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Heritage languages and language as heritage: the language of heritage in Canada and beyond

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ABSTRACT

This article draws on recent discourses surrounding intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and its relationship to language preservation, practice, and revitalisation to propose that language be considered a form and practice of heritage in and of itself, not merely a vehicle for the conveyance of ICH. As such, language can serve as a bridge between the often-parallel tracks of tangible and intangible heritage, helping arrive at an understanding of heritage that is broader, more nuanced, and more inclusive. Until now, most scholars have resisted fully characterising language as heritage, viewing ‘heritagisation’ as a threat to the vitality of language rather than embracing language as a boon to the aliveness of heritage. In support of our argument, we draw on examples from Latin America, Asia, and in particular Canada to highlight specific historical and political discourses that determine whose language counts as heritage and whose heritage counts more generally. While certain communities may derive some benefit from an acknowledgement of their language as a form of heritage in service of a language reclamation agenda, the field of heritage will benefit greatly from inviting the vitality of language to enrich its many facets – discourse, practice, materiality, and the interplay among these three.

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Preface

This article stems from discussions between the two authors, both of whom work at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver, Canada. Eaton, a PhD student in Socio-Cultural Anthropology, has a background in heritage studies, and Turin, an associate professor of Anthropology and Critical Indigenous Studies, has a research focus on language. Both authors are newcomers to Canada and were intrigued by the use of the term ‘heritage languages’ and its place in the curriculum of our university. Paging (or, rather, clicking) through the most recent UBC course catalogue¹ reveals a very particular and contingent use of the word ‘heritage’. Our university offers full, separate, and parallel learning tracks for ‘heritage’ and ‘non-heritage’ speakers of Mandarin Chinese and Cantonese (both of which have large numbers of speakers in Vancouver). Elsewhere in the catalogue, the course Persian Reading and Writing for Persian-Speaking Students is ‘restricted to Persian heritage speakers with aural/oral knowledge but no reading/writing skills’, indicating a specific conceptualisation of the skills that a heritage speaker of a language is expected to possess. Conversely, a Persian Short Story course is offered for ‘native and heritage speakers’,

indicating distinct forms of language proficiency between these two categories. At our university at least, the term ‘heritage language’ evokes a certain set of relations, imaginings, attributions and proficiencies.

Just as telling as the course entries focusing on language instruction are those that mention heritage but have no reference to language: an Anthropology course on Museums and Heritage and a Planning course on Urban Design. The only other course with ‘heritage’ in its description that is not explicitly focussed on language instruction is one devoted to revitalising Indigenous languages. According to its description, this course assesses how various ‘heritage resources’, including libraries, archives, and museums ‘can contribute to endangered language and cultural heritage sustainability’.

Looking at the various ways that ‘heritage’ is deployed in the course catalogue of our university, we see a pattern emerging. When it comes to the languages of newcomers, settlers, and immigrants to Canada, heritage refers to knowledge of an ancestral language that is essentially incomplete. In relation to the languages spoken by Indigenous peoples, however, heritage refers to tools and techniques that can aid preservation, revitalisation, and reclamation in the face of diminishment and endangerment. Our cursory review of these course catalogue entries offers insights into how the terms heritage and language are used in relation to one another. This, in turn, has encouraged us to explore further, both in the literature and through our fieldwork experiences, productive ways to theorise the connection between heritage and language.

Introduction

In this article, we suggest that the work of heritage – even within the emergent space of Critical Heritage Studies (CHS) – would benefit from greater attention to language. As a spoken and signed cultural practice unique to our species and as an embodied expression of individual and collective belonging, language remains under-theorised within the broader landscape of heritage studies, and it deserves additional intellectual scrutiny and further analytical attention. To that end, we invite critical consideration on the nature of the relationship between heritage and language.

Our inquiry addresses the following questions. First, we assess how language is perceived, theorised, and mobilised within various heritage discourses. Second, we explore under what conditions language can be considered ‘heritage’, and importantly, by whom and to what end. While the term ‘heritage language’ is common in settler colonial states such as the United States and Canada, this expression merely hints at an association with heritage that is broadly conceived. We understand the use of heritage language in such contexts to communicate highly specific and coded meanings about imagined ancestral homelands and immigration status that bears only a tangential relationship to the definition of heritage as understood by professionals working in the field.

Through our comparative analysis of relevant examples, we identify a tendency: language is usually only considered to be a form of heritage when it is no longer spoken or used as the dominant form of communication in a society (Turin 2014). In this contribution, we draw on studies from Latin America, Asia, and in particular Canada to consider the place of language in the cultivation of discourses of belonging. In Canada, as a case in point, while English and French receive generous federal support and protection as co-official languages (Cardinal 2004), we explore what place Indigenous languages hold in the national consciousness and whether official and officialising heritage frameworks offer autochthonous languages any protection and resources.

Engaging with the extant literature on heritage and language, we parse out moments of interaction and divergence between these two fields of academic inquiry and cultural practice. We conclude by proposing that an understanding of language *as* heritage can both enrich and challenge assumptions of how heritage functions; and we envision that the work of language revitalisation and reclamation may serve as a productive conduit between heritage as preservation and living heritage as contemporary practice and use.

Locating language in discourses of heritage

Situating language within heritage studies requires a particular frame of engagement with heritage *discourses* – in particular, the relationship between heritage discourses and materiality. While heritage discourses and practices have always involved – consciously or not – values-based engagement with the past, recent theoretical developments in the field of heritage studies have opened up new ways of understanding the relationship between language and heritage. In considering heritage in relation to language, we engage with changing considerations of what constitutes heritage. This includes both the generative concept of heritage discourses and one very singular outcome of the practice of international heritage discourses: the categorisation of specific heritage elements as either tangible or intangible.

Over the past several decades, the discipline of heritage studies has shifted from an overwhelming focus on the preservation of the material fabric of human cultural expression towards an understanding of heritage as a discursive process (Smith 2006). This realignment has provided an opening to consider heritage as not only something to be preserved, but as a meaning-making process in and of itself that engages with the past, is mindful of the needs of the present, and at once focused on the transmission of certain values into the future (Smith 2006; Harrison 2013). Earlier conceptions of heritage as primarily invested in historical and material objects effectively foreclosed the inclusion of language in the practice of heritage. Today's appreciation of heritage as a form of *discourse* invites us to consider how language and heritage may be intertwined. Making connections between heritage and language has the potential to both benefit language revitalisation efforts and enrich heritage studies.

We find the conception of heritage as discourse – and particularly as an authorised discourse – to be strongly suggestive of an intimate association with language. For Smith (2006, 11), an authorised heritage discourse (AHD) is a hegemonic, institutionalised form of governance that relies heavily on 'expert knowledge' to validate a particular set of practices and performances. In this way, the 'language' of heritage – or, better, the language of the AHD – serves as a specialised professional jargon for a cadre of heritage gatekeepers. In the international heritage field, the 'authorising' of heritage discourses is dominated by literature written in English, French (the dual languages of UNESCO and its ancillary organs), Italian, Spanish, and other European languages (Gentry and Smith 2019). It is worth noting that these languages are also the linguistic vehicles of European colonialism and that heritage is only one of many discourses and ideologies which have been deployed to impose worldviews on Indigenous and original inhabitants living in what are now modern nation-states.

While the language of heritage discourses may be rooted – as ostensibly scientific language often is – in hegemonic gatekeeping practices that promote certain worldviews over others, recent directions in both heritage research and international heritage discourses point to a productive opening for incorporating language itself *as* heritage. In positioning the field of Critical Heritage Studies vis-à-vis the 'heritage canon', Gentry and Smith (2019) advocate for an active engagement with heritage discourses and a critical analysis of heritage making. In so doing, they consider heritage to be both politically engaged and culturally connected, and therefore inherently socially motivated. We find this realignment exciting. Our contribution may be read as an extension of Gentry and Smith's intervention in that we propose language be included in both the theory and practice of heritage, enriching our understanding and challenging our assumptions of how heritage functions.

We envision that by positioning language within Critical Heritage Studies, it will become possible to further decrease the gap that has emerged between tangible heritage (all things material, such as historic buildings and objects) and intangible heritage (practices and knowledge, such as dance, song, and storytelling). As Harrison and Rose (2010) note, the tangible-intangible dualism can be problematic on account of its rootedness in other western dualisms (e.g. culture-nature, mind-matter) that assume human reason to be separate from and dominant over the material world.

We understand language to serve as a bridge between what can sometimes appear to be two solitudes – the parallel tracks of tangible and intangible heritage – helping us to arrive at an understanding of heritage that is broader, more nuanced, and more inclusive. At the same time, we acknowledge the value of expert practices of heritage – particularly at the state and supra-state level (Hølleland and Skrede 2019) – and we do not seek to minimise their lasting impact. In these intergovernmental domains, distinctions between tangible and intangible heritage remain engrained and have long served important strategic purposes (cf. Turner and Tomer 2013).

Synthesising heritage and language: a review of recent literature

Given this rootedness, it is instructive to review how recent scholarship has positioned language within established frameworks of heritage classification. Analysing the then-newly-adopted UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which mentions language only once, Smeets (2004) concludes that ‘as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage [ICH]’ (UNESCO 2003, 2), language is integral to the safeguarding of ICH although not itself a manifestation of it. This is an intriguing distinction, situating language less as an output, product, or end in itself but rather as a medium for the transmission of heritage.

Brief as it may be, the framing of language as a ‘vehicle’ of ICH within the 2003 Convention – as well as the framing of ICH itself within the convention – has influenced subsequent studies that explore the connections between heritage and language. Reviewing the transmission of ethnic languages in Malacca, a World Heritage Site in Malaysia, Abu Bakar et al. (2014) conclude that the transmission of these languages does not strongly encourage or stimulate other ICH practices overall. The authors point to a weak statistical association between ethnic language practices and established ICH practices as recognised by UNESCO, including Oral Tradition, Performing Arts, Knowledge, Social Practices and Traditional Craftsmanship. Bakar et al. (2014, 219) also identify the unfavourable influence of ‘universal cultures’ which have served to dissuade younger generations as well as individuals from higher socio-economic groups from practicing their local cultures.

The study by Bakar et al. helps to expose key differences between language and heritage, as well as the ways that heritage and language push against limits inherent in international regimes of classification and tabulation. First, studies of ICH such as Bakar et al.’s that rely on UNESCO’s fixed categories of recognition may not be granular enough to consider the interplay between materiality and practice that exists in many expressions of heritage. As we argue below, thinking of language as heritage presents an opportunity for spanning discourses of tangible and intangible heritage by breathing new life into ‘preserved’ heritage objects. Second, agreeing with Bakar et al. 2014, we identify a tension between the established World Heritage principle of ‘outstanding *universal* value’ (our italics) and the necessarily very *local* and oftentimes territorial practices of both heritage and language which can be directly threatened by the pressures exerted by universalising discourses mobilised at national and international scales.

Other research in heritage studies that engages with language includes Ateca-Amestoy, Gorostiaga, and Rossi 2020, in which the authors assess cultural heritage engagement in eighteen Latin American countries. Through a survey of visits to historic sites and participation in community celebrations, the authors explore, among other variables, whether speaking an Indigenous language correlates with increased heritage participation. Their findings show that ‘there are larger participation rates in intangible heritage-related activities, but below average participation in the case of visits to heritage sites’ among people who speak an Indigenous language (Ateca-Amestoy, Gorostiaga, and Rossi 2020, 408) and that ‘social capital and speaking an indigenous language are variables related to higher probability of participating in community celebrations’ (416).

Ateca-Amestoy, Gorostiaga, and Rossi helpfully challenge the dominance of activities related to tangible heritage (such as visits to monuments and historical sites) in studies measuring heritage engagement. Yet, we propose that an association, perhaps even a correlation, between heritage site visits and language retention may not reveal much about the relationship between heritage and

language. Inevitably, the outcomes of such a survey will be influenced by how heritage (especially the term ‘heritage site’) is defined by experts and researchers. Ateca-Amestoy, Gorostiaga, and Rossi do not appear to question how the identification of specific sites *as heritage* (i.e. official designations based on national and international AHDs) may influence who is interested in visiting a site, or even to what extent they imagine that they belong there. What, for example, might we stand to learn if we were to extend the definition of ‘heritage sites’ to include places where community celebrations are held? How might the results of such a survey differ under those parameters? We suggest that such research questions might offer insights into the ways in which the goals of speakers, language users, and cultural practitioners may at times be at odds with the values of heritage experts who champion their practice.

In our analysis, case studies that consider language *in relation to* heritage often stop short of acknowledging language *as* heritage. In the following section, we engage with literature that addresses language as heritage and find that in instances where language is in fact considered heritage, this often reflects poorly on the health of the language in question.

Considering language as heritage: what consequence?

We now turn to a deceptively simple question: when is language considered ‘heritage’, by whom, and to what end? We have observed that in most mainstream discourses, language only becomes heritage when it is perceived to be under threat of disappearance. By extension, we argue, when language exists as a lived, vibrant, and embodied practice, the organising framework of heritage is generally thought to be less relevant. In such instances, even thinking about language as heritage can be taken as a sign that competence, practice, and transmission are ebbing away, moving from fluency towards diminishment, and in the process, inching towards heritage. The positioning of language vis-à-vis heritage in the literature supports this disheartening perception.

Smeets (2004, 161) discusses the loss of linguistic diversity as one reason for including language within intangible cultural heritage, given that specific obligations regarding language preservation have fallen directly to those states party to the 2003 UNESCO Convention. Bernini (2014) identifies the threats posed to languages by linguistic imperialism, globalisation, and the growth of the nation-state, proposing the term ‘ecolinguistic capital’ to recognise the importance of connections between language, people, and place. For Bernini (2014, 174), a recognition of language as intangible cultural heritage is presupposed by discourses of ecolinguistic rights, which provide the basis for ecolinguistic capital and a means of countering language loss by de-emphasising a purely instrumentalist approach to language. Without minimising the ongoing cultural oppression that many language communities continue to face, we ask whether language can be considered heritage without necessarily being considered at risk of loss?

We take issue with the suggestion that when language is understood to be a form heritage, it somehow suggests a failure – either a disconnect between linguistic values and actual language practice, or a perceived lack of cultural vitality. Aside from the problematic element of victim shaming (Perley 2012) – as in, ‘you brought this upon yourself by not transmitting your language to the next generation’ – those mobilising heritage discourses would be well served to attend more carefully to why so many languages are endangered in the first place, and what the risk actually entails.

Across the world, Indigenous languages are under threat because of orchestrated efforts by states to eliminate Indigenous people and silence their speech, what some scholars have referred to as linguicide (Turin 2019b). Yet, while acts of violence to material culture, like the 2001 destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan, result in international outcry (United Nations 2001), the diminishment and destruction of many of the world’s languages is still regularly portrayed as an unavoidable and inevitable consequence of processes of modernisation and globalisation.² Instead,

linguistic decline needs to be understood as the direct result of centuries of state-sponsored neglect and the product of intentional policies aimed at the cultural assimilation and termination of Indigenous peoples (Pine and Turin 2017).

The imminent threat to many Indigenous languages has a structural parallel in the understandings of heritage being 'at risk': the simple idea that heritage would not need defending if it was not in danger. This logic and the language of 'safeguarding' has received sustained critique within CHS (Harrison 2013; Rico 2015; Akagawa and Smith 2018; DeSilvey and Harrison 2020). Akagawa and Smith (2018) note that while the 2003 UNESCO Convention mounts an important challenge to Eurocentric, authorised heritage discourses, the Convention advances thinking that can at the very same time undermine these efforts.

The choice of terminology offers a case in point. Using phrases such as 'intangible value' and 'tangible value' can reassert 'expert heritage values over community and other non-expert values' (Akagawa and Smith 2018, 2). Pushing 'at risk' thinking further still, Rodney Harrison (2013, 26–28) suggests that the concept of risk establishes conditions of heritage governmentality, where the management of risk requires increasingly bureaucratised and professionalised systems of heritage governance. CHS helpfully challenges the preconception that when something is considered heritage, it carries with it an implied threat of loss *together with* the case for professionalised intervention in the form of conservation, protective legislation, and recognition.

When a language is flagged as 'endangered', a similar set of logics and responses are enacted to those outlined above. First, there is the demotivating reality that the more at-risk a language is, the more urgent and compelling the appeals are for funding (Dobrin, Austin, and Nathan 2007). In this 'salvage' logic, diminishment is rewarded with resources: the fewer speakers there are, the more attention and funding a language community can expect to leverage. While the most severely marginalised languages – when represented and packaged in ways that attract attention – can access resources, and the least marginalised (such as international and colonial languages) have the backing of formidable nation states, government-funded institutions, and academies that represent their needs, Indigenous languages that are either not gasping for breath or simply less visible for any number of reasons receive very little sustained support. Regrettably, then, endangered languages need to be at once vital enough to warrant scholarly attention and yet fragile enough to be recognised and thereby access sustained funding.

In addition to the tension outlined above regarding fragility, visibility, and resourcing, the role of archives as powerful instruments of control and heritage making requires further investigation. The growth in access to digital recording technology has meant that contemporary research initiatives working with speakers of endangered languages are not only born digital, but often birthed directly into an archive. At the same time, however, older collections of recordings made by earlier generations of ethnographers and linguists are themselves ever more endangered, becoming orphaned when their collectors die or fragmented into their component parts based on the medium of documentation when they are finally deposited in an archive (Turin 2011). Major international research programmes that are funded by philanthropic organisations in support of endangered language documentation usually prioritise the creation of an 'archive' of the primary language data as a central and measurable output. Grant-giving bodies often imagine that a language archive will withstand the test of time, serving both the speech community whose voices and verbs have been accessioned and a wider societal goal of preserving and protecting records of human expressive diversity for posterity.

While there is no doubt that archival studies are becoming more agile and responsive to the needs of historically marginalised communities (Turin, Wheeler, and Wilkinson 2013), archives remain sites of imperial control, cultural hegemony, and structural violence that can contribute to heritage being perceived as frozen, ossified, or unbendingly rigid (Stoler 2002, 2009). The goals of linguists and archivists are not necessarily orthogonal to those of language speakers and community members, but the archiving imperative baked into the rubrics and expectations of many contemporary research projects raises complex questions around power, ownership, control, access, and

possession (Turin 2019a). In addition, certain traditional archival beliefs and practices can work to entrench unwelcome oppositions between different stakeholders who may have very different expectations in term of visibility and access.

As with language, identifying certain heritage resources as endangered can be an effective strategy to secure political and financial support for their preservation. Unlike languages, however, ‘successfully preserved’ heritage assets often receive high levels of funding and attention. This may be because they are understood to be beneficial to the tourism economy (Garrod and Fyall 2000) and/or particularly ‘charismatic’ and therefore suitable for strategic deployment by governments looking to promote a national brand (Ahn and Wu 2015), even if the outcome may be a certain degree of exotification (MacCarthy 2020). National political entities don’t commonly have the strongest track record of uplifting Indigenous cultures and languages unless these can be effectively commodified (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). Assertions of linguistic sovereignty and self-determination have a subversive elasticity that renders them not only less conducive to state-driven narratives, but also more problematic for nation building projects, introducing multiplicity in situations where governments often seek clarity through unity (Meek 2017).³

The number of contemporary media reports, films, and podcasts that focus on ‘saving’ endangered or ‘disappearing’ languages reflects an apparently insatiable public appetite for what was until recently a less visible undertaking: language documentation, conservation, and revitalisation. While for some the public interest and mainstreaming have been welcome, offering both an infusion of funding and a timely platform to talk about the challenges facing minoritized languages the world over, others are drawing attention to the more problematic aspects of language as ‘commodity’ that have ensued from this increased visibility. The interest and investment of large philanthropic organisations (Arcadia Fund and the Volkswagen Foundation, in particular) and tech giants such as Google in endangered language work has reinforced a sense that the resources directed at projects in the global south are helping to build careers, collections, and prestige in the global north.

A further point of intersection between language work and heritage studies is the domain of identity formation through enactments of belonging. Language and identity form a fully developed area of scholarly interest (cf. McCarty et al. 2009; Baloy 2011; McCarty 2014; Chew, Greendeer, and Keliiaa 2015; Davis 2016), mirroring the strong association that exists in research on heritage and identity (cf. McLean 2006; Crang and Tolia-Kelly 2010; Russell 2010; Ashworth 2014; Gibson 2017). As Smith notes, echoing what anthropologists have long asserted about the construction of linguistic identities:

Identity is not simply something ‘produced’ or represented by heritage places or heritage moments, but is something actively and continually recreated and negotiated as people, communities and institutions reinterpret, remember and reassess the meaning of the past in terms of the social, cultural and political needs of the present. It is thus simultaneously about change and continuity; it is a mentality or discourse in which certain realities and ideas of ‘being’ are constituted, rehearsed, contested and negotiated and ultimately remade. (2006, 83)

We see very similar logics playing out in the domain of language. For example, the first phase of the Linguistic Survey of Sikkim – India’s second smallest and least populous state – conducted in 2005–2006, sought to uncover some of the complexities around understandings of identity and belonging among school-going children. One of the more unexpected findings of the survey was that more young people identified the autochthonous and Indigenous languages of Sikkim as their mother tongue than there were students who identified as actually speaking these same languages. This apparent anomaly can be understood as an expression of an emotional connection to an ancestral heritage, to an ethnic identity, and to a sense of linguistic belonging (Turin 2014, 386). The Linguistic Survey of Sikkim was helpful in uncovering specific patterns of language shift and in identifying how an individual’s linguistic heritage can serve as a convenient proxy for ethnicity,

helping to cultivate a sense of attachment. In addition, the project helped to illustrate how linguistic identities can challenge hegemonic narratives about how and where language communities situate themselves within nation-states.

Language identities, like heritage identities, are constantly being negotiated in relation to the needs of the present, to understandings of the past and in anticipation of an imagined future. As the studies outlined above demonstrate, both language and heritage are inextricably tied to processes of identity-making, meaning-making, and belonging, though not always in ways that are immediately apparent. Moreover, heritage and language not only exhibit shared characteristics and parallel discourses but are explicitly linked together through instances when language is considered to *be* heritage. In the sections that follow, we draw on examples from Canada to highlight specific historical and contemporary discourses that determine whose language counts as heritage and whose heritage counts.

When and why language is considered heritage: the curious case of Canada

In 2009, Canada's then Commissioner of Official Languages Graham Fraser was quoted as saying: '[I]n the same way that race is at the core of . . . American experience and class is at the core of British experience, I think that language is at the core of Canadian experience'. Canada is internationally celebrated for its official commitment to bilingualism at the federal level – providing resources and support to two European settler languages, English and French, neither of which were originally from the territory that is now Canada and both of which have homelands where the languages are thriving. In this rather paradoxical state-sponsored recognition lies a tension: Canada is home to rich multilingualism (Werker et al. 2021), thanks not only to the hundreds of Indigenous languages spoken in what today constitutes Canada, but on account of the in-migration of people from around the world who have carried their languages with them as they have settled and made Canada their new home.

At a structural and symbolic level, the national ministerial portfolio in which heritage and language are located reveals something of the official perceptions and governance models of both fields. Since 2006, the Canadian federal government has entrusted the implementation of its language policies – for both of its two official languages and for Indigenous languages – to the Heritage Ministry. As of April 2022, the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages notes on its website that, 'Canadian Heritage is responsible for coordinating the implementation of Part VII of the *Official Languages Act* [which] pertains in particular to the federal government's commitment to enhance the vitality of English and French minority communities and support their development'.⁴ In addition to Canada's two official languages, programmes for Indigenous languages also fall under the purview of the Heritage Ministry, meaning to say that all of the federal government's language-related activities are subsumed within the expansive portfolio of Canadian Heritage.

At the provincial and local levels, Canada invests substantially in supporting *heritage languages*, a term that refers to all languages other than Indigenous languages and the two official languages (Cummins 1992) – in other words, those languages that fall outside the portfolio of the Heritage Ministry. Heritage language programmes in Canada include such diverse offerings as Cantonese, German, Hebrew, Italian, Korean, Mandarin, Portuguese, Punjabi, Spanish, Tamil, Ukrainian, Urdu, and dozens of other languages spoken by immigrant communities (Nagy 2021). Duff and Li (2009, 4) outline how 'Canada has long been a leader in developing pro-active policies and initiatives to support minority and heritage language instruction and maintenance'. Despite the existence of similar language learning initiatives in the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States that are identified using other descriptors, such as *community*, *complementary*, *ancestral*, *ethnic*, or *immigrant* (Duff and Li 2009, 4), the term 'heritage language education' seems to have originated with Canadian programmes (Baker 2001).

The designation 'heritage language' speaks to a relationship between heritage and language that is at once specific and yet also curiously unspecified. While the working definition varies by national and institutional context (cf. Polinsky and Kagan 2007; Leeman 2015; Nagy 2021), heritage

languages in the Canadian setting appear to have the following characteristics. First, they are or were originally spoken somewhere else, in a location other than where they are currently spoken. Second, they were brought to their current location through the migration and settlement of their speakers. Third, the term ‘heritage language’ invokes ancestry and historical origin, not nationality or political allegiance, and is therefore unthreatening to the integrity of the nation state in which such languages are now spoken. Fourth, the term is intentionally agnostic about contemporary spoken ability, not discerning between speakers and ‘rememberers’ (Grenoble and Whaley 2005). Individuals are thus free to invoke a connection with a heritage language simply through identification with the cultural community of origin, without having to demonstrate any specific level of competence. Finally, and perhaps most tellingly, a diagnostic feature of a heritage language is that fluency is an ideal that is generally maintained elsewhere. The linguistic homeland is usually the site of the imagined and ideal fluency, and this is necessarily located outside the country of current settlement.

This heavily loaded definition and the understandings that it encodes are epistemologically and emotionally important for at least two reasons. First, unlike Indigenous languages which are by definition from the territory where they are spoken and have no other homeland to invoke or return to, heritage languages have a ‘motherland’ located elsewhere, where ‘mother tongue’ speakers are often assumed to preserve the original, authentic language with the richest cultural expression. Second, and again unlike Indigenous languages, should one’s descendants eventually cease to use, understand, and speak their heritage language, individuals will be able to draw on the existence and cultural assets of the linguistic homeland through strategies such as immersive language learning opportunities, summer camps, and homestays with relatives.

The existence of an external site of imagined fluency offers settlers and migrants the freedom to relinquish their language, moving it from the domain of active use to serve as an element of their personal *heritage*. While it is important for the community as a whole that the language continue to be spoken, individuals need not assume personal responsibility for its continuance. The very idea of heritage languages thus comprises an imagined language community that includes both native speakers and non-speakers, tied together by common ancestral identity and ethno-national exchanges. Through increased fluency in the heritage language, learners can begin to access and concretise this imagined community (Leeman 2015). At the same time, the idea that certain languages function or stand as heritage allows even a non-fluent speaker to feel a sense of belonging to a larger ethno-linguistic community.

How, then, should we make sense of the heritage element in the phrase ‘heritage languages’? And why do institutions consider only those languages brought to Canada by non-English or French speaking immigrants to be heritage? These questions inevitably lead us to consider the status of Indigenous languages in Canada, languages that have been spoken and sung for thousands of years on these lands before the establishment of the colonial state. Indigenous languages have been accorded neither federal status as official languages, nor can they draw on the resources extended to heritage language communities (Cummins and Danesi 1990; Balan 2022).

Only two territories in Canada accord official status to Indigenous languages: Nunavut and the Northwest Territories. In Nunavut, both Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun have official status alongside English and French, and Inuktitut is commonly used in the administration of territorial government.⁵ The Official Languages Act of the Northwest Territories goes further still, recognising eleven languages – Chipewyan, Cree, English, French, Gwich’in, Inuinnaqtun, Inuktitut, Inuvialuktun, North Slavey, South Slavey and Tłı̨chǫ.⁶ Official recognition of Indigenous languages can serve to reduce the sense that they are ‘under threat’ while at the same time mobilising similar resources that are available for speakers of settler languages. Yet, official recognition may also result in increased bureaucratisation as a by-product – for example, enshrining the dubious privilege of completing a tax return in one’s own Indigenous language – without necessarily driving forward the broader goals of language revitalisation and reclamation that generate new speakers.

Within the Canadian context, then, conceiving of some speech forms as ‘heritage languages’ or granting official status to individual languages within specific territories can result in a hierarchy of language rights, steeped in political discourses of heritage, constitutional entitlements, and the Canadian trope of multiculturalism. The same language can be officially recognised in one location but not in another, contingent on the governmental framework of each site. In some instances, being considered a ‘heritage language’ might indicate that there is a thriving community of speakers; in others, it rather serves to denote that a language is under threat. This awareness is not the same as recognising all languages as heritage, which leads us to ask precisely that: what would it mean for all languages – official, Indigenous, and settler – to be considered heritage? In the following section, we argue that doing so would open up productive opportunities for language revitalisation and for recognising other forms of living heritage.

Opening up heritage

Broadening the conception of language as heritage beyond the narrow confines of ‘heritage languages’ or the instrumental ‘language as a vehicle for ICH’ may result in fruitful openings for both heritage and language discourses and practices. ‘Language as heritage’ can enrich the field of heritage studies by revealing connections between language and other manifestations of heritage while highlighting the ways in which heritage itself is increasingly understood to be a living and dynamic human practice.

Olga Bialostocka presents one of the strongest arguments for fully considering language as intangible cultural heritage and not merely as a vehicle for ICH. Citing Smeets 2004, Bialostocka (2017, 19) argues that language itself fulfils all the traits of ICH found in the 2003 UNESCO Convention: ‘it is transmitted from generation to generation; constantly recreated; speech can be treated as linguistic practice and expressions; language bestows identity upon people in the same way that social practices, rituals or indigenous knowledge do’. At the same time, Bialostocka warns against the essentialisation of culture that can occur when international instruments work to safeguard languages as artefacts, adding: ‘the preoccupation of international regulations and cultural heritage protectors should be with the people rather than their product’ (23). We welcome this important distinction between considering language-as-heritage according to Eurocentric norms of preservation and risk, and language-as-heritage in its own right as living and dynamic, and therefore not only representing cultural knowledge but actively working to shape cultural practice.

And yet, contemporary literature connecting intangible heritage to language all too often defaults to an instrumentalist approach. In their recent article on the intangible cultural heritage of immigrant and refugee communities, Giglitto, Ciolfi, and Bosswick (2022) discuss many ways that ICH can help bridge the cultural gap and facilitate dialogue between immigrants and host communities. However, nowhere in this analysis are immigrants’ languages considered *as a part of their ICH*. Rather, language is presented as a barrier to or a facilitator of immigrants’ entry into the ‘host society’ (Giglitto, Ciolfi, and Bosswick 2022, 11). If, instead, language was to be recognised as a part of ICH, then ICH could be understood not only as something carried forward (like baggage) but also as an integral aspect of an individual’s everyday life and worldview.

Immigrants live a blend of language experiences *as part of* their encounter with their host country, and in so doing are constantly mixing and negotiating experiences of cultural heritage. By recasting language as heritage in and of itself, a heritage language can represent not only a distant homeland and an associated ancestral past but also serve as a means of negotiating cross-cultural belonging in the present. Inverting the frame from heritage language to language-as-heritage can work to encompass more fully the richness and depth of immigrants’ blended heritage, a constituent element of which is language.

While supporting the proposal that language be considered an aspect of intangible cultural heritage, we advocate going further, suggesting that language-as-heritage benefits the heritage field more broadly. Numerous studies have tied language, especially Indigenous languages, to a sense of place, particularly in settler colonial contexts. Place is also a key consideration for heritage, particularly for landscapes. Baloy (2011) discusses the importance of ‘placing language’, Chew, Greendeer, and Keliiaa (2015) contend that studying language only in formal educational settings misses out on the richness of emplaced cultural learning, and Gibson (2017) highlights the interconnectedness of the social and physical landscapes of the Stl’atl’imx people, which are tied together through language, tradition, and relationships.⁷ Toponyms are central to linguistic placemaking and increasingly employed in traditional use studies, in which Indigenous peoples living in what is now Canada mobilise their uninterrupted presence on the land to assert territorial sovereignty through the documentation of the ancient naming of a landscape.

In addition to being a medium for inherited oral and textual literary works, language embodies cultural knowledge and ethical protocols, including complex histories, epistemologies, and legal traditions that enact heritage through practice. As Martindale, Shneiderman and Turin write:

Cultural communities share a tacit understanding of what things mean, an understanding that emerges from sharing lifetimes of experience and memory. [...] Where storytelling conveys the conscious understanding of cultural knowledge, performance captures the experiences that transmit the less conscious frameworks of knowledge upon which conscious understanding is built. (2018, 201)

In the dance between ‘telling’ and ‘doing’ heritage, language transmits cultural knowledge from the past to the future through the present, not as a passive vehicle for ‘cultural data’ but through culturally specific forms of meaning making. Precisely because it is ever-changing, contextually specific, and alive in the present – thereby resisting comprehensive archiving and preservation – language functions as a form of heritage in and of itself, not only as a supporting mechanism for the transmission of other forms of heritage. In fact, construed in this way, language-as-heritage can help counter homogenising notions of the universality of heritage (De Cesari 2010) that have to date served to privilege European norms and Western values. Heritage discourses inevitably involve acts of translation; considering language to be an integral part of heritage makes the process of translation and any attending inadequacies more visible.

Considering all language to be heritage may even have implications for decolonial work and the promotion of Indigenous language rights, both in Canada and globally. In their critical analysis of heritage governance, Grey and Kuokannen (2020) discuss how models of ‘co-management’ of Indigenous cultural heritage tend to subvert complex political-legal orders in favour of ones that promote material culture. While their article touches only lightly on language, Indigenous languages have the potential to be central to arguments that Indigenous heritage governance requires recognition of Indigenous peoples’ own regimes of rights, customs, laws, and obligations. Recognising language as heritage offers an additional structure to dislodge the dominance of material culture in heritage discourses.

Others have shown how language revitalisation paves the way for cultural revitalisation more broadly alongside the re-enlivening of heritage practices. To quote Ryan DeCaire, Assistant Professor of Indigenous Languages at the University of Toronto and a teacher of Kanien’kéha, the Mohawk language: ‘People revitalize a language, but language revitalizes a people. When you speak your language, you are more likely to feel self-confident . . . You’re much more likely to have a sense of understanding of who you are . . . and a sense of understanding and responsibility within a community’ (Srikanth 2020). This supports the mutually reinforcing correlation identified by researchers working in British Columbia between cultural continuity, language, and the health and wellbeing of marginalised communities (Hallett, Chandler, and Lalonde 2007; McIvor, Napoleon, and Dickie 2009).

In considering language to be heritage, language reclamation (as opposed to merely preservation) can serve as a model for analogous efforts towards the revitalisation of cultural heritage. This, in turn, has the potential to generate a more holistic response to the cultural genocide of colonialism (MacDonald 2015). Such an approach would reinforce a beneficial focus on the social value of heritage, i.e. an understanding of heritage as living and changing, rather than ossified and frozen. Mobilising the inherent dynamism of language, and conceiving of language as heritage, helps to ground heritage practice in people's cultural rights to live and transform their heritage through its enactment and embodiment, and thus move away from perceptions and structures of fixity.

Conclusion: Recentring Language

Objects and ideas only become heritage through the manner in which we interact with them in the present. In this contribution, we have aimed to demonstrate how language is generally only considered to be heritage when it is translocated – through migration and settlement – or no longer spoken. It seems reasonable then to ask whether the ultimate goal of a speech community – Indigenous or historically marginalised communities in particular – would be to avoid the heritagisation of their language at all costs? In other words, if one's language has been identified as a heritage language, does that either consign it to the past or locate it in a distant ancestral land? We see productive opportunities for an inversion of this unfortunate teleology by considering language to be an *integral part* of heritage, countering the notion that a language must be either 'endangered' or 'imported' to be considered heritage.

In the work of heritage conservation to date, more focus is trained on the heritage resource itself than on those who use or appreciate it. Likewise, the logics of language preservation are more often in service of the language than of the needs of speakers – objectifying and even commodifying language through documentation, archiving, and standardisation (Deumert and Storch 2018). Any recognition of language as heritage must carefully avoid ossifying language as an object to be preserved and protected irrespective of the needs and goals of its speakers. Deumert and Storch (2018) argue that the 'heritagisation' of language will have to circumvent the coercive and problematic logic of language-as-archive that reinscribes control into the future over the marginalised voices of the present. In this manner, language-as-heritage invites us to consider more lively ways of conceiving of heritage. As Deumert and Storch write, 'If we wish to understand language as heritage more fully, we need to look beyond language archives and towards the everyday practices of people' (2018, 103). We propose the extension of this understanding to heritage as a whole, through the appreciation and enactment of everyday practice.

Languages flourish *in relation* – among people, and in relation to places, cultures, and practices. Languages thrive within a dynamic and vibrant present, the very dynamism that certain aspects of professional heritage practice – such as conservation – have traditionally resisted. In sum, we propose that a conceptualisation of language-as-heritage can benefit both language and heritage, especially the latter. While language communities may derive some benefit from an acknowledgement of their spoken language as a form of heritage, the field of heritage will be considerably strengthened by inviting the vitality of language to enrich all its facets – discourse, practice, materiality, and the interplay among these three. Just as all living heritage practices should be and are always changing, so too language is inescapably fluid. Language as heritage serves as both method and illustration of the inherent vitality of heritage as a lived and embodied practice.

Notes

1. See <https://courses.students.ubc.ca/cs/courseschedule> (UBC Course Schedule).

2. As Davis (2017) has argued, the rhetoric of Indigenous language endangerment remains rooted in the persistent colonial trope that Indigenous peoples and cultures are vanishing, thus justifying extractive processes of salvage linguistics and paternalistic scholarship. Similar ideologies of endangerment and salvage were used to fill museum collections with the belongings of so-called ‘vanishing’ Indigenous communities (Brown 2014).
3. Benedict Anderson (2006, 67) recognised the development of a single ‘national print language’ as being of central ideological and political importance to the consolidation of nation-states, and many national anthems and most citizenship processes focus intently on the affective and performative power of competence in the national, official language(s).
4. See <https://www.clo-ocol.gc.ca/en/aboutus/mandate> (Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages), as well as <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage.html> (Canadian Heritage).
5. See <https://www.gov.nu.ca/culture-and-heritage/information/official-languages> and note also that administration of official languages in Nunavut falls under the purview of the Department of Culture and Heritage.
6. See <https://olc-nt.ca/languages/overview/> (Office of the Languages Commissioner of the Northwest Territories).
7. The Stl’atl’imx (or, St’át’imc) people reside within the boundaries of what is today known as British Columbia, in Western Canada. Importantly, they describe their own territory geographically, rather than in relation to the colonial state. According to the website of the St’át’imc government (<https://statimc.ca/about-us/>), ‘the St’át’imc are the original inhabitants of the territory which extends north to Church Creek and to South French Bar; northwest to the headwaters of Bridge River; north and east towards Hat Creek Valley; east to the Big Slide; south to the Island on Harrison Lake and west of the Fraser River to the headwaters of Lillooet River, Ryan River and Black Tusk.’

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