

A Linguist's Code of Conduct: Guidelines for Engaging in Linguistic Work with Indigenous Peoples

Anna Belew and Amanda Holmes
Endangered Languages Project



Gaaḵ (Raven), by Chantelle Trainor-Matties

Executive Summary

This “code of conduct” is a collection of thoughts, reflective questions, and suggestions for linguists who are engaging in (or preparing to engage in) linguistic work with Indigenous peoples. It has been prepared by two North American scholars, Anna Belew and Amanda Holmes (non-Indigenous and Kanienkehá:ka, respectively), for a primary audience of non-Indigenous linguists in the Global North, but it is meant to be useful for people working anywhere in the world.

The goal of this resource is to offer some jumping-off points for conversations and reflections about values and practices in linguistic work with Indigenous peoples; to increase the likelihood that Indigenous communities will have positive and mutually beneficial experiences when working with linguists; and to help non-Indigenous linguists reflect on their relationships and responsibilities to those relationships, as well as their roles and ideologies, in order to conduct more ethical, decolonizing, and equitable work in linguistics.

This document is structured around an ethical framework, which takes shape here as a set of organizing values for linguists working with Indigenous communities. First and foremost among these is relationality: the importance of prioritizing the living, ongoing relationships between all parties involved in language work, rather than specific outcomes, research products, or normative “best practices” in linguistics. For many Indigenous Peoples, relationship is the first and last thing – and everything in between – that you do.

Interwoven with relationality are the ethical principles of humility, flexibility, sensitivity, respect, transparency, self-awareness, self-reflexivity, reciprocity, and responsibility. We encourage linguists to engage in critical reflection on their disciplinary culture and training, their beliefs about language and language work, and which ways of knowing and thinking they consider more valid, legitimate, or worthy – and where those ideas have come from. It is important for linguists to be aware of the complicated histories of encounters between Western academic researchers and Indigenous peoples. We encourage linguists to develop a critical, nuanced understanding of these historical and ongoing traumas and tensions; engaging with these realities should lead not to defensiveness, but to positive transformations of the practices and norms of linguistic work.

We also encourage linguists to think carefully and critically, and communicate openly, about their roles and responsibilities in language work. All parties involved in language work have their own sets of responsibilities and obligations (to the community, to funders, to their discipline, to thesis supervisors, to governing bodies, etc.), and these should be discussed early, clearly, honestly, and often, in a continual process. Engaging in meaningful reciprocity requires co-creation of research agendas, practices, and outcomes, which in turn requires a deep understanding of community needs, aspirations, and protocols. Similarly, everyone involved in language work brings a unique set of knowledge, experiences, and skills; by making clear what you are able, and not able, to do in language work, as well as what you are obligated to do within your own role as a linguist, you may avoid serious and relationship-damaging miscommunications.

Finally, we offer some general “code of conduct” suggestions which may be useful to linguists. These suggestions are meant to help linguists reflect on how they can best go about the day-to-day work of linguistic collaboration with Indigenous communities, with relationality at the center of their practices.

This document is not intended to be the final word on how to do linguistic work with Indigenous communities. Instead, this is meant to be a resource to facilitate ongoing conversations between linguists, the community(ies) they work with, and any other parties involved in linguistic work. We hope it will be useful to linguists in their efforts to build lasting positive relationships with Indigenous communities.

Foreword

This is a “code of conduct” (really, a series of suggestions, thoughts, and reflective questions) drafted by Anna Belew and Amanda Holmes, at the request of the [First Peoples’ Cultural Council](#), to provide guidance and shared/suggested practices for linguists who are contacted to work with First Nations communities in the area called British Columbia, Canada. While this document was written with a North American context in mind, by two North American scholars (non-Indigenous and Kanien’kehá:ka, respectively), it is also informed by Belew’s work in Cameroon, and aims to be useful for linguists working anywhere in the world.

This is not the final word on how to be a linguist. This document is simply intended to facilitate conversations, thoughts, and reflections. We intend this to be a resource that changes and grows over time, and reflects the ever-transforming contexts in which people engage in language work.

Before we begin, we would like to say a word about who we are writing to here: the (imagined) audience for this Code of Conduct. We have largely written this document thinking of a particular type of reader: a non-Indigenous (settler) academic researcher/scholar, possibly someone earlier in their research career, who is (or will be) operating within Western academic norms, assumptions, and expectations for research of academic institutions, especially those situated in the Global North. This document is intended for an audience situated within the norms of settler colonial discourse and education; thus, we recognize that our audience may have limited understanding or experience of Indigenous cultural practices, community ethical protocols, practices, concerns, aspirations, sovereignty, or nationhood.

Of course, this description may not fully apply to you. For example, perhaps you are a non-Indigenous researcher from somewhere other than the colonial Global North. Perhaps you are working with a community who can’t, or prefer not to, apply the term “Indigenous” to themselves¹. Perhaps you come from an academic or disciplinary background very different from Western linguistics. There could be any number of other differences between you and our imagined reader – that doesn’t mean this document isn’t meant to be useful to you. It simply means that there are likely to be some inapplicable assumptions embedded in our words and recommendations. Wherever you are coming from, and whoever you are, we encourage you to engage critically with this document; think about how it applies (or doesn’t) to your positionality, your work, and your circumstances, and see if the underlying principles could be adapted to your context.

Regardless, the reader we are imagining has decided to undertake language work in an Indigenous community they are not part of. This fact alone should create pause for anyone who is finding themselves moving into Indigenous spaces for their own academic research agenda – it raises deep ethical concerns and considerations that necessarily give rise to the need for critical self-reflection and examination before entering into work with Indigenous communities. We will expand on some of the self-reflective questions you can be asking yourself in this document, as well as offering suggestions for how you might act on these reflections.

We encourage this intended audience to take seriously and spend time considering – *prior to engaging with* Indigenous communities – the ways in which the particularities of your own background (race, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, ability, upbringing, socioeconomic background, etc.) and multilayered cultural contexts might impact your ways of relating with and to the specificities of different, diverse sociocultural contexts, cultural protocols, ethics, assumptions, and expectations. In short: examine and reflect carefully, deeply, and honestly upon yourself, your motives, your goals, your backgrounds, and your beliefs before you begin this work.

Fundamentally, we write this in a spirit of disciplinary improvement, critical self-reflection, and solidarity with Indigenous peoples who choose to engage with linguists and other researchers. We hope that this document will be a small part of the long, unfinished process of decolonization; that it will provide useful and actionable thoughts and ideas for linguists working with Indigenous Peoples; and that it will contribute to the transformation of the discipline of linguistics away from its extractive, colonial roots, towards a more just, ethical, and collaborative future.

¹ See [Roche 2019](#) for a brief discussion of “Indigenous” as a contested/contentious term in some parts of the world.

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“No uniform or universal Indigenous perspective on Indigenous knowledge exists - many do. Its unifying concept lies in its diversity. Each group holds a diversity that is not like another, although as Tewa scholar Gregory Cajete (1995) has offered, there are unifying strands among Indigenous nations that lie beyond the colonizing features of each group. These strands are related again to ecology, to place, and to the relationships embedded with that place.”

(Battiste, 2008, p. 501)

Underlying values:

Relationality
Humility
Flexibility
Sensitivity
Respect
Transparency
Self-awareness
Self-reflexivity
Reciprocity
Responsibility
And again: Relationality

A bit of background reading:

Archibald, Jo-ann. 2008. *Indigenous storywork: Educating the heart, mind, body, and spirit*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

Kirkness, Verna J., & Ray Barnhardt. 1991. First Nations and higher education: The four R's—Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, Responsibility. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 30(3). 1–15.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 2021. 3rd ed. *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*. London: Zed.

² anna@endangeredlanguages.com

³ heyholmes@endangeredlanguages.com

1. A place to begin: Relationship.

As you engage in language work, recognize that relationship is a core way of knowing and being for most Indigenous Peoples, so if you wish to work with Indigenous communities in a good way, remember, remember, *remember* that **relationship is the first thing and last thing – and everything in between – that you do.**

Linguists and other researchers who work with Indigenous communities often approach the work with a singular focus on the product (outcome) and the work (actions) needed to achieve that product. However, for most Indigenous communities, it is the living, ongoing relationship that is most important. A relationship allows for the natural ongoing interplay of needs, motivations, and unique circumstances. It contextualizes the outcomes of the work within the bigger picture of the community, and the connection of linguistic work and language revitalization to all other aspects of life. A relationship requires regular, clear communication, respect and reciprocity, and shared understandings.

Depending on the context you are working in, you will likely need to establish and maintain good relationships with many different people and groups (formal or informal) to carry out your linguistic work. This can include local scholars, government officials, community organizations, religious groups, people at your home university, and more. These are important relationships in their own right. However, the core focus of this document is your relationship with the Indigenous communities and individuals you are working with – the people who are sharing their language, knowledge, culture, and time with you in your linguistic work. The following sections offer some thoughts and suggestions for linguists to build and maintain good relations with Indigenous communities.

Core way of being: Practice good relationship in everything you do.

2. Be humble. Practice humility.

Begin with relationship. Especially if you are from outside the language community you are working in, acknowledge that you are not an expert on the language or culture you are studying. The languages and people/People you are working with have their own complex societies, sociocultural contexts, historical contexts and circumstances, worldviews, philosophies, principles, protocols, knowledge systems, ways of knowing and being, and meanings – and you are likely unaware of many of these factors. Conduct your work in a spirit of humility and desire to learn. Be prepared to listen far more than you explain. This means learning how to listen with humility.

- a. **Acknowledge that when people from marginalized communities, including Indigenous communities, spend time in dominant communities, the burden of adapting to different cultural norms and practices generally falls on them.** As an outside researcher spending time in an Indigenous community, you should be prepared to reflect on this dynamic and put forth the same effort. (Don't expect Indigenous communities to adapt to your way of doing things.)
- b. **Acknowledge and honor the expertise in the community.** (Don't self-promote, brag, or act like/think that your expertise – or “scientific” expertise in general – is more valid than community expertise.)
- c. **Acknowledge and respect different understandings of language.** The people you are working with have their own beliefs and understandings of language - *especially their own language* - and these understandings should inform your work. (Don't narrowly focus on your own ideologies and understandings of language.)

- d. **Listen and learn from the community experts**, and challenge yourself to build new understandings and perspectives. (Don't preach, proselytize, missionize, or know-better-than other people.)
- e. **Consider different ways of doing things, and knowing things**, that you may be less familiar with. (Don't tell people how to do or know things.)
- f. **Acknowledge and respect that there are multiple ways of knowing**, including many ways of knowing within a single community, and none is better than others. (Don't privilege your way of knowing, or think that it's the only one.)

Circle back to relationship.

3. Learn how to listen – differently and deeply.

Begin with relationship. Working with Indigenous people and communities often requires different listening practices than you may be used to, ways of listening that are embedded within, and tied to, oral practices and knowledge systems that reach back over many generations. Paying attention to these practices and discussions about listening will help you understand how to listen.

Being able to listen on the terms of the communities you work with, from within their protocols, is necessary to building relationships of mutual respect.

- a. **Think about what appropriate listening looks like in different contexts** – is “backchanneling” (saying things like “mm-hm,” “totally!”, etc. while the other person is speaking) considered enthusiastic, or rude? What about overlapping speech? How long should pauses be between turns? Is it polite to make eye contact, or avoid it? How do people of your age and gender show politeness in listening to people of different ages and genders? Listen and observe how people in the community show respect and politeness, and do your best to follow protocols around listening.
- b. **Learn how to listen at a more profound level.** This means learning how to listen differently and deeply – and using that listening to learn from community.
- c. **Learn and observe the meanings of silence.** Silence can play an important communicative role in many cultural contexts, different from your own; it is important to listen to what's *not* being said, as well as what is.
- d. **Listen without an agenda.** We often tend to listen to others with expectations, predictions of where their statements might be going based on our own norms, or awaiting confirmation of what we *think* they might be saying – you can think of these as “listening maps” or “listening agendas” in our minds. It's normal to have these as part of our communicative practice, and it takes some practice to listen beyond them. Challenge yourself to listen openly without an agenda. Rather than trying to fit what someone is saying into your prepared or habitual “listening map,” instead listen to fully understand what they are trying to communicate.
- e. **Challenge yourself to see how listening differently enables you to understand differently.**
- f. **Challenge yourself to think about how some of these community listening practices can be engaged with**, or used in, your work with the language and the community.

Circle back to relationship.

4. Be flexible.

Begin with relationship. Your goals for your research may not be the same as the goals of the community you're working with; your goals may not end up being feasible or appropriate; and your goals may – or, most likely and appropriately, *will* – need to adapt to what you learn and the relationships you develop. For example, you may initially think you're going to write an article on tense-aspect morphology, but end up being asked to develop a learner's grammar to help children acquire verbs. Regularly re-evaluate and re-clarify your research goals based on community expressions of their own needs, goals, and aspirations (which are also likely to change as language work progresses); on who is willing or able to work with you; on practical considerations like travel or weather, and so on. Ideally, this continual re-clarifying of research will be done with ongoing participation and collaboration with the community.

- a. **Ask what the community (or the specific people you're working with) want to accomplish** by working with you.
- b. **Ask what the community needs**, and make realistic assessments of what you are able to lend a hand in.
- c. **Bite off manageable chunks** – try hard not to make promises you can't keep, or commit yourself to things you can't actually do.
- d. **Be accountable to yourself and to the community.**
 - i. Being accountable to the community means keeping in mind throughout the entire research process, from beginning to end, what the community's goals and aspirations are, what they have asked you to do, what you have agreed upon, and the ways you are working toward these collaborative goals for the research project.
 - ii. Being accountable to yourself means keeping in mind your own commitments – to your personal and professional relationships, to your values and boundaries, and to what kind of linguist you want to be. (See also “be responsible,” below.)
 - iii. There may – or, almost certainly, *will* – be tensions between these accountabilities and commitments. Your ability to re-structure your research agenda will be subject to the constraints of your discipline, your employment status, your grant funding, your degree program, or many other factors. If the constraints are so great that you cannot meaningfully re-structure your work to attend to the needs and requests of the language community you are working with, you (and they) may be better served by redirecting your research attention elsewhere.
- e. **Be honest if you realize that your commitments are not feasible**, and work with the community to re-structure your shared plans. (This assumes you are working in a context where polite and respectful conduct does *not* include making promises you can't or don't intend to keep – see Dobrin 2008 for a counter-example.)
- f. **If the community does not want to work with you**, or they are not interested in collaborating on the type of project you have in mind, respect this preference, and don't push or attempt to “convince” them.

Circle back to relationship.

5. Be sensitive.

Begin with relationship. Respect the fact that you are likely working in a context of historic and ongoing trauma, oppression, displacement, dismemberment, dispossession, and cultural and linguistic disruption that may be a direct result of colonization, settler-colonial conquest, and/or genocide. Research by Western academics has often been implicated in those processes, as well. When you are interacting with communities, recognize that each community has a unique context and history. Take the time to educate yourself on that context and history, instead of relying solely on community members to educate you.

Also be sensitive to the fact that many communities have had profoundly negative or harmful experiences with linguistics, anthropology, and other disciplines you may work within. Learn about this history in the community where you are working, and take it into account in your own actions.

- a. **Consider undertaking training for trauma-informed work**, and be cautious and sensitive about discussing traumatic experiences and topics, such as residential or boarding schools and language and cultural loss.
- b. **Remember that the people you're working with are *people***, who have lives, emotions, opinions, and obligations beyond your language work. They are not just “vessels of language”! Show a genuine interest in people’s lives outside and beyond language work. Be sure not to make people feel that you are only interested in them for their language. For example, be mindful of being overly focused on “speakers,” to the exclusion of community members who may not know the language fluently – they are also important stakeholders in language work, often with a keen interest in and commitment to the language flourishing into the future.

Circle back to relationship.

6. Be transparent about your work at every step.

Begin with relationship. Many communities have very good reasons to be wary of academic researchers, especially those from outside the community. There is a long history of outside researchers misrepresenting their intentions or research to Indigenous communities, extracting knowledge and language, and leaving with it, causing bad relations and harm in the process. (See Linda Tuhiwai Smith, 2021.)

- a. **Introductions are important.** Before you begin working with a language community, explain clearly who you are, where you come from, and what you hope to accomplish by working with their language(s). Don’t just explain who you are as a researcher – also explain who you are as a person.
- b. **Have frank and open discussions with the community about how you might benefit from this work, and why you are choosing to engage in it** – even if the invitation has come from the community themselves. Is this research for a dissertation or thesis, to complete a graduate degree? Is this a grant project, and does the funder have requirements for your work? What are those requirements? What will you receive (funding, career advancement, prestige, travel, or other benefits) through your work with the community?
- c. **Discuss how the community will be included in any benefits that accrue to you** as an academic researcher through your work with them. How might they wish to be included in the processes of funding, publications, conference attendance, etc.?

- d. **Discuss what you hope to work on, what topics you are trained in/interested in studying, and why you think those topics are important** – both to your discipline/field/department, and to you as a researcher. Talk together about the ways your areas of research or training might be useful and relevant to their particular context. Give examples of other communities who may have benefitted from this kind of research, and share knowledge about these topics. One of the foundational goals of your presence and work in Indigenous communities *must* be the building and strengthening of community capacity, knowledge, understandings, resources, and skills. Provide contacts with other linguists and language communities if you have them, so the community can hear about the (hopefully) positive relationships, outcomes, and benefits from similar work.
- e. **Discuss what you envision collaboration would look like in the area of work in which you have expertise.** Use clear, plain language without academic jargon. What will working with you involve (e.g., translating words/sentences; gathering vocabulary; recording conversations)? What might you need help with? What kind of work might you need speakers/signers, learners, community leaders, or other people to collaborate with you on?
- f. **Discuss options for what you will do with the information you gather.** For example, will you be expected to place recordings in an archive, as per the requirements of your university or funder? Are you required to, or planning to, publish articles which include written forms of the language? Do you hope to make or disseminate video or audio recordings? Where do you hope to publish your work? For whom – for what audience? How widely do you hope to have your work with the community published?
- You will need to think about how the community will be involved in making these decisions with you. It is far better to have these conversations at the *beginning* of your research relationship – these decisions, made early and collaboratively, will help you and the community achieve your shared goals for language work. Through this process of community co-design and co-participation in the research, you will be making these kinds of decisions together from the outset.
- g. **Think carefully, and communicate clearly, about how you will engage with previous scholarly work about the language or community.** You may encounter challenging situations of citational ethics: whose work you will cite, draw from, make visible, or legitimize in your own work. There may be researchers who have published widely about a language, but who have also done harm or had bad relations with the community. They may have collected data or conducted research in unethical ways. These researchers may be necessary to cite in your work, or they may even be your professors or advisors. Think carefully about how you will approach these issues (Will you refuse to cite these scholars? Will you discuss that refusal openly in your work, and “speak back at the academy” (Smith 2021)? Will you cite those scholars, but address these issues in your own publications? Something else?), and discuss it openly and frequently with your collaborators in the community.
- h. **Read Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (2021, 3rd edn.) foundational work, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.**

Circle back to relationship.

7. Practice reciprocity.

Begin with relationship. Reciprocity is a core value in many Indigenous communities. Work in ways which are mutually sustaining and beneficial to all those involved. Avoid work where the balance of labor and benefit are unequal or unidirectional.

- a. **Think long and deeply on what the community will receive from working with you, in real terms.** This may not look like “language” products – it may involve other things you are able to contribute (e.g., see Good 2012, Ngué Um 2017, and Akumbu forthcoming on collaboration in Cameroon). For example, you may be asked to bring physical supplies from your home community, or help the community access technical or archival resources. Even if these requests aren’t linguistic in nature, focus on offering what is specifically requested by the community to the best of your abilities. If you are asked to do things you don’t have the resources, time, or capacity to do, try to foster other relationships (i.e., introduce people to other trusted colleagues or organizations you have contact with) to help the community meet their objectives. Seriously consider the ways that your work can contribute to the real needs of the community; pay attention to, and develop an understanding of, the interconnectedness of language to other social, economic, political, and other non-linguistic needs and issues.
- b. **Think about how you are prepared to enact reciprocity and respect with the people you work with, from within *their* cultural norms and protocols.** (Find ways to extend reciprocity beyond academic norms and protocols).
- c. **Don’t make assumptions about the nature of reciprocity** – do your best to listen and learn about what reciprocity looks like to the people you work with, and ways to enact it that are meaningful to them. (See Dobrin 2008 for a story of navigating reciprocity between an American scholar and a community in Papua New Guinea.)

Circle back to relationship.

8. Be introspective.

Begin with relationship. Think critically and constantly about your language ideologies, and the ideologies of the field you are trained in. This is a continual process, an ongoing conversation, not an end goal. Academic fields have their own ideologies about language, knowledge production, rights and responsibilities in research, etc. (No academic discipline is ideologically neutral!)

- a. **Practice introspection and critical self-reflection at every step.** The more self-aware you are, the more you will be present and learn to recognize your own assumptions, positionalities, and judgments, which will reduce the likelihood that you will do harm.
- b. **Do your homework.** Understand that, in fact, academia is deeply implicated in the settler-colonial project. Come to an understanding of this history that is not defensive, but rather, prepared to shift these practices and ways of being to create different possibilities.
- c. **Do some careful thinking and reading about the history of the discipline of linguistics** (“capital-L Linguistics,” per Leonard 2017), the assumptions and beliefs that are part of this work, and how they relate to your own thoughts, beliefs, and actions in working with language and culture. See references for suggested readings.

Circle back to relationship.

10. Be responsible.

Begin with relationship. The role of a researcher in a community not your own carries a profound amount of responsibility, and the way you carry this responsibility should be guided by your relationships and a deep sense of ethical responsibility in and to the community. You have responsibilities to the community’s knowledge – individual and collective – you are engaging with in your research; to the data you collect; to presenting your research in respectful and ethical ways; to the discipline you have chosen to work within; and, crucially, to upholding the data sovereignty of the communities and Nations you are working with.

- a. **Think carefully, and talk with the community, about how you will present your research**, not only in publications, but in conference talks, funding applications, and informal conversations in your department. If the community has preferred ways for their language to be talked about or represented (e.g. spellings, context to be shared about the language, translation conventions, etc.), honor those preferences. If the community has preferences about which journals or conferences you should present your work in (or *not* present your work in), honor those preferences. Recognize that community members may not be familiar with academic publishing venues or processes (journals, conferences, etc.). It is your responsibility to share what you know about academic publishing, so that you and the community can decide together how the work might be disseminated. Relationships should guide all your work, and if you are presenting your research in ways that ignore or dishonor those relationships, problems and/or harm will ensue.
- b. **Build Indigenous data sovereignty into every step of your work** as a core guiding principle. This means educating yourself about the legal frameworks (largely based around the concept of individual ownership of intellectual property) that most Western universities and research boards operate within, and how they are misaligned or in conflict with Indigenous frameworks of knowledge production and dissemination (see Palosaari 2016). It also means beginning from the foundational principle of Indigenous data sovereignty (IDS) that the knowledge you are engaging with, including the data you collect, is not “yours”; instead, it belongs to the people/People who have generated, cared for, and transmitted it, and it is subject to their protocols, laws, governance, and choices. Indigenous peoples’ data doesn’t belong to those who collect it; it belongs to those it is collected from.

Indigenous languages have been part of the “resources” (including knowledge resources) that the Western academy and outside academic researchers have a long history of extracting for their own academic interests, pursuits, agendas, and career advancement/aggrandizement. The need for IDS has emerged as a self-determining response and stance to this colonizing, genocidal history, by Indigenous communities asserting their (inherent) right to control access to, and use of, their knowledge resources.

Since this short document cannot provide a comprehensive overview of IDS, we have provided some further reading below, with the recommendation that linguists engage with these core texts for understanding issues of Indigenous data sovereignty.

Circle back to relationship.

11. Be mindful of, and take good care of, your relationships.

Begin with relationship. A central focus in working with Indigenous communities and/or language communities other than your own should be to give care, respect, and time tending to your relationships in community. Listen and observe carefully to see what makes someone a good friend and colleague in a given context, and take care to be that good friend and colleague.

You should expect that these relationships will not be finished once you complete your research – for most Indigenous Peoples, relationship is a lifelong commitment; you will likely be expected to maintain, nurture, and sustain these relationships over the long-term, generationally. Think long and deeply on this *before* you decide to work with Indigenous communities.

Always circle back to relationship.

Closing comments

This is challenging work. Your research agenda may wind up being tossed out for any number of reasons – or none at all – so be careful to remember not to blame communities. Remember, you are arriving into long, often brutal, histories of coloniality, colonization, marginalization, dispossession, and/or oppression – and these histories are ongoing. Your positionality as an academic researcher represents a place of great tension and complicated, often fraught, meanings for Indigenous communities. **Do not take things personally** – these histories and systems are bigger than any single person, and go far beyond you, though they can also be reinscribed through individual practices and lack of care or attention. This work will mean a constant conversation, both internally and externally, with what it means to actively, self-consciously engage in a continual process of decolonization. This work must be intimately connected to supporting and sustaining the self-determining aspirations, agendas, desires, hopes, and dreams of the communities with whom you are working. This may mean re-working research agendas, and stepping aside when needed.

This process can be difficult and personally challenging. **You will make mistakes!** No one gets everything right, especially when they are just beginning to work with a community; there will be times when you will need to make amends or repair harms you've done (whether intentional or not).

However, the time, effort, and commitment you put into doing linguistic work in a relational, ethical way will – hopefully – create lasting, meaningful, and positive relationships. The work that you're doing as a linguist has the potential to be of concrete use and benefit to the communities you are working with, and will help forge a path for more respectful and ethical practices in linguistics. **This is an opportunity for you to change the trajectory of this discipline** – away from the harmful practices so common in the past, toward an ethical and collaborative path in the future.

For more information and discussion on this topic, we invite you to read the references below, visit the ELP website, explore learning resources there, and connect with others to discuss these ideas further: www.endangeredlanguages.com

We also invite you to contact us: Amanda Holmes (heyholmes@endangeredlanguages.com), Anna Belew (anna@endangeredlanguages.com)

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And we thank all those, past and present, who have been working tirelessly on behalf of their languages, to keep their languages and knowledges, and all that they hold and carry, vibrant and strong, so that the future generations who are coming will know the joy of sharing their languages and knowledge ways with each other.

Building on This Document

We welcome you to build on this document in ways that are useful and relevant to your context and work. This includes quoting, “remixing,” discussing, adapting, etc., within the limits of the Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0 license. See details here: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>



Further reading

Further reading on the history and disciplinary culture of linguistics and anthropology:

Dobrin, Lise. 2009. SIL International and the disciplinary culture of linguistics: Introduction. *Language*, 85(3), 618–619. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.0.0132>

Fabian, Johannes. 2014. *Time and the Other: How anthropology makes its object*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Leonard, Wesley Y. 2021. Toward an anti-racist linguistic anthropology: An Indigenous response to white supremacy. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 31(2). 218–237. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1b35q0dj>

Perley, Bernard C. 2012. Zombie linguistics: Experts, endangered languages and the curse of undead voices. *Anthropological Forum* 22(2). 133–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2012.694170>

Wolfe, Patrick. 1999. *Settler colonialism and the transformation of anthropology: The politics and poetics of an ethnographic event*. New York: Cassell.

Further reading on relationships in linguistic research:

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