

CONNECTION, COLLABORATION AND COMMUNITY: REFLECTIONS ON THE USE
OF VIDEOCONFERENCING IN KASKA LANGUAGE DOCUMENTATION,
REVITALIZATION AND EDUCATION

by

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Abstract

This thesis addresses how stakeholders of Kaska, a Dene Athabaskan language spoken in northeastern British Columbia and the southeastern Yukon, have incorporated videoconferencing technology into their long-distance language documentation, revitalization and education practices. Many speakers and communities of endangered, Indigenous, and minority languages who live in remote regions are at a disadvantage simply because of their remoteness, which has limited their ability to access funding, form partnerships and work with language researchers. In turn, historically such Indigenous languages — their speakers, their stakeholders and their projects — have been under-resourced. This thesis discusses how a team of Kaska language workers have used a professional videoconferencing platform to regularly engage in long-distance collaborative language projects between Watson Lake, Yukon, and Vancouver, British Columbia. While language projects often focus either on documentation or revitalization of a language, in these videoconferencing sessions project collaborators are able to integrate these two activities. The incorporation of this technology in their language work has had several positive by-products for project collaborators, including strengthened personal relationships, a heightened sense of connectedness to language, land and each other, and an interdependence on each other that also distributes authority, all of which have formed a community of practice that has made this language team into invested collaborators. Ultimately, this research suggests that in certain circumstances, videoconferencing technology can be used to support language documentation, revitalization and education, as well as the people who undertake such projects, in a myriad of ways that extends beyond the intended outputs of the projects themselves.

Lay Summary

Many Indigenous languages in Canada, and across the world, are spoken in areas that are relatively remote and removed from urban centers. Several people working with Kaska, a language spoken in the Yukon and British Columbia, have started using a professional videoconferencing platform to connect with each other between Watson Lake in the Yukon and Vancouver in British Columbia. This thesis looks at the ways these stakeholders are using videoconferencing to overcome the barriers posed by their geographic separation, as well as the way the use of this technology has impacted the work they are able to do and how they are able to do it. Specifically, videoconferencing has not only helped these stakeholders regularly and reliably collaborate on long-term projects, but has also helped them feel closer and more connected to each other and the language, which in turn has positive effects on the projects they undertake.

Preface

This thesis is an original intellectual product of the author. The fieldwork discussed throughout was approved by the Daylu Dena Council and by the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) under the title “Face-to-Face: How Digital Video Technology Can Increase Indigenous Language Engagement” BREB number H17-01051.

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1. Introduction

Indigenous languages that are spoken in remote or less accessible regions of the world are often under-resourced and their speakers, advocates and stakeholders are at a disadvantage simply because of the remoteness of where they live. For example, their distance from urban centers often makes it hard for language supporters to access and form partnerships with people and institutions that can support language work, identify grants and apply for funding, all of which makes it harder to sustain engagement in language projects overall. In this thesis, I look at one context in which a team of Kaska language stakeholders in western Canada are using videoconferencing technology as a way to overcome some of the obstacles posed by the fact that they can't regularly meet and work in the same location. Kaska is a Na Dene language spoken in the southeastern Yukon and northeastern British Columbia, most of the speakers of the language live in Kaska traditional territory and are 60 years and older. Several Kaska language stakeholders (speakers, teachers, researchers and learners) have started using videoconferencing technology as a way to 'meet' for regular Kaska language documentation and revitalization work between Watson Lake in the Yukon and Vancouver in British Columbia. While projects with Indigenous languages conventionally focus *either* on documentation *or* revitalization, in these videoconferencing sessions these Kaska stakeholders are often able to integrate these two activities and participate in both language documentation and revitalization in complement.

In recent years, Indigenous language workers, researchers and stakeholders have begun to explore how emergent technologies offer promising tools that be used to increase engagement and support for language revitalization (Carpenter et al. 2016; Eisenlohr 2004; Hennessy 2010; Moore and Hennessy 2006; Pulla 2015). However, Carpenter et al. report that the potential of these technologies is not being maximized because the specific ways that they can be used in this type of work is underexplored: "Despite the sharp uptake of digital tools to support endangered

language learning, there is little in the way of systematic and rigorous evaluation of the results of their use” (2016: 3). My research project is in part a response to this report, in it I evaluate the ways in which this team of Kaska language stakeholders have incorporated videoconferencing into their language documentation, revitalization and education practices, as well as the additional implications and impact this technology has had on the work they are doing.

1.1 Engaging Discourse

Before introducing this research project and the specific questions it addresses, it is necessary to situate this project in ongoing discussions about the reasons for documenting and revitalizing Indigenous¹ languages, and the benefits to undertaking this work. In 1992, Michael Krauss published the seminal article *The World's Languages in Crisis* where he outlined the decline in speakers of many of the world's languages and urged linguists to direct their attention to these languages before linguistics became the only field to preside over the loss of the very thing it studies (Krauss 1992 and 1998). Since then, minority language stakeholders and researchers have continued to articulate arguments for revitalizing endangered languages, and ask whether ‘revitalize’ is even the optimal term (Pine and Turin 2017; Leonard 2017). Some researchers have written that every language is in a sense its own species, and that linguistic diversity must be maintained just like biological diversity must be maintained (see Duchêne and Heller 2007). The metaphor of ‘death’ has even been created by comparing the impending ‘death’ of these languages to the impending extinction of some of the world's species (Nettle and Romaine 2000; Perley 2012). Or that when a language ceases to be actively spoken a window for humanity to explore our own cognition closes (Harrison 2007). Although the urgency and sensationalization of these arguments has brought wider attention to the decreasing number of speakers of many of

¹ In this thesis, I primarily use the terms ‘Indigenous’ or ‘minority’ to refer Indigenous languages that can also be categorized as ‘endangered’ and are typically ‘under-resourced.’

the world's Indigenous and minority languages, and catalyzed an increase in academic and public support for language documentation, they have become increasingly problematized as generating and perpetuating discourses that ultimately work against and undermine the very subject they claim to support (Davis 2017; Duchêne and Heller 2007; Hermes and Engman 2017; Hill 2002; Leonard 2017; Perley 2012). On this subject, Barbra Meek contends, “the historical and conceptual depth of these permeations constantly presents barriers, challenges, or constraints that need to be destroyed, unpacked, deconstructed, or just changed” (2011:55). One way in which Indigenous language speakers, advocates, stakeholders² and researchers (all of which are not mutually exclusive categories) are working to dismantle and reorient these discourses is by looking at how the process of language documentation and revitalization can create sites and opportunities for equity, accountability, continuity and collaboration.

Researchers of Indigenous languages have also addressed the myriad barriers that have limited, and continue to determine, what these language documentation and revitalization efforts can accomplish (Meek 2010; Whaley 2011). In her work on Kaska language revitalization *We Are Our Language: An Ethnography of Language Revitalization in a Northern Athabaskan Community*, Barbra Meek discusses how sociolinguistic disjunctures, which are “points of discontinuity or contradiction, moments where practices and ideas about language diverge” (Meek 2010:50), can create barriers for successful language revitalization with Kaska or in similar contexts. These sociolinguistic disjunctures occur when ideas and language practices diverge; this divergence can hinder language revitalization efforts or can engender opportunities to construct new ideas or language practices (Meek 2010). Disjunctures also “make salient opportunities for change, for creating or re-creating new intertextual, interdiscursive, and

² In this thesis, I primarily use the term ‘stakeholder’ because it is an inclusive term that accounts for the diverse roles and skillsets people involved in language projects can have. I later also use the term ‘collaborator’ in reference to the team of Kaska language stakeholders I researched and worked with.

interactional connections and improving or building upon current practices” (Meek 2010:160). Videoconferencing technology may present language stakeholders with a type of sociolinguistic ‘conjuncture’ where their practices and ideas about language are able to converge. In this thesis, I address how the incorporation of videoconferencing technology in Indigenous language work (documentation, revitalization and education) creates a meaningful opportunity for change by enabling stakeholders to participate in a multi-sited community of practice where they are able to mutually form new practices of collaboration.

In the chapters that follow, I outline the background to my research project, discuss my research methodology, briefly address how this project should not necessarily be situated in discussions about technology use in work with Indigenous languages, but rather in discussions about collaboration, community building and understandings of expertise and control. I also discuss the utility that the framework of communities of practice has in understanding the impact that videoconferencing can have in long-distance work with Indigenous languages. Lastly, I briefly address factors that determine the potential utility of this technology for other people working with Indigenous languages.

1.2 Project Background

Like many First Nations communities in northwestern Canada, people who live on traditional Kaska territory have to drive several hours to get to larger towns and centers. In regards to language work, the remoteness of Watson Lake and other First Nation communities in this part of the country has limited the types of projects that could be undertaken, particularly those in collaboration with language stakeholders and researchers who are not, or cannot be, based in the region. This meant that for Watson Lake and similarly remote communities who wanted to work with outsider language researchers, language documentation and revitalization work was limited

to intense periods when the researcher could visit, and the necessary hours of follow up work had to be done over the phone.

This system of intense recording sessions and long-distance follow up had previously been the way that Leda Jules³ and Patrick Moore had conducted language work together. Leda is a speaker of the Pelly Banks dialect and a dedicated Kaska language advocate, and over the years she has worked with Patrick on various Kaska documentation projects. Patrick has been working with Kaska since about 1985 when he moved to Ross River, home of the Kaska Ross River Dena Council, as a teacher. Since 2001 he has worked as a professor in the Anthropology Department at the University of British Columbia Vancouver campus, and he has continued to work with people in Ross River and Watson Lake on language projects from afar. In the past, Patrick would travel to Watson Lake where he would have dedicated recording sessions with Leda and other speakers, and then transcribe the recordings and create other materials after he returned to Vancouver. Leda recounts that they would often call each other to review transcripts and ask questions. They each expressed how this system was workable, but wasn't optimal because the phone was tiring for both of them, it limited their projects to being primarily text based, and because it only engaged other stakeholders who were already highly dedicated and invested in Kaska language work.

In 2015 Leda, Patrick and a team of other Kaska language stakeholders who were located in Watson Lake started using the videoconferencing platform, BlueJeans, for which Patrick's university had a site license, to collaborate on Kaska language projects. Not long after, two Kaska undergraduate students also started joining these BlueJeans meetings as part of a Kaska language course offered at UBC. Patrick said he got the idea to use videoconferencing to connect with Indigenous language speakers from another linguist who he heard was using Skype or a

³ Each Kaska language stakeholder I discuss in this thesis consented to having their first and last names used.

similar platform to connect with Sto:lo speakers in Chilliwack, British Columbia from Vancouver. Patrick said he figured that if it was useful to them, it could be even more useful for Kaska language stakeholders and he could help on more projects in between his trips to the Yukon. Patrick said that he learned about BlueJeans while helping to conduct long-distance interviews for faculty positions at UBC, and because at the time it seemed to offer better quality video and audio than the available free platforms. Unlike other common videoconferencing platforms, like Skype or Google Hangouts where the initiator has to instigate a call to another user or users, BlueJeans can provide one continuous session that runs 24/7 that users can join anytime by pasting the unique session URL into their browser or joining through the BlueJeans app. It is important to note that unlike Skype or Google Hangouts, BlueJeans is not a free platform; BC Net had negotiated a BlueJeans subscription for all of the universities in British Columbia, and Patrick said he worked with Arts ISIT staff at UBC to ensure that they had a continuously open and running session for Kaska language work.

These videoconferencing sessions were first used to connect Patrick with Linda McDonald, the Kaska language teacher at the high school in Watson Lake, and Mida Donnessy, a speaker of the Liard Dialect and Language Teacher at the high school. Linda considers herself a semi-speaker of Kaska, and her role was to connect to video conferencing sessions from a classroom at the high school, to manage the audio recording of the sessions on her end, and to upload and share the audio recordings with Patrick online. Patrick would then transcribe and gloss the recordings so that he could organize them into documents and resources to share back with Linda. Patrick said initially they used these sessions to record scripted conversations and produce language materials that Linda could use as teaching resources for the Kaska language courses she taught at the high school.

In spring of 2016, Martina Volfova, a PhD candidate in the Department of Anthropology at UBC and an advisee of Patrick, started her dissertation research in Watson Lake. At this time there were two projects with Kaska in the works, the first was the Kaska “Talking” Dictionary which was funded through a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Partnership Development grant and the goal was to create an online dictionary of Kaska where users could listen to audio clips of each word and its example sentences. The second project was funded by Canadian Heritage and the goal was to create Kaska language lessons and conversations that could be used in language instruction and would be made publicly available on the Kaska language website in partnership with UBC.

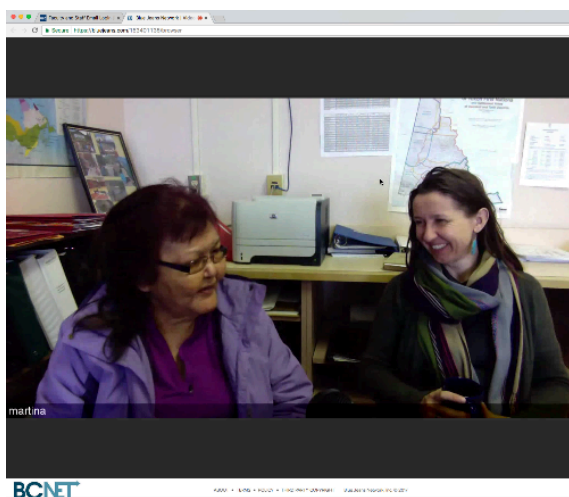


Figure 1. Leda Jules and Martina Volfova, and Patrick Moore (upper corner) elicited on April 28, 2017.

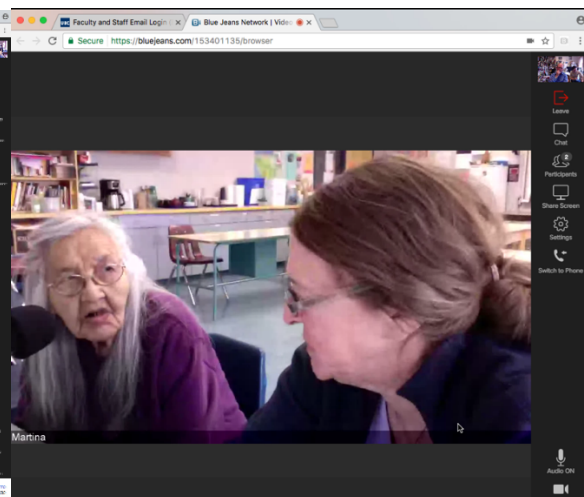


Figure 2. Mida Donnelly and Linda McDonald, Patrick Moore (upper corner) and Victoria Sear (upper corner) elicited on April 20, 2017.

In order to undertake the conversation project, Linda and Mida started connecting with Patrick via videoconference almost daily during the week. Martina and Leda also started connecting from the high school almost daily in separate sessions to do the same. Each session was audio recorded by either Linda or Martina, after which they would upload these audio recordings to a Google Drive account dedicated to Kaska language work so that the files would be available to everyone working on these projects. Martina notes that in conversations between

her and Patrick, speakers and other people involved from Watson Lake didn't express concerns about the privacy of the documentation (recordings) or other materials (transcripts, etc.) they produced and they said they wanted their language to be available to everyone. For these reasons, they started, and continued to, share language materials and resources on the Kaska website and through this shared Google Drive. It is important to note (and I will explore this later), that these sessions were used for various activities, both indirectly and indirectly related to the goals of these two language projects.

Patrick said that around this same time, in 2016, two Kaska students pursuing their undergraduate degrees at UBC, Brittany Tuffs and Ronnie Lutz, asked him whether he could teach a Kaska language course. He decided that it wouldn't be the most beneficial for them to just hear him (a non-native speaker not from the community) speak Kaska. Since the conversations he and the other stakeholders were working to record were for the same level of language learners as Brittany and Ronnie, he decided to start a Kaska class at UBC and schedule it so that Brittany and Ronnie could join the videoconferencing sessions with Linda and Mida three times a week. Joining these sessions gave Brittany and Ronnie the opportunity to hear a native speaker of Kaska and learn the language as they watched (and sometimes participated in) Kaska documentation and revitalization work, and gain credit for their work.

Although everyone who has participated in these sessions is a Kaska stakeholder, for the sake of clarity I divide participants into two categories: (1) core or essential collaborators and (2) non-essential collaborators. There is no hierarchy in this schema other than the fact that core collaborators are necessary for the videoconferencing session to happen, while the non-essential collaborators are peripheral to the general functioning of sessions. Leda, Mida, Patrick, Linda and Martina were the core collaborators for this project; Brittany, Ronnie and I, as well as anyone else who participated, were the non-essential collaborators.

During the peak documentation time Patrick was connecting with Linda and Mida, and with Martina and Leda, for a half hour to an hour and a half every weekday, with Brittany and Ronnie attending three times a week for their class. I attended at least once a week and when my schedule permitted. Periodically, other people involved in language work at UBC would drop in or other people in the Yukon would join, or rarely, someone else would join remotely or Martina would join Mida's and Leda's session. Once we decided that I would be researching these sessions for my thesis, Patrick started regularly recording them using Camtasia, a video editing software recommended by the Arts ISIT department at UBC.⁴ It is important to note that these sessions were just a part of the Kaska language work that was being done: language workers were cutting up sound files for the Kaska "Talking" Dictionary, cutting up sound files for the conversations to add to the Kaska website, uploading the conversations to the website, Patrick and Martina were constantly sending transcripts back and forth, Martina was managing people in Watson Lake who were helping with these tasks, I was starting to become the resource person at UBC for some aspects of these projects, and Linda was pursuing a Master's degree at Simon Fraser University near Vancouver. All in all, there was a lot of Kaska language work ongoing and each participant had a different level of involvement. Importantly, I observed that all of these collaborators used these videoconferencing sessions as a way to 'anchor' all of their ongoing work and projects. I discuss how they did this in later chapters, but first I will explain the inception of this project and my research methodology.

2. Project Inception: Methodology Preamble

When I started the Master's program at UBC I was keen to explore the way that the products of

⁴ Martina said that she also recommended they start screen recording these sessions because she was interested in analyzing the performative elements happening in the sessions, gestures in particular. One drawback to BlueJeans that she and I both noted is that the screen that shows you is very small (see Figures 1 and 2), and that there is no easy way to record these sessions, particularly if you want to be able to see all participants clearly.

language revitalization projects were received by community members, learners and other stakeholders. Patrick Moore, who is also my advisor, let me know that for various reasons it wouldn't be the best option for me to conduct fieldwork on location in Watson Lake at that time (despite on-site fieldwork being one of the canons of our field). We thought about how to develop a thesis project that (1) I could undertake given all these constraints; (2) was fitting for the language context; (3) would provide me with the type of research/data I would need to write my thesis; and (4) be of value and interest to the Kaska community and to stakeholders of other Indigenous languages. Ultimately, we decided that since I was interested in language revitalization methodology and practice, I could conduct my thesis research on the way that he and the Kaska stakeholders he worked with were using videoconferencing in their language work. The goal of this project was not to generate 'linguistic' data for Kaska; rather my data would be 'extra-linguistic' and would concern the way in which stakeholders were creating, analyzing and making use of 'linguistic' data.

I was thankful to have my advisor propose and help me develop a project, but in turn this left me unsure of how to proceed and how I should take ownership of the project. For example, since I couldn't attend many of these BlueJeans sessions, Patrick would record them for me, and I initially felt apprehensive that I wasn't doing all my own data collection. Additionally, during my interviews other Kaska stakeholders were often close by and would chime in, or the interviewee would ask them questions or they would interrupt us to check in on something else. Needless to say, my interviews inevitably became very casual and involved digressions where we would start talking about tomatoes from Patrick's garden, or updates on the status of Kaska work we needed to do, or share information we had about upcoming projects. It wasn't until I started reviewing the 'data' from my research and reading about collaboration in language work that I realized that, although my research project deviated from the traditional system of a solo

on-site project, this type of research dynamic and data collection did not undermine my research and should not inhibit me from taking ownership of this project, but rather it showed the highly interdependent and collaborative nature of these Kaska language projects and the people who are working on them, of which I had become one.

Likewise, I was also a participant, collaborator and employee of the Kaska language projects I was researching⁵ and was initially concerned about instances where the line between my role as ‘participant observer’, ‘participant’ and ‘student employee’ might become blurry. My anxiety about how to embrace my role as both a research participant and researcher was further complicated by the fact that during a committee meeting about my Behavioral Ethics Application for my research project, my second committee member noted a potential conflict of interest in my research proposal: Patrick — my advisor, and someone who had significant power over both my research and my academic career — would be one of the participants in my research study. Upon my committee member’s recommendation, I arranged a phone meeting with a member of the Office of Research Ethics (ORE). I was relieved to hear that this conflict of interest was not overly concerning for the ORE because applications where a researcher proposes to research people or bodies that have some form of control or authority in their research are becoming less unusual. As an example, they anecdotally cited that researchers at UBC who undertake projects with First Nations are increasingly finding themselves in similar situations where they are researching the same people who also oversee their research and determine the goals for the projects they participate in. To accommodate this, they said that the UBC Office of Research Ethics acknowledges the need for these types of projects and is trying to find ways for the ethical review process to better accommodate and serve them.

⁵ I was funded as a Graduate Research Assistant to work on both the Kaska “Talking” Dictionary and I worked with the conversation project that was funded through Canadian Heritage.

Likewise, Lise Dobrin and Saul Schwartz (2016) argue that linguists will miss important insight into their own language work if they *don't* make use of participation observation. They propose that documentary linguists should become participant observers of their language documentation projects partly because participant observation “requires fieldworkers to embrace rather than try to mitigate their role as the personal vehicles of research” (Dobrin and Schwartz 2016: 262). Once again, I realized that, although the types of research dynamics I was navigating were complex, and often involved me as the researcher navigating my roles as participant and participant observer, the benefits of this type of research and research structure outweighs the additional complexities it entails and it presents new opportunities to engage and learn.

2.1 Research Methodology

My research methods included three modes of inquiry: (1) participant observation of videoconferencing sessions; (2) analyzing recordings of these sessions; and (3) interviewing people who regularly participated in these sessions as well as other people involved in related activities. Weekly during the 2016-17 academic year, I joined sessions. I primarily joined the sessions with Mida, Linda, Brittany and Ronnie in the mornings because it accommodated my own class and work schedule better than the afternoon sessions with Leda and Martina.

In fall 2016 Patrick started using a video editing software to regularly record videoconferencing sessions for me to use in my research and to create an additional level of archival documentation. These sessions were also audio recorded in Watson Lake by either Martina or Linda, and the audio recordings were uploaded to a shared Google Drive account. I reviewed and annotated a random sampling of 34 of these recordings, 17 of them with Mida as the speaker and 17 with Leda as the speaker. The recordings ranged from 0.5-1.5 hours and involved different combinations of participants. When starting my review, I encountered a technical issue that the voices of the people in Vancouver were practically inaudible on the video

recordings. I was able to remedy this setback by downloading the audio recording(s) for each video from the shared Drive and syncing it with the video. This process was a bit painstaking, and I once again felt unsettled because for a second time I had to rely on recordings that someone else had produced. However, the fact that I knew how to access these audio recordings also illustrates the level of interdependence in not only the projects we participated in together, but also of my research itself.

Lastly, I interviewed the stakeholders who regularly participated in these videoconferencing sessions, who included Leda Jules, Mida Donnelly, Martina Volfova, Patrick Moore, Brittany Tuffs and Ronnie Lutz. I also interviewed Ricardo Serrano, Associate Director–Information Technology Arts ISIT at UBC about UBC’s history with BlueJeans and their decisions for a future move to Skype for Business.

3. Videoconferencing and the Fit of Technology in Indigenous Language Work

Researchers and other stakeholders are increasingly incorporating the use of emergent technologies into their work with Indigenous languages. In fact, at this point in time it is impossible to fathom constructing a dictionary, transcribing a recording or archiving language materials *without* the use of technology generally or the specialized programs designed for this type of work. In the last several decades, language researchers and stakeholders of Indigenous languages have started investigating the ways in which emergent technologies can support Indigenous and minority languages (Holton 2011) by being mediating forces between language death and language change (Hermes 2012). This technology can take many forms, from the development of specialized and customizable software for creating dictionaries or transcribing elicitation sessions, to non-specialized programs that allow the hosting of language recordings, materials and archives online, and even to social media platforms that promote Indigenous language, culture, heritage and programming.

Although the ways that technology can support work with Indigenous and minority languages may seem infinite, it is important for language researchers and stakeholders to remember that technologies are only tools that can aid people — who do the real language work — and that technologies should be treated as such. Patrick Eisenlohr voices concern that “taking a skeptical perspective, some researchers have reported a fetishization of technology among speakers of lesser-used languages, who locate the agency to “save” their language in technology instead of in themselves, thereby further undermining revitalization efforts” (Eisenlohr 2004: 36). Mary Hermes also cautions that “no matter how good any digital resource or learning material is, this can only be a tool to assist people in using their language to communicate” (Hermes 2012: 138). Hermes also argues that identifying the appropriateness of a technology to any given context is imperative, as “in this sense, appropriate technology means matching factors of the language ecology to language-shift efforts, using tools which are the most widely available, affordable and suited to the needs of the language and community of users” (2012: 139). For these reasons, it behooves language researchers and stakeholders to decide which specific technologies offer the best tools for their individual language projects, because “when technology is implemented for language revitalization, learning, and teaching, it is not a simple or haphazard endeavor, but rather a complex reality that necessitates informed decisions” (Galla 2016: 1149).

Even though language researchers and stakeholders in North America are increasingly incorporating emergent technologies into their language revitalization practices, such as documentation, analysis, education, dissemination and archiving, many language researchers voice concern that not enough attention is being paid to the multiplicity of ways in which these technologies are being used and how this information is shared with researchers and stakeholders of other languages. In 2016, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

released a knowledge synthesis report, *Digital Access for Language and Culture in First Nations Communities* (Carpenter et al. 2016), outlining the importance of undertaking research that looks at how technologies are being used in projects and programs that support First Nations languages. This report asks language researchers to not just reflect on the ways in which technologies are (or maybe are not) successfully or productively supporting their language projects, but rather to research and examine how specific technologies can support specific language projects. I have situated my own research in these ongoing discussions and focus on the ways in which this team of Kaska language stakeholders have specifically chosen to use videoconferencing technology to support their long-distance language work and the impact it has had on this work.

Multiple types of technologies (low-tech initiatives, mid-tech initiatives, high-tech initiatives) can be used in synchrony in Indigenous language revitalization and education efforts (Galla 2009). Galla (2016) proposes a Technancy Framework for Language Revitalization (TLFR), which includes five factors to help language stakeholders determine the appropriateness of the use of a technology in Indigenous language learning and teaching regardless of the tech level: linguistic and cultural, social, technological, environmental, and economic. The Kaska language work is a high-tech initiative that uses both videoconferencing as well as other technologies, and in the next sections of this thesis I explore the appropriateness or ‘fit’ of videoconferencing technology to their projects and goals.

3.1 “I like BlueJeans. The End.” : Beyond Technology Itself

In the last several decades there has been an increased focus placed on the ways that technology can support documentation, revitalization and teaching of Indigenous and minority languages (Cook 2004; Eisenlohr 2004; Hennessy et al. 2013; Hermes and King 2013; Kroskrity 2016), and the potential that videoconferencing platforms have for long-distance teaching and learning of

these languages (Galla 2010; Holton 2011). Often, researchers who have published about technology use in language revitalization method and practice have reflected on the specific capabilities or limitations of the technology they are using (see Obonyo et al. 2011; Kroskrity and Reynolds 2001). For example, researchers have reflected on the unique difficulties they've encountered trying to construct a dictionary of a North American Indigenous language in a dictionary program not made to accommodate the structure of such languages (Cristinoi and Nemo 2013; Dyck and Kumar 2012; Poser 2002). I originally approached my research project with these types of questions in mind, and I framed my research and interview questions around the technology itself. However, when I asked these types of questions in interviews, Kaska stakeholders simply responded that they liked using videoconferencing and they liked BlueJeans. As Ronnie Lutz summarily said at the end of our interview "I like BlueJeans. The end."

Most people I interviewed had not critically reflected on the technology of videoconferencing itself before our interview, and they struggled to come up with suggestions on the spot about how the technology could be improved, changed or adapted. They noted that sometimes BlueJeans lagged, or that it would be hard to use in other communities that didn't have high speed internet connection, and Martina said she wished it was easier to record sessions and see yourself on the screen, but overall people didn't have many complaints. I was initially surprised by their apparent lack of interest or opinions, but later realized this absence of reflection was not out of disinterest, rather it was because the platform regularly functioned well enough for them to *not* have to constantly reflect on it. In this same vein, the few recommendations people did make addressed how videoconferencing could be used a bit differently for this type of work, and not necessarily how the technology itself could be altered or improved. Through my interviews, I quickly learned that the less each person had to focus on the technology itself, the more they could focus on their own goals and the more energy they could

devote to engaging with each other during each session.

The specific things people expressed that they liked about videoconferencing was the way it helped them connect with each other, both in terms of the language work (documentation, teaching, learning, etc.) it allowed them to do, but also in the way it allowed them to socialize with each other. I observed that the less people had to think about the videoconferencing platform or about the ways it mediated their social interactions, the more successful they viewed the technology to be. After conducting several interviews, I realized that I should direct my focus away from the technology itself, its functionality, limitations, etc., and redirect my focus to the ways in which videoconferencing allowed people to engage with each other and what this meant for the work they were doing together.

3.2 Technology and Community

Researchers working with Indigenous and under resourced languages have proposed that a major benefit of emergent technologies is their potential for community building across long-distances (Eisenlohr 2004; Holton 2011). This is particularly true for people working with remote communities who often are excluded from larger projects, partnerships and more sustained engagements because of the limitations of where they live and where they can get to. Gary Holton proposes that “information technology has the potential to create digital language communities which bridge the gaps created by language shift in minority-language communities” (Holton 2011: 371). Although Holton is most likely categorizing a ‘digital language community’ as including primarily language users and language speakers, I propose that this term can be expanded to also include people actively engaged in language revitalization work, such as linguists, researchers, teachers and learners. I use the rest of this thesis to address the ways that videoconferencing technology has helped Kaska language stakeholders to form and maintain a digital language community that is formed around collaboration and mutually-

articulated goals and is made up of not only language speakers, but also of language learners, teachers and researchers.

4. Collaboration Despite Dispersion: Emerging Research Models

In this chapter I introduce ongoing discussions about the importance of collaboration in work with Indigenous languages and address the ways that videoconferencing has helped Kaska language stakeholders engage in new types of long-distance collaborative language work. In her article titled *Indigenous Language Revitalization and Documentation in the United States: Collaboration Despite Colonialism*, Mary Hermes argues that “endangered language work demands a paradigm which repairs colonial distrust and can revitalize the field of linguistics as well” (2012: 132). She proposes that a key element of a new paradigm rests on the basic fact that “in short, linguists need Native speakers, and revitalization efforts need the work of linguists” (Hermes 2012: 132). People working in language revitalization and documentary linguistics have acknowledged the interdependence between language speakers and people trained in linguistics (Czaykowska-Higgins 2009; Perley 2012; Rice 2009; Shaw 2004) in order to address what ‘collaboration’ means in the context of work with Indigenous languages, and how collaborative projects can (but don’t always) foster more equitable and sustainable language projects (Crippen and Robinson 2013; Robinson and Crippen 2015).

Dobrin and Schwartz propose that “one way to understand the proliferation of literature on collaboration, with its descriptions of individual projects and celebration of their outcomes, is as a mechanism for translating field linguists’ otherwise invisible social labor into something that can be comprehended by existing standards of disciplinary value” (2016: 260). In other words, as a way to balance this work with the ‘publish or perish’ world of academia, researchers of Indigenous languages have started to write about the *process* of creating these outputs and deliverables instead of the end products or goals themselves. Dobrin and Schwartz give the

example that even though helping develop a coloring book for an Indigenous language may be a meaningful resource for language learners, it might not be considered a legitimate professional accomplishment. However, an article about the process of developing and producing the coloring book published in a peer-reviewed journal is. In a way, I have chosen a similar route to my own research, devoting significant time to participating in Kaska language projects while choosing to write about the process of how these projects are being carried out.

In the next sections I discuss how videoconferencing has not only allowed this team of Kaska stakeholders to develop new models for undertaking long-distance language documentation and revitalization work, but has also given them the opportunity to engage in a form of long-distance collaborative language work that aligns with ongoing discussions on collaboration.

4.1 New Research Models: Integrating Documentation and Revitalization

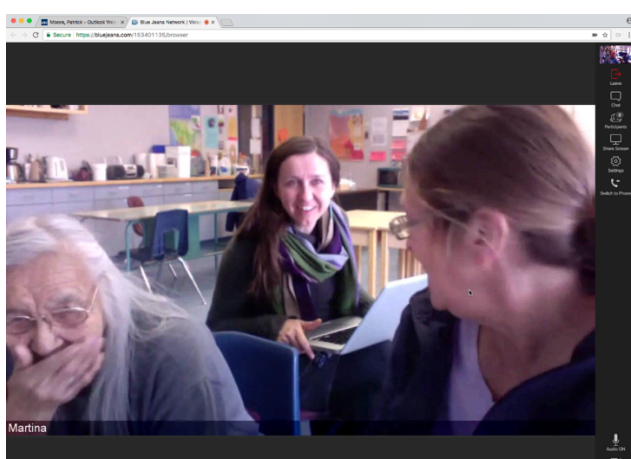


Figure 4. Martina Volfova physically joins Mida Donnelly, Linda McDonald, Patrick Moore (upper corner) and Victoria Sear (upper corner) during their elicitation session on April 28, 2017.

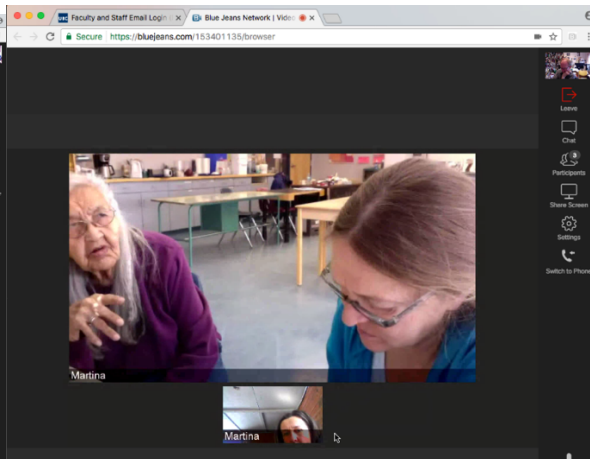


Figure 3. Martina Volfova joins Mida Donnelly, Linda McDonald and Patrick Moore (upper corner) via BlueJeans on April 19, 2017.

Patrick said that although on grant applications they often simply list videoconferencing as “a way of carrying out the work,” in actuality it is a relatively novel methodological approach in work with Indigenous languages, and that he, Linda, Martina, Mida and Leda have had to dedicate a good amount of time and energy into figuring out the best way to integrate BlueJeans into their workflows. Since they are most likely one of the first teams to use videoconferencing

technology to facilitate and anchor long-distance documentation and revitalization work in this way, they “don’t have exactly a clear model about how you do things,” and as Patrick also said, “It’s not like you’re reproducing usual models of how you do language work or what it’s going to be about.” Not only is it relatively novel that these stakeholders are conducting most of their elicitation sessions over videoconference, but the multiple types of work they undertake and navigate in these sessions is also worth noting. Although the overarching purpose of these sessions is to work on documentation projects, the collaborators involved are also simultaneously participating in different language revitalization practices and projects.

Language researchers have noted that language documentation and language revitalization are two distinct activities (Bower 2008; Bower and Warner 2015). Whereas the goal of language documentation projects may be to document a language in some form, analyze it, and archive it, the goal of language revitalization projects is often to ensure that a language will be taught, shared and spoken. While language projects often focus *either* on documentation or revitalization, these videoconferencing sessions illustrate how these two activities, although distinct, can be integrated. The overt purpose of these sessions is to undertake language documentation to create language material that can later be used in language revitalization work, but during the sessions themselves I observed that collaborators often engaged in different types of language revitalization. For example, part of some sessions are devoted to eliciting word lists, phrases and other material that Linda plans to soon distribute in the Kaska language class in the high school, and Ronnie and Brittany participate in these sessions as Kaska language learners and students.

Patrick also highlighted that navigating this particular type of research model that incorporates so many different simultaneous, and integrated, documentation and revitalization activities also means they’re “having to adjust in various ways all the time. And there are

adjustments that occur on both sides” because each session has “emergent qualities” and is not “totally predictable” (Patrick Moore). Although there is a general structure to sessions, additional elements are unpredictable and are determined by the goals of the participants on that day, the functioning of the technology, as well as external elements, such as topics that need to be discussed, when breaks are taken, and who is present. Martina said that in each videoconferencing session they address what is most pressing, and that can vary from day to day. The example below from November 10, 2016 illustrates the unpredictability and emergent nature that is characteristic of many of these sessions. On this day, Martina was eliciting conversation #22-Jade Mountain with Mida at the high school in Watson Lake and Patrick participated from Vancouver, but partway through elicitation they take an impromptu break so that Linda can elicit a prayer to distribute to the high school students the next day.

[Martina and Mida start eliciting together; at a point, they have to stop while an announcement is made over the intercom; it sounds like Linda is making the announcement]

[Patrick’s BlueJeans connection cuts out, and you can see he has to restart the application]

Linda: [Enters classroom, shuts the door and walks over] Did you stand for a moment of silence?

Martina: [Turns around to face Linda] We sat.

[Linda laughs and walks by]

Martina: We were trying to figure something out here with Mida. Do you want to do your prayer first?

Linda: Yeah, sure.

Martina: [Raises her voice and looks at screen] OK, Linda is going to — wants to ask Auntie Mida about some prayers because we have a little thing here for Remembrance Day at the school.

Patrick: Yes.

Martina: She’s gonna ask. [Gets up from chair]

Mida: [Looking up at Martina and Linda] *Ninī—ninī esqhdī ekōnanzāt’?* (You—just you, you stand up?)

Linda: No, *sinī lā* (It’s me). Yeah, yeah. [Sits down in front of screen] Hey Pat,

dínht'ā? (How are you?)

Mida: [Inaudible words] help already.

Pat: *Estīe* (I'm Good).

[Martina walks out of the classroom]

Linda: OK. [Turns to Mida and starts eliciting]

[Once Linda and Mida finish Martina returns and continues eliciting Conversation #22]

Even though this exchange is less than two minutes, during it Martina and Mida have to stop and redo part of their elicitation so that the unexpected loud speaker won't muffle Mida's voice in the audio recording, Patrick has to restart his BlueJeans connection, Linda enters and needs to use her minimal free time between class periods to elicit something for the next day, Patrick agrees that they should temporarily shift elicitation gears, and this shift in elicitors and topics needs to be communicated to Mida. Patrick proposed that these types of emergent elements make each session relatively unpredictable, and they have had to factor unpredictability into their research plans. In the next sections, I address how the unpredictable elements in these sessions are a product of stakeholders being able to articulate their own goals and make adjustments and space for those of others.

4.2 Goals: Collaboration in Context

I observed that these videoconferencing sessions provide Kaska stakeholders with a regular, structured time and space in which they can work toward the shared goals of Kaska language continuance as well as voice and work toward their individual goals. The example from the previous section where Mida, Martina and Patrick quickly accommodate Linda's need to elicit a prayer for the upcoming Remembrance Day event at the high school is a representative example from these sessions of how individual goals are acknowledged and jointly worked towards. As such, even though Patrick often facilitates these sessions, space is made for Martina, Linda, Leda and Mida to ask questions and bring their own agenda items to the table. When

asked about this dynamic, Patrick said:

You have to be conscious that people have goals that aren't your goals. You could just do it as kind of an extraction project, that you would be doing research that didn't feed into community goals, especially around developing great fluency, understanding, building capacity for the local community. So, that's what we've tried to do. I try and meet some of these community goals, which have to do with engaging people with language and knowing more about the language, developing your skills. So, Linda would suggest things like, "Well, you're doing a dictionary project, but what we really need is lots of things about conversation. We need to know how to do conversation." So, we did scripted conversations. She came up with ones, we came up with a whole set that developed language understandings within them. Then we're doing the fluent conversations. I didn't have to do conversations, but I know she's right, it's very important. [...] In a way it takes you off your exact academic path to things that are going to lead to publications, things that are going to lead to products like a dictionary, but that's the reality. That's what people have the right to ask for those things, and they're important for what they're trying to accomplish. So, that's what I've done. You try and keep it just to the extent that you still get some other things done too. So that you still have some kind of academic integrity to what you're doing. And you know, have the language documentation sort of being there, but still have people basically realize what they want to do and be able to do that the best you can. (Patrick Moore)

Patrick has identified that people in Watson Lake may have goals at the project level that may deviate from his own, or at least may not enhance his own academic or career capital, but he also acknowledges that these goals are important and must be worked toward *because* they are important to people from the language community. Patrick's rationale for the projects he helps coordinate and the approach he takes to facilitate videoconferencing sessions aligns with ongoing discussions about how collaboration in work with Indigenous languages centers around the acknowledgement and articulation of shared goals and capacity building with stakeholders and speakers from the language community. An overarching theme in this ever-growing body of work on collaboration in work with Indigenous and minority languages is the concept of 'goals,' who gets to set them, who gets to execute them, and where the agency lies in this process (Crippen and Robinson 2013; Hinton and Hale 2001; Leonard and Haynes 2010; Penfield et al. 2008). Laura Robinson and James Crippen propose that "for those linguists who began conducting fieldwork several decades ago, the literature on collaboration is clearly a response to

an ethos of linguist-centered fieldwork that ignored community goals” (Robinson and Crippen 2015: 86). Saul Schwartz and Rena Lederman note that “when goals converge, collaboration is possible; when goals diverge, collaboration may be impossible” (2011: 65-66). Collaboration can be further complicated by the fact that the same goals are not always shared by language communities and researchers across differing contexts, just it has become increasingly evident that collaboration is inherently complicated and context-dependent. In particular, discussions on collaboration address the goals of the language community in relation to the goals of a formally trained linguist or language expert who is aligned with academia and not from the community. As the formally trained linguist involved in these Kaska projects, Patrick acknowledges both his own goals and those of community stakeholders, but also articulates the importance of finding ways to reasonably and productively accommodate them both. He also acknowledges the importance of the involvement of ‘the language community’ in planning and execution of language documentation and projects, which is often taken up as an initial indicator for successful collaboration in language work (Leonard and Haynes 2010).

In order to be able to support, and devote significant time to, language projects that support community goals, Patrick has worked to find ways to contribute to these goals while also undertaking language documentation and producing other outputs and publications that help him maintain a foothold as a professor in academia. Whereas earlier literature on collaboration sought to address the ways in which the language researcher was in a position of intellectual power with respect to the language community and language users (Czaykowska-Higgins 2009), more recent discussions address the ways that language researchers are also vulnerable and can become compromised and disenfranchised by collaborative projects that are inequitable to them (Crippen and Robinson 2013; Robinson and Crippen 2015). In particular, the system of funding is also skewed to favor more academically-oriented, rather than community-oriented, language projects,

which can compromise both researchers and aspirations for getting funding to undertake collaborative work (Czaykowska-Higgins 2009; Crippen and Robinson 2013, Robinson and Crippen 2015). I observed that in the case of Kaska language work, Patrick and community stakeholders have worked to develop projects that satisfy both the community's goals and the output stipulations of allied institutions and funding agencies.

People working to document and revitalize Indigenous and under-resourced languages in North America have proposed several possible models for engaging in collaborative language work. I will address two here that are applicable to these Kaska projects, *Community-Based Language Research* and *Collaborative Consultation*. Ewa Czaykowska-Higgins writes about her work with Canadian Indigenous communities and proposes a model she terms *Community-Based Language Research* (CBLR), which is “Research that is *on* a language, and that is conducted *for*, *with*, and *by* the language-speaking community within which the research takes place and which it affects” (2009: 24).⁶ She details that “this kind of research involves a collaborative relationship, a partnership, between researchers and (members of) the community within which the research takes place” (2009: 24). One of the distinguishing features of CBLR is the way in which it seeks to democratize knowledge by unsettling the community's reliance on outside linguists and researchers by valorizing and uplifting knowledge from, and within, the community. In this way, the authority of the outsider linguists can be appropriately attenuated without being diminished. I propose, whether intentionally or not, Patrick's focus on building language skills and greater capacity for this type of work in the community and with Kaska stakeholders aligns with the CBLR approach to collaborative language planning and projects.

⁶ For further discussion on the appropriate use of prepositions when describing this and similar research and projects, see Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council's Indigenous Research Statement of Principles: http://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/about-au_sujet/policies-politiques/statements-enonces/indigenous_recherche_recherche_autochtone-eng.aspx.

Wesley Leonard and Erin Haynes propose that collaboration fundamentally has to be ongoing, and in order to ensure their engagement in equitable and collaborative projects language workers must engage in a process they term *Collaborative Consultation*, which involves sharing knowledge through the research process. They propose that best practices of collaboration, and the consultation that ought to accompany it, are situational rather than universal: “Collaboration is a philosophy and approach rather than a set of guidelines about research roles and outcomes” (Leonard and Haynes 2010: 289-290). An important characteristic of collaborative language projects is how stakeholders work together to develop collaborative practices specific to their situation and project, and organize a system of regular knowledge sharing. Collaborative Consultation aligns with CBLR in many ways, but a key difference is that successful collaboration is built upon consistent communication and clarification. I observed that the unpredictability of each videoconferencing session, and the emergent qualities that arise, means that stakeholders are continuously, if informally, communicating not only about individual and shared goals, but also about daily logistics, project details and general workflow. In this way, each individual videoconferencing session presents these Kaska language stakeholders with the opportunity, and the need to, engage in regular collaborative consultation.

I would also like to stress that, just as Kaska language work was not confined to these daily videoconferencing sessions, the acknowledgment and negotiations of shared and individual goals in Kaska language work also extended outside of these sessions. Martina expressed that she and Patrick have tried to support the goals of the community and stakeholders they work with, and originally she wanted to obtain support from more of the community regarding the privacy and access guidelines on Kaska language material and resources that would be hosted online, but that it was hard to figure out who to ask and who spoke for whom. One place where community goals often diverge is around understandings of access — who has certain level of

access to certain cultural and language information and material (Penfield et al. 2008). Wesley Leonard and Erin Haynes argue that at this point in time, discussions about collaboration in work with Indigenous languages in North America must recognize “the heterogeneity of Native American communities and researchers, allowing for ethical research within the social, political, and cultural norms of any given group” (2010: 276), and that a ‘community’ is not necessarily a single-minded homogenous body where every member has the same goals for their language, or agrees on how to reach those goals. For their work with Kaska, Martina said that ultimately they decided to follow the guidelines set forth by the speakers they were working with, which generally was that they wanted to share their language and for everyone to be able to access it. The Kaska language team prioritized these goals of the speakers and community stakeholders they worked regarding access to the language, and for this reason there are no access or privacy restrictions on the Kaska language website or on the material they create.

I observed that these videoconferencing sessions provided its core participants the opportunity to not only work together to accomplish shared goals, but also to articulate their own goals and work to accomplish individual goals. These individual goals can become shared goals, like when Linda recommended they record scripted conversations for which they later secured funding, or when Martina asked if they could record verb paradigms and they then devoted several sessions to verbs like ‘to wash,’ or when Patrick submitted applications for additional funding to record unscripted conversations between speakers, which elders and other community stakeholders voiced they would like recorded.

4.3 Building Closeness Over Geographic Divides

Another important element to these BlueJeans sessions is that they helped this team of Kaska language stakeholders foster a greater sense of closeness and community with each other. Linda says that connecting regularly to through videoconference has not only helped her feel more

confident in her own language ability and given her the opportunity to improve her language knowledge, but that being able to connect with Patrick, Martina and Mida regularly has helped her feel less lonely in the work that she does:

So, it's really allowed me to have that support in doing this work. Sure, I'm a language teacher at the school, but I think my job is much bigger, it's part of a much bigger picture of language revitalization and it's a lonely place to be working often times. You're just alone a lot.

Linda calls Patrick and Martina her 'colleagues' and says that they are able to help her and relate to her dedication to her work with Kaska in ways that her other colleagues never could.

Likewise, Martina talked about how being able to regularly see and work with her advisor regularly means that her fieldwork experience has been different than that of many graduate students, but that it's enabled her to take on more responsibility for these language projects because almost daily Patrick is able to offer guidance and support. The topic of loneliness in language work didn't come up in my interview with Leda, but Martina said that she and Leda have had conversations about how lonely language work can be, and that Leda expressed that she also feels less lonely since she and Martina started regularly connecting with Patrick through videoconference. Ewa Czaykowska-Higgins proposes that "linguistic research is thus at the very least a social act and not simply an isolated intellectual act" (2009: 34). Many of the other stakeholders I interviewed expressed that one of their most liked things about these sessions is the social component. The very fact that people are able to regularly connect, and maybe are somewhat obligated to, means that they've formed similar types of relationships to those a person form with people they can see and talk to several times a week. In the sessions, participants often laugh, and joke, and maybe get sidetracked asking about a word they heard someone say the other week, or ask about an old friend, or try to organize logistics to get something from Vancouver to Watson Lake with the next person traveling through, or vice versa. These types of conversations, and type of social dynamics they help maintain, may not be

possible if these stakeholders weren't able to use a medium that allowed them to see and hear each other in real time. As Leda says, "As much as I don't like Pat living so far away from us, you know, he's still connected with us over this BlueJeans."

4.4 Rethinking Long Distance 'Connection'

This team of Kaska language stakeholders have also expressed that even apart from actively studying, learning and working with the language, being involved in the videoconferencing sessions helps them feel a sense of connection to each other, to the language, and the place. Even though Ronnie and Brittany are from different centers in Kaska territory where different dialects are spoken — Brittany is from Ross River and Ronnie is from Watson Lake — they both expressed that being involved in the videoconferencing sessions for their class helped them feel more connected to not only the language, but to their home and their respective Kaska communities and families. When I asked Brittany what she liked most about how Patrick decided to use these videoconferencing sessions as a part of their Kaska language class at UBC, Brittany said that it "makes you feel connected, you know, to people back home. And so I think that's probably the main appeal of it. You're still connected — connected to the people, the culture, the language." Ronnie expressed that the ways in which videoconferencing can help her feel more connected to home is good, but it can also make her feel lonely and distant:

I enjoy the sessions, the class sessions. It gives me a chance to keep in contact with another Kaska person from my community. It's like I'm at home, you know. I feel comfortable. I forget about being in Vancouver, I forget about what it's — like all the problems here. When I see somebody from home we talk about what goes on in the community, they talk about things they've done, things that you [emphasis] want to do, but sometimes the disadvantage is that you got like "I want to go hunting too." Like, "I want to go pick berries too." Like, "I don't want to be here," you know? Like it just can make you homesick as well. Yeah, so there are a lot of good things about it, but there are also a lot of other things that makes you feel really horrible that the one part of who you are is home and you want to be with family, you want to do the things that families do. So, it's both good and kind of bad. (Ronnie Lutz)

For Ronnie and Brittany who attend school several thousand kilometers away from their homes, participating in videoconferencing sessions as part of their Kaska class is not just about language learning, it's about associating the language with their home, their communities and their senses of self. This sense of connection is important and vital to maintain, and research shows the positive impacts that increased and sustained engagement with culture, heritage and language has for First Nations individuals and can lead to increased individual and overall health and wellbeing and can contribute to community healing and solidarity (Guevremont et al. 2016; Hallett et al. 2007; Hovey et al. 2014; Reyhner 2010; Whalen et al. 2016).

When I mentioned this increased feeling of connection in my interview with Patrick, he said that his choice to shape the Kaska class around the videoconferencing sessions was strategic both in the way that its existing structure allowed him to incorporate the course into the sessions without using additional time he couldn't devote to teaching, but also because he thought that Ronnie and Brittany would benefit from hearing Kaska regularly and being able to 'connect' with people up north and feel less disconnected from UBC, a place in which he said that First Nations students and students from remote areas of Canada often feel isolated. In our interview Leda said, "I just feel encouraged that these are two young Kaska people that are willing to learn and it doesn't matter how far they go from home to do it." This feeling of connection cannot only benefit the people who are connecting to home from far away through videoconferencing, but can also encourage and motivate the people who they are connecting with. When used in this way, videoconferencing technology perhaps cannot only increase feelings of closeness and connection for people who do not live in their home communities, but can also create solidarity with, and encouragement for, people from their community or neighboring communities.

5. Redefining Expertise: Decentralization and Revalorization



Figure 5. Leda Jules, Martina Volfova and Christopher Cox elicit verb paradigms in Watson Lake on November 21, 2016.

The use of videoconferencing has also presented Kaska stakeholders with new opportunities and necessities to negotiate and reevaluate authority and valorizations of expertise in their language work. With any type of language work, whether it aims to be collaborative or not, questions about control, authority and expertise arise. Patricia Shaw proposes that stakeholders working with Indigenous and under resourced languages continuously work to identify and address any potential power imbalances that arise, and that “the traditional role of the Linguist as ‘Expert’ and the Native Speaker as ‘Consultant’ must be re-evaluated, and redefined to create a more balanced, collaborative, and empowering model which recognizes the vital importance of community-centered self-determination and control over their language, their heritage, and their linguistic future” (2004: 181). As such, Shaw discusses the negative impacts existing power imbalances in language documentation and revitalization projects can have on both the language community and linguists if this paradigm remains unchanged. Mark Turin acknowledges that even though such a paradigm shift where speakers are recognized as more than just producers of

data can lead to more equitable and collaborative language work, this transformation of practices and theoretical positions can be, and has been, unsettling for some linguists (2012: 853).

One way these power imbalances are created and perpetuated is through the understanding of what constitutes an ‘expert’ in the project, and that the experts involved invariably have greater authority and power than participants viewed as non-experts (Furbee et al. 1998). The linguist-focused model of language ‘expertise’ refers to linguistic training and knowledge, and Ewa Czaykowska-Higgins critiques this research model as creating a “discourse of experts talking to other experts” (2009: 24). One way to unsettle the power imbalances this understanding creates is to shift ‘expert’ away from designating ‘linguistic expertise’ to designating ‘language expertise’ or another type of expertise. In this revised paradigm, the language speakers are considered the experts, or at least a type of expert with equal, if not greater, authority and agency than the linguists (see Hinton et al. 2002 for an example). Czaykowska-Higgins proposes that in this scheme, “if the language-users are themselves the experts, then the priorities of all the experts, and not just the academic ones, are likely to be reflected in the discourse and practice of research” (2009: 24). Particularly in collaborative research projects, it is highly likely the stakeholders involved will possess other types of expertise or skills that are important to the project, but may not involve speaking the language or knowing how to document the language. Schwartz and Lederman (2011) highlight that ongoing discussions on collaboration in language revitalization don’t put a value on linguistic vs. ‘activist’ expertise, rather both types of expertise need to be acknowledge and valued. In this same vein, linguists can participate in language revitalization efforts in ways that don’t draw upon their expertise as linguists (2011: 65-66).

Even though the Kaska videoconferencing sessions have to be collaborative in order to function, Patrick seemed to be unanimously viewed as the facilitator of the sessions as well as

the coordinator of projects they were working on. All other participants (the author included) viewed him as the linguistic expert and he was the person that linguistic-oriented questions were always directed to, as well as the person who always provided the final review of transcriptions and other language resources. When asked about the amount of power and control he had over the videoconferencing sessions, he replied “Yeah, well you’re in a very powerful position because you’re running the network” and “You turn it on. So, part of what you’re doing is always kind of limiting your power.”

Patrick acknowledges that the very fact that he turns the technology ‘on’ (which refers to the fact that he manages the 24/7 videoconferencing session with Arts ISIT at UBC, and because he is the person who typically has to tune in before Martina or Linda can start the elicitation session) means that he has a certain level of authority and power in these sessions as well as the projects they are used to support. He also acknowledges that he is always trying to limit his power during the sessions, and in the projects themselves, while still offering support and guidance. See the excerpt below from a session on November 21, 2016, where Patrick participated from Vancouver, and Leda and Martina participated from Watson Lake. Christopher Cox, a linguist who works with Yukon First Nation languages and used to work at the Yukon Department of Education, and who collaborates on several projects with Patrick, joined Leda and Martina in Watson Lake while he was traveling through the area (see Figure 5 above).

Patrick: For this first part we had *ts’á’ sed’lé’ĩ*. Is that from *ts’á’ sedzūlé’ĩ*?

Leda: [Looks down at Martina’s transcription] Is that from *ts’á’ sejūlé’*? “We’ll gather the dishes.”

[Inaudible speech from Patrick; Christopher murmurs]

Leda: Ha?

Patrick: OK... I’m trying to figure out where the “we” part is. It sounds like the *dzū* became a *jū*.

[Christopher looks up from notes to Leda, and then to the camera at Patrick and nods and murmurs agreement]

Patrick: *Ts'á' se—sejūlé'ī.*

Leda: *Ts'á' se—dzū—lé'ī?* [says more loudly and assertively] *Ts'á' se—jū—lé'ī.* “We’ll gather up the dishes” [looks at Patrick and gives a small nod]

Patrick: OK.

[Martina and Christopher look at Leda and laugh; Martina puts her hand on Leda’s shoulder]

Martina: [Looks at Patrick] This is her standing her ground, “This is how you say it!”

Christopher: There you go.

[Leda, Martina and Christopher laugh]

Christopher: [Looks at Patrick] “Don’t ask again!”

This conversation, #39-Washing Dishes, involved eliciting many verb forms from Leda. In this excerpt, Patrick draws upon his linguistic expertise to question whether the form that Leda has given them was correct because it did not use the expected morpheme *dz* to indicate plural agents (“*We* gathered the dishes”). Initially Martina and Christopher seem a little tense, looking between their transcriptions, Leda and Patrick, and Christopher nods to Patrick, perhaps to agree with him that his proposed form should be the form they are looking for. Leda then takes the time to ponder and sound out the form Patrick has given her and compare it to the form she originally used. After she concludes that her proposed form is the correct one, Patrick doesn’t question it further. Any tension present is released when everyone starts to laugh and authorizes and uplifts Leda’s knowledge by acknowledging her expertise and supporting her standing her ground as the language expert, as well as acknowledging Patrick’s acceptance and acknowledgement that he won’t assert his linguistic expertise further or allow it to dominate over her knowledge as a speaker of the language. I observed that these navigations of expertise and authority, and the acknowledging of different types of expertise, occur regularly in these sessions. Later in this session Patrick directed an explanation of a linguistic phenomenon to Christopher. As they talk about how high tone surprisingly doesn’t spread into the perfective tense in the verb “to gather,” Martina touches Leda on the shoulder and they start to laugh about

what Patrick and Christopher are talking about.

Patrick: [Asks, and Christopher mimics] Why? Why on that verb?

Leda: [Interjecting] Because “We’re going to gather it,” that’s all.

[Everyone starts laughing again]

Christopher: [Jesting] Come on Pat. [As if to say “Leda says stop wasting our time”]

Leda: No reason to it, we’re just going to gather it.

Patrick: Great. Ok.

[Everyone continues to laugh]

Christopher: I have so much to learn, holy cow.

Patrick: Every day, it’s like a new adventure.

Leda: I don’t even have to think about it, I just say it.

[Everyone laughs and they move onto the next verb form]

This second excerpt also shows that everyone acknowledges that although Christopher and Patrick in particular enjoy digressing from elicitation lists to talk about linguistic phenomena they were observing happening, it was taking up important time they could use to work with Leda, even if it was an educational and productive interlude. This exchange also shows a respect for Leda’s expertise, energy and time as well as an understanding that these questions may not be interesting for her or a speaker of the language.

I observed that these specific language projects would not be possible without Patrick: he wrote the grant applications, he arranged for the videoconferencing meetings through UBC, he coordinated everyone involved, and he was the person with the most linguistic expertise. However, core collaborators did not seem to mind this dynamic or find the level of authority and power he had troubling or that it created a power imbalance. Linda often said how useful it was to be able to ask him questions regularly and have him to create transcripts to send to her, Leda expressed that it was nice to ‘see’ him regularly and to do work together, and Martina voiced her appreciation that he was regularly accessible as resource and guide.

Dobrin and Schwartz (2016) propose in their experience the best forms of collaboration

and reciprocation in language documentation and revitalization projects are those that may initially seem counterintuitive. Schwartz details how he collaborated with an elderly community partner to construct a dictionary of Chiwere. After Schwartz discovered that his partner had chosen to compile the dictionary in Microsoft Word, he had wanted to transition the project to more sophisticated programs, such as FLE_x or ELAN. However, through participant observation Schwartz observed that using Microsoft Word was more respectful and empowering to his partner because he felt as though he had more control and autonomy with this technology. Although it violated best linguistic practices, and initially seemed counterintuitive to the success of their projects, Schwartz deferred his own technological expertise and training to support this more relational, and perhaps collaborative, style of work.

Similarly, although after taking stock of conversations on collaboration in this field it may initially seem counterintuitive, the level of control and authority that Patrick assumes with these Kaska language projects may represent the best form of collaboration and reciprocation for the specific situation. This example suggests that while it is always important for anyone involved in language work, particularly those viewed as some form of ‘expert,’ to be aware of the power and authority they assume and how it may lead to imbalances, the assumption of power and control by one individual may in fact be an appropriate form of collaboration in certain contexts and for certain language teams. These observations illustrate that language workers do not only have to assess the appropriateness of any technologies they want to use in their work and collaboratively consult about their goals, but that it behooves them to incorporate technologies, and to identify authority and expertise, in ways that are best suited to the project and that make them comfortable.

5.1 Language Teams: Expanded Expertise and Distributed Authority

Patrick acknowledged that their projects, the Kaska language class and

videoconferencing sessions themselves, are equally dependent on the people on the other end of the screen in Watson Lake. As Kaska speakers, Leda and Mida are integral to each session, and Martina and Linda are integral because they manage the videoconferencing connection, set up the audio recorder, and do most of the eliciting. Martina and Leda are integral outside of these sessions as well because they organize and share the audio recordings with the rest of the Kaska language team, and they help Leda and Mida in other ways; Martina often transports Leda, and Linda deftly raises her voice and intermixes English with Kaska to accommodate Mida's loss of hearing and preference for Kaska. In this way, the core collaborators are equally dependent on each other to successfully carry out each videoconferencing session, as well as their joint language projects overall. I observed that this interdependence, particularly in regards to the videoconferencing sessions, between core collaborators works to lateralize, diffuse and distribute authority and control to a certain degree across all of their Kaska language projects. Importantly, it also ensures that no one person maintains an over-abundance of control over the projects they engage in together, both during and outside of these videoconferencing sessions.

6. Videoconferencing and Integrated Language Learning

Both Brittany and Ronnie expressed how when they arrived to UBC they didn't want to devote significant time and energy to learning a commonly studied majority language (Spanish, German or French) or the language of another First Nation. As Ronnie said, "My heart wasn't into learning another language." They said they were both happy they had been able to connect with Patrick and arrange to fulfill their language requirements by studying Kaska with him.

For this language course Ronnie and Brittany would join Kaska BlueJeans sessions three times a week during the school year as part of their in-class instructional time. Researchers and educators of minority languages have addressed the ways that videoconferencing offers a promising tool for long-distance language instruction (Galla 2010; Holton 2011). However,

Patrick said his decision to have Ronnie and Brittany join the sessions was partly because he thought they would enjoy joining the sessions and being able to hear people speak Kaska on Kaska traditional territory and not because it offered a novel type of language instruction. As I've already discussed, his decision was also pragmatic because his existing obligations as a professor and to the Kaska projects meant he didn't have enough extra time in his week to teach a stand-alone language course. This negotiation between sufficiently participating in academia while also balancing community and collaborative projects is a constant struggle for many researchers of Indigenous languages, and Patrick has chosen to manage it by coordinating his activities with Kaska in such a way that they overlap and complement each other. For example, Ronnie and Brittany have also been employed as undergraduate assistants to help cut sound files and transcribe recordings, a process that is educational for them, compensates them for time worked, and also contributes to ongoing Kaska language projects.

In chapter 4 I discussed how these sessions helped Ronnie and Brittany feel more connected to their language, their home and their communities. Ronnie said her family never spoke Kaska to her as a child, and it's been hard for her to study and learn Kaska, or any other language. Even though she admitted that she has trouble retaining information in class, she says the class time is still productive for her because it gives her the opportunity to hear and enjoy her language. Ronnie is an avid photographer, and in the class produced several books of Kaska stories that she was able to elicit from Mida. She is proud to have created reference and learning texts for the language and has donated these books to Xwi7xwa Library at UBC so that they can be accessed by other language stakeholders. In this way, she has also participated in Kaska language revitalization by creating these education materials and making them available.

Brittany said she has never studied another language, so she has no other classroom experiences to compare the UBC Kaska class to. Being able to join the videoconferencing

sessions has helped her develop writing and listening skills, but she says the fast-paced elicitations leave little time for her to practice her speaking. To accommodate this, last year she organized a directed study with Patrick where she hoped to work on her speaking. Brittany also voiced the benefit of just being able to sit and listen to Kaska elders talk and tell stories in ways that mirror traditional ways of learning from elders. She identified the potential videoconferencing has to support decolonized learning setups (see Galla 2010; Hermes and King 2013; Kovach 2009; Smith 1999) and proposed that in regards to language learning, there is additional potential for these videoconferencing sessions to replicate types of what she calls ‘traditional traditional’ learning environments where elders can join from their homes while they’re making tea or bannock and anyone who wants to can join the session to listen to them tell stories and speak the language. Brittany acknowledges that this type of project would be different from what the Kaska language team is currently doing because their goals would be to share knowledge and hear the language instead of document it and produce materials. From her perspective, she said what they are currently doing strikes her more as a type of ‘salvage anthropology’ to document the language, but that this mentality is understandable given the barriers to language revitalization in general, and those in Watson Lake and Ross River in particular.

Ronnie and Brittany’s observations of their experiences in the class illustrate that they acknowledge that the way the course was structured around the videoconferencing sessions may not have been optimal for pure language learning, but it was a positive experience for them overall and made them feel closer to their language and home, and provided them an outlet to become involved in language projects. Their feedback suggests that videoconferencing technology offers a versatile multimodality that language stakeholders can draw upon to work toward their language documentation and revitalization goals, and also potentially offers new

opportunities for decolonized and integrated ways of distance-language learning and engagement.

7. Videoconferencing and the Creation of a Community of Practice

In these videoconferencing sessions, I observed that instances of learning regularly extended beyond language learning and the language course component, and that shared practices of collective, cooperative and social learning and teaching constituted and solidified the team's collaborative practices. In this chapter I propose that although models of collaboration in work with Indigenous languages help us make sense of these videoconferencing sessions within the context of language documentation, revitalization and education practices, the concept of *Communities of Practice* helps us better understand the ways that these videoconferencing sessions have provided a new opportunity for stakeholders to form a community of collaborators. Miranda Weinberg and Haley De Korne propose that community of practice is not only a useful and productive framework for examining the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages, but that it can provide wider insights into language revitalization practices and the discourses surrounding them, and can help identify “factors that may benefit other language revitalization initiatives” (2016: 124). Similarly, I propose that participants in the videoconferencing sessions have helped these stakeholders create a community of practice centered on social learning.

The concept of communities of practice was developed in social anthropology (Lave 1991; Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 2000) and was quickly adopted by sociolinguists (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992), and has been proposed as a representative model to analyze language use in a social and cultural context (Muehlmann 2014). Lave and Wenger (1991) propose that communities of practice are grounded in the social learning of their members. Lave proposes to “consider learning not as a process of socially shared cognition that results in the end in the internalization of knowledge by individuals, but as a process of becoming a member of a

sustained community” (Lave 1991: 65). Social learning systems determine this process and these systems themselves are formed around two things: social competence and personal experience. Social competence is the set of socially accepted competencies that can help a person participate in the community (i.e. relevant expertise), and personal experience determines the individual and relevant perspectives a person might contribute to the community. For each member of a community of practice these two elements are both interdependent and constantly in flux, and are the reasons that a community of practice is never purely static. In other words, communities of practice are built on the fact that their members are simultaneously engaging in social learning with each other, while also constantly negotiating their roles and participation in this learning. The brief example below from a session on from December 12, 2016 illustrates the types of social learning that stakeholders often engaged in during videoconferencing sessions and the negotiations that accompanied them. In this session, Linda and Mida participated from Watson Lake, Patrick participated from Vancouver and Martina participated from a third location.

Linda: [Eliciting] “Are you going to see Bill?”

Mida: “Bill”?

Linda: Yeah, you know, just somebody named Bill. “Are you going to see Bill?” or “Bob?” Ok?

Mida: Bill? *Aqq* (Yes). *Bill gādenāstāl* (I will see Bill [future]).

Linda: No, I’m asking you. Are you going — say — ask me, “Are you going to see Bill?”

Mida: [Asks Linda questioningly] Are you *gonna* see Bill?

[Linda starts laughing almost uncontrollably, which muffles what Mida says next]

[Martina, who created the elicitation sentences, starts laughing, puts her hand over her mouth as if to acknowledge the confusion this particular sentence has generated]

Mida: [Starts laughing, sits back, looks at the screen and shakes her hand, then she sits forward, playfully slaps Linda’s arm and tries to talk through the laughing] *Bill gānūnhtā?* (*Are you going to see Bill? [optative]*) [Puts her hand over her mouth and continues laughing]

Linda: [Still laughing, looks down] Yeah, that one.

[Everyone, including Patrick, continues laughing and Linda and Mida continue to joke in Kaska about the miscommunication]

In this example, even after months of videoconferencing regularly, everyone involved is continuously learning the best and clearest way to elicit together. In English Linda asks Mida to say a particular interrogative sentence in Kaska, but Mida thinks Linda is asking *her* the question and doesn't know whether she should respond in English or Kaska. This confusion leads to moments of great humor on everyone's part where Mida isn't sure why Linda is asking about Bill, but she tries to acquiesce and provide her best guess. Not long after this exchange ends, Linda jokingly spreads culpability by telling Mida to "ask Martina, she made these sentences." This brief exchange illustrates the moments of social learning that are common in these sessions where each stakeholder is continuously adjusting and accommodating as they work through the clearest and most effective way to elicit and work together. Specifically, each person's social competence and personal experience shaped both the miscommunication that arose while eliciting, but also the ways they were able to embrace it as a moment of learning and humor, and then move forward. The community of practice they have formed is constituted and sustained by these moments of social learning where members jointly engage in practices (such as elicitation) while also becoming closer through the mutual creation and recognition of new practices.

The community of practice framework also applies to my observations of how authority, acknowledgment of shared and individual goals, as well as perceptions of connectivity are realized in these videoconferencing sessions. In order for a community of practice to be sustained, it needs a 'community coordinator,' which can be a person who coordinates the joint activity of the community of practice (Wenger 2000). However, the chances of the creation of a power imbalance is high when only one person is a community coordinator, and leadership is usually not assumed by one person, but rather different types of leadership are assumed by different people in the group. This diffusion of leadership inevitably shifts over time depending

on many contextual factors, but importantly, it maintains a functional distribution of authority and power. For this team of Kaska language stakeholders, Patrick is the community coordinator, and the way that power and authority play out, and are often distributed, in communities of practice formed around social learning aligns with discussions from earlier in this thesis regarding how power and authority is negotiated and distributed in these sessions and in Kaska language projects overall.

While discussing collaboration in Indigenous language documentation and revitalization, one of the elements researchers stress is the importance of recognizing, and working towards, individual and shared goals. Similarly, an important ‘mode of belonging’ in communities of practice is *alignment*, which “does not connote a one-way process of submitting to external authority, but a mutual process of coordinating perspectives, interpretations and actions so they realize higher goals” (Wenger 2000: 228). In this way, similar to the community of Kaska stakeholders, communities of practice are formed in such a way that this ‘alignment’ or collaborative consultation (Leonard and Haynes 2010) is both possible and routine.

Importantly, on a very basic level, in order for communities of practice to form, and be maintained, a level of social *connectivity*, meaning the ability to communicate and interact, between members must be maintained (Wenger 2000: 232). Wenger proposes that multi-media and emergent technologies can help foster communities of practice simply because they can improve the frequency and duration of their interactions. In the context of these Kaska language projects, it appears that regular videoconferencing sessions have done just that: these sessions have increased connectivity of each stakeholder in a way that has allowed them to engage in shared practices and activities that have in turn formed, and continue to constitute, the community of practice.

Weinberg and De Korne (2016) propose one possible way for the speech community of

an Indigenous language to grow is through the mutual participation of language learners, speakers, teachers and advocates in forming a community of practice. Similarly, I propose that even though on the surface level these videoconferencing sessions support Kaska language documentation and revitalization projects, they in fact create a community of practice that fosters sustained engagement and relationships between Kaska stakeholders and learners that presently, and in time, contribute more to Kaska language documentation and revitalization than any projected project outputs alone.

8. Applicability to Other Contexts

The success of videoconferencing technology in this type of long-distance work with Indigenous languages depends on a distribution of power that is mutually agreed upon and accepted, the utilization of each member's individual skills, the acknowledgment and accommodation of their individual goals, and — very importantly — on the sheer ability to put together a team like this. When I was presenting on this research at the 2018 Society for Applied Anthropology Annual Meeting, a man approached me after my presentation. He was attending the conference for professional development, but he explained that he was from an Indigenous Pueblo community in Mexico and they had been trying to figure out how to do long-distance language documentation and/or revitalization work. He said they had tried something similar to what the Kaska language team has done, but the difficulty for them had been putting together a dedicated team whose members cumulatively had all the needed skillsets as well as the ability to regularly and dependably connect via videoconference. Although anchoring their language documentation and revitalization work in videoconference sessions has been productive and sustainable for Kaska language collaborators, the distribution of authority, and control, as well as the interdependence of all core team members, also suggests that without a dedicated team of people

who can cumulatively fulfill all necessary core roles, the outcome of similar projects in other contexts may be quite different or may not be feasible altogether.

Both Patrick and Brittany touched on the possibility of increasing the amount of language work happening in Ross River. Ross River is smaller than Watson Lake, and Brittany, who is from Ross River, voiced that more work should be done there, but she wasn't sure how it could be done given how small it is, how remote it is and the number of people who could become involved. Patrick said even though there are people in Ross River with very important and vital expertise who want to support language work, they haven't been able to find a sustainable way to regularly connect through videoconference. He contributed their past difficulties to less access to the necessary technology at the time, to scheduling issues and to the difficulty of creating a team of people who could regularly be involved in the way that Leda, Mida, Linda and Martina are in Watson Lake.

These examples underscore that videoconferencing technology can support certain types of long-distance language documentation, revitalization and education work only when certain logistical factors align, those factors being: technology access, project interdependence, distributed expertise, and the ability for core collaborators to regularly and reliably connect for videoconference sessions. My research on how these Kaska language collaborators are using videoconferencing technology in their work also highlights how additional factors can support and sustain this work, including: mutually acknowledged and/or shared goals, regular and reliable commitment and accountability, as well as the sense of community and connection.

9. Conclusion

In this thesis, I explored how a team of Kaska language stakeholders has incorporated one emergent technology — videoconferencing — into their language documentation, revitalization and education work in western Canada. I began my discussion by asking whether the use of this

technology can create a ‘sociolinguistic conjuncture’ that overcomes barriers to language revitalization and creates salient opportunities where ideas about language and practices can converge. I propose that these conjunctures are best identified through looking at language documentation, revitalization and education as integrated ongoing processes that have meaning outside of the end goals its undertakers hope to accomplish. As such, I propose that these videoconferencing sessions presented this team of Kaska stakeholders with sites of stability and continuity in which sociolinguistic conjunctures could emerge and shared practices and ideas about the language were able to productively converge. Put another way, these sessions offered this team of language stakeholders a unique ‘space’ where they could come together and work together in new and productive ways (Stebbins 2012).

In summary, this research suggests that videoconferencing technology can provide Indigenous language stakeholders with the opportunity to become long-distance collaborators in regular and ongoing language work. Videoconferencing itself has helped Kaska language collaborators engage in more collaborative and equitable language projects, partly due to the interdependent and mutual-reliance that the multi-sited use of this technology necessitates. In particular, videoconferencing can provide a way for language stakeholders to become long-distance collaborators by participating in social learning, sharing common goals and forming shared practices, all of which form a community of practice. In the end, for these Kaska collaborators videoconferencing has successfully helped foster new types of sustained and rewarding long-distance (and hopefully long-term) language work and engagement. However, like all technologies, videoconferencing has to be appropriate to the circumstances and to the team who will work with it. I hope this research will be of use to stakeholders and researchers of other Indigenous languages who wish to explore whether videoconferencing technology can, or should, be used in their language projects, and the potential outcomes of its use.

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