"Will the Real Semi-Speaker Please Stand Up?" Language Vitality, Semi-Speakers, and Problems of Enumeration in the Canadian North

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Abstract: This article reassesses categories used in language revitalisation efforts and critiques some enumeration practices that language activists use to measure language endangerment and vitality. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in the Dene Tha settlement of Chateh in northwestern Alberta, Canada, I argue that the practices of speaker enumeration are often premised on idealised notions of who counts as an endangered language speaker. Standard methods for counting endangered language speakers fail to capture the heterogeneous linguistic practices of partially fluent "semi-speakers," who often constitute the majority of young speakers in endangered language communities. To correct this oversight, I propose shifting the discourse of language endangerment toward one of language vitality, enabling semi-speakers to be recognised and counted as rightful, valid speakers of endangered languages.

Keywords: semi-speakers, language vitality, enumeration, endangered languages, revitalisation, Dene Tha, Canadian North

Résumé : Cet article reconsidère les catégories qui sont utilisées dans les tentatives de revitalisation de langues et critique certaines pratiques d'énumération employées par des activistes pour mesurer la vitalité et la mise en danger d'une langue. Me basant sur un travail ethnographique auprès des Dene Tha dans la communauté de Chateh dans le nord-ouest de l'Alberta au Canada, je soutiens que ces pratiques d'énumération sont souvent fondées sur des notions idéalisées de « qui doit compter comme un locuteur de langue en voie de disparition ». Ces méthodes standard de comptage ne reconnaissent pas les pratiques linguistiques hétérogènes des « semi-locuteurs », qui parlent la langue partiellement et constituent souvent la majorité des jeunes orateurs des communautés linguistiques menacées. Pour corriger cet impair, je propose de modifier les discours élaborés en termes de « langue en danger » par celui de « vitalité d'une langue », permettant aux « semi-locuteurs » d'être reconnus et comptabilisés comme orateurs valables de ces « langues en voie de disparition ».

Mots-clés : semi-locuteurs, vitalité linguistique, énumération, langues en voie de disparition, revitalisation, Dene Tha, nord canadienne

Over the past three decades, language endangerment has increasingly become an issue of interdisciplinary concern. Language activists, non-governmental organisations, linguists, and anthropologists all warn about the shrinking diversity of the world's languages. Many also call for immediate action to document and preserve endangered languages before they disappear. These calls are supported by some truly dire statistics, which inform most academic discussions of language endangerment (Austin and Sallabank 2011; Crystal 2002; Krauss 1992; Nettle and Romaine 2002). For example, by the end of the 21st century, almost 90 percent of the world's 7,106 languages are predicted to be extinct (Ethnologue 2014; UNESCO 2003). Such troubling statistics underscore the threat that language endangerment poses worldwide. Arguably, they form the most compelling case that language activists can make about the urgency of addressing language endangerment – even if, as I shall argue, the use of such statistics comes at the risk of deterring younger people within endangered language communities from actually speaking endangered languages.

In this article, I examine the enumeration practices that language activists and scholars use to measure language endangerment. My aim is to analyse the ideological implications that different ways of measuring language endangerment can have for language revitalisation projects. In doing so, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Chateh, a Dene Tha settlement in northwestern Alberta, Canada. On the basis of interviews with Dene Tha youth, as well as my own observations and experiences, I raise doubts about current approaches to assessing language endangerment. How should language endangerment be measured? How many speakers are required for a language to be considered "safe" as opposed to "endangered"? What level of fluency must someone possess to be counted as an endangered language

speaker? And, finally, how should success be evaluated within the paradigm of language revitalisation?

In posing these tough questions, I wish to contribute to a growing body of literature critical of the language endangerment discourse that is emerging among anthropologists and language activists (Duchene and Heller 2007; Hill 2002; Makoni and Pennycook 2007; Moore et al. 2010; Muehlmann 2012). Central to this critical literature is a reassessment of the categories and measurements used to document endangered languages in practice. My argument is that many enumeration practices for measuring language endangerment are based on ambiguous notions of who exactly counts as a "real speaker" of an endangered language. Because these enumeration practices adhere to strict notions of language fluency, they fail to account for the heterogeneous ways that people may use and identify with the heritage language of their community. But language fluency, I maintain, cannot be so easily categorised and measured, especially in the context of endangered languages. The varying levels of fluency exhibited by semi-speakers of endangered languages attests to this fact.

To highlight the blind spots of standard enumeration practices, I focus my attention on the semi-speakers of endangered languages who are "imperfect" or capable of "getting by" but who are not fluent enough to be counted as a speaker by either language activists or local community members (Wyman 2012). The term "semi-speaker" was first coined by Nancy Dorian in her pioneering work on language obsolescence (Dorian 1977). Dorian observes that the presence of semi-speakers in communities faced by "language death" is a "major problem." Semi-speakers are not fluent enough to register in measurements of language vitality, yet they cannot be easily distinguished from the fluent speakers of an endangered language. The ambiguous place of semi-speakers in the documentation of endangered languages can damage the reliability of linguistic data collected from the field, Dorian suggests. She worries that accidentally counting semi-speakers as being fluent might distort our perceptions of a given language's overall health (24). "Semi-speaker performance" may also misrepresent a language, giving a false impression of its "stereotypical linguistic features" (31). For these and similar reasons, semi-speakers have often been excluded from language documentation and revitalisation projects – or, worse, disparaged as "foreigner seekers" who opportunistically present themselves as "good speakers" so that they can be employed as language consultants for visiting linguists and other outsiders (Grinevald 2005).

Whereas Dorian sees the ambiguous status of semi-speakers as potentially undermining language documen-

tation, it is precisely this ambiguity that I am most interested in exploring – ideally, in ways that challenge received wisdom about who semi-speakers are and the role that semi-speakers can play in language documentation and revitalisation. My purpose here is to try to describe what semi-speakers – particularly young semi-speakers – think about language endangerment: their personal beliefs and perceptions about language and the multiple, sometimes contradictory, ways that they use and identify with their heritage language. In drawing out this tension, my hope is to counter the negative perception that the presence of semi-speakers can hurt language documentation and revitalisation efforts by distorting official tallies of fluent speakers of endangered languages. To this end, I propose that scholars and language activists should expand standard measures of language vitality to be more inclusive of semi-speakers, who often constitute the majority of young speakers in contexts of language endangerment. It is my firm belief that young semi-speakers are at the forefront of learning, relearning, and revitalising their heritage languages and cultural practices.

The article unfolds over four sections as follows. In the first section, I provide an ethnographic backdrop against which to reconsider the role of semi-speakers in language revitalisation projects, based on fieldwork in the Dene Tha settlement of Chateh. I describe the historical circumstances that have led to a language shift in Chateh, before highlighting its effects on the increased number of young Dene Tha semi-speakers in the community. By the term "language shift," I mean a situation where younger generations effectively abandon their heritage language (in this case, Dene Dháh[1]) by shifting – often unconsciously – to another language (in this case, English) in their daily interactions (see Garrett 2005).[2] In the second section, I connect my ethnographic observations about young semi-speakers in Chateh to broader theoretical and practical concerns about the kinds of enumeration practices language activists and scholars use to assess a language's vitality. Here, I consider four common scales for assessing language vitality: the Ethnologue scale, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) scale, the Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS), and the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS). Though each of these scales offers sophisticated criteria for assessing language endangerment, I argue that each also utilises highly idealised categories of "real speakers," with the result that the newer, heterogeneous linguistic practices of younger generations are (implicitly) overlooked, lowering baseline counts of the total number of endangered language speakers within a

particular community. In reality, this has the result of distorting the impression that younger speakers have of the health of their heritage language, their confidence in speaking that language, and their willingness to pursue opportunities to speak it on a daily basis. In the third section, I turn back to my fieldwork in Chateh to identify some potential contributions that semi-speakers can make to language revitalisation efforts. I relate my findings from a series of interviews with Dene Tha youth in Chateh about their personal beliefs and perceptions about the health of their Dene language. I note that although younger generations of Dene Tha are often criticised by adults in their community for being disinterested in Dene language and culture, the youth I interviewed were deeply concerned about the future of their linguistic and cultural heritage. More to the point, these young Dene Tha "semi-speakers" consider themselves to be "real speakers" of the Dene language, despite their partial levels of fluency. In the fourth and final section, I argue for the need to reframe the current discourse of language endangerment in more inclusive terms of language vitality. Adopting more inclusive terms of language vitality, I claim, would enable language activists and scholars to devise ways of including the positive contributions that semi-speakers can make to language revitalisation efforts in endangered language communities, and encourage young semi-speakers to continue speaking their heritage language. I conclude with the suggestion that, to the extent semi-speakers play an important role in language revitalisation projects, the measures that are used to assess language endangerment should include – rather than overlook or exclude – semi-speakers.

Ethnographic Context

I first encountered a version of Dorian's (1977) "problem of the semi-speakers" during my fieldwork with the Dene Tha First Nation in 2010. The Dene Tha ("People Ordinary" or "People Regular") are a Dene (Athabaskan) group living in three reserve communities in northwestern Alberta, Canada: Bushe River, Meander River, and Chateh (also known as Assumption). There are approximately 1,800 people living on these three reserves, with 600 additional band members residing off the reserves in major cities in Alberta, including Calgary and Edmonton.

I began my fieldwork in June 2010 and returned in December 2011. My research was primarily based in Chateh, where I conducted several in-depth interviews with Dene Tha youth, after long conversations with local Dene language consultants. In addition to my own research, I was also involved in the "Dene Tha Language and Culture Project," led by Dr. Patrick Moore between 2010 and 2013 at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. For the project, we collaborated closely with Dene adults who worked as local language consultants in Chateh. Our aim was to document and record the Dene Dháh language in order to create print and digital language learning materials, including booklets and alphabet books for the Chateh and Meander River dialects. During my collaboration with the Dene language consultants, I took extensive field notes based on discussions and participant observations. We used video conferencing to maintain regular interactions with these language consultants after we left Chateh, and they also visited us at the University of British Columbia annually for two to three weeks over the course of the project.

My discussions with the Dene language consultants first alerted me to growing concerns about a Dene Dháh-English language shift among Dene youth in Chateh. These concerns immediately caught my attention as they tapped a long-standing interest in the intergenerational transmission of linguistic and cultural knowledge. Eager to learn more, I began a series of interviews with Dene youth in the community to investigate their perceptions about the health of the Dene Dháh language and their thoughts about the problem of langauge shift more generally. According to the Dene language consultants I had first spoken with, younger generations of Dene Tha were not keen on following the proper "Dene way" of speaking and living. Most of the Dene adults I encountered corroborated the language consultants' story. They worried about a noticeable upswing in the frequency with which English is spoken on the local reserves, particularly among the youngest generation of Dene Dháh speakers. This language shift was especially alarming to the eldest generations of Dene in Chateh (roughly, those who had reached adulthood before the residential school system came into force in the 1950s), in part because they had grown up as monolinguals, speaking only Dene Dháh. The only exceptions were two women who had attended a nearby Catholic residential school in Fort Vermillion and two Metis families (Patrick Moore, personal communication).

Part of the concern that older generations of Dene Tha expressed about younger generations had to do with maintaining the cultural and linguistic heritage of their community. Before the establishment of the residential school in Chateh in 1951, all social and cultural activities were conducted exclusively in Dene Dháh. But residential schooling had the effect of dramatically increasing the prevalence of English in everyday life. Even though children were not punished for speaking

their heritage language – as was common practice in many residential schools in Canada – all interactions with teachers and instructors were in English, and children were explicitly encouraged to speak in the language of the instructors. To succeed at school, Dene children used English with their teachers in the classroom, complying with the rules set by instructors.

The assimilationist strategies of the Canadian residential school system did not cause an immediate language shift to English in Chateh. Indeed, despite being encouraged to speak English at school, the Dene who attended the residential school in Chateh continued to speak Dene Dháh with their fellow students and with their families at home. As a result of this intimate in-group socialisation, the Dene Dháh language has continued to be widely spoken. In Chateh today, almost everyone over the age of 40 can speak Dene Dháh fluently, except for a few people who moved to the community from elsewhere or who were educated away from home and later moved back (Patrick Moore, personal communication).[3] Ironically, the marginalisation of Dene Tha in the 1970s from Alberta's resource extraction industries helped to maintain the widespread use of Dene Dháh in Chateh. Unlike in other Indigenous communities in Alberta, Dene Tha adults were not forced to routinely switch languages to interact with their English-speaking coworkers in the oil and gas industry.

According to Patrick Moore, who lived and worked in Chateh for several years, generational language shift is a more recent problem. The change from Dene Dháh to English started approximately 20 years ago, well after the community's residential school had closed. During my fieldwork, I also noticed signs of this trend. I observed that most Dene adults would switch to speaking English when their children were present but would switch back to Dene Dháh when talking among themselves. English was spoken by youth at the local school, except in the Dene Dháh class and with a few fluent teachers and staff members. Elder generations of Dene Tha, as well as the Dene language consultants I spoke with, blamed the prevalence of spoken English on the changing beliefs and attitudes of Dene youth. So I asked: What do Dene youth actually think about Dene Dháh?

To find out, I conducted a series of interviews and participant observations at the Dene community school in Chateh. The school had about 150 registered students in kindergarten through Grade 10, almost all of Dene heritage. During my visits to the school, most students spoke in English with other students. Very rarely would they switch to speaking Dene Dháh, and even then this switch was brief and usually informal. Yet, as I spent more time at the school, I observed, in fact, that the fluency in Dene Dháh varied among students. Many students were "semi-speakers" to one degree or another. Some could understand Dene Dháh but not speak the language, some could switch between English and Dene Dháh quite comfortably, and some knew only a few words. Only a small fraction of students were able to maintain a conversation exclusively in Dene Dháh.

Despite varying levels of fluency, the perception the Dene youth I interviewed had of their language was surprisingly similar. Contrary to what I heard from Dene adults, I found that many youth consider Dene Dháh to be central to their personal sense of identity and culture. Even more striking is the fact that all of the students I interviewed seemed convinced that their peers spoke Dene Dháh frequently and fluently. The few students who admitted that they did not speak the language well expressed their interest in learning and passing on this knowledge to their children. For the students I interviewed, being a "real speaker" of the Dene language did not necessarily imply being "fluent," at least as language activists and scholars usually understand the term. Instead, these students thought of themselves as qualified speakers of Dene Dháh and rightful members of the Dene linguistic community, despite their partial fluency in the language. Interestingly, this is not an isolated phenomenon. In Navajo communities, Teresa McCarty, Mary Romero, and Ofelia Zepeda (2006, 37) find similar beliefs about language proficiency among Navajo youth, concluding that "self-assessments of language proficiency are complex and problematic, [but] they are nonetheless important indicators of local perceptions of language use and vitality that have implications for language choices."

These observations give us an initial sense of the dilemma that language activists and scholars face when coming up with measures for assessing language endangerment. Were we to simply count the number of youth in Chateh who are fluent in Dene Dháh, the sum total would likely be quite small and the language would appear gravely endangered. But if we were to instead count the number of self-identifying speakers of Dene Dháh, including young semi-speakers, our assessment of the vitality of the Dene language in Chateh would be different. For me, this realisation underscored the importance of incorporating local perceptions of language use and vitality in assessments of language endangerment. Scholars and activists are, of course, aware of these challenges (see Walsh 2005). As I argue below, however, standard measurements of language vitality continue to enforce rigid distinctions based primarily on fluency. Drawing sharp lines between fluent and partially fluent speakers can profoundly affect the beliefs and attitudes younger generations have about speaking their heritage language,

particularly when, as in Chateh, those who some would disqualify as "semi-speakers" perceive themselves to be "real speakers."

Theoretical and Practical Problems of Language Endangerment Assessments

Let me bracket, for now, the many challenges that the beliefs and attitudes of young Dene Tha semi-speakers pose for language revitalisation efforts in Chateh. As I suggested above, the increasing prevalence of young semi-speakers in endangered language communities is also challenging at a far deeper level. It calls into question the kinds of enumeration practices typically used to measure and assess language endangerment. To fully appreciate the force of this criticism, however, we need to take a closer look at the scales language scholars and activists rely upon to guide their measurements and assessments. In what follows, I examine four common scales for assessing language endangerment: the UNESCO scale, the Ethnologue scale, the GIDS, and the EGIDS. I argue that each of these four scales, in its own way, places an emphasis on fluency to the exclusion of semi-speakers. Each has the potential to preclude consideration of semi-speakers, who count neither as "real speakers" (or native speakers) of endangered languages nor as "non-speakers." Enumeration methods based on rigid notions of who qualifies as a "real speaker" can fail to account for the diverse, heterogeneous linguistic practices that often emerge across different generations of endangered language speakers. They can deny aspiring young speakers a proper sense of "speakerhood," with the unintended consequence of discouraging them from pursuing opportunities to continue speaking and learning their heritage language, or so I will suggest.

Four Scales for Assessing Language Endangerment

Consider the four common scales language scholars and activists use to assess language endangerment. The first scale was developed by UNESCO, and the second by the Summer Institute of Linguistics, a non-profit organisation that catalogues languages around the world through a project called "Ethnologue." The work of both of these organisations has been essential to raising public awareness about the need to document and preserve endangered languages, and they have garnered significant international attention. The other two scales that I will discuss are more scholarly in orientation. They were specifically designed by linguists as models for "reversing language shift" in contexts of language endangerment. They are Joshua Fishman's (1991) GIDS

and Paul Lewis and Gary Simons's (2010) EGIDS, which was meant to refine and improve Fishman's original measures.

To get a handle on how these different scales conceptualise and measure language endangerment, I will start by examining the Ethnologue scale. The stated goal of the Ethnologue project is to catalogue "all of the world's known living languages" (Ethnologue 2014). The project's website claims that "there are two dimensions to the characterisation of endangerment: the number of *users* who identify with a particular language and the number and nature of the *uses* or functions for which the language is employed" (Ethnologue 2014; emphasis in original). Together, these two dimensions – the number of users and the number of functions – form the basis for how Ethnologue approaches and measures language vitality and assesses the risk of language endangerment. On the Ethnologue scale, language endangerment can be broken down into three distinct levels before extinction: "second language only," "nearly extinct," and "dormant" – all of which are determined by a baseline count of the number of fluent speakers in a given language community. For example, to be classified as "nearly extinct," according to Ethnologue, a language must be spoken fluently by only "a very small and decreasing fraction of an ethnic population" – typically, no more than 50 fluent speakers (Lewis 2009).

Ethnologue's threshold of 50 fluent speakers considers only "first-language speakers." Second-language learners and other semi-speakers are automatically excluded, with the consequence that a language may be classified as "nearly extinct" when, in fact, it is still alive and vital to the identities and culture of younger generations of aspiring speakers. It is worth noting, for example, that only one of the Dene Tha students I interviewed would register as a first-language speaker on the Ethnologue scale. What is more, even if the other students were to eventually become fluent, they would still fall into the Ethnologue category of "second-language only." Because the Ethnologue scale is concerned with first-language speakers only, any uptick in second-language users does not affect its designation of a language as "living" or "extinct." Nora England (2002, 142) urges us to take seriously the practical implications that such rigid categories can have for specific language communities: "The fear that speakers of these languages have, I think, is that the name endangered language can convince people to give up speaking the language more readily because, after all, there is no real point to speaking a language that is doomed."

In this context, we are apt to underestimate the influence that categories like "second-language only" can

have in shaping the communal perceptions of different groups of language users about their language (see Kroskrity 1998; Silverstein 1979; Woolard 1998). For example, in Chateh, I spoke with two local Dene language experts, Glena and Susan, who offered me their assessments of the language abilities of local members of the community, saying: "*Séé újon Dene Dháh wodeh*" ("S/he speaks Dene Dháh well") of those they considered to be fluent.[4] On some occasions, particularly when talking about Dene youth in Chateh, they would also say: "*Edu séé újon Dene Dháh wodeh*" ("S/he doesn't speak Dene Dháh well"). Although these experts did not use technical terms like "fluent," "semi-fluent," "first-language," or "second-language," their judgments carried significant weight. I observed that Dene Tha adults in Chateh would rarely initiate conversations with younger Dene in Dene Dháh, on the assumption that youth could not speak the language well enough. I can only speculate that this lack of conversational engagement with youth in Dene Dháh was, in part, due to the widespread belief that younger Dene Tha had little knowledge or interest in speaking the language. In Navajo communities, McCarty, Romero, and Zepeda (2006, 37) likewise observe that adults' opinions about youth influence their everyday language choices: "An adult speaker who believes the children to whom she or he is speaking have little knowledge of or interest in using Navajo is likely to address them in English."

The real problem with the Ethnologue scale, then, is that it divides groups of endangered language speakers into rigid categories that, once ascribed, cannot be easily shaken. By doing so, the Ethnologue scale makes the assumption that only first-language speakers are "real speakers," possessing all of the knowledge and resources needed to preserve an endangered language. Yet, as Robert Moore and colleagues (2010, 11) point out, in reality, being a "speaker" within an endangered language community is "almost always a matter of degree: some speak 'more' of the language, others 'less'." In this sense, Ethnologue's reliance on the number of first-language speakers as a proxy for measuring language vitality not only falls short but is also risky. Assessed according to idealised counts of "real speakers," endangered languages will almost inevitably sound doomed to younger generations of semi-speakers and second-language users – they will appear "nearly extinct," "dormant," or "extinct."

The UNESCO scale runs into a similar problem. Officially called the "Language Vitality and Endangerment Scale," this scale relies on two basic measures – the "absolute number of speakers" and the "proportion of speakers" – as the major evaluative criteria for assessing language vitality. Although the UNESCO scale does consider less tangible factors, including intergenerational language transmission, changing trends in domains of language use, the effects of new media, and language education and literacy, the decisive measure is still a baseline speaker count. On the whole, the reasons UNESCO experts give for this deference to numbers are unconvincing. UNESCO experts admit that although it is often impossible to get an "absolute" tally of first- and second-language speakers in a population, it is still the case that "a small population" of language speakers will be, on average, more at risk of language endangerment than a larger population. This is because smaller populations are more vulnerable to external threats ranging from cultural assimilation to migration, natural disasters, and warfare. The UNESCO scale labels a language "critically endangered" if "very few speak the language" among the great-grandparents' generation, and "severely endangered" if primarily grandparents and older generations speak the language. It labels a language as "definitely endangered" if the language is spoken by a clear majority of the members of the parental generation. Finally, the scale labels a language "unsafe" if it is spoken only in limited domains (for example, ceremonies, schools, and official events), regardless of whether "nearly all speak the language" in those contexts (UNESCO 2003, 8–9).

Compared to Ethnologue, the UNESCO scale represents an attempt to adopt a more holistic approach to assessments of language endangerment. Instead of focusing narrowly on fluent "first-language speakers," as Ethnologue does, the UNESCO scale focuses on what it calls "actual speakers," although this term is never clearly defined. UNESCO experts provide some clarification in claiming that, in practice, the best that enumerators can ever hope for are rough approximations of speaker numbers: "It is impossible to provide a valid interpretation of absolute numbers" (UNESCO 2003, 8). The categories that the UNESCO scale comes up with to convey its estimates reflect this belief in the impossibility of ever getting accurate speaker counts. Hard numbers are replaced by looser terms like "nearly all," "a majority," "a minority," or "very few." There is a recognition that "language communities are complex and diverse; even assessing the number of actual speakers of a language is difficult" (7).

I admit to approving of the improvements the UNESCO scale makes to its measures of language vitality. But, in the end, I also see the UNESCO scale falling into the same traps that the Ethnologue scale has. First, although the UNESCO scale broadens its criteria and loosens its definition of fluent speakers, a consideration

of the "absolute number of speakers" remains the determining factor in classifying languages as more or less at risk of endangerment. Second, as with Ethnologue, the UNESCO scale employs loaded terminology in its classification of endangered languages. Labels like "unsafe," "definitely endangered," "severely endangered," "critically endangered," and "extinct" can discourage semi-speakers and aspiring language learners from interacting with adults and Elders in their heritage language, as I suggested earlier.

What these criticisms of the Ethnologue and UNESCO scales come down to is an interrogation of what Jane Hill (2002, 119) calls "expert rhetorics" of endangerment. This rhetoric of endangerment arises from a fundamental tension that exists at the core of most language revitalisation projects today. Whether or not they are accurate, numbers and labels matter a great deal to language revitalisation efforts, if only because they are what attract public attention and are awarded funding and support from governments and organisations. Hill suggests that such "unfortunate entailments" too often "go unnoticed by linguists and their target audiences of policymakers and funding agencies, yet distress and alienate speakers and members of their communities and amplify their distrust of linguists" (120). Eleanor Nevins (2004, 284) goes so far as to suggest that language revitalisation projects risk imposing an expert-led "institutional discourse," "without listening and responding to criticisms from the communities they are intended to benefit" and, thus, "may be interpreted as yet another form of oppression." From this perspective, the estimates of fluent speaker numbers and various categories of endangerment found in the Ethnologue and UNESCO scales are heard as "dismissive and insulting by members of younger generations in the community who make claims of speakerhood in some form" (Hill 2002, 128; see also Perley 2012).

This being said, experts do sometimes listen and adjust their measurements accordingly. Consider a third scale, Fishman's (1991) GIDS, which addresses some of the issues and concerns just raised. Fishman's GIDS has the virtue of avoiding problematic designations for threatened languages like "endangered" or "extinct." Instead, the GIDS is specifically designed to assess not just the number of fluent speakers of a language but also how social, cultural, and economic disruptions within a particular language community affect the transmission of linguistic knowledge from one generation to the next. For a language to receive the highest score on Fishman's GIDS (and so be considered "safe"), that language must be used in places (or domains) of work,

education, media, and government throughout the entire community. The lowest score, which indicates the complete disruption of intergenerational transmission, is given in situations where the only remaining speakers of a language are found in the grandparent generation of a community.

Perhaps because it avoids loaded terms, Fishman's GIDS is arguably the best-known language assessment scale in operation today. But it also invites a now familiar criticism. Like the Ethnologue and UNESCO scales, the GIDS cannot avoid drawing lines and counting numbers to measure levels of intergenerational disruption. The drawbacks of this approach are most readily observed in smaller language communities, where the threat of intergenerational disruption of language transmission is often the greatest (Bourhis 2001; Lo Bianco and Rhydwen 2001; Walsh 2005). Indeed, recent critics have raised concerns about whether the GIDS is fine-grained enough to detect intergenerational disruption among families and kin groups in different contexts, since the GIDS must conceptualise disruption in a more or less static way in order for it to be properly quantified and measured (see, for example, Lewis and Simons 2010; Simons and Lewis 2013). Critics also worry about the underlying "Euro-centric" character of the GIDS since the scale was originally developed to track the intergenerational transmission of European languages, not Indigenous ones (Hinton 2003, 51–53).

One last proposal is to modify the GIDS to include updated measures of oral and written modes of linguistic transmission unique to Indigenous communities as well as to integrate UNESCO's and Ethnologue's measures of language vitality (Lewis and Simons 2010). This fourth scale, called the EGIDS, combines the GIDS's sensitive terminology with the finely calibrated metrics of the UNESCO and Ethnologue scales, with the intent to create a comprehensive measurement of language vitality that is applicable across different cultural and linguistic contexts. Specifically, Lewis and Simons (2010, 108) propose integrating the four degrees of endangerment found in the UNESCO scale – "unsafe," "definitely endangered," "severely endangered," and "critically endangered" – with the three levels of endangerment described by the Ethnologue scale – "second language only," "nearly extinct," and "dormant." The result is a 10-point "vitality-endangerment continuum" intended to correct for some of the imprecisions in the GIDS, by distinguishing levels of vitality that scholars typically "lump together," including different levels of "safe" languages (for example, spoken at the "international" level, the "regional" level, or the level of "trade" or "education") as well as different levels of

endangerment (for example, "threatened," "shifting," "moribund"). While the EGIDS needs to be "empirically tested" further in applied settings like language revitalisation projects, the ambition is to eventually provide "an estimate of relative safety versus endangerment for every language on earth" (Simons and Lewis 2013, 4–5).

This series of tweaks and modifications to different scales for assessing endangerment brings to the surface the underlying problem with trying to measure and quantify a language's vitality. If the problem with current enumeration practices is determining who counts as a "real speaker," then it is not enough to simply develop new, more comprehensive metrics for language assessment – as does the EGIDS, for example – by folding together several older (and problematic) scales. In this respect, I see the EGIDS as a nice illustration of the limits of what language scholars and activists can hope to accomplish through assessments based on enumeration alone. Of course, this is not to suggest that numbers should have no place in language revitalisation projects. But, it is to suggest that too narrow a focus on refining measures of language endangerment can lead language activists and scholars to overlook the ideological implications that their measurements and assessments may have in practice. This is particularly true when it comes to defining the role of younger generations in local processes of language revitalisation.

If, as I am arguing, young semi-speakers are framed and approached as a symptom of language endangerment – as evidence of the dwindling number of "real speakers" – then my worry is that we might foreclose opportunities for this younger generation to see themselves, and to be seen, as playing leading roles in the revitalisation of their heritage language. In response, our aim should not be to create yet another new or updated scale for measuring language vitality. Indeed, recalling my fieldwork, this is the lesson that most stuck with me: how young people self-identify with their heritage language matters just as much, if not more, for that language's long-term health and vitality than do objective measurements of the number of fluent language speakers. With this lesson in mind, let us return to my interviews with Dene students in Chateh.

Semi-Speaker "Counter-Narratives": Interviews with Dene Tha Youth on Language Vitality[5]

> If I talk Dene Dháh I sound like a good Dene Tha.
> —Laura

In December 2011, I conducted a series of semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with a small number of Dene students at the Dene Tha community school in Chateh. My interviewees were four ninth-grade girls: 13-year-old Shirley, 15-year-old Joselyn, 18-year-old Maureen, and 18-year-old Laura. Each of the girls was asked a similar set of open-ended questions about their thoughts on Dene language and culture, the role of their parents and grandparents in teaching Dene Dháh to them, and their participation in traditional Dene cultural activities. The most surprising revelation was that all of the girls I interviewed strongly believed that the Dene Dháh language was still widely spoken, not only by their fellow students at the school but also by younger Dene in the community. This belief contradicted the stories I was told by local Dene language consultants when I arrived in Chateh. I was informed that Dene youth in the community preferred to speak in English to Dene Dháh and had little interest in following the proper Dene language and traditions. Most adults I spoke with in Chateh blamed this Dene Dháh-English language shift on the prevalence of English in mainstream youth culture, especially on television and the Internet. "You can't go anywhere without English," said James, a local Dene Tha artist. This stood in sharp contrast to James's memories of growing up in Chateh. Like James, most Dene adults contrast their perceptions of youth today with their personal experiences of learning about the proper use of traditional customs and values from Elders, including puberty seclusion for girls and hunting and fishing lessons for boys. Adults worry that Dene Tha practices like "*emots'ededli*" ("teachings through storytelling and counselling") and "*dahots'ethe*" ("tea dances") are falling into disuse, severing the intimate intergenerational connection that exists between Dene Elders and younger generations. One Dene adult told me that young Dene simply lack the patience to learn the Dene language and cultural practices. They always "want to have immediate action."

Testing the girls' levels of fluency during the interviews was beyond the scope of my study. But I did follow up on their claims about speaking Dene Dháh by asking each of them to translate a few common words and expressions, which they all knew. This was not completely surprising. Although the school's resources are limited, it does have a mandatory Dene language class, giving students at least a basic knowledge of Dene Dháh. One of the girls noted, however, that her classroom instruction rarely went beyond memorising numbers and flashcards. As far as I could tell, none of the girls were aware that most of the adults and Elders in their community believed that they were uninterested in learning and speaking Dene Dháh. Nor did they seem aware of this older generation's worries about the language shift in the community. It is significant that it did not occur to any of the girls I interviewed that Dene Dháh might be

endangered. Rather, each highlighted their impression that Dene Dháh was widely spoken by their peers, and they expressed their enthusiasm for learning and speaking the language themselves. For instance, Laura, who grew up in a very tradition-oriented family environment and whose first language was Dene Dháh, stated that "a lot of people" her age could fluently speak the language. Another interviewee, Shirley, did not grow up speaking Dene Dháh (her first language was English), but, nonetheless, she expressed the view that most of her peers were fluent Dene Dháh speakers. As evidence, Shirley mentioned a friend, who, if need be, was able to speak only in Dene Dháh – something that happened often when her grandmother was present.

Maureen also challenged the assertion that I had heard from Dene adults that few young people could speak Dene Dháh or even wanted to. She was clear: "People are still speaking it, even people younger than me are speaking." Maureen was referring to cousins that, in her opinion, spoke "really good" Dene Dháh. Joselyn's reply was also positive. Although Joselyn could understand the language but not speak it herself, she believed that speaking Dene Dháh was popular among students at the school. She told me that two of her best friends spoke to each other in Dene Dháh most of the time, and that she would frequently try to speak Dene Dháh with them. Notably, all of the girls I interviewed seemed certain that Dene Dháh was widely spoken by members of their age group, especially in informal settings outside of school. Even the girls who could not speak the language fluently – Shirley, Maureen, and Joselyn – were adamant that Dene Dháh was nowhere near endangered in their community. Relying on their assessments alone may of course be problematic. That said, most of the girls I spoke with told me that they had made an effort to speak Dene Dháh with their parents, grandparents, and friends, and so considered themselves to be "real speakers" of the Dene language, despite their partial fluency.

Except for Laura, who grew up speaking Dene Dháh at home, all of the girls I spoke with were semi-speakers to one degree or another. Maureen revealed that she understands "most of it," and she went on to tell me that on the rare occasions when her father speaks to her in Dene Dháh, "he gets surprised sometimes whenever I say something [answer back] in Dene Dháh." Even though Maureen mostly spoke English, she told me that "a lot" of her friends at school spoke to her in Dene Dháh since they knew "I understand it." Joselyn told me something similar about herself. She disclosed that she "understands the words but can't really say it." Despite not speaking Dene Dháh well, Joselyn said that

her parents and grandparents would converse in Dene Dháh at home and also, occasionally, with her. Shirley's was a slightly different story: compared to Maureen and Joselyn, her knowledge of Dene Dháh was far more limited, probably because she did not grow up speaking it. Shirley mentioned that her parents would speak to each other in Dene Dháh at home, just never with her. When I asked if she could understand what her parents were saying, she replied "kind of."

Although semi-speakers, each of the girls I interviewed affirmed their belief that Dene Dháh was widely spoken among their peers and that this was one of their main motivations for wanting to speak the language. English and mainstream culture were influential – noticeable, for instance, in the music that students at the school listened to – but the girls were nonetheless enthusiastic about learning and conversing in Dene Dháh since the language carried a high degree of prestige or "symbolic capital" among their peers (see Bourdieu 1977). The girls also highlighted the importance of feeling connected to their heritage language and culture, which was another reason for wanting to learn Dene Dháh. For example, Joselyn told me that she believed it was "important for Dene youth to learn Dene Dháh because of the culture." She explained that knowing Dene Dháh would help younger Dene "not to forget the culture and what [they] learnt from the Elders." Maureen, too, saw the value of the Dene language and traditional cultural practices. She recalled her older cousin telling her, "even if you move away, don't forget your language and culture because it's where you come from, so you better not lose it." More generally, the girls told me that speaking Dene Dháh "is cool" or "sounds fun" and wished to learn the language to interact with friends and relatives.

I am convinced that these girls were not just telling me what they thought adults and Elders wanted to hear. To me, the girls were not just expressing a desire to learn Dene Dháh, but, rather, they were pointing to concrete instances in which friends and fellow students were actually speaking the language. That said, the girls' enthusiasm for learning Dene Dháh was apparent in the creative ways they found to incorporate the language into their everyday lives. For example, some of the girls took advantage of local media and technology to enhance their learning. Shirley routinely listened to the local community radio station on her iPod because it broadcast mostly in Dene Dháh, giving her an opportunity to improve her language skills. She told me that listening to the radio gave her access to new words and phrases, which she would then try out in conversations with her grandfather. Shirley was also very keen to

hear about the "FirstVoices" mobile application, which was launched in 2010 to allow speakers of Halq'eméylem, Senćoten, and other languages in British Columbia to create dictionaries and phrase books using their own images and audio-video recordings (FirstVoices 2013). In fact, all of the girls were interested in hearing about opportunities to practise Dene Dháh outside the classroom. They were especially excited at the prospect of becoming involved in local language revitalisation projects using new technologies and digital media, both in Chateh and in other Dene Tha communities nearby.

The girls' enthusiasm for new technologies is important to note since many language projects are focused on documenting and detailing endangered languages for the purposes of future preservation and less on actual contexts for their use (see Dixon 1997; Eisenlohr 2004; Thieberger 2002). From the perspective of young Dene Tha semi-speakers, new technologies and mediums like the iPod and iPad have the potential to facilitate individualised language learning in new and innovative ways. These tools can also raise a language's prestige among younger generations because they make use of technologies that are "modern" and familiar to young people – although adults and Elders may sometimes disagree (see Perley 2012). In my opinion, encouraging the use of new technologies and not stigmatising these tools as inauthentic (or advocating only "proper" traditional ways of learning and knowing) is crucial for ensuring that languages like Dene Dháh remain vital and relevant to younger generations of semi-speakers.

Perhaps more crucial, however, is for Elders and adults to create opportunities and spaces for young semi-speakers to practise their heritage language at home. In Chateh, the assumption that younger Dene Tha were uninterested in speaking Dene Dháh meant that adults rarely spoke it with them. Each of the girls I spoke with confirmed that the presence of patient and engaged family members was critical to learning the language. For example, Maureen said that her cousins spoke "really good" Dene Dháh because "their parents spoke to them [in Dene Dháh] while they were growing up." But while Maureen's father, aunt, and grandparents all spoke Dene Dháh to each other, they would switch to English when speaking with her. This was frustrating, Maureen told me, especially at family events with her cousins, who would often tease her about not understanding what was said: "The whole family speaks Dene and I can't. It's hard." But Maureen also added, hopefully, that her grandmother's good-natured "laughs" when she made mistakes in Dene Dháh made her feel more comfortable when trying to speak it.

The situation Maureen described is not unique to her family or to Dene Tha families in Chateh. Indeed,

Barbra Meek (2012, 41) notes that, "while historically American Indian languages were acquired in the home, and dominant languages were learned at school, today in situations of language revitalisation, with minor exceptions, the reverse is true; dominant languages are being acquired at home, and endangered languages are being learned at school." As primary sites of language learning move from homes to formal institutional settings with limited time and resources, like schools, it is important for young semi-speakers to feel that they are vital members – and potential contributors – to their language community. Creating informal opportunities for semi-speakers to practise their heritage language outside of the classroom, and without fear of judgment, is essential for motivating continued language learning (see also Field 2009).

A final observation has to do with encouraging – or, at least, not actively or openly discouraging – the accommodation of unconventional, hybrid forms of language use in the everyday speech of younger generations, such as the borrowing of words from English or frequent code-mixing and code-switching with English and Dene Dháh. It is on this point that disagreements about the implications of generational language shift within communities like Chateh are likely to be most pronounced (see, for example, Dalby 2003; Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1998; Goodfellow 2003; Loether 2009). A crucial component of language preservation, for many activists and scholars, is protecting the "pure" intergenerational transmission of endangered languages to ensure that traditions and practices are properly passed on (see Crystal 2003; Dorian 1994). But I believe that recognising young semi-speakers as "real speakers" of a heritage language also forces us to recognise their cultural appropriations and mixed vocabularies as, potentially, positive instances of a younger generation actually owning and expanding this language. To me, such recognition is at the heart of what it means to adopt more inclusive terms of language vitality when assessing endangered languages. In the final section of the article, I suggest ways in which accommodating semi-speakers within endangered language communities may, in fact, foster greater solidarity between different generations of language speakers, ensuring that everyone is perceived as having a role in revitalising their traditional linguistic and cultural practices.

Reconsidering the Role of Semi-Speakers in Processes of Language Revitalisation

What role, then, should semi-speakers play in the efforts by activists, scholars, and communities to revitalise endangered heritage languages? If we follow language

activists and scholars like Dorian (1977), the answer may appear to be "none." Dorian identifies semi-speakers as a problematic symptom of "language death." Her concern, to be fair, is that expert assessments that mistakenly count semi-speakers as "real speakers" distort the picture we have of the number of fluent members of an endangered language community. Since semi-speakers are, at best, partially fluent in their heritage language, their presence may limit the accuracy and reliability of the data that is collected about the language's overall health and vitality. For those actively engaged in documenting and preserving endangered languages, or in raising public awareness and funding for endangered language communities worldwide, the consequences of distorted data can be quite costly. Reservations about including semi-speakers are understandable from this perspective.

Yet, as my interviews with Dene Tha youth in Chateh attest, there is also another perspective. From the perspective of semi-speakers – often the majority of young speakers in endangered language communities – there is a strong self-identification with one's heritage language and culture and a deeply rooted personal belief in belonging, as full and rightful members, to this language community. Put simply, young semi-speakers quite often think of themselves as "real speakers" of endangered languages. Expert assessments based on rigid conceptions of speaker fluency can exclude semi-speakers from measurements of a language's vitality. This may have profound ideological implications for the beliefs and attitudes that younger generations of endangered language speakers have, or are taken to have, of their language.

Based on my experiences in Chateh, I have already suggested some strategies for including young semi-speakers in language revitalisation projects. These include creating informal opportunities for semi-speakers to encounter their heritage language, introducing new technologies for semi-speakers to learn and practise their language, and accommodating semi-speaker performances of that language. In this final section, I broaden my view to consider how the larger discourse on language endangerment might be usefully reframed, so that the role of semi-speakers in language revitalisation becomes a topic of greater conversation among language activists and scholars.

Boundary Policing and the Problem of Who "Counts" as an Endangered Language Speaker

The first challenge to reframing the current discourse of language endangerment concerns the strict policing of boundaries between fluent and partially fluent speakers within endangered language communities. Here, I think there is one problematic assumption in particular that must be dispelled – namely, that only those who speak an endangered language fluently should be counted as speakers of an endangered language, because only fluent speakers can play a role in preserving and passing on this language to younger generations. As my fieldwork in Chateh illustrates, the difficulty with this approach is that the fluency of individual speakers varies widely in actual contexts of language endangerment. In these situations, I would argue that we are better off broadening our conceptions of "speakerhood" to include the full range and diversity of claims to speakership that may exist within a particular language community. This recommendation is controversial only insofar as we fail to see the goals of language documentation and language revitalisation as somewhat distinct enterprises. Salikoko Mufwene (2003, 341) echoes this point exactly: "It is perhaps important," he writes, "that we in linguistics learn the distinction between preserving a language (like a museum piece), maintaining it in usage, and revitalizing it (by restoring vitality to it)." Hinton (2003, 45) similarly notes that "to document a language is just to 'pickle' it; but to save a language is to train new speakers – to find ways of helping people learn the language in situations where normal language transmission across generations no longer exists" (compare with Newman 2003).

If we too often fail to acknowledge that the goals of language documentation are distinct from those of language revitalisation, we also tend to overestimate the descriptive accuracy of the concepts we use to document and assess languages. Here, it is particularly worth noting that, despite what the names imply, categories like "language death" or "last speaker" are not always terminal designations for a language (see Walsh 2005). Nicholas Evans (2001, 258–259) gives an example from Australia in which the term "last speaker" was given to three different people in the same Indigenous community on three separate occasions. Eventually, the community appropriated the term and started using it as an honorific of sorts, to distinguish their most senior and knowledgeable living Elder. In a similar vein, Debenport (2011, 90) notes that, among the Pueblo in San Antonio, the term "native speaker" has evolved to denote membership, not fluency: "Tribal members who play significant religious or political roles are more likely to be counted by San Antonians as 'speakers'."

To my mind, the designation "semi-speaker" and what it implies for endangered language communities is no different. Indeed, it is perhaps telling that scholars and activists often have a hard time determining who is, and who is not, a semi-speaker within contexts of

language endangerment. Colette Grinevald (2005, 65) goes so far as to suggest that the "semi-speaker" label is, in reality, a kind of catch-all covering anyone and everyone who is not completely fluent in a language – it "spans a wide range of speakers from near-fluent to quite limited speakers." Part of the reason for this ambiguity arises from the fact that the language skills of would-be semi-speakers are often misjudged by those around them, as was the case with the Dene Tha youth I encountered in Chateh. But another reason, according to David Hornsby (2007, 78–79), is that semi-speakers are also often skilled at hiding or disguising their limitations. Strategies semi-speakers may deploy to hide their lack of fluency may include "code-switching" from an endangered language to a standard one, use of slang, or even the avoidance of speaking in certain circumstances or situations. These strategies may arise from many sources, including a desire to "fit in," a need to belong, or a feeling of pride in one's cultural and linguistic heritage, among others.

For these kinds of reasons, my experiences in Chateh lead me to conclude that scholars and language activists would do well to defer to the judgments of semi-speakers when it comes to determining who counts as a speaker of an endangered language. It matters a great deal, I think, that while only one of the Dene Tha students I interviewed would qualify as a "real speaker" according to standard language assessment scales, all of the students I spoke with thought of themselves, and of each other, as speakers of Dene Dháh. In other words, these young semi-speakers had no hesitation in self-identifying as qualified speakers of their heritage language. Reframing the discourse of language endangerment thus begins with rethinking the concepts and categories we use to assess a language's vitality in order to more fully capture the diversity of ways that people can use and identify with a language, even if they are only partially fluent. In Canada, one promising development in this direction is the recent inclusion of a new category – "potential fluent speaker" – in the 2004 Aboriginal Language Services survey, supported by the Yukon territorial government. Approximately 40 percent of Kaska people surveyed between the ages of 15 and 24 self-identified as "potentially fluent speakers" of the Kaska language (see Meek 2014). This diverse group might have otherwise gone unrecognised.

Moving from Assessing Language Endangerment to Reinforcing Language Vitality

A second challenge we face in trying to reframe the current discourse of language endangerment has to do with the metaphors we often use to ground our language assessments. As I argued earlier, our aim in refining assessments of language vitality should not just be to create new or more refined measures for documenting and enumerating endangered languages. What we instead need to work towards, I believe, are new metaphors of language vitality that we can use to supplement existing measures of language endangerment – metaphors that reflect the variety of ways that people can positively contribute to the maintenance and revitalisation of their heritage language (see also Leonard 2008; Perley 2012).

Reflecting on my experiences in Chateh, I see the inability of standard language assessment scales to adequately capture the heterogeneous linguistic practices of semi-speakers as a significant obstacle to language revitalisation efforts. While alarming data on fluent speaker numbers undoubtedly helps raise public consciousness about the global problem of language endangerment, too little thought is given to how this endangerment discourse affects the beliefs and perceptions of endangered language speakers (see also Moore 2006). There is plenty of testimonial evidence to suggest that perpetuating a discourse of endangerment does have a negative effect. "I find it damaging to fellow tribal members to be told their language is extinct because it implies the culture is extinct and that Native Americans belong in the past," states Wesley Leonard, a Native linguist and member of the Miami tribe of Ohio (quoted in Eastman 2012). His sentiments are shared by Bernard Perley (2012, 134), a Maliseet anthropologist, who argues that the dominant discourse of language endangerment "reifies language as the object of value that must be 'saved,' while the speakers are relegated to the role of unwitting casualties victimized by processes greater than themselves." This is also the frustration of Tagish-Tlingit Elder Peter Sidney: "Another thing I dislike hearing about is that we lost our heritage, our language. Let's examine that for a minute. What is language? Where does it come from?" His answer: "Language is a gift of the Creator for the purpose of communication … it can never deteriorate … all we have to do is dust it off" (Council for Yukon Indians 1991, 11).

Not only does the terminology of standard assessment scales magnify the gap between "safe" (or "living") languages and "endangered" languages, but it also masks the emergence of new forms of language use that fall between established categories of "safe" and "endangered" linguistic practices. Obscuring these new and creative forms of language use can have a profoundly negative impact on the willingness of younger generations to continue speaking their language. It can give the false

impression that a language is "off limits" or no longer vital. Thus, as experts and Indigenous communities engage in the long process of language revitalisation, I believe that there must be greater awareness of the need to create an inclusive space that incorporates the novel linguistic practices of young semi-speakers and recognises them as valid. Indeed, in speaking against such "language purism," Ghil'ad Zuckermann (2009, 63) reminds us that "when one revives a language, one should expect to end up with a hybrid."

In sum, the concepts that language activists and scholars use to assess language endangerment have ideological implications that need to be carefully rethought and reframed. I highlighted some of these ideological effects in my observations about adult misperceptions of young Dene Tha semi-speakers in Chateh. Changing these misperceptions would involve rethinking how the categories we use to assess language endangerment may implicitly reinforce popular beliefs about a language's vitality. It is with these issues in mind that scholars critical of the current language endangerment discourse suggest replacing its terminology with more positive metaphors emphasising vitality – for example, "sleeping languages," "language awakening," "emergent vitalities," and "potential fluent speakers" (Baldwin and Olds 2007; Leonard 2008; Meek 2014, 76; Perley 2012). Grounding language assessments in these more positive metaphors of language vitality may have a significant impact on the perceptions that younger generations of language users and learners have of their heritage language.

To this end, consider some contributions that semi-speakers are already making to language revitalisation efforts in their communities. In the early 1980s, Kathryn Michel, a Secwepemc second-language learner from British Columbia, Canada, founded a Secwepemc language immersion school known as T'selcéwtqen Clleqmél'ten (Chief Atahm School), despite her limited language skills. Celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2011, the school's mission is to provide an immersive "language nest" for students as young as 3 and as old as 16. All of the school's classes are taught in Secwepemc, and English is never spoken (Michel 2005). The school has contributed significantly to the revitalisation of the Secwepemc language in British Columbia. It was modelled on a similar total-immersion program, Pūnana Leo (Nest of Voices), based in Hawaii, which is run through the dedicated efforts of Hawaiian second-language educators and Elders ('Aha Pūnana Leo 2015). The fault in using categories that exclude semi-speakers lies in obscuring the achievements of language revitalisation projects such as these. Indeed, as Leanne Hinton and Kenneth Hale (2001, 6)

observe, "all that is really needed for language revitalisation to begin is a minimum of one person who is dedicated to the cause."

Conclusion

The collection of data and statistics about worldwide language endangerment provides essential information for scholars and activists to assess language documentation and revitalisation efforts. But statistics and data are only as reliable as the categories that underlie them. When these categories make distinctions about who counts as a "real speaker" of an endangered language, they also make distinctions that can disqualify certain people from counting as speakers of that language. In practice, this can have the consequence of compounding language endangerment by deterring younger generations of semi-speakers from participating in the revitalisation of their heritage language.

I have argued for the need to shift the current discourse of language endangerment toward one of language vitality when it comes to semi-speakers. Speaker fluency is not a rigid category that can be, or should be, easily measured in contexts of language endangerment. Instead of focusing our efforts on assessing the number of fluent language speakers in an endangered language community, we should focus on identifying ways individual community members – many of whom are semi-speakers or even non-speakers – might positively contribute to their language's revitalisation. This move is essential precisely because semi-speakers often perceive themselves, and are believed by others, to be rightful speakers of their heritage language. The interviews I conducted with Dene Tha students during my fieldwork in Chateh support this conclusion. The beliefs and perceptions that younger speakers have of their heritage language plays a significant role in encouraging them to continue to learn and to speak that language. None of the Dene Tha students I interviewed saw themselves, or each other, as partially fluent "semi-speakers" – though the Dene adults and language consultants I spoke with almost certainly did. The experiences of the Dene Tha students I encountered in Chateh, and of younger generations of endangered language speakers more generally, can help us better appreciate the many ways youth may contribute to language revitalisation projects around the world. When it comes to younger generations, we should see the phenomenon of the semi-speaker not as an obstacle to the documentation and revitalisation of endangered languages but, rather, as a potential source of motivation to inspire youth to make their heritage language their own.

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Notes

1 In the standard orthography, the self-designation of the Dene Tha would be written as Dene Dháa ("People Ordinary" or "People Regular"). In English, "th" can be either voiced or voiceless (as in "that" versus "thin"). The Dene Tha decided to implement an English-based spelling to refer to themselves. For their language, however, the Dene Tha kept the standard orthographic spelling Dene Dháh ("People Language").

2 Recent work by Richard Henne-Ochoa and Richard Bauman (2015) complicates Paul Garrett's (2005, 128) definition of language shift. In contrast to Garrett, Henne-Ochoa and Bauman introduce "a performance-based approach to develop a perspective of [the] generations" involved in a language shift, who are otherwise perceived as already existing social categories. In doing so, their aim is to give greater agency to children and youth in the construction of language ideologies. While I use Garrett's definition of a language shift in this article, the argument I am making is compatible with Henne-Ochoa and Bauman's general approach.

3 There is no current information on the total number of Dene Dháh speakers in Chateh. According to Patrick Moore, the best we have are estimates (Patrick Moore, personal communication).

4 I use pseudonyms for all of the students and adults that I interviewed or interacted with.

5 I borrow the term "counter-narratives" in the title of this section from Teresa McCarty, Mary Romero, and Ofelia Zepeda (2006, 31) who use it to refer to the narratives that "resist or counter … taken-for-granted assumptions" about language and language use.

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