 and April 20, 2020, the Cree Literacy Network offered a daily language-learning video series – with videos coming primarily from language teacher Solomon Ratt’s existing teaching library – called *Stay Home: Learn Cree* for people self-isolating during the pandemic. Bringing humor, the description of the first video begins: “Like Sasquatch himself, Solomon Ratt has experience with self-isolation. Who better to help out with online Cree lessons for remote learning?” (Saskatchewan History & Folklore Society 2020). Similarly, the Iakwahwatsiratátie Language Nest at Kahnawà:ke shared resources created for the language nest on Facebook. One activity involved going outside as a family and looking for critters. The Language Nest encouraged families



Figure 9. Indigenous language resources.

to contribute back pictures of what they found in the comment section of the post (Iakwahwatsiratatie Language Nest Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Territory 2020b).

Posts under the theme of Creating and Sharing Language Resources highlighted the ways multimodal resources were newly developed or re-shared to support language education. Posts reflected an increase in language speakers creating content for social media, making the language and supporting resources more accessible to learners. The circulation of these resources on social media reflected a spirit of care and generosity, for the benefit of Indigenous peoples and languages, during a time of hardship. From social media posts alone, it was unclear whether communities and organizations were also archiving these resources outside of social media. This raised questions for the research team: What will happen to these resources over time? Will they become lost in a stream of posts or will they be used in other learning spaces? Our research team also wondered about motivation to create and post media. Were Elder speakers compelled to share because their speaking community became inaccessible due to the need to socially distance? Additional research would benefit understandings of motivation and long-term sustainability of language resource creation as well as sharing on social media.

4.6 Information about ILR and COVID-19 The final theme Information about ILR and COVID-19 focused on posts in dominant languages (like English) that raised awareness of ILR and COVID-19 (see Figure 10). Posts grouped under this theme were relatively few. Most posts within this theme circulated links to news stories and media. Several accounts circulated featured news articles about ILR during the pan-

demic. On April 13, the British Columbia news outlet *The Tyee* published “When a pandemic threatens to erase a community’s memory” about the vulnerability of Elder language speakers during the pandemic (Wyton 2020). A week later, the *Santa Fe Reporter* published “Native voices vs. virus: Native languages face new threat from COVID-19, but Indigenous programs adapt” featuring ILR efforts in New Mexico during the pandemic (Lewin 2020). In July, the *Winnipeg Free Press* released “Learning Indigenous language gives community a future” about how Indigenous communities are using technology to support ILR during the pandemic (Sinclair 2020). Overall, it was mostly reporters who were not involved in ILR work who took time to write about ILR work during the early months of the pandemic. This does not mean those involved in ILR were not reflecting on the big picture impact of the pandemic. More likely, they were busy doing their language work and relying on these news stories to raise awareness.

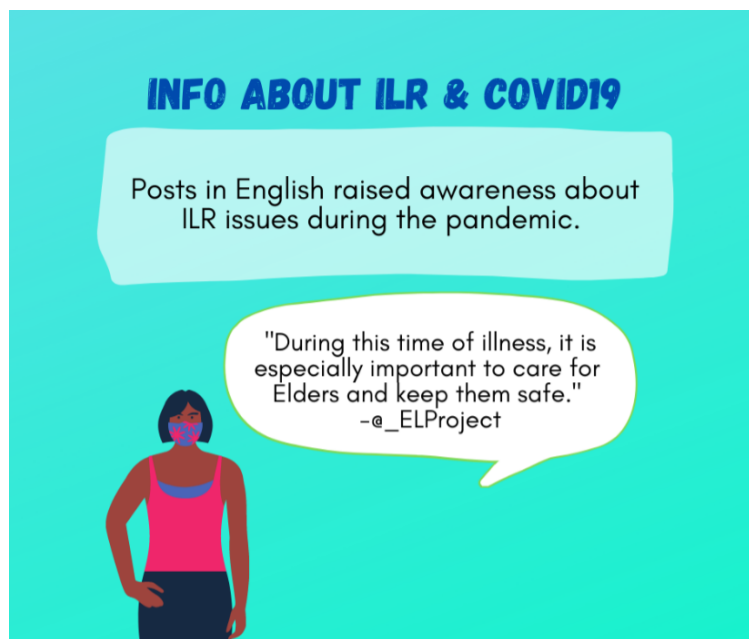


Figure 10. Information about ILR & COVID-19.

5. Continuing ILR efforts and research through the pandemic and beyond This article offers some insight into how those committed to ILR used social media to #KeepOurLanguagesStrong during spring through summer 2020 of the COVID-19 pandemic. Communities, organizations, and individuals across Canada, the US, and beyond have prioritized Indigenous languages as they collectively made a shift from doing language work mostly in person to almost entirely online. Though there is no substitute for gathering in person, on the land, to visit, eat, and use language together, those committed to ILR work understood that this shift was needed for the protection of Indigenous communities and languages. Indigenous language learners,

teachers, and speakers demonstrated remarkable persistence to ensure the continuance of Indigenous languages in this moment and into the future. Our research team, because of shared commitments to the work of ILR, undertook this research as a way to better understand how our work and our field was changing and to share these insights with others. We are grateful for the opportunity to learn from all who shared posts on social media to uplift Indigenous languages.

This article does not end with a particular set of conclusions, but rather questions to support continuing ILR efforts and research through the pandemic and beyond. Based on what we learned from our analysis of social media posts, our research team identified key questions warranting continued exploration:⁵

- Will online ILR spaces that emerged during COVID-19 be sustained once it is safe to resume in person activities? If so, which ones?
- Will the increased accessibility of ILR opportunities lead to increased interest and involvement in ILR in the long-term?
- How is the language work of Indigenous communities in other parts of the world being impacted by the pandemic?
- What privacy and intellectual property issues do Indigenous communities, organizations, and individuals need to consider when sharing their languages on social media?
- How will ILR work be funded in the wake of the devastating economic consequences of the pandemic?

It is undeniable that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted and will continue to impact ILR efforts. These questions underscore a need to understand *how* the COVID-19 pandemic will shape ILR work in the long term so that communities can more effectively respond.

At the time of writing, in January 2021, the world remains amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. We have lost many Indigenous language keepers, and the protection of languages and speakers remains urgent. Yet, as powerfully asserted by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2020), the pandemic “is not our [Indigenous peoples’] apocalypse”. Colonization remains ongoing, and through it, Indigenous peoples have demonstrated persistence and endurance. As vaccines become available, some Indigenous communities are placing Indigenous language speakers first in vaccine distribution plans. Phase 1 of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma’s vaccine distribution plan, for example, includes language speakers among frontline healthcare workers, first responders, and others most at risk (Crawford 2021). This is a remarkable expression of sovereignty and one that will no doubt have a lasting positive impact on the language and community for generations to come. Indigenous peoples will continue to story our experiences with and through our languages because “the process of telling and listening

⁵These questions are also informed by the feedback of two anonymous reviewers. Yakkookay hachimanhili – thank you for your suggestions.

to stories of Indigenous presence and persistence allows us to become whole in them” (Chew et al. 2019: 133). This is the continued work of healing – by finding comfort, wisdom, and guidance in our languages during times of crisis and of resurgence.

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