

Reclaiming Dákwanjè for my Family, for my People

By

Khâsha / Stephen Reid

Masters of Education, The University of Victoria, 2015

A Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTERS OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION

in the Faculty of Education

Reclaiming Dákwanjè for my Family, for my People

“For language revitalization, the goal is language **use**, not language learning. Language **use** drives language learning” (Hinton, 2015, as cited in Zahir 2015)

Please let me begin with a personal introduction of my humble beginnings, my mother is from the Kwach'al area (around Champagne, Yukon) while my father is from the Bella Bella, Kimsquit area. My English name is Stephen Michael Reid, while my Lingit name is Khâsha. I am a father to five beautiful junena (children), a husband to my supportive wife, Krista Reid (nee Mudry). This has been the staging grounds of my masters project, my family, my home. Our family is nestled in Dákwanjè (Southern Tutchone) ancestral territory, Whitehorse, Yukon Territory Canada. There are four Dákwanjè nations that cite Dákwanjè as one of their nations languages: Champagne & Aishihik, Kluane, Taa'an Kwach'an, and the Kwanlin Dun First Nation whose combined populations number 2700 citizens, as of 2011 (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada). The number of proficient speakers of Dákwanjè, from this membership is drastically low. UNESCO places our fluent speakers at 40, thereby categorizing Dákwanjè as a critically endangered language.

With this stark reality, I now bring you to my work through the University of Victoria's Master's in Language Revitalization Program. Though there are many components, the heart of my project is giving Dákwanjè a place to live in my home with my family. I was inspired and advised by Indigenous language scholars, ʔəswəli, (Zalmai Zahir) and Carson Viles who brought to life a methodology called, 'Reclaiming Language Domains'. In this methodology ones language, "...envisions the world as broken up into different places and activities" (Viles, p. 74). For example, one's 'home' could be a domain that could then be broken into smaller sub-domains. A

sub-domain under the home could be the kitchen, and a sub-topic under the kitchen could be making toast. So reclaiming a 'domain' becomes a, "multi-step process." (Viles, p. 74) My projects guiding question was: **How can using the, "reclaiming domains" model increase my use and my families use of Dákwanjè?"** While my second question was, **What makes this method successful in language regeneration?** To answer these questions I chose to focus my efforts to my kitchen, I put duct tape at both entrances to my kitchen. For six focused weeks whenever I stepped over that duct tape I only spoke Dákwanjè. The heart of this methodology is in the term 'reclaiming' - to reclaim my kitchen is to reclaim that space for Dákwanjè. Once reclaimed for the language you hold that line, never to revert back to english again. So while my efforts were focused within six weeks, my projects focus goes on indefinitely.

My greatest asset to draw from has been an amazing elder named, K'axhnuxh. This project allowed me to bring all his language teachings to life with my family, in my kitchen. It wasn't long before my labeling became more refined, instead of just 'butter' I soon started researching and compiling phrases around very specific domain activities, 'how to make toast', 'how to boil eggs', 'how to wash the dishes' which included a step by step vocabulary. Further to labeling my kitchen is the discipline to stick to your guns and never use English in that space again. This was not easy, to be honest there were many instances where I would hop out of the kitchen and spew forth what was on my mind in the english language. Even with this misstep, something amazing started to happen. Day by day, week by week, month by month the language of my home slowly started changing more and more to Dákwanjè, and not just in my kitchen! Quite gradually I started speaking more and more Dákwanjè throughout my home, throughout my day, with more than just my immediate family. It felt like the very make up of my being was

changing. Dákwanjè was on my mind all the time, no matter the time, the day, or the company I was with. This is quite possibly the most important transformation that took place throughout my six weeks.

If speaking Dákwanjè in my kitchen was my, ‘data’, then the four Agoonda (wolf clan people) I asked to witness my project could be considered the ‘data analysis’ portion of my project. This form of qualitative data-analyses is rooted in the land of my ancestors, guided by the living elders of today, and respectful of both our body of knowledge and how it is conveyed and passed on through the generations. The Agoonda I chose were a cross-cut of individuals from my community. We met at the beginning of my six week project, at the middle of my project, and at the end of my project. We discussed the logistics of the project, how it works, where the idea came from, what has been working, and what hasn’t been working. My Agoonda witnesses offered advice from their own language journey and always encouraged me to keep going with the project.

Not all transformations came about easily, two weeks into my project I decided to try a ‘fast’ from the English language for the entire day. Every emotion came through from high stress, elation, to exhaustion. I had to teach throughout the day, luckily I am a Dákwanjè teacher so it makes complete sense to speak Dákwanjè to my students. Even so, by lunch I was feeling a deep sadness. No one could really understand me. I felt so alone. I had a deep chill throughout my body that no amount of tea or coffee was helping. Tears were close. I needed to express myself, if only to a video journal. I grabbed my iPhone and went outside. I spoke in Dákwanjè, “My heart is sick today. Where does our language live? I don’t hear our language today. Everyone speaks English. Our people speak English. My heart is sick. I speak our language. Everyone I

don't hear speak our language, I hear them talk English.” (S. Reid, video journal, February 8, 2016) Once I expressed these feelings I felt a rush of energy and my body warmed up. Though saddened by this realization, it was also liberating. Still, by the end of the school day I was exhausted. I couldn't quit though, I had to go get some groceries with my two young sons. I was tired and didn't want to talk to anyone, but realized I needed to exchange my toonie for a loonie. I decided to try get my son to be my speaker. He agreed and exchanged my toonie, and we went shopping. At that moment I completely understood the experience of elders whose first language is not English.

Besides my written project proposal, this small paper, this glimpse into my journey is the only written documentation of my Master's Project. My contribution to greater language regeneration efforts was focused to Dádan, My People. In an amazing collaboration between the University of Victoria and Khajet Dän (Crow people), we created a gathering of Dádan where I presented my language journey orally. Over 100 Dän from my community came to my ancestral home to bear witness to what reclaiming one's home entails. There was ceremony, gifting of my Agoonda witnesses, dancing, feasting, and exploring how we as a people can bring our languages back into our homes, our lives. It was a remarkable day, we are indeed a beautiful people, and yes our ways of knowing, sharing and living are also beautiful and deserve a seat at the academic table. To the University of Victoria I say Gunalhchish. To Dádän I say Gunalhchish. Both took a risk, and both I hope are now stronger.

My language journey of course continues, my family and I still have a long way to go. I will go see grandpa K'axhnuxh and ask him how to say, 'my heart is singing.'

Jaw ts'àn ni'j? : Where did you see that?

References

Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada. Retrieved July 28, 2015, from

<http://pse5-esd5.ainc-inac.gc.ca/fnp/Main/Search/FNListGrid.aspx?lang=eng>

Viles, C. (2013). Daa-naa~-yash / Hediw': A Thesis for Those Revitalizing Indigenous

Languages (Unpublished B.A. thesis). University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon,

United States.

UNESCO Script source. Retrieved April 18, 2016. <http://www.unesco.org/culture/>

[languagesatlas/index.php?hl=en&page=atlasmap&iso=tce](http://www.unesco.org/culture/languagesatlas/index.php?hl=en&page=atlasmap&iso=tce)

Zahir Z. (2015) Language Revitalization Lecture Retrieved April 18, 2016, from

http://nationalbreathoflife.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Zalmai-Zahir_-

[Lang_revitalization-June8-15-BOL.pdf](http://nationalbreathoflife.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Zalmai-Zahir_-Lang_revitalization-June8-15-BOL.pdf)