

Languages, Place and Power

May 4, 2023, 2:00pm–3:30pm

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Buchanan Tower #997

Guiding questions for thought and action (will take decades, if not longer!)

1. What about your experience would you like to share around settler languages, European and “world language” learning, and the place of Indigenous knowledge-making in that experience?
2. Can sustainability and climate justice be sought or achieved monolingually? What is the role of Indigenous and settler multilingualism in the ambitious long-term pursuit of climate justice?
3. Since the 1960s, settler languages and settler language learning/teaching practices have usually been known for their emphasis on global mobility and intercultural commerce, but not for their emphasis on land, place, and local accountability. Climate emergency is frequently engaged as one progressive topic, alongside gender equity and multiculturalism, for instance. What would a settler language curriculum (Italian, German, Ukrainian) on sovereign Indigenous land emphasize, if it intended to found itself on its specific locatedness and deeper ecological relations in an age of climate emergency?
4. To whatever extent Indigenous land acknowledgements are meaningful, does it matter if they are tendered in languages beyond English and French? If so, why? Does an English land acknowledgement reinscribe English and Anglophone hegemony in some way, or is it merely a useful vehicle for communication? (Note: students respond to this question here: <https://cenes.ubc.ca/news/acknowledging-indigenous-land-multilingually/>)
5. What is most important to Indigenous students who choose to learn settler languages or “world languages” beyond English and French? What do programs who teach these languages need to do well to make sure that the learning endeavour is available and suitable to them on their terms?
6. What is the practical responsibility of settler language-instruction programs and departments in enacting and supporting not only Indigenous cultural / linguistic / land sovereignty, but also of supporting the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages at UBC?
7. What recent or ancestral Indigenous practices of dealing with settler languages, going back to the 15th century (see Anna Brickhouse on “[strategic mistranslation](#)”), need to be understood more fully and brought into language instruction contexts at UBC?
8. Colonial settlers who did/do not speak English or French as their first language are frequently left out of the story of genocidal Indigenous erasure in Canada / Turtle Island. But clerics, mercenaries, missionaries, and prospectors who spoke Czech, Danish, German, Ukrainian and other languages were / are among the powerful and ambitious agents of settler colonialism. Does this matter in the big picture? Why is colonization so frequently told as an Anglophone/Francophone story alone?
9. Sovereignty of land, culture, and language is crucial to Indigenous movements today, in planning for the future. Indigenous linguistic sovereignty entails the Indigenous management of the teaching, learning, documentation, use, translation, and description of Indigenous languages. Meanwhile, settler languages rarely perceive themselves in terms of “sovereignty”, preferring a kind of global intercultural / mobility model that puts anti-protectionism and commercial exchange far before sovereignty (which is often quickly conflated with nationalism). That is, languages like German are presented to new learners as “a lot like English” and “easier to learn than you think” and “full of cognates you already know”, rather than saying—for instance—“if you want to learn German, you need to engage with it on its own terms.” What are we to make of this stark difference in self-conception between Indigenous and settler languageness?
10. Every time the university adds a new language to its curricula, fiscal officers know that this language course will operate at a budgetary loss for a while at least, and will need to be compensated by larger-enrolment (i.e., Anglophone) courses. How problematic is this scheme? Should departments continue to add instructed “less commonly taught” languages (Indigenous or settler), on the understanding that

other parts of the program will need to fund them vicariously? What is an Indigenous-led view on these questions?

11. Predominant theories of translation and multilingualism derive from colonial concepts and their presumptions about culture, language, and place. What do Indigenous-led approaches to multilingualism and translation look, feel, and sound like? How would these meaningfully differ from current colonial assumptions?
12. How do approaches and conceptions of Indigenous language(s) / languageness differ from settler conceptions in ways that settlers might not be able to perceive? The history of European linguistics since the 17th century waffles between disembodied abstraction and populist romanticism in regards to what makes a language “a” language, but Indigenous answers on these questions are overwhelmingly left out of the mix. What would it be like if Indigenous conceptions of what language and “a language” is were applied to settler languages and the teaching of settler languages, rather than the other way around?
13. Monolingualism is a powerful force, and a lot of Canadian universities are dropping or reducing their Additional Language Requirements for graduation. From time to time, a notion is floated that Canadian universities do not need to teach the languages of Europe anymore, given those languages’ past and present role as vehicles for colonization around the world. A second part of this notion is that funding for European languages should be repurposed for the teaching of Indigenous languages. Is there merit to this argument? Or is it a shell-game for downsizers to cut expensive existing language programs, while not actually designing funding parity for Indigenous languages?
14. For those colleagues currently developing “Place and Power” courses across the Faculty of Arts, how can we ensure that those courses are not “linguistically indifferent”? How can they honour and exemplify attentiveness to translation, Indigenous multilingualism, settler multilingualism, official state bilingualism, and to languages themselves as meaning-making repertoires?
15. ChatGPT and AI-generated translation are big issues for instructors, whether or not they see themselves as “language instructors”. How do Indigenous-led responses to these platforms differ from colonial responses, if at all?
16. Facing enrolment challenges in the age of AI and global neoliberalism, some language departments on Turtle Island see themselves as undereappreciated by their university administrations and surrounding communities, and this leads them to engage in a kind of “fort pedagogy” (Dwayne Donald) of defensiveness and moralism around their misunderstood purpose. How can such departments cast off these sentiments of (colonial) refortification in the future?