

Making Modern Treaties Work – LCAC  
Breakout 4A: Sustaining Indigenous Languages

**Moderated by Hannah Uniuqsaraq, Chief Administrative Officer, Nunavut Tunngavik Inc.**

**PANELIST 1: Math'ieya Alatini, Chief Strategist, GSD Strategies**

- Bio: southern Tutchone, top of Athabaskan Nations in the Yukon, 5 Nations identify as Tutchone. It is matriarchal and I am named after my grandmother's sister, it is an old clan name passed down. I grew up in 2 worlds; mother is hippy, fighting the resistance, she grew up in bush either in cabin or hitchhiking in Canada.
- Women in the community wanted to start their own school in community.
- I attend KeetsédünKú (our house of learning), It started in kindergarten and went to Grade 9.
- I was lucky enough to have my grandmother Lena, who taught me. She was one of the first people to graduate language class as a certified language teacher. She was the language teacher in the school, got rudimentary Southern Tutchone teaching, grandmother is still teaching in Southern Tutchone.
- Teaching methodology was not to present fluency, but it was to present basic vocabulary but not stringing them together so there was a break-down there.
- 4 or 5 fluent language speakers in community; crisis situation, did a good job while an Indian Act band, we are 16 years into self-government and are looking back at how do we really identify and preserve our language? How do we take it out of a preservation state and bring it into revitalization state?
- Crisis of language speakers has always been at forefront of mind; documenting words and stories of individuals.
- When I was elected Chief in 2010, there was a new initiative coming out; \$1M to do language programs, I was told that our Nation would be the champion of the initiative. So, we got to know everything about language revitalization projects.
- Did global research for what works (Polynesian communities), looked at Shuswap Nation, wanted to take a distinction between preservation (documenting) and revitalization (engaging with the youth and new life).
- I learned some key things:
  - start with babies (Lesson from the Shuswap & Polynesians)
  - Pick one dialect, so although there were at least 5 dialects with competing interest, we needed to pick one (teaching from a Maori elder)
  - Respond to the desires of the people; if youth are asking for programming, respond to those first because this is where change will happen.
  - Commit the money, you have to commit the resources to make it happen and,
  - No judgement; we need to talk to elders and help them understand how important it is to not make fun of people who are practicing the language. It is important that we do not discourage people who are learning language, instead we need to encourage them in a positive way which is the key to making and creating new speakers (Maori elder).
- We took these lessons and envisioned a strong and healthy community with strong ties to culture, language and heritage.

- Language was a big part of identity and we wanted to bring stronger community foundation and build relationships between families. In small northern communities with a lot of violence, grudges, long memories, this was an opportunity to build strong connections between families.
- This can be done through the land. There are healing opportunities which help build connections, help inner healing and help individuals learn the connections of where they are from.
- Can't help but have great experiences when out on the land (campfire healing and stories), this was part of the strategic plan.
- Revitalization practices as well.
- How do you create opportunities to speak?
  - Through songs, recordings, re-patriation of historic songs.
  - We researched all museums in North America that hold recordings.
  - Some elders that have long since passed were on those recordings and we brought those songs back.
  - One of our citizens is a linguist and he and another musician brought the recorded songs to our fluent elders and then translated them with elders. The songs have Tlingit mixed in. These recordings were given to people to practice.
- Our neighbouring nation created an app of Southern Tutchone words to learn.
- We are providing language lessons online through Zoom with lesson plans and a language instructor. This helps people understand language structure. We held conference call with people.
- In 2011, we created a language nest.
- We identified people in community. Started by looking at all the people who had been taught the language as their first language before going to residential school and then paired them with elder in community. Then we “voluntold” that person to be the language champion in the daycare.
- Had to shift from daycare mentality to language learning mentality.
- One big challenge was that our daycare is fully subsidized by the Nation and therefore there are non-Indigenous children there. We had to uphold the decision to fund the daycare to keep subsidizing it.
- Important to cultivate language speakers who are not just Indigenous, within a year we had such a strong bond between babies and elders. By the time those babies started speaking their first language, it was southern Tutchone and then parents came to the office asking us to create language classes for them so they could understand their children. We responded to that right away and now we have parents speaking southern Tutchone.
- Kids going into school knowing southern Tutchone at what is considered a 7<sup>th</sup> grade level!
- The cost was \$145,000 of our core dollars which is less than a house construction and there is a great return on investment.
- Other thing within the strategy: place names; street signs, river names and mountains to be official in southern Tutchone. This took years to do. It was a challenge to change the signs in buildings (e.g. “close the door” etc.)

- Integrating, speaking, seeing, hearing, doing best methodology is the Total Physical Response (TPR) method. This methodology is used to teach children in their language nest.
- We are also embracing language at work; Yukon Native Language Centre is now shifting to re-vitalization and is partnering with Simon Fraser University. Will also potentially partner with the University in Yukon for language teaching certificates.
- Paying for Master's in the Apprentice-Master's relationship is important. It's important for the fluent speakers to be recognized and adequately valued for their unique skills.
- Also working with neighboring Nations to move ahead and create a cohort of Native speakers to keep the momentum going.

**Hannah:**

- Integrating inter-generations to preserve and re-vitalize through the land is a strong message taken.
- Ancient spirits, modern minds, using technology as a means to re-vitalize language.

**Q: Being taught with Inuit pedagogy, what their standards and skills are that can be used in their own system?**

- Important to record elders in family to understand new vocabulary and stories.
- Engage with families to plan education and how to assess methods.
- Tlingit Language and Culture Act was created over a year. There is a 10-year implementation to implement the Act. Self-governing First Nations worked with the Yukon Government and finally got space in a Whitehorse high school to teach a Tlingit language program. But losing elders and native language speakers at fast rate.
- Struggling with language teachers and just because you are language speaker doesn't mean you are a teacher, what strategies do you have in place to create teachers? Because it is a struggle to find teachers to fill positions that they fight for, also need to ensure safety for them to learn.
- Language teachers in general, need to engage with them, make sure people know what they want. We need to have discussions at the community level and be able to look at developing resources.
- Heard from teachers that they need resources. Need to identify where assets are in community.
- Connecting learners and what they want to learn and networking at the community level.
- We voluntold people with good characteristics and aptitude. Told them that we see you in this position and then we put them there and have provided teacher training.

**PANELIST 2: Julia Ogina, Programs Coordinator (Elders, Language & Culture), Kitikmeot Inuit Association**

Started her presentation with the reciting of a song

- Bio: a singer of songs. Have worked the last 13 years in work life from 8:30-5:00. Focus on getting to know who we are and how we can present that back amongst our people as a way of identity.

- Songbook created of all songs. The words from the song were written long before us. We are returning back to the ones that are after us, that was an old song with no written date known.
- A passion is to continue to work in my own time. I am also a mother, grandmother and have a lot to teach own children. That is who I am. A tribute to how powerful language through song is.
- When I started 13 years ago at association, I came in as an individual who loved to work with people, especially out on the land. Worked in camps, with small groups, visiting people, background health education, also language specialist at the school.
- When I came across the position, applied for it and was out traveling when I got the interview.
- Was not the first chosen, but luckily the individual who was first pick did not want to relocate, so the job was offered to me.
- When I first started, spent some time with files and looking back at work that had been done by previous program coordinator, they were doing camps, sewing programs, tool making, continued for about 4 years observing and watching how people interact and how they worked at their culture. Looked at how it is being transferred to the next generation and their peers.
- Cultural skills were being passed on but as a language program there was no emphasis in language of instruction or language use or transcribed and translating how language is being affected.
- Kept hearing from regional and community groups in 5 communities that the language is declining, that language is not being used in programs, and there is no hope for the language.
- Still get emotional over that because it comes from our elders who are close to the end of their time.
- Of course, they will feel that there is no hope in comparison to where they are sitting and the next generation is.
- Started to think and have discussions as to how we can answer that hopelessness; suicide rates were climbing and kept thinking of individuals who took life too soon and as someone of the middle generation, how can we be part of solution? What do we need to do?
- Realized we did not have anything in terms of language revitalization and tools, heard bits and pieces from different places and presentations attended. People were doing bits of work here and there but all individually working and not networking together.
- There are so many things people were involved with in terms of language and culture in the communities. People were attending various events and came back to the community, but little was shared because there was no place or structure for them to share.
- That is when we started talking about a framework for language KIA. We put in a proposal to look at what people wanted, where they were at, what we knew of our language through research and stats.
- They came up with the KIA language framework. Working on this for many years, and it was passed and approved by KIA board in 2011. But there was no implementation plan so it sat there for almost a year.

- Then they started to ask how can we make this come alive? Started to look at options. Had to find partners in community that were language experts. We looked at becoming a steering committee and looked at how to become a language advisory group.
- First thing: community beneficiaries and grassroots people needed to own the document and the content of it. So, after a few meetings with the advisory group we began this part of our work: Witirmiut Language & Culture
- Where our language is at and how it affects our culture, foundation and people? That is a discussion that had to be had with all communities and groups. Men involved saying what about us as men? There are women's group, elder's groups, etc.
- Now we know, do we want to do something about it? When? Today, tomorrow, 20, 40 years from now?
- Why is it important? What are the benefits? The hopelessness, the suicides, the crime rates
- What is out there? KIA Language framework. Years after framework published the GN drafted their first Uqausivut plan for their workplaces.
- Framework looks at homes, programs after school and how to support families, how to get language exposure and use in the homes.
- Like going out on the land; transfer of knowledge camps and food provided, teaching the middle generation how to prepare and put into storage for the winter the food that we crave through the year when it is not abundant.
- We do not live on pathways for animals like before, it has now shifted and we are instead looking for the animals, the animals don't come to us.
- We have to look at all these things to ensure it make sense so that our people can start to own and find the changes that affect our people; it is not just because we stopped using the language. It is because we stopped doing things the ways we used to do things. We have changed our values in the environment and the people.
- 20 people to look at key points of framework on how they can maintain, enhance and revive language and connect with new learners and their families.
- early years of introducing framework: sharing stories of how change took place
- We need to look at Inuinnait history, effects of acceptance and change today, where are we today and do we want to change or do we want to continue in the same manner we are today?
- Not everybody fell, some elders walked across without falling. The ladder has its supports and each step, so much like us, we need support but we need each step, sometimes we need to step back down and add a few more steps. Some need a bit more time in order to help and take part in the plans they are setting now.
- Acceptance of change starts when you talk about these things; they found their place within the diagram; people who visualized what they saw in the framework by presenting it after presentations in discussion.
- Elders know they needed a way to keep language alive and singing in safe places or ceremonial purposes where it fits into "somebody's agenda" instead of their own
- The drum can be so easy to pick up and can dance to; needed to create singers, in order to sing the songs, you need to visualize a song, what is happening in the song.
- Was not a singer of these songs but remembered them in childhood, remember seeing an old man so she knew before she was sent to hospital for TB, tall man, words they were

saying and heard terms that are not used anymore in their language, same thing for animals, they had sight terms to respect the animals.

- There are so many things that they have to do that are being done in programs like this
- Even though they are creating a lot of things that they want preserved and the next generation to do in their culture, we have great ideas but we lack infrastructure, need infrastructure and spaces.
- Struggle with at community level when looking at programming for language revitalization, need resourceful people as professors at the community level and have to pay them accordingly, not just the minimum that we could get because funders didn't provide full funding, need to have discussions about work we are doing and challenges that we are facing so that we can respect the work that is happening.

**Hannah:**

- Can counter the very heavy feeling of hopelessness with a brighter future with ideas like those from Julia.

**PANELIST 3: John B Zoe, Senior Advisor, Tłı̨chǫ Government**

- Picture of work: 5 layers of information from when people and animals could speak the same language and understand each other. This was because we had to live in same environment and eventually when we separated who would be a person and who would be an animal.
  - There are lots of legends about this in Indigenous culture.
  - When they learned who they would be, they conflicted because the respect for one another did not quite gel. Communication break down and animals would prey on the people and the people did not know who was going to be who.
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> layer is about that conflict
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> layer is Yamosa and his brother who started to travel the landscape to place order between animals and people. Showed how we should live together
  - 4<sup>th</sup> layer is the people putting the place names in the language onto where the animals live, where the fish are, caribou cross, where the moose go to lakes and navigational tools for how we can get to those places so we can survive.
  - 5<sup>th</sup> layer is our neighboring Indigenous groups that we have come to have respect for after times of conflict, there is now friendship.
- When people overseas came in 1490 first thing, they drew down from our world was animals and animals' product; commercialized our food sources and we were recruited to bring those things to them and took their languages with them.
- Second draw down title to the lands got transferred to them; saying it was theirs.
- Third draw through treaties, all renewable resources and children we will take care of since you do not have the ability to vote. We had no say up until 1960s. Given to government entities who spread the resources out to entities, businesses, agencies, NGOs.
- Then transferred to provinces, spread out and put FN's in box as Indian Act where you do not have access to your own resources where you have access to minimal resource.
- Still in that box and treaties is how to get ourselves out of that box.

- At the beginning, languages were strong, now we are in the box and we were delegated to churches who started pounding languages out of them. That is the legacy of residential schools.
- At the same time this box was opened up in early 50s by changes to Indian Act to say that the family services would have access through new legislation to children.
- People in early 60s were given the right to vote without consultation and all of a sudden government agency became interested because that is what they do to Canadians. They discovered that people were living in squalor because 500 years behind.
- The standard of living in this box is so low that the smallest of legislation could be enforced. That was the beginning of removing children from this area into the society all over the world aka “sixties scoop”.
- Languages, future generations and elders that have survived were beaten down and part of modern treaties and modern agreements is about getting ourselves out of here.
- Have to do an agreement with the Governments of Canada and provinces/territories. 3-way agreement and we say we are going to move between where we were and where we are in to a river and will park ourselves there because these agreements and the structure is a necessary evil. Necessary to manage further encroachment by governments that we want to get out from underneath because policies have been repressive.
- By doing that and through these agreements, we are going to take what little of the core funds that were given (core funds, housing) as a beginning because even though it was a cruel, crude structure, at least there was a little bit of recognition, not much.
- So, we need to build on it.
- Taking apart the Indian Act while people are in there is not a good thing because only recognition they have when not in an agreement. We are taking what little we have to a new space, reversing the arrow of being put down and with the resources (e.g. governance), we maintain our relationship to the federal and provincial governments from further encroachment.
- New place means the tendency of using resources that were previously denied. The mistake we make is we become too corporate and start acting like the systems we are escaping from, but this new governance is where we hold the resources.
- People are the source of energies and where voices and original stories are from, so to do a proper strengthening of what we have, we need to access our own communities for the first time.
- Shouldn't we be hiring our own people to re-institute and bring back languages and knowledge? You are a teacher of language by your own government.
- Certify says your own government can certify you as a teacher of language, culture and way of life, can do that automatically, so that when we go back to the original classrooms (on the land), these programs become very important.
- Take children with you fishing, describe the place name you are going to, describe the fish and language, hole in water, types of hooks and different parts of fish and stories of the fish and how they came to be.
- Story laying out the bones of trout on cloth and wants to tell its story. One time he was a moose hunter and here is the moose egg in its head, here is another part of the moose and means that he was a moose hunter who wanted to be a trout when animals and people could switch places at that time. When started eating they said moose hunter took tools with him.

- Animals can tell you stories. There is one for every animal.
- We need to look at ourselves to say that everything that we need is there to strengthen and re-strengthen ourselves.
- I am trying to re-strengthen audience, going to step up and learn these stories because they are embedded in the minds of elders. And they come from the source where they are embedded in landscape.
- Story is in landscape and the only way to know the story is to go to the land.
- Agreement has to be in the middle where young people are learning about the old way and the new way to protect themselves from encroachment
- Need to know about the land before you can do work with it.
- Campfires to learn, hole in rock on mountain is place where you go to do an evaluation for whether the land is comfortable with you. If it is, you will get to know and you are open to learn as much as you can.
- Been going out every summer every 32 years, still collect information and story is how do we pass it on? Need to develop our own systems of transmission.
- Traditional one is there but a lot of people are at the bottom and need to design a way for them to come to the surface.
- Part of going back to the land is that the land can evaluate you about your shortcomings and whether you are on the right path and can become a teacher.

**Hannah:**

- Do not want to just exist but we want to thrive.