'AUTHENTIC' L2 KANIEN'KÉHA REVITALIZATION: THE IMPLICATIONS OF IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS[*]

Martin Renard
University of Toronto

1.   Introduction

Kanien'kéha (Mohawk) is a Northern Iroquoian language spoken by the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) Nation in eight communities across Ontario, Quebec, and upstate New York (Mithun 1999: 424). Like most other Indigenous languages of North America, it is severely endangered. The number of speakers has been steadily decreasing for a few generations, as the remaining elderly L1 speakers are passing away after an abrupt breakage of inter-generational transmission in the mid-20th century. Today, there are fewer than 700 active users of the language left (about 600 L1s and 80 L2s) (DeCaire forthcoming).

This has led to the creation of various revitalization projects since the late 1970s (Gomashie 2019). Adult immersion programs, for instance, follow the strategy of *L2 revitalization*: create young adult L2 speakers, who could in turn raise 'new' L1 children, thereby re-establishing inter-generational transmission. However, these programs face serious challenges: how can we ensure that L2 learners who attend them acquire and transmit to their children a sufficiently 'authentic' form of the language? The notion of 'authenticity' in language restoration is obviously more complex (Hinton and Ahlers 1999), but 'authentic' Kanien'kéha can be roughly equated with L1-like speech patterns.

The issue is that this final 'authentic' layer of proficiency is difficult for L2 learners (whose L1 is usually English) to acquire, and as a result we tend to see a significant proficiency gap between L1 and L2 speakers. This affects virtually every level of the language, from prosody to discourse patterns (Mithun 2021: 737). Due to the large scope of this phenomenon, I focus on only one case study, which should give us insights into this broader issue: *idiomatic expressions*. For the purpose of this work, I define idioms as fixed non-compositional expressions (Nunberg et al. 1994). Due to the polysynthetic nature of Kanien'kéha, most idioms involve a noun-incorporating verb. Consider the following example, collected as part of the *Ratiwennókwas* documentation project (Brant 2017):

(1)   *tewakatene'konhrekstha'tsheriià:kon*
        te-wak-ate-ne'konhrekstha'tsher-iia'k-on
        DUP-1SG.PAT-SRFL-hammer-break-STAT
        'I am broke' (lit. 'my hammer is broken into two pieces')[1]

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[1] In all examples, the standard orthography of the Eastern Kanien'kéha dialect is respected. All symbols have standard IPA values, except for <'> which marks glottal stop /ʔ/, <y> which marks palatal glide /j/, and <en>

Here, the literal meaning 'my hammer is broken' is used idiomatically to express poverty.

This work addresses the following question: what are the implications of idiomatic expressions for the creation in adult immersion programs of 'authentic' L2 speakers (who may then raise L1 children in order to re-establish inter-generational transmission)? Four specific sub-questions follow from this issue: (1) What is the importance and function of idiomatic expressions in speech? (i.e. the question of *functionality*); (2) What role do idiomatic expressions play in the construction of 'authentic' Kanien'kéha? (i.e. the question of *authenticity*); (3) What challenges do idiomatic expressions present to L2 learners? (i.e. the question of *learnability*); and (4) How can we improve the L2 acquisition of idiomatic expressions? (i.e. the question of *pedagogy*). The objective is thus to clarify and suggest solutions to the issues surrounding the acquisition of 'authentic' Kanien'kéha through a case study on idioms, in order to contribute to Kanien'kéha revitalization.

To investigate this issue, I conducted a one-hour online focus group in March 2022, with five adult Kanien'kéha speakers and language workers, including one L1 speaker (KH) and four L2 speakers (AM, OM, RB, and TB). I adopted a semi-structured group interview method, trying to ask participants non-leading questions based on the four issues identified above. The recordings were then transcribed manually, and coded and analyzed using the NVivo software. The participant who produced each quote below is identified by their two-initial code, as specified above. The ideas in this paper are therefore synthesized from the opinions of expert stake-holders who work to revitalize the language on the ground, in the spirit of ethical collaborative linguistic work (Cameron et al. 1992).

In the rest of this paper, sections 2, 3, 4, and 5 respectively discuss the participants' responses to the four research questions identified above, and section 6 concludes.

2. Functionality

I will begin with the issue of functionality: what is the importance and function of idiomatic expressions in speech? In the words of AM, echoing the opinions of all participants, idioms are an 'extremely important' part of the language and 'have to be saved as best as we can', because they carry out crucial functions. Participants mentioned four such functions.

First, three of them mentioned the expressive freedom which idioms provide:

(2) a. 'It shows a picture on how creative the language can be, or how our mind can express itself.' (AM)

b. 'Oftentimes, there's more than one meaning, but you understand what the point is […] based on the context that surrounds it. [It] give[s] opportunities for free thinking, and not just concrete 'one word is meaning one thing'.' (TB)

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and <on> which mark the nasal vowels /ẽ/ and /ũ/ respectively. The colon <:> marks vowel length, and accents <´> mark tone. The following abbreviations are used: > = transitive pronoun; 1 = first person; 2 = second person; 3 = third person; AGT = agent; CNTR = contrastive; DUP = duplicative; FAC = factual; INDEF = indefinite; JOIN = joiner vowel; NMZ = nominalizer; PAT = patient; PL = plural; PUNC = punctual; SG = singular; SRFL = semi-reflexive; and STAT = stative.

    c.   'Sometimes, in these expressions, there's a slight difference. It means the same thing in English, but in our language it's different. For example, 'to do something on purpose': *wa'ka'nikonhrón:ni'*, it implies I put some thought into it; but *thá:kehte'*, 'I just did it, who cares?'. There's nuances like that.' (KH)

For AM, idiomatic expressions reflect the general creative power of the language, by combining ideas in novel ways to form new concepts. TB more specifically points out that this expressive power resides in the wide range of interpretations that idiomatic expressions can assume depending on the context, providing 'opportunities for free thinking'. KH gives a specific example of fine semantic nuances which are expressible in Kanien'kéha thanks to these idiomatic expressions, but are neutralized in English: while *wa'ka'nikonhrón:ni'* (wa'-k-a-'nikonhr-onni-' ; FAC-1SG.AGT-SRFL-mind-make-PUNC) and *thá:kehte'* (th-a-k-eht-e' ; CNTR-FAC-1SG.AGT-go-PUNC) both translate to 'I did it (on purpose)', the former implies that the action was thought through, while the latter that it was done on a whim. This is perceived as making idioms expressively valuable tools in the language.

    Second, two participants built on this last point to suggest that the expressive power of idiomatic expressions also enables them to be used for humour:

(3)   a.   'Many are for jokes […]. [S]ome are just so wild, so funny. […] Sometimes, they're just out of left field, and they're just so fun.' (AM)

       b.   'My mentor has some amazing stories and jokes and whatnot, so what I noticed is that there's a lot of idiomatic expressions in telling those jokes or stories, whether it's more than one, two, or just multiple different ways of interpreting that word. […] So the purpose of it can be to lighten the mood.' (TB)

Idiomatic expressions can be exploited to create humour and hence 'lighten the mood'. For AM, some of these expressions are inherently funny because of the significant discrepancy between their actual and literal meanings, presumably as perceived through their English translation. For TB, idiomatic expressions are often used for telling jokes, as humour can be created by the ambiguity between their actual and literal meaning. For example, while *wa'khehiatónhsheron'* (wa'-khe-hiaton-hsher-on-' ; FAC-1SG>3SG.INDEF-write-NMZ-give-PUNC) literally means 'I gave someone paper', it can also be used idiomatically to mean 'I sued them' (DeCaire p.c.). Many idioms create double-meanings in this way, giving rise to humour. This reinforces the perceived importance of idiomatic expressions in speech, given the presumably crucial role that humour plays in human communication.

    Third, two participants discussed another important function carried out by idiomatic expressions, which seems more phatic or social than expressive:

(4)   a.   'When they say it and you know what it means, it kind of creates an immediate bond with people you haven't spoken to before. You know you're gonna have the same background, the same experiences behind you. That's when I enjoy using it.' (KH)

b. 'That's very true. Because even, as well, different communities will have different ones, right? So when you use them, you're aware that 'okay, we're of the same certain community or family'. And when other people use theirs, you're like 'wow, this is new, this is interesting!'. So it creates like a bond.' (AM; immediately replying to (4a))

Here, participants are insisting on the fact that idioms are not only used for their expressive or humoristic potential, but also in order to signal in-group relationships with speakers who use the same community or even family dialect (given that these expressions tend to be very dialect-specific; e.g. the example in (1) is specific to the Kahnawà:ke dialect). Using these expressions, or hearing other speakers use them, establishes an 'immediate bond' among speakers, insofar as it may index membership in the same community. If one of the primary motivations of language revitalization is the maintenance of the connection to one's identity and community (Sallabank 2013: 79), then linguistic expressions which contribute to this, such as idioms, should unsurprisingly be a key target of such endeavours.

A last function, which was discussed extensively by a single participant, concerns the link between idiomatic expressions and the Kanien'kehá:ka 'cultural worldview':

(5) 'I think that when it comes to the purpose, I think really one important aspect of it is the portrayal and perpetuation of a Kanien'kehá:ka mindset. I think idiomatic expressions are really talking about the way of knowing or the experiences of our people, and some of these expressions are old. […] It's a really nice way to get a glimpse into the worldview and really understand the knowledge and experience that comes with building vocabulary and building expressions in the language.' (TB)

The idea here is that idiomatic expressions provide a window onto the Kanien'kehá:ka worldview, in the sense that they reflect the way that previous generations of speakers conceptualized their environment and packaged information into words and phrases, some of which have come to be lexicalized into idiomatic expressions. This seems compatible with the intuition that many idiomatic expressions may be culture-specific, and reinforces the importance of idiomatic expressions as links between language and culture. Note that the fact that many of these links are empirically unverifiable due to a lack of sufficient evidence, or even provably objectively untrue, is irrelevant, as we are arguably dealing here with the qualitatively distinct category of subjective speaker impressions, which constitute valuable insights in their own right (Renard 2021).

3. Authenticity

Let us move to the issue of authenticity. As alluded to in the introduction, participants seemed to understand 'authentic' Kanien'kéha as the speech patterns of fluent L1 elders, and agreed that it is this form of the language that should constitute the target of revitalization efforts. This leads us to a question with respect to our case study: what role do idiomatic expressions play in the construction of this 'authentic' Kanien'kéha? We have already shown in the previous section that participants view them as a crucial part of the

language that must be preserved, due to their various functions. In fact, participants more specifically insisted that they form a key component of 'authentic' Kanien'kéha.

This can be seen in two caveats regarding 'authenticity' mentioned by participants. First, three participants consider L2 speech less 'authentic' because it lacks idioms:

(6) a. 'It makes me think, when I hear new speakers, it's that these expressions sometimes are missing. And so, at times, when they're trying to express a thought or an event to you, you notice that they're circling around their topic, and I'm like 'you're missing that expression in order to get it'.' (AM)

b. 'I would add here that I use them [idiomatic expressions] almost never, because I didn't grow up hearing it, and I didn't learn it from first language speakers. I learnt just by bits and pieces. I know how to put words together, so I can put together simple language, and the number of these metaphors I know, I can count on one hand, really.' (OM)

c. 'I don't think I use these idiomatic expressions as much as I need to. I think that's a challenge with being a second language learner.' (TB)

Here, AM makes the unsurprising observation that less proficient L2 speakers use fewer idioms than more proficient L2 and L1 speakers, and seems to imply that their speech is less authentic as a result. Even OM and TB, who are highly proficient L2 learners, admit that they do not use idiomatic expressions as often as they would like. The key point, then, is that 'authentic' Kanien'kéha entails the use of at least some idiomatic expressions, and that speech lacking such expressions is therefore less 'authentic'.

This brings us to the second caveat: to speak authentically, one must not only use any idioms, but these must also be 'authentic' themselves. Three participants thus rejected as inauthentic new English-based idioms created by younger speakers:

(7) a. 'The students nowadays, not my generation but the younger students in their early twenties, they're trying to make their own expressions. And I hate it! I do not like it because they originate from English, right? […] One that they're always saying is *wa'tkaterihwawèn:rate'*, meaning 'I'm over it'. And I'm like 'stop saying that, say something that we have!'.' (AM)

b. '[T]hese things that they're coming up with, it's rooted in English. It's not rooted in our traditional relation to the environment, or our relation to our traditions, you know. It's all rooted in English and popular culture. So that's really annoying me.' (OM)

c. 'I think they [idiomatic expressions] are important, provided they're […] not the ones that are just created, because they're translated from another language. As long as it doesn't follow the pattern of another language, I think it's important.' (KH)

AM and OM are referring to the phenomenon whereby young L2 learners may create new Kanien'kéha idioms by directly semantically calquing from English ones, rather than based on native patterns. For instance, *I'm over it* gave rise to *wa'tkaterihwa-wèn:rate'* [wa'-te-k-at-rihw-a-wenrat-e' ; FAC-DUP-1SG.AGT-matter-JOIN-climb.over-PUNC], which literally means 'I climbed over the matter'. Participants reject such expressions as inauthentic, to the extent that they are 'rooted in English', and recommend using 'what we have', that is authentic native expressions, instead. KH articulates a summary of this position: idiomatic expressions are important in speech, as long as they are 'authentic' expressions reflecting native ways of thinking, and not foreign calques reflecting 'the pattern of another language'. Similar attitudes are found in many other endangered Indigenous language communities, including in California (Hinton and Ahlers 1999: 56).

This lack of 'authenticity' in L2 speech can also result in incomprehensibility. Recall the larger challenge to which idiomatic expressions belong: L2 learners face serious obstacles in suppressing L1 interference and acquiring a final layer of 'authentic' proficiency, comprising things like idioms and L1-like prosody and discourse. According to TB, this can go as far as impeding the comprehensibility of L2 speech to native speakers:

(8) 'I took a full year in an adult immersion course […], and I was still largely incomprehensible to first language speakers. And it wasn't until ten years later that I was able to develop that. So again that speaks to this authentic language. Was the language that I was speaking authentic? No, it was translated English thoughts, using different words, and terrible pronunciation. […] When they [L2 learners] come out of immersion programs, if they're anything like me, they're gonna be incomprehensible to first language speakers.' (TB)

Thus, L2 speech is often difficult to understand for (at least unsympathetic) L1 speakers, because it lacks key components of authentic Kanien'kéha, and excessively relies on the structure of English, to the point where it might sound like 'translated English thoughts'.

One consequence of this which TB also mentioned is that it gives rise to a new 'L2 variety' of the language, as students coming out of these programs can easily communicate with each other, but are difficult to comprehend for L1 speakers:

(9) 'It's interesting, these speakers that are coming out of these programs, they can converse with each other, because they're at the same understanding and they talk to each other, but they come out and it's obvious the difference between how they speak and how others speak. […] There's an obvious breach of comprehensibility.' (TB)

Because L2 learners typically attend comparable immersion programs, involving similar language training and constant interaction with peers, they have no difficulty understanding one another. As we have seen, however, it can sometimes be difficult for L1 speakers to understand them. Effectively, the result is the emergence of a new and slightly different L2 variety of the language, influenced by the L1 of its speakers (English).

If community-members are willing to accept some amount of language change, this would not necessarily be an issue. In fact, Holton (2009) suggests revitalizing a purposely

creolized L2 variety of a language instead of the native-like speech patterns, as it greatly facilitates L2 acquisition. This L2 variety may then either serve as an end in itself, or as a stepping-stone for the acquisition of the L1 variety. Zuckermann (2020) goes even further, claiming that Modern Hebrew is a hybrid language with both Hebrew and various Indo-European languages as parents. The idea is that the first generation of language planners acquired the language imperfectly as an L2, and subconsciously imported influences from their L1s, which became fixed in the language when their children acquired their parents' L2 as an L1. He insists, however, that this nativized L2 variety should not be discarded as 'broken Hebrew', but rather celebrated as a new language with its own complexity.

A parallel can be drawn with Kanien'kéha: perhaps speakers could accept L2 learners' 'inauthentic' language, with unavoidable English influences, as a necessary step in the revitalization of Kanien'kéha, before the next generation nativizes this L2 as an L1. Of course, they would then have to accept this generation's new L1 as equally authentic compared to the original variety, even if it is slightly influenced by English. Some might see this as a necessary compromise for the language to survive at all; but the key difference with Hebrew is that there are actual L1s remaining, so that the speech community might understandably wish to aim for this L1 variety instead in order to maximize authenticity.

If this is the case, that is if L1 speech is held up as the non-negotiable end goal of revitalization, as seems to be happening in Kanien'kehá:ka communities, then additional measures must be taken to ensure that L2 learners acquire this final layer of authentic proficiency and minimize English influence. Ultimately, this is a question of how high a given speech community wants to 'set the bar' for L2 revitalization (Holton 2009: 263–264): if the bar is set high and nothing less than full mastery of the authentic L1 variety is accepted, then we retain full authenticity, but risk creating an obstacle too difficult for some L2 learners to overcome; if the bar is set lower and L2 learners are allowed to use a less complex form of the language (possibly with some influence from English), then we greatly simplify the task for L2 learners and increase our chances of success, at the cost of sacrificing a certain degree of authenticity.

This trade-off constitutes a continuum of equally valid strategies rather than a binary choice, and there is no objectively superior solution. Each speech community needs to select an optimal strategy in light of its linguistic, historical, social, and political context. Kanien'kehá:ka communities seem to lean towards the high end of this spectrum, with a higher degree of authenticity required of L2 learners, which may partly explain the greater difficulties which they encounter. Crucially, however, this does not detract from the validity of their objective: these difficulties should be seen as a challenge to overcome, rather than as a problem casting doubt on the whole enterprise.

A similar idea is captured by a final remark from KH:

(10) 'I think we can think of 'authentic' as authentic at the time for each learner. The key is to use the language they're comfortable with at that point in their language-learning journey. And as they go along, they'll get more and more authentic.' (KH)

Here, KH is making the interesting point that authenticity should perhaps be viewed as a subjective rather than an objective concept, that is, as defined relative to each speaker's

proficiency instead of in an absolute sense as equating to native-like speech. This is not meant as a rigorous definition of authenticity, which should probably continue to be understood as L1 speech. Rather, it is meant to encourage sympathetic attitudes from native speakers towards the difficulties which L2 learners encounter in their quest to acquire 'authentic' Kanien'kéha, as well as to motivate these learners to overcome these obstacles.

4.   Learnability

The third issue to take up is learnability. To address this issue reliably, we must first discuss how idioms are taught in immersion programs. Three participants tackled this question:

(11) a.   'I found with teaching too, none of them [idiomatic expressions] are in our curriculum, right? […] But it's the absolute first thing they [students] want to learn, I found. […] But, yes, we don't teach them here [Onkwawén:na Kentyóhkwa program, Ohswé:ken, Ontario]. Well, it's about creating a foundation to become an effective communicator of the language. You know, for the sake of time, we have to focus on verbs, the polysynthetic nature.' (RB)

   b.   'I think I can just speak to how I acquired these expressions. It wasn't really explicitly taught through my language-learning programs. Most of my learning of these terms comes from just communication with L1 speakers.' (TB)

   c.   'The focus for the end goal of L2 revitalization, at least in this community, it should be the re-establishment of parent-to-child language transmission. […] Anything that gets us there is adding to that point. And something that doesn't contribute is not getting us there, what we should be working towards.' (OM)

Note that all three participants have both attended and taught in immersion programs.
      RB and TB begin by pointing out that idiomatic expressions are absent from immersion curricula, despite the fact that students are often very interested in acquiring them in the early stages of language acquisition, perhaps in an attempt to access authentic language as quickly as possible. RB justifies this absence in terms of the incompatibility of the teaching of idioms with the priorities of these programs: because their goal is to provide students with a 'foundation to become an effective communicator' within a limited time, they understandably focus on the 'polysynthetic nature' of the language (i.e. the complex verbal morphology), and therefore have no time to devote to idioms. OM concurs by implying that teaching idioms is probably not the priority for their community: if one takes a step back and considers the ultimate goal of revitalization, namely the re-establishment of inter-generational transmission, then it makes sense to focus on core aspects of the language such as verbal morphology, and leave peripheral elements such as idioms aside. TB remarks that a consequence of this decision is that, if L2 learners acquire idioms at all, it is usually later through natural interaction with L1 speakers (see next section). AM echoes TB's remark: 'Usually, what I notice is that they [L2 learners] learn them [idiomatic expressions] through situational conversations.'

Assuming, then, that idioms are usually 'picked up' in context by conversing with native speakers, what challenges do they present to L2 learners? Participants mentioned four specific obstacles. First, AM mentioned the opacity of some expressions:

(12) 'I remember one of my favourite idioms: *wakatà:riote*. And I was like 'what?'. I didn't get it. Sometimes they're just out of left field […]. It means 'I'm flirting', literally 'my hook is standing up', like you're ready to catch somebody.' (AM)

The idea is that some idiomatic expressions are inherently challenging to memorize if one breaks them down into their component morphemes and does not learn them as wholes, because the link between their actual and literal meanings is very opaque (i.e. non-compositional and unpredictable). The expression *wakatà:riote* 'I'm flirting' [wak-at-ari-ot-e ; 1SG.PAT-SRFL-hook-stand.up-STAT], for instance, literally means 'my hook is standing up'. Such mismatches are taken to hinder the acquisition of idioms.

AM then followed up on his previous point by proposing a cause for the opacity of this actual meaning - literal meaning connection:

(13) 'We [L2 speakers] haven't seen the world the same as the elders have. […] I noticed, most of the time, that these expressions are rooted in a different era, where things operated differently. Their jobs were different, probably technology was different, the environment was different. So sometimes these expressions reflect then, and at times for myself I understand the expression and why it's used, but I've never seen it. […] And so these expressions, they don't match with modern times, because we don't see it, but the expression has carried on.' (AM)

AM observes that idiomatic expressions probably start out as compositional expressions coined for a specific purpose within a particular historical context, and then survive as descriptions of a more abstract situation even after the original context has become irrelevant. This not only breaks the predictability linking the literal meaning to the now non-compositional actual meaning; it also makes the post-hoc recovery of the actual meaning much more difficult, as speakers lack the real-world knowledge and experiences to grasp the historical basis of this mapping (contrary to, for instance, *wakatà:riote* above, where the actual meaning cannot at first be predicted from the literal one, but the link between the two can be understood after they have been revealed). This arguably further complexifies the memorization and acquisition of these idiomatic expressions, because learners cannot anchor their understanding of these expressions in extra-linguistic knowledge. The idiomatic expression in (1) (*tewakatene'konhrekstha'tsheriià:kon* 'I am broke', literally 'my hammer is broken into two pieces') provides a good example of this: it originated in the early 20th century, when professions involving hammers remained the primary sources of income for many speakers, which is no longer the case today.

A third key obstacle mentioned by TB relates to the usage of idiomatic expressions:

(14) 'How difficult that is? I think the difficulty is finding out where and when and how to use them.' (TB)

While we have so far mostly focused on the acquisition difficulties that idiomatic expressions present in terms of memorization, TB points out that mastering their appropriate usage in speech can be equally, if not more, challenging. Indeed, for each of them, one has to acquire the dialect in which it is actually used, the registers in which it is acceptably used (some, especially the humorous ones, often revolve around socially taboo topics such as sex), as well as the social situations in which it is felicitously used (i.e. the contexts to which it applies); and we are not even considering its integration with other elements within the information structure of a given utterance.

A final obstacle mentioned by AM concerns the lack of opportunities to use idioms:

(15) 'I think part of a bigger challenge would be having a bigger speech community that's really proficient, but we're not there yet. […] I'm aware and I know a lot of them [idiomatic expressions], but I don't really use them all, because they don't fit with what my daily activities are. I'll use the ones that work for my life, but usually some don't occur.' (AM)

If a major part of L2 acquisition involves strengthening neural pathways through practice, then it is reasonable to hypothesize that lacking opportunities to use certain aspects of the target language makes these aspects more difficult to acquire. For AM, this is essentially what we find for idiomatic expressions, in two major ways. First, the absence of a larger and more proficient speech community means that there are fewer people for learners to practice using idiomatic expressions with (this is of course a more general issue which applies to all aspects of the Kanien'kéha language). Second, the specificity of some of these expressions means that contexts in which they are relevant rarely occur in most people's lives today (e.g. hopefully, situations in which it is appropriate for a Kanien'kéha speaker to utter *tewakatene'konhrekstha'tsheriià:kon* 'I am broke' are not too common). The acquisition of idioms is thus further complexified by the lack of opportunities which L2 learners have to practice using them. Even if they still learn them through brute-force rote memorization, it is unlikely that they will retain them without practice. To conclude, then, these four obstacles make idiomatic expressions difficult to acquire for L2 learners.

5.   Pedagogy

The last question that we tackled in our focus group concerned pedagogy: how can we improve the teaching and L2 acquisition of idiomatic expressions? Three main strategies were suggested by participants. Two of them first mentioned the possibility of explicitly teaching these expressions as part of immersion curricula:

(16) a.   'I guess maybe when you're designing the program, you could establish the most common ones that are used and actually teach them, or make sure you're using them in class.' (KH)

b.   'Sometimes it has to be overtly taught. Like they don't get something and so you have to make it into a lesson, right? [...] They [idiomatic expressions] need

to be associated with other verbs that are kind of similar, going hand in hand. Like, for example, when we teach a certain verb, you can say 'well, there's also this expression you can use'.' (AM)

KH states that it might be beneficial to overtly teach idioms, especially the most common ones, as part of the core curriculum alongside more traditional grammatical components. This could potentially help students memorize them. AM concurs, and suggests two concrete options: either establish an entire unit devoted exclusively to idiomatic expressions, or teach them 'as they come up' (e.g. every time students learn a new verb, the instructor can mention in passing a few of the most common idioms based on it).

Explicitly teaching idioms raises some issues, however. RB, for instance, warns against the dangers of 'spending all day dissecting the etymology of a couple of words' instead of practicing aspects of the language that will truly improve students' proficiency (e.g. verbal morphology), as some of them 'want to know what every little part of every single word translates to' in this morphologically complex polysynthetic language. In order to mitigate these issues, two participants suggested project-based methods instead:

(17) a. 'It's a lot of project-based stuff. These projects, that's where these expressions come up definitely organically, especially in talking with L1 speakers. We have like a class lexicon too, and that's just a shared document for these expressions and cool things. So they talk to L1 speakers, re-listen to it through an active listening exercise where they transcribe and try to translate everything.' (RB)

b. 'I think a good method perhaps would be to just give them the expression, then ask them to go search for a speaker to explain the meaning of it, and then they come back and explain to the class what it means. And then as a recap of them all, a fun thing to do is to have them mime the expression. […] They would remember it more I think that way, without going through English.' (KH)

RB presents the projects that students carry out in the third-year program at Onkwawén:na Kentyóhkwa: students record conversations with L1 speakers, and then listen back to them in order to transcribe and translate them. Idioms often tend to spontaneously come up during these conversations, which students can then add to a shared class lexicon. KH proposes an alternative project-based option: give students an idiomatic expression, have them look for its meaning by asking L1 speakers, and then let them present their findings to the class orally or through miming. Presumably, such project-based methods in which students more actively engage with the materials allow them to 'remember it more'.

Two participants went further, by promoting the 'contextual' acquisition of idioms:

(18) a. 'I think it's important to learn it [idiomatic expressions] naturally too, and not just like get a lesson per se. When it comes up, then teach it.' (KH)

b. 'I think it's about contextual language development, that's based in the learner's everyday lived experiences. I think that's where it [idiomatic expressions] will

come up the most easily. We need to anchor our approach, our curriculum, our pedagogy. What phrases, what words, what actions, what tasks do we need to complete everyday?' (TB)

For KH, it is important to acquire idioms 'naturally' (i.e. through interaction with L1 speakers), as explicit lessons might not always be very effective to that end, presumably due to the difficulty of accurately transmitting knowledge concerning the contexts in which these expressions can or cannot be used within immersion curricula focusing on grammar. TB expands on this idea: immersion programs have to 'anchor' their teaching of idioms in 'everyday lived experiences' in order to enable 'contextual language development.' As seen in the previous section, this is in fact how idioms are usually acquired.

Note that these last two methods systematically involve interaction with L1 speakers, something which three participants promoted on a larger scale:

(19) a. 'But also, you can just go and live with an elder after the immersion program, to learn the language.' (AM)

b. 'I think more incorporation of first language knowledge in adult second language programming, in whichever way, is needed. […] I would really like to see little first language speaker teams of two or three first language speakers come to the communities and work with families, in their homes, doing regular everyday things in the language, and helping them develop proficiency.' (TB)

c. 'Language-learning is a lot of interacting with sympathetic and non-sympathetic interlocutors, and you're gonna learn a lot from both of those. You can make all kinds of mistakes to some speakers, and they'll just let you go. Other times, you'll get people who stop you every time you make a mistake. Both types of interlocutors are very beneficial to your language-learning.' (RB)

The idea is that one effective way to acquire the missing layer of authentic proficiency (including idioms) and suppress interference from English is to communicate as much as possible with native speakers post-immersion. This interaction can take several forms: while AM discusses the option of L2 learners moving into L1 speakers' homes, TB mentions that it is also possible for L1 speakers to move into L2-learning homes in order to create a totally Kanien'kéha-speaking household. RB remarks on the importance of the different attitudes of L1 speakers towards imperfect L2 speech: both sympathetic and unsympathetic speakers are 'very beneficial to your language-learning', presumably because the former inspire motivation, while the latter provide actual negative feedback which helps the learner corrects their mistakes.

Crucially, interacting with L1 speakers also helps mitigate the limitations of these immersion programs, as language teachers themselves acknowledge:

(20) '[Our program] focuses initially on developing knowledge of morphology and syntax. […] Restricted mainly to classroom contexts, learning activities are not

embedded within a community context, and focus more so on grammatical correctness rather than native speaker-like semantics, prosody, and pragmatics. Learners often lack knowledge of colloquial expressions, idioms, contractions, and slang, and demonstrate difficulty […] interacting with unsympathetic native speakers. Former learners of Kanien'kéha in immersion programs who have become highly proficient L2 speakers have sought out contact with L1 speakers of Kanien'kéha after program completion and in this way have acquired native speaker-like semantics, prosody, and pragmatics.' (Green and Maracle 2018: 149)

Because (as mentioned several times above) immersion programs tend to focus on grammar, due to the massive typological distance between analytic English and polysynthetic Kanien'kéha, L2 learners may often 'lack knowledge' of elements peripheral to the core morphosyntactic structure of the language, and yet central to live communication, such as idioms. In order to fill that gap, L2 learners sometimes choose to spend time with L1 speakers post-immersion, providing them with a more holistic environment filled with 'authentic' language of the kind they are missing.

Accessing L1 speech is not always easily feasible, however. Given the advanced age of most L1 speakers, the only way for L2 learners to increase their interactions with them is generally to move to the area where these native speakers reside, which may often be in another community. The issue is that 'a lot of the students are married and have families, they're not gonna pick up and move for months to another community' (OM). This is especially true of the Western communities (Tyendinaga, Ohswé:ken, and Wáhta in Ontario), which have very few L1 speakers left, and whose members therefore must but often cannot move to the Eastern communities (Ahkwesáhsne, Kahnawà:ke, and Kanehsatà:ke in Quebec) if they wish to spend time with native speakers.

In order to make native speaker-knowledge more widely accessible, language documentation may also be a viable strategy:

(21) 'One of the ways that we have to acquire [the language] is through documented materials. Because of the aging demographic of our speakers, it's always more and more important that we bring them to us, and the cool thing is that we have these technological tools to help bring them to us. It's not ideal. Ideally, we would have inter-generational within the home, whether that's a formal or informal setting.' (TB)

TB has years of experience in the documentation of Kanien'kéha. For him, documenting native speaker knowledge, especially unpredictable elements such as idioms, is an effective way to preserve the knowledge of L1 speakers in the face of their 'aging demographic', and of integrating it into L2 immersion curricula. This allows teachers to fill in the gap left by the lack of L1 speakers in certain communities, without physically displacing them. Documenting L1 speech in more depth would not only be useful for the Western communities which have no native speakers left, but will eventually be a key component of revitalization efforts in the Eastern communities as well, as the remaining L1 speakers on whom they rely now will most likely pass away within the next generation. Furthermore, TB adds that language documentation can now be aided by new technologies, such as

digital recording software. He nevertheless concludes by pointing out that L2 teaching, no matter how well-informed by L1 knowledge, can never trump the efficiency of natural inter-generational transmission within the home, making it easy to see why the restoration of this process is the ultimate end goal of all Kanien'kéha L2 revitalization efforts.

6.   Conclusion

This work examined the issue of L2 revitalization in Kanien'kéha through a case study on idioms. Specifically, we tried to identify the implications of these expressions for the creation in adult immersion programs of 'authentic' L2 speakers (and ultimately for the re-establishment of inter-generational transmission, as these new L2 speakers transmit the language to their L1 children). We focused on four specific issues.

First, participants insisted that idiomatic expressions carry out crucial expressive, humoristic, phatic, and cultural functions in Kanien'kéha, and should therefore be preserved as part of the authentic language to revitalize. Second, we saw that speakers generally equate authentic Kanien'kéha with L1 speech and uphold it as the target of revitalization, but remark that L2 speech is often less authentic when it comes to these idioms, to the point where it might impede comprehensibility for L1 speakers. Third, participants mentioned a few key challenges that idiomatic expressions create for L2 learners, especially in terms of memorization and usage. Finally, we summarized some of the participants' suggestions concerning potential ways to facilitate the L2 acquisition of idioms, such as explicit teaching, project-based learning, and contextual learning. We also noticed that they insisted particularly strongly on the benefits of exposure to L1 speech, as a way to mitigate the limitations of immersion programs that focus on grammar.

Crucially, as repeated throughout, I focused on idiomatic expressions not for their own sake, but rather as a case study of a much larger phenomenon, whereby L2 learners often face tremendous difficulties post-immersion in acquiring a final layer of proficiency and suppressing L1 interference in order to sound truly authentic. Given that, according to the current L2 revitalization strategy, these young adult L2 speakers (rather than elder L1s) will have to restore inter-generational transmission themselves by raising new L1 children, immersion programs must do (and are doing) everything they can to bridge this proficiency gap and maximize the authenticity of L2 speakers. Participants were acutely aware of this, and constantly related their specific points concerning idioms to this bigger picture. In this sense, it is my hope that this case study will have shed some light on this larger issue, and may thus find useful applications outside of its narrow focus; especially as one of its primary goals was to clarify the challenges at play in this issue and suggest potential solutions to them, in order to contribute to the revitalization of Kanyen'kéha.

These findings, however, should always be appreciated against a clear perception of the complexity of language endangerment situations. In particular, it is important to keep in mind that these contexts are in constant evolution, and that, therefore, so should be the revitalization strategies designed in response to them, so that they remain relevant and effective. That is probably why TB also mentioned the need for self-reflection:

(22) 'The cool thing about having this experience [the difficulty of acquiring authentic Kanien'kéha] with so many graduates of immersion programs is that it's afforded us an opportunity to learn a lot from them. Maybe this is one of the most important learnings. We need to be reflexive in our practice, we need to learn from our learners, our speakers, our teachers, to see what's working and what's not working.' (TB)

This work is in a sense an attempt at answering this call, by consulting various Kanien'kéha language workers and synthesizing their expert opinions in order to inform future revitalization practices. Thus, although I hope that the findings summarized in this work will be found helpful and actionable by Kanien'kéha immersion teachers in the current context, further research may become necessary as the revitalization of the language hopefully moves forward, and the situation shifts accordingly.

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