# Ideologies of Olympic Proportions: The Aboriginal Language Broadcast of the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Games

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**Abstract:** This paper considers the language ideological implications of the decision to broadcast the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Games in eight Aboriginal Canadian languages. Using media coverage of this decision, I consider the motivations expressed by the organizers, the representations of the event by journalists presenting it to a predominantly non-Aboriginal audience, and public reactions to these representations. I analyze this media event as a "language ideological debate" in which competing discourses about language revitalization, multilingualism/ multiculturalism and identity (both Canadian and Aboriginal) reveal deep disagreement among participants with respect to the meaning, role and importance of Aboriginal languages in Canada.

**Keywords:** Language ideology, language revitalization, Aboriginal identity, multiculturalism, Vancouver Olympics, media

***Résumé*** **:** Cet article s'intéresse aux idéologies linguistiques sous-jacentes à la décision de radiodiffuser les Jeux olympiques de Vancouver de 2010 en huit langues autochtones canadiennes. À partir de la couverture médiatique de cette décision, j'étudie les motivations exprimées par les organisateurs, les représentations de l'événement par des journalistes l'expliquant avant tout à un auditoire non autochtone, et les réactions du public à ces représentations. J'analyse cet événement médiatique comme un « débat en idéologie linguistique » dans lequel des discours concurrents en matière de revitalisation des langues, de multilinguisme et multiculturalisme, d'identité (aussi bien canadienne qu'autochtone) révèlent de profondes divergences d'opinions parmi les participants, à l'égard de la signification, du rôle, et de l'importance des langues autochtones au Canada.

**Mots-clés :** Idéologie linguistique, revitalisation des langues, identité autochtone, multiculturalisme, Jeux olympiques de Vancouver, médias

## Introduction

Acting as the host country for the Olympic Games constitutes a unique opportunity for a nation to engage in intense debate about the particular images of nationalism and national identity that are presented to an extremely large, global audience. Chen (2010), for example, argues that a country's success as an Olympic host depends upon its ability to manage the media narratives in such a way as to "culturally seduce all the world" (814); similarly, Liang (2010) points out that national broadcasters use these highly ritualized media events in order to imagine a shared national identity that often undermines the supposed Olympic ideals of internationalism (820). Heinz Housel (2007) specifically considers how the Opening Ceremonies of the Sydney 2000 Summer Games, as presented in Australian media sources, construct an image of a multicultural community that, through linear historical progress, has become unified under the umbrella of the Australian nation (446). In a context in which language and languages represent an important aspect of national identity, these elements may take on additional significance for the identities being constructed and presented in these mediated events. DiGiacomo (1999) highlights the way that the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, held in the capital of the Catalan region of Spain, brought new international attention to the significance of language choice for both Catalan and Castilian identities. The actors involved in constructing these images include the state itself, the organizing committee and, importantly, media broadcasters, who possess a great deal of creative control over the form and content of the stories they tell and re-tell over the course of the Games.

During the Vancouver 2010 Winter Games, the organizers and media repeatedly focused on multiculturalism and the role of Canadian Aboriginal peoples in shaping Canadian national identity, especially during the Games' Opening Ceremonies. The latter aspect was also highlighted in the emphasis that was placed on the involvement

of the "Four Host First Nations" on whose traditional lands the Games were held, in the planning process. In addition, the perception that the French language was not granted enough presence during the Opening Ceremonies sparked a heated public debate about the importance of official bilingualism to Canadian identity. Although languages other than English and French were rarely discussed, an additional language ideological debate (Blommaert 1999) concerning Canadian Indigenous languages also took place during the Vancouver Games. This debate reveals the ways in which the same event can be used to support different kinds of identity claims for different participants in the discussion. Constructions of both Canadian identity and Aboriginal identity are at work in this story, particularly ideals of multiculturalism and inclusion for the former, and the importance of language revitalization for the latter.

The Rogers/CTV broadcasting consortium that won the Canadian rights to televise the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Games decided to use affiliated networks in order to include coverage of Olympic events in 22 different languages, including eight Aboriginal languages.[1] Originally, the media corporations brought forward a proposal to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) that only featured "ethnic telecasts on OMNI" (Houston 2009) and limited the involvement of the Aboriginal People's Television Network (APTN) to the Opening and Closing ceremonies. After the IOC awarded the rights to this group, however, APTN pushed for greater participation. The result was the first-ever inclusion of an Aboriginal television network as an official broadcaster in this kind of worldwide sporting event. APTN aired daily coverage in English and French across the country, and coverage of specific events in different Aboriginal languages on three regional feeds (North, East and West).[2] While the promotion of endangered languages constitutes a component of APTN's mandate, and regular programming includes a significant amount of Indigenous language content, the size and nature of this event make the decision and its impact much more complex. The debate resulting from this event touches on a number of ideological themes. These include the significance of endangered languages for Aboriginal peoples, the economic costs of language promotion, the relevance of minority languages within a multicultural community, and the extent to which the use of these languages may serve a metacommunicative, identity-based function.

In this paper, I consider the decision to present these multilingual broadcasts, specifically focusing on the inclusion of Aboriginal languages, as well as the process involved in preparing for the event. By examining print,

online and broadcast media sources from across Canada that commented upon this broadcast,[3] I will analyze the ways in which the event is presented by various parties involved in both the event itself and in the discursive construction of the decision within the larger narrative of the Olympic Games. Specifically, I will consider how the Indigenous people involved in the broadcast describe the ideologies that motivated them, and how the journalists[4] writing about the broadcast for non-Indigenous publications transform their descriptions in light of their own ideological perspectives. Discourses about language endangerment and revitalization, the terms of which are referenced repeatedly by these broadcasters, play an important role in the motivations that they express. Most estimates place the total number of Aboriginal languages currently spoken in Canada at around 60 (see the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures [TFALC] 2005). While the degree to which each one is considered "endangered" varies substantially, the need to plan against language loss and promote revitalization remains a strong theme in discussions of all Aboriginal languages in Canada. The three languages that are considered the strongest (Cree, Ojibwe and Inuktitut) are assessed as "viable but losing ground" and "[e]ven languages with a large number of speakers may be flourishing in some regions or communities and be in a critical state in others" (TFALC 2005: ii). Indigenous participants in this broadcast event frame their involvement in terms of the potential disappearance of these languages, and with reference to how their protection and promotion is important to Indigenous identity. Commentary from non-Indigenous people (both journalists and online commenters) on the other hand, focuses on what the multilingual broadcast means for Canadian multiculturalism (either as a positive or a negative force). For both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians, the Olympics as a whole, and this broadcast specifically, constitute significant sites for the creation of identities across "imagined communities" (Anderson 1991). Further, different language ideological concerns are associated with these differing (though overlapping) categories of identity as focal points, and with the different positions that people take regarding how, or even whether, these broadcasts should be presented. As a strategy for language revitalization, this type of broadcast offers the potential of a large audience, but also creates challenges resulting from the ideological complexity of the event as a whole.

A number of different ideological themes that are relevant to the questions of language revitalization and language and identity are analyzed in this paper. These themes include: the sense of pride associated with

Aboriginal languages; the relationship between language and Aboriginal identity; multilingualism as a marker of Canadian multiculturalism (both as a strength and weakness of national identity); the overall relevance of language as a marker of identity (in addition to or rather than as a communicative tool); the division of limited resources to be used for multilingual broadcasts, the choice of which languages or language varieties to include; and the creation of new fields for the use of endangered minority languages, as well as the role of individuals and communities in monitoring or regulating this process. Each of these points is discussed by some of the participants in the debate and fits into the complex question of the role that Aboriginal languages can or should play for two different communities—Aboriginal Canadians on the one hand, and Canada as a multicultural nation on the other. The debate brings to the forefront the question of why, or even whether, these minority languages, especially endangered Aboriginal languages, are worthy of the attention and the investment required to protect and promote them. Neither the media institutions nor the event planners can necessarily be seen as the exclusive source of a particular set of language ideological beliefs, as interaction among them and responses from the general public reveal that sociolinguistic outcomes (such as the production of this broadcast or the nature of additional, future efforts to promote multilingualism and/or language revitalization) are dependent on complex and multifaceted processes (Johnson and Milani 2010:5). As the data illustrate, a huge disparity in ideological perspectives exists between the Aboriginal people involved in the broadcast and many of the non-Aboriginal participants in this discussion, and these ideological differences continue to create major challenges for those people who are involved in language revitalization.

## Language Ideologies: Revitalization, Media and Symbolic Power

In Canada, discourses and practices of language revitalization are powerfully linked to Aboriginal identity, to processes of decolonization, and to the nation-to-nation framework of relations with the state (Patrick 2007). The use of broadcast media as a tool for language revitalization is itself a complex and contested ideological stance. Eisenlohr (2004:23-24) presents a summary of the ways in which television has been analyzed as both a particularly powerful threat to minority languages, and as a potentially useful tool for countering this threat. He emphasizes the importance of considering minority language media in light of its implications for the formation of communities and group identities, building on Anderson's (1991)

interpretation of the role of print capitalism and literacy in the construction of European nationalism. He specifically notes that a, "central concern of the use of lesser-known languages in electronic mediation…is achieving a transformation of ideological valuations of the language so that the lesser-used language is viewed as part of the contemporary world and as relevant for the future of a particular group" (1991:23-24). By working to change perceptions of the role of these languages in everyday life, this strategy attempts to invest these languages with new forms of "symbolic power" (Bourdieu 1991). Dominant Canadian media, in this perspective, is part of a cultural "neutron bomb" that erases and pushes away Indigenous languages and cultural values (David 1998). Media in Aboriginal languages work to counter this erasure and reinforce alternative values. Zellen (1998) articulates this transformation as turning "neutron bomb television and cultural nerve gas into … 'electronic smoke signals'" (25) and argues that, in Canada, this strategy has been largely successful. The statements of the Aboriginal participants quoted below illustrate that for these individuals, this broadcast serves as a particularly visible example of the "electronic smoke signals" that work to communicate the value, vibrancy and relevance of Aboriginal languages.

At the same time, the (predominantly non-Aboriginal) journalists writing about this story present its relevance and meaning in different terms. As Billig (1995) points out, the mass media acts as a prominent site for the construction of national consciousness, and journalists often write in ways that speak to members of the nation being constructed. In this debate, the various participants are not necessarily speaking to the same people, as they use this event to help define different "nations" or community identities. This difference in audience is associated with radically different ideological perspectives about why, or even whether, minority languages are valuable and worthy of protection. In the traditional model of journalistic interactions, the audience acts as a largely invisible participant that is referenced by journalists and other speakers, but whose reactions are left unheard (Pujolar 2007). New media, however, introduces the potential for this audience to participate more directly in the interaction through online commentary and to lay claim, in these statements, to authoritative interpretations about the event's meaning (Blommaert 1999). As such, it is possible to examine the ways that some members of the public (those motivated to leave a comment on stories that offered this option[5]) introduce additional ideological positions into this discussion.

In the analysis below, I consider statements made by three types of participants in the debate—Aboriginal

broadcasters (APTN personnel and Aboriginal-language commentators), journalists writing for non-Aboriginal media outlets, and online commentary from members of the non-Aboriginal public. I examine the ideological differences that their statements reveal, and in turn, the ways in which these ideologies inform their interpretation of and reaction to this media event, as well as their visions for the future of Aboriginal languages in Canada. The first group, Aboriginal broadcasters, speaks about the event in overwhelmingly positive terms, as an exciting and groundbreaking step for Aboriginal Canadians and Aboriginal languages. Journalists commenting on the story reframe and refocus the narrative in ways that tend to minimize the emphasis on language revitalization and activism, shifting the discussion away from Aboriginal identity and towards reflection on how this multilingual event relates to the Canadian nationalism being expressed through the Olympic Games. Finally, a small sample of online commentary from non-Aboriginal members of the general public reveals even more movement away from the ideals of language revitalization and promotion, and away from the goal of strengthening Aboriginal identity. This selection includes some comments which are extremely critical of the decision to present multilingual broadcasts, some which express qualified support for it, and very few which support the decision entirely. The main focus of these commenters is on the perceived utility (or lack thereof) of the multilingual broadcasts to reach and communicate to particular audiences, and on whether or not the use of these languages should, in fact, be welcomed and encouraged within the Canadian nation. In the analysis below, I consider the expressions of specific ideological themes that emerge as terms within this debate, in order to illustrate the ways in which the use of mass media in the revitalization of Aboriginal languages relates to multiple kinds of identity and becomes the subject of contestation.

## Symbolic Capital: Languages as a Source of Pride

Because this event involved a substantial investment of time and money, the goals expressed by the APTN producers and Aboriginal language commentators who made it happen are extremely important to understanding its overall meaning. In describing their motivations for involvement, these participants placed strong emphasis on the ways in which this decision would help to promote Aboriginal languages and identity. Specifically, the use of television was seen as a way to increase the symbolic capital associated with these languages. These participants in the debate called attention to the way that both

the medium and the application of Aboriginal languages to a field of discourse (sports, and specifically the Olympics) that is not necessarily associated with "traditional" Aboriginal culture could serve to strengthen the sense that Aboriginal languages are living and vibrant, with a place in the contemporary world. As is common in the use of mass media for language revitalization (Browne 1998), these messages were directed especially toward Aboriginal youth, who are identified as not necessarily speaking the languages of their Aboriginal community and as needing encouragement to learn them.

APTN CEO Jean LaRose, in particular, drew on this theme in explaining the decision. On his website *Truth and Rumours* William Houston, a *Globe and Mail* columnist who writes primarily about sports and media in Canada, quoted LaRose as saying:

> The goal behind this initiative is to create *a sense of pride* among *our young people* so they realize *there is a place* for their language. We want them to understand that it can be used at the *world stage* and there's nothing wrong with speaking it, as well as English or French. [2009, emphasis added]

He repeated these themes in the articles presented in the Saskatoon *Star-Phoenix* and the *Winnipeg Free Press*, the major daily newspapers for each of these two cities. The *Star-Phoenix* quoted LaRose as saying, "we hope to use this event to give people a *sense of pride* in their language. *It's OK* to keep your language. It's a link to who you are" (Warick 2010; emphasis added). The Winnipeg *Free Press* included a longer quote that articulates the threat to these languages as well as the potential increase in symbolic capital that accompanies this type of broadcast:

> The key thing for us was to be able to provide coverage of some of these events in aboriginal languages. Some of our languages are in trouble; the population that speaks them is ever-decreasing, and *younger people* aren't necessarily picking up the language or wanting to maintain it. What we're hoping to do is show them that *their languages have no barriers (and) they can be used to broadcast events such as the Olympics*; we want to show that *these languages are living*, and *they should be proud of them.* [Oswald 2010:C3, emphasis added]

In these quotations, LaRose clearly directs his statements towards Aboriginal Canadians, and defines this target audience as a community with shared interests in all of these languages. His consistent use of possessive pronouns (for example *your* language, *their* language,

*our* language) asserts a connection to language that is common to all members of Aboriginal communities, even those who do not themselves speak an Aboriginal language (a group that constitutes the majority of those who identify as Aboriginal in Canada [Norris 2007]). LaRose also emphasizes the importance of these languages as links to Aboriginal identity, not as tools for communication. Several of his statements make reference to the need to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of Aboriginal languages, and to work against the sense that they are linked primarily to the past or to a limited geographical context. For example, in the above quotations, he uses words and phrases like "living" and "these languages have no barriers," and argues that they can be used "on the world stage."

The individuals recruited to present the commentary in Indigenous languages were selected on the basis of their linguistic abilities, their familiarity with the sports being presented, and their having had some form of previous broadcast experience. Many are individuals involved in language revitalization activities in other capacities. Statements by these commentators reiterate the themes of pride, identity and the attraction of youth. The Saskatoon *Star-Phoenix* article referenced above also includes a quote from Allan Adam, a Dene Suliné speaker and translator hired to provide commentary for cross-country skiing. Adam described the broadcast as "really exciting. The language is important. We need to show these kinds of things to *young people*" (Warick 2010, emphasis added). Public Radio International, a United States-based station that focuses on global issues, presented a full interview with Cree commentator Abel Charles, who noted:

> I believe there's going to be a lot of viewers. The older generation are the ones that [sic] are going to be viewing the Olympics you know when it's broadcast in the languages, in the aboriginal languages. *The younger generation* is also going to be beside those older people then hopefully they will get a *stronger sense of identity* and that they, you know, they get a sense that *their language is important.* [2010, emphasis added]

In the *Toronto Star*, these themes are repeated by several commentators in an article that presents the story as a hopeful development for Aboriginal languages. For example, Mohawk commentator Tehawennahkwa Miller, himself only 22 years old, pointed out that "[w]hen *young listeners*, some of them future athletes, hear the Winter Games called in their native tongues, it's *empowering* that their own people are represented at the Olympics, and know that they can do it, too" (Watson 2010, emphasis added). Another young commentator, 31-year-old

Inuktutit broadcaster Karllin Aariak, expressed her hope that "this is a beginning and not a one-time opportunity, so others have the chance to *expose and use our language in spreading the Inuktitut word*" (Watson 2010, emphasis added).

All of these statements are grounded in an ideological framework that emphasizes the use of Aboriginal languages specifically as part of the promotion and strengthening of Aboriginal identity. The commentators believe that the main potential gain from the effort that they put into this broadcast comes from the possibility that such a high exposure event will raise the profile and symbolic capital associated with their languages. By using Aboriginal languages for non-traditional purposes such as broadcasting and sports commentary, they are working to increase the contexts in which these languages can be used and thus raise their value within the dominant linguistic marketplace (Patrick 2003). The specific attention paid to young audiences makes this point especially relevant, as these speakers make direct efforts to convince young people of the contemporary value and relevance of their languages within the existing structures of their everyday lives. Ideologies that run counter to this perspective—that Aboriginal languages are not relevant, and that directing resources towards their protection is wasteful and should be discouraged—emerge in many of the comments made by non-Aboriginal Canadians on the CBC website and will be discussed in the following section.

## Referentialist vs. Performative Functions of Language

The motivations expressed by the commentators and producers quoted above emphasize the performative functions of these languages in this context. Ahlers (2006) analyzes the public use of Native American languages by non-fluent speakers, arguing that in such cases, the non-fluency of both speaker and audience suggests that the role language serves in performing identity and strengthening community greatly outweighs its referential or communicative functions. Here, I use the term *referentialist* to refer to an ideology that considers the main function of language to be in the communication of direct content, and erases any consideration of the meta-communicative aspects that are involved in the choice of a given code for expressing this content. In contrast to the situation that Ahlers describes, the speakers providing Olympic commentary in this case were themselves fluent speakers, but their comments demonstrate that their primary target audience did not necessarily consist exclusively, or even primarily, of competent speakers. The

goals that they express highlight the metacommunicative, political function of using Aboriginal languages for this broadcast, rather than considering the communication of content. Although the commentators recognized that, due to devaluation, many young Aboriginal people do not speak their languages, none of these discussions of concerns and expectations suggested that the inability of their target audience to understand the content of the broadcasts could potentially pose a problem. The absence of this particular concern can be attributed at least partially to the highly visual nature of sporting events, and the strong possibility of following what is happening simply by observation, but points also to these participants' understandings of what is and is not relevant about this decision.

Critical comments left on the CBC News web article, which reported on the multilingual broadcast as a whole (on all affiliate stations, not just APTN), reflect a very different understanding of the event's meaning, based on a referentialist ideology of multilingualism. Many of these commenters call attention to the target audience of the broadcasts (for example members of Aboriginal or minority language communities) in such a way as to make it clear that they do not identify themselves as part of this audience. Some commenters pointed towards their own linguistic abilities and the irrelevance of these languages to them personally in order to do this, and to express their scorn for the project. For example:

> *PHRed d'Red*: That's 22 languages more than I can handle.
>
> *Kranky Dude*: I can only speak and read English. Does that mean I'll catch 1/22 of the coverage?[6]

One of the common focal points in these comments was the expense associated with the project, and the perception that it fit within the general "waste of money" that was going into the Vancouver Olympics. Commenters who derided the decision as wasteful as well as those who argued against these negative positions both ignored and erased the performative aspect of language use and focused entirely on a "referentialist" function of languages—from their perspective, the primary motivation behind using different languages is to ensure that a particular audience is able to understand the ideas being communicated. The small size of any potential audience speaking these languages, whether because of the small total population of speakers or because of their presumed lack of interest in the sports being broadcast, was cited as one of the reasons for its irrelevance.

> *Get 'ir done*: curling cantonese? so the 6 chinese people watching will know what's going on?

Specific mentions of Aboriginal languages focused on the commenters' perceptions of their overall obscurity, rather than their relative irrelevance with respect to these sports. For example:

> *powderhound2:* Good old Canada—choosing to represent the most politically correct language choices instead of the most common. Choosing Michif over German eh—I have a Canadian History degree and had never even heard of Michif until I googled it just now. And I quote: "The number of speakers [in the world] is estimated at fewer than 1,000." Who ever said that special interest groups don't run this country...?

These arguments about why this project is not worth the money put towards it reflect a linguistic ideology that stands in direct opposition to the one expressed by the Aboriginal commentators and APTN personnel. These commenters situate languages as relevant exclusively for their referentialist function, and the purpose of multilingual service provision or translation should be to ensure the most widespread comprehensibility possible. Value is measured purely in economic terms, and the worthiness of an expense is largely dependent on the size of the population that could be served by it. The references to commenters' own linguistic abilities also fit in to this ideology. These commenters not only operate from the assumption that the multilingual broadcast is intended as a communicative service directed at individual consumers, they also situate themselves as "idealized" versions of these consumers. By noting their own inability to understand these languages, or even their personal ignorance of the languages' existence, commenters emphasize their skepticism about the presence of an audience for these broadcasts and further trivialize the broadcast decision.

Given the ideologies of language promotion/revitalization that the Aboriginal language broadcasters express, their actions stand as a language-level version of what, on an individual level, Duranti (2006:455) calls "ego-affirming agency." As he notes, any time an individual speaks, "[t]he very act of speaking in front of others who can perceive such an act establishes the speaker as a being whose existence must be reckoned with." In this broadcast, the performative uses of these languages serve a similar existential function with respect to the languages as a whole, situating these efforts within the language revitalization efforts that fit within the broader framework of a "politics of recognition" (Eisenlohr 2004:22). The pushback from

the commenters, expressed in terms of the uselessness of this broadcast for reaching an audience that would not otherwise understand the events, completely ignores this political motivation. The ideological gap between these participants in the debate therefore extends beyond the surface question of whether or not minority languages require promotion or protection, to questions about the overall purpose of languages and translation.

## Multilingualism and Canadian National Identity

As the above quote by "powderhound2" illustrates, many of the non-Aboriginal commenters saw this decision/ event as reflective of Canadian identity and priorities. This transition away from themes of Aboriginal identity and language revitalization toward images of Canada and multiculturalism begins with the narrative structures chosen by the journalists. Pujolar (2007) identifies two types of stances taken by journalists in their writing—one for reporters informing the public on events and another for columnists offering opinion and analysis. In this case, these journalists, acting as reporters, "are supposed to take a stance...that formally evacuates issues of personal judgment and perspective" (Pujolar 2007:128). Within this professional stance, however, the journalist simultaneously makes ideological points about nationalism and identity through the construction of a target audience.

The journalistic representations analyzed here explicitly situate the newsworthiness of this broadcast in relation to the preparations for the upcoming Games and the implications of Canada's status as the host nation. The issue is not one of using Aboriginal languages on the airwaves in general, since such material is a staple of APTN programming and indeed, part of its mandate, nor is it merely of interest because of the application to sports (CBC has recently begun to broadcast NHL Games in Inuktitut, for example, with practically no mention outside of the CBC Sports page itself). The Olympics are a special case, and a great deal more time and money was invested into this broadcast than into these other forms of language-related programming. As mentioned above, the intense emphasis on Canadian national identity that surrounded these Olympic Games radically changes the implications of this particular broadcast decision, over and above the general complications of Aboriginal language broadcasting. The bulk of the media narrative around these Olympics considered the place of Canada in the world, what constitutes Canadian national identity, and whether or not it was best represented by the decisions made during the Games. In addition to a vehicle for the promotion of Aboriginal languages, this broadcast can be seen as a small part within this overall story, which included special emphasis on multiculturalism and the inclusion of Aboriginal people. In addition to the participation of the Four Host First Nations in the preparation for the Games, Aboriginal symbols played a significant role in marking Canadian identity, from the Inuit Inukshuk used as the Games' logo, to the three mascots derived from coastal Aboriginal peoples' mythologies, to the involvement of Aboriginal performers in the Opening Ceremonies. In all of these cases, Aboriginality serves mainly to represent Canada to the rest of the world, rather than to highlight differentiated Aboriginal identities.

Riggins (1992:4) points out that ethnic media plays a "dual role"; in addition to the promotion of alternatives, "ethnic minority media may also unintentionally encourage the assimilation of their audiences to mainstream values"(4). While the attention that the Olympic Games attracts contributes to its value as a medium for this kind of broadcast decision, the weight of symbolism that inevitably surrounds them, especially within the host country, also heightens the possibility for these unintentionally mainstream encouragements. The closing quotation chosen by the *Montreal Gazette* (Bonnell and Lovie 2010) exemplifies this complication. Although the speaker, Jatinder Bassi, is a Punjabi commentator who was hired for OMNI's broadcasts, the statement was selected to close the article discussing the multilingual broadcasts as a whole, including both immigrant and Aboriginal perspectives. Bassi says, "at the end of the day it doesn't matter what colour, race or religion you are—if Team Canada is playing, you are Canadian." By closing with these lines, this article moves the focus away from Aboriginal (or other minority) identities and assumes an overarching umbrella "Canadian" identity. Despite the commentators' focus on the value of Aboriginal languages as a link to Aboriginal identity, then, the intensity with which Canadian identity is constructed through these Olympic discourses threatens to override (or at least restructure) this motivation.

Commenters to the CBC article also situated their reactions in relation to what the broadcast means for Canadian identity, using phrases like "That's Canada for you" (Sebastian Massey) and "Good old Canada" (powderhound2). The journalists' perspectives primarily highlight the promotion of minority languages as a positive thing, a sign of inclusiveness and multiculturalism. Some of the commenters directly challenged this position, however, arguing that speakers of minority languages constitute "special interest groups" (powderhound2) and that these concerns do not serve the interests of the majority of Canadians. Another related aspect of many

of these comments is the invocation of a sense of "threat" to English, and by extension, to whiteness. In addition to the above-quoted rhetorical question about whether a monolingual English speaker would only understand 1/22 of the broadcast, three different commenters asked sarcastically whether English would be included among the languages of the broadcast. Also of note to many of the commenters, including powderhound2 quoted above, was the point raised within the story that some "notable" languages, specifically German and Spanish, had been omitted. According to the story, the decision of which languages to include were made by each of the three multilingual affiliate networks, who "crafted their plans based on the communities they served and the terms of their broadcast licenses" (Canadian Press 2009). The number of speakers of these languages living in Canada, especially in contrast to some of the Aboriginal languages that were chosen, was emphasized several times, both by commenters who supported the decision in general but lamented these omissions, and by commenters who saw it as an opportunity to dismiss the relevance of the entire process. These latter commenters emphasized the economic arguments mentioned above while also suggesting that the decision reflected "pandering to minority groups" ("Sarcastic DJ") and "politically correct choices." A commenter named "SebastienMassey" made the most direct claim of a threat to whiteness when he stated unequivocally that:

> German and Spanish were 'omitted' [sic] because they're 'white' or 'western' languages. There's no other explanation possible. This is Canada for you.

Other commenters later called his inflammatory reasoning into question, primarily on the grounds that several of the languages that were included (Polish and Ukrainian, for example) would obviously have to be considered "white" European languages. In these statements, language is connected to racialized power relationships, and the resonance of the ideological claims about these minority languages and their political importance is directly connected to ideologies of race and culture (Hill 2008). These speakers have different beliefs about the value and utility of a language, as well as its political implications, based on whether it is spoken primarily by white or by non-white people.

These commenters, who situate themselves as speaking on behalf of the general Canadian public (in other words, those who are not members of "special interest groups"), criticize both the specific political position that they perceive this decision to be advocating (multilingualism and multiculturalism) and the general idea that language is a political issue. These speakers are critical of the image of national identity that is being presented as explicitly artificial (for example based on a desire to be "politically correct" rather than to "accurately" reflect the linguistic interests of the Canadian population). Further, their comments push back against attempts to incorporate these non-official languages (several of which are spoken by non-white populations) into the national discourse and use their commentary to further marginalize these languages and their speakers.

## Whose Voices? The Selection of Languages and Language Varieties

The role of language ideology in the production of these broadcasts is not limited to why they took place, but also informs how they were produced. The narrative of how the decision was implemented was told primarily by two voices, APTN CEO Jean LaRose and sports commentator Jim Van Horne, who was hired to train the Aboriginal-language commentators, most of whom had no experience this type of live play-by-play commentary. These two voices, and the nature of the quotes from commentators, tell the story in such a way as to emphasize a "pan-Aboriginal" identity, rather than noting the unique value of individual Indigenous languages/varieties to the communities that speak them. Since particular ethnolinguistic identities are completely absent from this discussion, these participants argue for language revitalization with reference to what Hill (2002) calls "universal valuation"—that is, languages and linguistic diversity in general provide an abstract benefit to humanity as a whole, rather than particular benefits to individuals or groups. Further, representations of the process of preparing the broadcast elide specific ways in which politics and power relationships inevitably influenced the final product, especially with regard to the selection of Aboriginal language commentators.

While the total number of commentators or their communities of origin were not mentioned in any of the articles, the selection of a few individual speakers of any of these languages almost inevitably means that certain regional variants will be represented over others, especially for the most widely-spoken languages (for example Cree and Inuktitut). In addition, these eight languages were chosen out of the approximately 50-60 existing Canadian Aboriginal languages. One factor in this choice would certainly be the number of speakers, since all of the languages chosen for the broadcast are among those estimated to have several thousand fluent speakers. Other languages, however, fall within this range and were not part of the broadcast, including several Athapaskan

languages (for example South Slave, Dogrib and Carrier) and the Siouan languages of Dakota and Nakoda. No languages of the Siouan family were represented at all, while the only Athapaskan language was Dene Suliné. In longer stories and interviews with APTN personnel (see APTN 2010a, 2010b, LaRose 2010), the planners made reference to the difficulties they faced in finding individuals with the unique combination of skills necessary for these positions (as mentioned above, commentators were required to speak their language fluently, to have had some broadcast experience, and, ideally, to have some knowledge of or experience with sports). The focus placed on the way that these requirements limited the pool of qualified applicants obscures some of the linguistic and political implications of these hiring decisions. Ignoring these implications creates an oversimplified image of the way the selection of a particular variety influences the path of language revitalization (England 2003). Browne (1998) provides an overview of the complex set of concerns regarding the use of "dialects" in Indigenous language media. He notes that while mutual intelligibility often exists across these dialect differences, the variations may also be a matter of "intense pride." He further argues, however, that the use of various dialects and varieties also involves consideration of how best to ensure that the Indigenous population can unite "as a force to be reckoned with on a national level" (57). The producers' representations of the process emphasize a generalized Aboriginal identity that can be promoted through the use of these eight languages, without introducing considerations about those specific Aboriginal languages or about other varieties that were not included in the broadcast.

This political orientation is further demonstrated by some themes that featured prominently in comments offered by LaRose and Van Horne. The process of training the commentators once they were found, for example, constituted one such theme. The exact type of previous experience that each of the candidates had appears to have varied widely, but because so few broadcasts of this type had ever occurred, very few had specific experience providing play-by-play sports commentary in an Aboriginal language. Van Horne took primary responsibility for the training process, which took place over approximately one year leading up to the Games. In discussing this aspect of the process, Van Horne emphasizes the significance of "Indigenizing" the descriptions of the sporting events themselves. Despite not speaking the languages himself, and not belonging to an Aboriginal community, he noted that listening to some early practice attempts gave him the impression that commentators were trying to follow English-language speech patterns in their commentary.

He says that he emphasized to commentators that they should approach the broadcast in ways that would be meaningful within their cultures, and to ignore the need to "have the white man accept you," because "you're talking to your brothers and sisters, aboriginals" (Watson 2010). Here, he specifically defines the community in question as "Aboriginal" in opposition to "white," creating the image of one large "family," rather than smaller, more loosely connected groups. His statement also highlights an ideological understanding of language that is not based on translation equivalence, but that connects language patterns to different ways of thinking about and experiencing the world—what Eisenlohr (2004:22) calls the "popular Whorfianism" that often characterizes discussion of Indigenous languages. Though Van Horne does not specify what linguistic factors gave him the impression that these lessons were necessary, his emphasis on them (as he says, they "got into this pretty heavily," [Watson 2010]) suggests that he believes that a kind of authentically Aboriginal way of telling the story is perceptible even to someone who doesn't speak the language(s) in question.

## Corpus Planning and Community Involvement

The relationship between these languages and Aboriginal identity and the symbolic significance of the languages themselves are reinforced by the careful attention paid to how they were used to describe these sporting events. Even fluent speakers could not casually or easily begin to use their languages to simply describe what they were seeing without careful thought and consultation, and several of the planners expressed concern with producing an *Aboriginal* broadcast at a deep, rather than merely a surface level. Another of the common challenges to using media for Indigenous language promotion comes from the new contexts and concepts to which these languages are being applied, resulting in the need for new terminology. In language revitalization efforts, a debate often emerges about the extent to which "purism" is significant to a particular language and how new words for new inventions or practices come to be included in the language (Dorian 1994). Browne (1998) points towards the potential for using broadcast media descriptions of current events to show that Aboriginal languages are not limited to "songs, folk tales, and myths" (54). He goes on to note, however, that, "this practice poses a dilemma. If Indigenous electronic media hope to restore or preserve the purity of their languages, aren't they defeated before they begin, at least where the worlds of technology, medicine, perhaps sports, and possibly societal problems, are concerned?" (54).

The Aboriginal language commentators placed substantial focus on the process of establishing specialized sports terminology that did not previously exist in the lexicons of their languages. In addition to general qualities of the genre that had to be "Indigenized," these commentators noted the challenge of finding ways to talk about the specific sports that were being covered. According to Browne (1998:54), at least in the early days of Indigenous language media, most of these situations were resolved simply by borrowing the term from the dominant language, and perhaps by adding an Aboriginal ending to the term. These commentators, by contrast, spent time consulting with elders and fluent speakers of their languages in order to develop glossaries of terms for the sports they would be covering. The *Toronto Star*, for example, noted that in Mohawk, there is no word for "seconds." Tiorahkwathe Gilbert, one of the Mohawk commentators, says that what they came up with in order to describe the various distinctions was "in the time it takes you to blink four times, or seven times or nine times" (Watson 2010). The Saskatoon *Star-Phoenix* pointed out that in Dene Suliné, no word for cross-country skiing exists, even though the sport would be called in that language. The term that Allan Adam planned to use was "dechen ai k'e sets'anede," or "playing on wooden snow shoes" (Warick 2010). The process used here demonstrates a complex interplay between openness to change (manifested in the very willingness to use the language for new purposes and in broadcast forms) and linguistic conservatism. This type of process for the creation of new words is one of several options typically employed by people involved in language revitalization activities (see Kimura and Counceller 2009). While it is not clear whether or not this practice was the one chosen across all of the languages used in the broadcast and by all of the commentators, these strategies were the ones that were seen by both journalists and commentators as worthy of explanation in their stories and interviews. Though English-language speakers would likely feel perfectly comfortable inventing new words without discussion or consultation, the extent to which these commentators turned to community elders as arbiters of these decisions reflects their ideological beliefs about where authoritative knowledge about the language can be found. This process of consultation also reflects an understanding of language as belonging not to the individual speaker, but to the community; control over its use in such a public setting is therefore subject to discussion among the group and among trusted representatives of the group.

## Conclusion

The decision to present the Vancouver 2010 Olympics in 22 languages, including eight Aboriginal Canadian languages, was far from a simple one. Indeed, among the various voices heard in the public discussion of this issue, several of the broad ideological debates about language revitalization, language and identity, and language and media are evident. The Aboriginal commentators and APTN producers who worked hard to prepare for the broadcasts intended to use the opportunity of such a large event to raise the symbolic capital associated with their languages. Both the broadcast itself and the commentary about it issued by APTN personnel and Aboriginal-language commentators fit within a larger discourse about Aboriginal language revitalization in Canada. As the discussion and commentary outlined in this paper reveals, the performative and political understanding of language use takes precedence in their discourse, while in journalists' and commentators' reactions to the decision, referentialist functions of language dominate. For these latter participants in the discussion, the fact that few people would be able to understand the Aboriginal languages in question undermined the necessity of the effort; for the APTN organizers, the relatively small, and falling, number of speakers was in fact one of the main motivations for pursuing the project. In addition, in contrast to the producers' and commentators' emphasis on Aboriginal identity and language promotion, many of the articles reframe the story in terms of Canadian multiculturalism and the nationalism being expressed during the Olympic Games. While discourses and ideologies of language revitalization represent one framework through which this story must be seen, these metacommentaries situate it simultaneously within the discourse of Canadian nationalism. Because of the extent to which nationalistic discourses circulate surrounding this particular sporting event, the space that is available for articulating genuine alternative or minority identities becomes extremely limited. The few available reader responses illustrate even larger ideological gaps with respect to conceptualizations of minority languages.

The extent to which the organizers were successful at meeting their goals is difficult to determine, since statistics on the number of people who watched the multilingual broadcasts have not been publicized by any of the media organizations. The media representations of their attempts, however, illustrate the challenges that these language activists continue to face, as journalists tell the story through the filter of their own language ideologies While the limited sample of online commenters cannot be taken to represent the opinion of the non-Aboriginal

Canadian public as a whole, the available comments do indicate some of the ideological positions that are circulating within this population. These speakers assess the value of languages in numerical and utilitarian terms, operating from the assumption that the purpose of a multilingual broadcast is to communicate with a particular audience. Even the comments that support the decision tended to justify it in these ideological terms, as a service to minority communities. These perspectives represent a further ideological layer that language revitalization activists battle against.

Broadcast media has become an important tool for revitalizing and promoting Canadian Aboriginal languages, though many scholars have observed potential drawbacks (see Browne 1996; Cormack and Hourigan 2007; Eisenlohr 2004). While the broadcast of the 2010 Olympic Games in several Aboriginal languages took this strategy to unprecedented lengths, the greater opportunity for visibility comes along with a concomitant increase in risk, as the ideologies of revitalization and Indigenous community building also had to compete with ideologies of national multiculturalism and Canadian identity, as well as the continued presence of beliefs that value multilingualism only for the purposes of widespread communication. Overall, the attempt to use this large stage to provide a louder voice for Indigenous languages must also consider the cacophony of ideological voices already present during these Olympic Games.

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APPENDIX 1:

## List of Languages Used in APTN's Broadcast and Schedule of Events

**Languages:** Inuktitut, Cree, Dene, Mi'kmaq, Ojibway, Oji-Cree, Cree-Mechif and Mohawk.

### Broadcast calendar:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Fri, Feb 12 | Opening Ceremonies | North – Inuktitut<br>West – Cree<br>East – Mohawk |
| Sat, Feb 13 | 4:30 pm – Moguls (Ladies) | Multiple Languages (not specified) |
| | 5:30 pm – Women's Hockey (Canada vs. Slovakia) | Oji-Cree |
| Sun, Feb 14 | 7 pm – Figure Skating – Pairs Short Program | Ojibway |
| Mon, Feb 15 | 2 pm – Women's Hockey (Canada vs. Switzerland) | Oji-Cree |
| Tue, Feb 16 | 5 pm – Men's Hockey (USA vs. Switzerland) | Cree |
| Wed, Feb 17 | 4 pm – Alpine Skiing (Women's Downhill) Cross-Country Skiing | Cree and Dene |
| Thur, Feb 18 | 5 pm – Men's Hockey (Canada vs. Switzerland) | Cree |
| Fri, Feb 19 | 5 pm – Cross-Country Skiing | Dene |
| | 6 pm – Alpine Skiing (Men's Super G) | Mohawk |
| Sat, Feb 20 | 5 pm – Aerials (Ladies) | Cree |
| | 6 pm – Ski Jumping | Mechif |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Sun, Feb 21 | 5 pm – Alpine Skiing (Men's Super Combined) | Cree |
| | 6:30 pm – Long Track Speed Skating (Ladies' 1500m) | Cree |
| Mon, Feb 22 | 5 pm – Women's Hockey (Semifinal) | Mi'kmaq |
| Tue, Feb 23 | 5 pm – Biathlon (Women's Relay) | Dene |
| | 6:30 pm – Men's Giant Slalom | Cree |
| Wed, Feb 24 | 4:30 pm– Men's Hockey (Quarter-Finals) | Cree |
| Thur, Feb 25 | 3:30 pm – Women's Hockey (Gold Medal Game) | North/West – Cree<br>East – Mi'kmaq |
| Fri, Feb 26 | 6 pm – Men's Hockey (Semifinal) | North – Inuktitut<br>West/East – Cree |
| Sat, Feb 27 | 3 pm – Curling (Men's Gold Medal Game) | North/East – Cree<br>West – Ojibway |
| Sun, Feb 28 | 12 pm – Men's Hockey (Gold Medal Game) | North – Inuktitut<br>West – Cree<br>East – Mi'kmaq |
| | 5 pm – Closing Ceremonies | North – Inuktitut<br>West – Cree<br>East – Mi'kmaq |

APPENDIX 2:
**Complete List of Articles and Media Sources**
**Consulted in Analysis**

1.  Aboriginal People's Television Network
    2010a  Aboriginal Commentators. http://www.aptn.ca/
           pages/vancouver2010/aboriginal-commentators.php,
           accessed April 22, 2010.
    2010b  Aboriginal Commentators Feature. http://www
           .aptn.ca/pages/vancouver2010/feature-aboriginal-
           commentators.php, accessed April 22, 2010.
    2010c  APTN Hosts and Commentators. http://www.aptn.ca/
           pages/vancouver2010/aptn-hosts.php, accessed April
           22, 2010.
2.  Barnes-Cornell, Valerie G.
    n.d.   Charles and Opikokew...To Provide Cree Language
           Piponimetawaniwan (Winter Olympics) Coverage
           for APTN. The LaRonge Northerner. http://www
           .townoflaronge.ca/TheNortherner/Story.php?id=675
           accessed April 21, 2010.
3.  Bonnell, Keith, and Florence Lovie
    2010   Games Being Broadcast in Multiple Languages for
           Polyglot Canadian Audiences. Montreal Gazette
           February 11:1. http://www.montrealgazette.com/
           sports/2010wintergames/sports/2010wintergames/
           Games+being+broadcast+multiple+languages+
           polyglot+Canadian+audiences/2552342/story.html,
           accessed April 22, 2010.
4.  Broadcaster magazine
    n.d.   APTN News to broadcast in New Format During
           Olympic Games. http://www.broadcastermagazine
           .com/issues/story.aspx?aid=1000357220, accessed
           April 21, 2010.
5.  Canadian Press
    2009   Vancouver Olympics Coverage to Come in 22 Lan-
           guages. CBC News. November 16. http://www.cbc
           .ca/arts/media/story/2009/11/16/olympics-languages-
           broadcast.html, accessed April 22, 2010.
6.  Charles, Abel
    2010   Interview by Marco Werman, Public Radio Inter-
           national's "The World": Canadian Olympic Coverage
           Includes Aboriginal Languages. February 12. http://
           www.theworld.org/2010/02/12/canadian-olympic-
           coverage-includes-aboriginal-languages/, accessed
           April 22, 2010.
7.  Houston, William
    2009   Canada's First Triumph at the Vancouver Olym-
           pics. Truth and Rumours. December 9. http://www
           .truthandrumours.net/2009/12/08/canadas-first-
           triumph-at-the-vancouver-olympics/, accessed April
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8.  Karrys, George
    2010   Calling Curling in Cree, Cantonese. Toronto Sun.
           February 18, 2010. http://www.torontosun.com/
           sports/othersports/2010/02/18/12925026-sun.html,
           accessed April 21, 2010.
9.  LaRose, Jean
    2010   Interview by Rudy Blair, CTV: Winter Games broad-
           casted in Eight Aboriginal Languages. February 19.
           http://www.ctvolympics.ca/podcast/newsid=46533
           .html, accessed April 22, 2010.
10. Oswald, Brad
    2010   Speaking in Tongues: Olympic Coverage in 10 Lan-
           guages Broadcast from APTN's Portage Avenue Stu-
           dio. Winnipeg Free Press. February 13. http://www
           .winnipegfreepress.com/opinion/columnists/speaking
           -in-tongues-olympic-coverage-in-10-languages-broad
           cast-from-aptns-portage-avenue-studio-84292177
           .html, accessed April 22, 2010.
11. Warick, Jason
    2010   Games Acquire Native Accent. Saskatoon Star-
           Phoneix. February 12. http://www.thestarphoenix
           .com/life/Games+acquire+native+accent/2554285/
           story.html, accessed April 22, 2010.
12. Watson, Paul
    2010   Native Voices Bring Olympics Home. Toronto Star.
           February 20. http://olympics.thestar.com/2010/
           article/768699--native-voices-bring-olympics-home,
           accessed April 22, 2010.

# Notes

1   The eight Aboriginal languages used in the broadcast were
    Cree, Inuktitut, Mohawk, Dene Suliné, Michif, Oji-Cree,
    Ojibwe, and Mi'kmaq (see Appendix 1 for APTN's broad-
    cast schedule listing the specific events that were covered,
    and the languages in which they were broadcast). The
    additional multilingual broadcasts were hosted on ATN, a
    broadcaster focusing on Canada's South Asian community,
    and on the multicultural broadcast network OMNI. ATN
    made use of seven specialty channels in order to present
    coverage in Bangla, Gujurati, Punjabi, Hindi, Tamil and
    Urdu, while OMNI presented various events on its British
    Columbia, Alberta and Ontario stations in Mandarin, Can-
    tonese, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Punjabi and Ukranian.
2   See Appendix 1 for the full schedule of APTN's broadcast,
    including languages of presentation.
3   See Appendix 2 for the full list of media sources.
4   In this paper, I will use the term "journalists" to refer spe-
    cifically to those reporters who wrote about the multilin-
    gual or Aboriginal language broadcast for various news
    sources aside from APTN, despite the fact that many of the
    APTN personnel and Aboriginal-language commentators
    would also be considered journalists by profession. In order
    to make the distinction between the differing roles that
    these parties play in this discourse, however, I will refer to
    these latter participants as "commentators" and "APTN
    personnel."
5   Of the articles that were published online, only two offered
    the option to leave comments. One of these stories (on the
    sports media weblog "Truth and Rumours") attracted
    responses almost exclusively from commenters who iden-
    tified themselves as having been involved in the broadcast
    itself, and as such repeated the themes expressed by com-
    mentators and APTN personnel in interviews and so on.
    The other story was published on the CBC News website
    and received 77 comments from readers.
6   Web comments have been transcribed exactly as posted,
    including spelling, capitalization and punctuation. Com-
    ments are attributed based on the chosen handle associated
    with the comment itself.

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