Guidelines for students working with the Six Nations of the Grand River

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1 Summary

This document is intended as a guide for McMaster students seeking partnerships with the Six Nations of the Grand River, and in particular with Six Nations Polytechnic, the Woodlands Cultural Centre, the Six Nations Language Commission, and Onkwawenna Kentyohkwa. The Department is working toward closer research relationships with these institutions, and building a program of research on the Iroquoian languages of the Six Nations (Mohawk/Kanien'kéha, Cayuga, Onondaga, Seneca, Oneida, Tuscarora). When developing and maintaining these partnerships, it is thus fundamental to observe good practices regarding administrative, ethical, cultural and political matters specific to working with Six Nations language speakers and communities, namely:

- **Work through proper channels.**

- **Follow the ethics policies** of McMaster University, the Six Nations Ethics Committee, provincial and federal governments, and relevant funding agencies.

- Behave with **sensitivity and respect** for the people, their communities, their language, and their traditional knowledge and ways of knowing.

- **Volunteer** time, effort and skills toward maintaining and preserving the languages of the Six Nations.

- **Acknowledge the contributions** of Six Nations collaborators in ways that are comfortable for them.

- **Be upfront about research goals** and strive to align these with community needs.

- Wherever possible, undertake research that is **useful to the communities**.

- **Make research available** to the community in forms that are accessible to non-linguists.

- **Maintain relationships**: make and keep commitments to Six Nations collaborators and their communities.

2 Administrative and ethical matters

All research must be approved by the Six Nations Research Ethics Committee, responsible to the Six Nations Elected Council. Their governing policy can be found at

http://www.sixnations.ca/admEthicsPolicy.pdf

Language matters are administered by the Six Nations Language Commission, also responsible to the Elected Council. However, the Elected Council co-exists with the Six Nations Traditional Council. Although approval of research by the Elected Council, through the Six Nations Research Ethics Committee, is legally required before the research can proceed, the Traditional Council also carries great moral authority. It is a courteous gesture for prospective researchers to seek their approval as well, and we recommend always doing so, though wait times for the processing of applications can be longer than those for the Elected Council.

Linguists should be aware that archived materials that include ceremonial and religious language are generally considered sensitive and/or sacred. As such, they are accessible only to the Faith Keepers of the Longhouse, and not to the public or to researchers.

All research involving Indigenous people or communities is subject to additional conditions by McMaster's Research Ethics Board. These can be summarized as **informed consent, respect for Indigenous knowledge and traditions, community engagement, reciprocity** and **trust**.

A description of Canadian government policies on research ethics for work with Indigenous people can be found at:

http://ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/initiatives/tcps2-eptc2/chapter9-chapitre9/

A description of McMaster's policies can be found at:

https://reo.mcmaster.ca/download/Ethical%20Guidelines%20for%20Aboriginal%20ResearchFinal%20Report-2005.pdf

While some ethical concerns are governed by the above mentioned policies, others are not. Here are some good practices we recommend to observe. These practices are to address concerns expressed by the Indigenous communities regarding their previous experiences with working with academics, such as lack of accountability for language revitalization, insufficient recognition of the contribution of the communities and failure to provide to the communities adequate access to the data and research results.

Students doing fieldwork must demonstrate **sensitivity and respect** for the speakers of Six Nations languages. Not only are they the providers of unique knowledge that is critical to the success of our research, but language is both a marker of and a vehicle for the continuation of cultural identity. It can be a politically sensitive issue in these communities, the more so because these languages are threatened due to the abuses of the Residential Schools and the Sixties Scoop, and to the overwhelming presence of English in every aspect of life in Ontario.

In the past, linguistic methods of data collection (elicitation) have not always perceived positively: data collection that does not directly aid language revitalization and documentation can be seen as irresponsible toward the acute needs of the community and disrespectful to the communi-

ties' language revitalization efforts. Traditional linguistic methods are in principle an acceptable way of doing research but they must be amended to aid the community as well.

We suggest two ways of approaching the matter: whenever possible the researcher should attempt to align their research question with the language revitalization needs of the communities (for example, by providing insights to language learning, language learning materials etc.). Another options is to offer skills and training in exchange for an access to native speaker's knowledge. These are some areas in which linguists at McMaster have multiple skills that can be useful to speakers and communities: designing pedagogical materials, discussing teaching methodology, building language apps, helping find sources of funding for projects, holding training workshops, advising students on career paths, teaching principles of linguistics and language documentation, and teaching literacy in Iroquoian languages. For students interested in doing research work on these languages, a useful exercise is to make a list of the kinds of things they could do for the communities, and ask whether any of them would be of help. The people to approach with such a list are the Six Nations Language Commission, who can also be excellent liaisons to connect linguists with expert speakers. Ideally, our students can approach by saying, "Here is what I can do. How can I help your efforts to extend and promote the use of your languages? In return, here is some research I'd like to investigate."

Because all the languages of the Six Nations are endangered, with small numbers of speakers ranging from a few dozen to a few thousand, it is important to understand that the people who are working to preserve, promote and teach the language are all very busy and overworked. This applies to the Six Nations Language Commission staff, faculty at Six Nations Polytechnic, teachers and principals in immersion programs, and so forth: everyone involved with the language works long hours and expends lots of energy. Hence, it may take time for people to reply to emails, and linguistic research may be seen as a low priority, because for people who work to save the language, it is. Therefore, an important thing to think about is how our research methodology and findings can generate applications useful to language revitalization efforts.

3   Cultural and political matters

The Six Nations of the Grand River are a complex society, with numerous political, linguistic and cultural distinctions within them: six related languages and their respective cultural and political traditions, two governing councils, and a complicated relationship between local identity and regional, provincial, and federal governance.

Political divisions exist within the Six Nations. The Elected Council and the Traditional Council coexist, as mentioned, and while the Elected Council's decisions are legally binding, the Traditional Council holds great moral authority for many people. Some local political entities are responsible to the Traditional Council, others to the Elected Council.

Students in our department who want to do research in the Six Nations should be aware that for many purposes they will be working in a different country and culture. Many Six Nations citizens do not identify as Canadian, but as Mohawk, Cayuga, Seneca, Oneida, Onondaga or Tuscarora. Relationships with Canadian society and government have historically been highly charged, and many long-standing issues have not been resolved. Virtually everyone in the Six Nations has close relatives who have suffered in Residential Schools, and many children and parents were separated during the Sixties Scoop. The awareness of living in a colonized nation is often very keen.

Students planning to work with a Six Nations co-author, collaborator, or consultant should be aware that they very likely have scars from the colonial experience. It may be something on which they wish to educate you (as many non-Indigenous people in Canada are still undereducated on this aspect of Indigenous people's experience) or it may be too traumatic to talk about. In either case, it is probably not something to bring up in conversation: wait for them to do so.

The Longhouse Religion, which has a history of syncretism of Christian and pre-Christian beliefs, rituals and practices, has many adherents in the Six Nations, as do various Christian sects. In general, many Six Nations citizens are more serious about religion than the average Canadian citizen, but this topic also is one that should remain private unless Six Nations colleagues bring it up.

Humour, especially as a way to combat adversity, is a prominent feature of a great many Indigenous societies. It can also be a great way to bond with friends across cultural traditions. Nevertheless, humour often doesn't translate well, and its use at the wrong time can create the impression of a lack of seriousness about the work, the languages, and the culture. This can do permanent damage to professional relationships. So, once again, it's best not to take the initiative in this area until a relationship of mutual trust and confidence has been built. It should go without saying that sexual or scatological humour is an almost certain route to being regarded as disrespectful or unserious, but mishaps of this sort have happened between researchers and Indigenous collaborators in the last few years within the GTA. We should therefore strive at all times to be mindful and respectful.

4   How to begin

An excellent way to begin is to think about the question not only from the perspective of our research but from the other direction, putting our potential contributions first. Here is a sample approach:

> Hi, I'm a student in the Linguistics and Languages Department at McMaster, and I'd like to do some volunteer work for the Six Nations to help preserve Iroquoian languages. I've been a teaching assistant for Japanese language courses, so I have experience with designing materials for languages with complex verb forms and verb-final sentences. I've made handouts for students to illustrate the way Japanese verbs are formed; if I designed something like this for Mohawk verbs, would it be useful for the schools, perhaps as posters? I also do a lot of work using Praat, the software for analyzing speech sounds, which can be used to help students with their pronunciation. I've done workshops on how to use Praat. Does any of this sound useful?

> I have about ten hours that I can volunteer this summer. I don't need pay, but I'm wondering if in exchange, it might be possible for me to work for a few hours with a fluent speaker of Mohawk to try to answer some questions I have about the pronunciation of some of the vowels. Depending what we find out, the results could be used to help design pronunciation lessons for adult students. Is this something that would be possible?

A useful way students can introduce themselves is to submit a short (1-page) summary of their skills, proposed research, and ways these might be used to help language revitalization. Linguistics

content can be phrased in non-technical language, since the audience at the Six Nations Language Commission are largely trained as language teachers, curriculum designers, and policy makers, not as linguists. Presenting the information as slides or in tabular format is probably the best way to get it looked at by busy, overworked people.

Learning the languages of study is an important way to show commitment. This doesn't have to mean becoming a fluent speaker: as we all know well, that takes years of intense work. However, just as in any other language community, being able to say a few words in a Six Nations language is a good way to express courtesy, and of course any effort put in may well result in deeper knowledge that can benefit future research.

5   Working with Indigenous ways of knowing

As linguists, we work within a reductivist scientific paradigm, which has proven an extremely useful and effective way of investigating language phenomena. Our methodology and goals are often quite different from those of communities, Indigenous communities in particular. The languages of the Six Nations are seen by many speakers as a holistic encoding of cultural knowledge. For this reason, and because the reductive method of scientific investigation is not part of traditional Iroquoian cultures, many speakers of these languages may find the formal linguistic approach to language analysis deeply frustrating. Particularly with respect to preserving and maintaining the use of the language in daily life, the documentation of (for example) traditional oral histories, the technical vocabulary used in traditional activities, or the songs to be sung to children are seen as much more important than the details of causative constructions or the distribution of nasal vowels. This can lead to a tension between what linguists and speakers want to document.

Fortunately, there are ways to serve both goals, although they require more preparatory work. First, more and more linguists today are working with corpora: large databases of oral and written text, from which patterns of use can be deduced and generalizations made. Naturally, the recording of stories, conversations, and interviews directly contributes to such corpora and can later serve as sources of linguistic data. A shortcoming of such documentation from a formal linguistic perspective is that it provides no negative data. For this purpose, it is generally necessary to use elicitation, as in traditional linguistic field methods. However, with care, elicitation can be used in a way that provides negative data, adds to corpora, and furthers revitalization efforts.

A further way that our research can adapt to Indigenous knowledge is by tailoring it to the investigation of relations between large, discourse-level linguistic units and smaller sentential and sub-sentential ones. This is a growing area of investigation within linguistics in general, and an almost untouched field of research with respect to Indigenous languages.

6   Acknowledging contributions

Traditionally, linguists doing fieldwork have thanked their native-speaker consultants in the acknowledgements sections of published papers, while individual sentences and other data have been cited within papers as "Author's field notes". There were various reasons for this practice, the primary one being that consultants sometimes wished their contributions to be anonymous, to avoid being put on the spot in the future as an expert on the language, or to avoid becoming involved in

disputes over the relative prestige of dialects, and so forth. However, there have also been many cases where consultants were not asked for their opinions on citation, and ended up feeling they had been made invisible while the linguist walked away with the academic glory. This is a real issue that needs to be discussed with consultants. There are at least three questions that should be cleared up before beginning research work and reconfirmed before the research is made public:

- Do consultants wish to be anonymous?

- If not, do they wish to be thanked in the acknowledgements alone, or cited for individual sentences within publications?

- Do they wish to be co-authors, if possible?

Offering co-authorship is a practice recommended by the panel on Acknowledging Indigenous Contributions at the 2018 meeting of the Canadian Linguistic Association. This approach allows the community language workers to propose topics of research. Such community-driven research is not only more likely to produce results that the community can use, but by giving agency to someone who speaks the language natively, it promotes a research style that will allow native-speaker intuitions about language to be an integral part of the research process. Furthermore, the process of doing such research will result in the McMaster linguist becoming more familiar with Iroquoian languages, and the language worker becoming more familiar with linguistic research. This being so, such an approach will almost inevitably generate further research questions in the future, and a mutually beneficial professional partnership.

There are times when co-authorship is appropriate, as when students wish to submit papers for publication. University course papers, on the other hand, are generally expected to be single-author, and of course graduate theses must be. One option recommended by the CLA panel in the case of graduate theses is to have a language consultant be a member of the thesis committee, contributing their expert knowledge of the language as a judge of the accuracy of the data and the student's interpretation of it. This approach has been used recently in linguistics thesis defences at the University of Victoria.

Another issue is that co-authors are generally not paid for their contributions, while language consultants are paid. For all of these reasons, the questions above should be negotiated explicitly.

7   Making research available

In many Indigenous communities of Canada, there is a painful history of researchers failing to return the results of research to the community in meaningful ways. In many cases, research results, and sometimes primary data, have ended up behind paywalls. Occasionally even sacred and sensitive material has been treated this way, with the result that citizens of Indigenous communities have ended up having to pay for access to their own cultural and family histories. This has happened many times at Six Nations, to the point where many elders have become very nervous about talking to researchers at all.

Making research and data available is the recommendation of the Department and a requirement of the Six Nations Research Ethics Committee. No research will be allowed by the Committee to proceed unless a commitment has been made for the release of the results to the community.

Therefore, it is critical to think about and plan the dissemination of research results to the community. At a minimum, this could be a two- or three-page summary of the results in non-technical language, submitted to the Six Nations Language Commission. A slide presentation, which could be given in a public lecture within the community and archived with the Commission, is another possibility. It's important to make research available at more than one level: copies of the raw data and of any journal articles or book chapters that come out of the research should be deposited with the Commission, and results that are significant for language pedagogy should be turned into materials and applications for the schools, ideally in collaboration with Six Nations teachers or teacher trainees. The latter can be approached through Six Nations Polytechnic.

8   Maintaining the relationship

Much frustration has been expressed with "helicopter researchers" who drop into a community, do a little research work, pay their consultants, and fly out again, never to return. Therefore, it's important not to let a professional relationship slide. Collaborators and consultants are professional colleagues, and maintaining communication is a vital part of keeping community trust. For work in collaboration with the community, this issue is even more significant. For endangered languages, all work on revitalization is a race against time, and completing projects is important and urgent.

For students, this is often difficult: pressure is intense, time is limited, and eventually they graduate. However, efforts can be made by faculty to ensure that partnerships begun by students are passed on to further students to maintain continuity.