

The Seneca Language and Bilingual Road Signs: A Study in the Sociology of an Indigenous
Language

Undergraduate Research Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation *with honors research
distinction* in Linguistics in the undergraduate colleges of The Ohio State University

by

Anna Taylor

The Ohio State University

May 2021

Project Advisor: Dr. Brian Joseph

Department of Linguistics

ABSTRACT

One of the fundamental types of human rights concerns collective-developmental rights which allow minorities to use heritage languages and practices without external interference (Vašák 1977). The protected status of minority language rights is a critical part of language revitalization in which speakers of heritage languages, faced with the encroachment of more socially, politically, and economically dominant languages, embark on vigorous programs to ensure the survival and continued usage of their language. The Five Nations Iroquoian language, Seneca, has just a few remaining speech communities and a variety of ongoing language revitalization initiatives (Mithun 2012).

To revitalize their traditional language, community classes through the Seneca Language Department and the Faithkeepers Montessori School Seneca Language Nest for young speakers have concentrated their efforts on preserving Onöndowa'ga:' Gawë:nö' the indigenous name for the Seneca language (Bowen 2020, Murray 2015). In the public sphere, a push by the Seneca Nation of Indians Department of Transportation fulfilling the intent of the federal Native American Tourism and Improving Visitor Experience (NATIVE) Act enacted in 2016, specifically included bilingual signs for state roads running through indigenous land in addition to other significant components (Figura 2016). In an area whose geographic names are strongly connected to Iroquoian languages including Seneca, these bilingual signs represent more public and visible Seneca language presence and stand as symbols of language revitalization. The place names and information that appear on the signs have considerable significance for community identity as well as linguistic and economic impacts, among others.

Through oral histories collected from Seneca Nation members and language advocates in addition to a representative from the New York State Department of Transportation, this study pursues an analysis of the Seneca public usage of their heritage language and the various language revitalization efforts occurring among indigenous and minority communities internationally. As the COVID-19 pandemic threatens already vulnerable populations, heritage languages that have been historically oppressed face a global language crisis that

disproportionately harms and disadvantages speakers of heritage and minority languages (Roche 2020). While the language of road signs may seem mundane, this study reveals how the Seneca bilingual signs play a significant role in awareness of indigenous territory and consequently stimulation of the local economy as well as supporting language learning, revitalization, and destigmatization. Primarily through the efforts of the Seneca community, the bilingual signs represent the expression of language rights in the public sphere and one part of the ongoing language revitalization.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Positionality

Before I moved to Columbus, Ohio to pursue my undergraduate degree in linguistics, I lived in Tonawanda, New York for my entire life. Although I had some awareness of the etymologies of the place names that dominated this area of western New York, it took three years of linguistics education at The Ohio State University before I set out to research and translate local names like Tonawanda, Niagara, Scajauqua, Allegany, and others from their Iroquoian origins. It was at that point that I realized that my hometown of Tonawanda is also home to the Tonawanda Band of Seneca, which is one of just a few remaining speech communities for the Seneca language¹ (Delgado N.d.).

The Seneca language, or the Language of the People of the Great Hills, is the traditional language of the Seneca Nation of Indians and the Tonawanda Band of Seneca, though it currently faces a dwindling fluent speaker population (Delgado N.d.). This has heightened the urgency of the revitalization programs for Seneca as part of the global language crisis currently facing minority languages around the world that are in similar danger of disappearing if not for active intervention on the part of community and non-community members alike (Roche 2020). In recognition of my status as a non-community member studying the Seneca language, the focus of my research is on public displays of “local definitions of language such as ‘how a community connects to each other and how they express ... themselves and their culture to each other’” in following with Wesley Leonard’s 2019 “Musings on Native American Language Reclamation and Sociolinguistics” which credits this positionality to a Miami language teacher (Leonard 2019).

There is considerable linguistic knowledge to be gained from studying all human languages, though I believe that the views and goals of the traditional speakers should be considered the priority for researchers and should be recognized by non-community members as

¹ There is limited data available at the moment concerning where the Seneca language is currently used among the various land under Seneca jurisdiction or where speakers of Seneca live.

a human right inherent to minority language speakers. While the death² of any language is a significant loss in terms of linguistic diversity, the decline in the Seneca speech community represents much more considering the indigenous knowledge systems, culture, and history that are at stake. My perspective as a sociolinguistic researcher has been significantly influenced by the insights of my thesis advisor, Dr. Brian Joseph, and my Global Arts + Humanities Discovery Theme Fellowship advisor, Puja Batra-Wells, as well as the Seneca language advocates and community organizers, Jody Clark and Flip White, who have kindly spoken with me about their traditional language, its history, and the ongoing language revitalization programs. Finally, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the contributions of the other members of my thesis defense committee, OSU professors Andrea Sims and John Low, who provided valuable insights on previous drafts of this paper.

In light of this positionality, this study pursues an examination of language rights in the public sphere through Seneca bilingual signs as well as some points of comparison of bilingual signs and language revitalization initiatives in other minority communities around the world. Specifically, I posit the following research questions: to what extent does Seneca bilingual signage, as well as such signage in general, encompass collective-developmental human rights and language rights in the public sphere and how do the public usage of the Seneca language and the Seneca revitalization programs compare to minority speech communities internationally?

1.2 Background

The Seneca language, which is natively referred to as Onöndowa'ga:' Gawë:nö', is considered a Haudenosaunee or Iroquoian language (Delgado N.d.). Based on Marianne Mithun's 2012 work on Iroquoian languages, the Seneca language is part of the Five Nations Iroquoian language family, which can be seen in the chart in Figure 1 below (Mithun 2012). The

² It would be academically irresponsible not to mention the failings of using a biological framework to analyze language endangerment considering that language 'death' does not necessarily mean that the language can no longer be used. For one thing, languages can survive in specialized niches, such as the use of Latin in the Catholic Mass into the mid-twentieth century (see also Section 3.2). In addition, though linguists had once considered the *myaamia* language to be 'extinct,' the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma has revitalized the sleeping language through archival records (Leonard 2019).

Seneca are one of the original five nations of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquoian) Confederacy along with the Cayuga, the Mohawk, the Oneida, and the Onondaga, with the eventual addition of the Tuscarora in 1722 (Delgado N.d.). One source writes that the confederacy, also known as the Great League, was created around 1450 as part of an effort to create an “ethnic confederacy among the Iroquois” (Wallace 1969, 42). The six languages of the League along with Wendat and Wyandot make up the Northern Iroquoian languages, all of which are said to be “highly polysynthetic, with templatic morphological structure...[which] are largely the same across the languages” (Mithun 2012, 247). However, the Northern Iroquoian languages are classified as mutually unintelligible, while the Five Nations Iroquoian languages have had mixed reports of mutual comprehension based on the intensity of exposure (Mithun 2012).

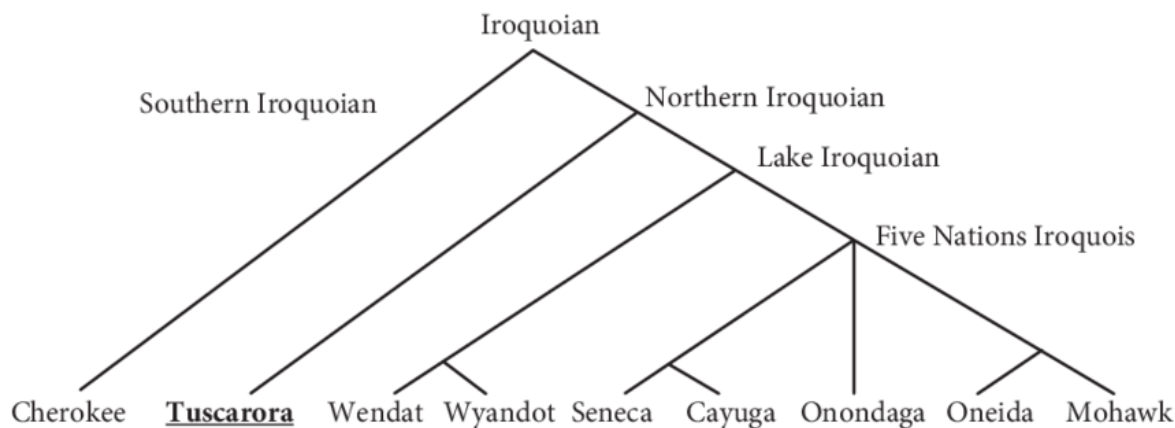


Figure 1: Iroquoian language family chart reproduced with permission from Dr. Mithun (2012).

In more recent times, Northern Iroquoian languages are spoken primarily in parts of New York State and Canada (Mithun 2006). While “the Seneca Nation holds land titles for the Cattaraugus Reservation, the Allegany Reservation³, the Oil Springs Reservation, and at reservations at Niagara and Buffalo” as well as the reservation of the Tonawanda Band of Seneca which spans three counties in western New York (Delgado N.d.), Mithun writes that “Seneca is now spoken in three communities in western New York: Cattaraugus, Allegany, and

³ It is worth mentioning that the United States government besieged and flooded 9,000 acres of land or about a third of the Seneca territory at the Allegany Reservation during the Kinzua Dam project in 1964, which had a profound impact on the Seneca community (Borgia-Askey 2010).

Tonawanda” (Mithun 2006, 32). Estimates of the current size of the speaker population are difficult to ascertain for a variety of reasons which include the inaccessibility of the speech community and the subjectivity of fluent speaker status among other considerations. The matter of determining a speaker’s proficiency in their heritage language is a complex topic that often leads to questions of what it means to be a speaker and how to qualify. This is an especially sensitive issue with a language spoken only by a relatively small number of speakers in a dwindling speech community. In a personal communication in 2007 with the author of a dissertation on language preservation at Ohi:yo’ or the Seneca Allegany territory, Wallace Chafe is quoted saying “my guess is that there are less than 50 speakers altogether” (Borgia-Askey 2010). Yet, based on the homepage for the Faithkeepers School Montessori Seneca Language Nest, a Channel 2 WGRZ news story featuring the school remarks that “there are less than 30 people who can speak the language fluently” (Faithkeepers 2021). These may be the most recent statistics generally available regarding the Seneca speaker population since the historical stigmatization of the language through governmental suppression, residential schools, and other injustices has made the linguistic situation into a complex and sensitive topic.

Regardless of the exact number of Seneca speakers, the population is dwindling, and most currently proficient speakers tend to be older in age and relatively isolated from other Seneca speakers and learners, especially considering the recent circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2007, Chafe classified the Seneca language as Stage 7 out of 8 according to Fishman’s 1991 “Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale” for measuring language endangerment (Borgia-Askey 2010). This classification means that “most speakers are beyond childbearing age, and a language in that position is seriously endangered” (Borgia-Askey 2010). While the terminology of language endangerment – as opposed to language oppression – will be discussed further in later sections of this study, the purpose of this classification is to show the urgency of language revitalization programs.

Despite this pessimistic observation, there is hope within the Seneca community for the language as well as the cultural traditions and teachings that accompany it, to be practiced and passed on in the present and into the future. Various language revitalization efforts are ongoing throughout Seneca territories with financial support from the Seneca community. Through the website for the Seneca Nation Language Department, there are community classes offered for

both beginner and advanced students as well as a wide variety of language-learning resources publicly available (Bowen 2020). In addition, the Faithkeepers Montessori School Seneca Language Nest provides a full-time, comprehensive learning environment for young children from three to twelve years of age to mindfully engage with traditional Seneca teachings and express themselves in the Seneca language (Faithkeepers 2021). The school also offers immersion programs for dedicated adult learners on the Allegany territory. Other publicly available resources include the Learning the Seneca Indian Language website assembled by Dr. Quinata Delgado with funding from Humanities New York (Delgado N.d.). Yet, the most publicly accessible and visible indicator of Seneca language revitalization are the bilingual Seneca-English road signs on the Allegany and Cattaraugus territories.

In the context of Seneca language revitalization, the issue of bilingual signage becomes particularly worthy of study. While the exact dates of the construction of bilingual signage on Seneca territory may not be publicly available, their support is officially recognized in the federal Native American Tourism and Improving Visitor Experience (NATIVE) act of 2016 (Public Law No: 114-221) introduced by Senator Brian Schatz of Hawai'i (114 Cong. Rec. 2016). Although the act did not include financial support for the bilingual signs, it acknowledged their significance and increased awareness of bilingual signage on indigenous territories within the United States. In an online news story from the same year, bilingual signs in various Iroquoian languages across New York State are acknowledged as public monuments of indigenous cultural heritage (Figura 2016). In the present study, I examine the impact of bilingual signage and focus primarily on community efforts at Seneca language revitalization.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

It was Michael Goodhart's 2008 work, "Human Rights and Global Democracy" that proposed that human rights represent normative claims, or reflections of how the state of affairs *should* be (Goodhart 2008). Therefore, a certain partisan point of view of human rights is advanced that adheres to liberties and values at the individual level rather than a national or even global scale. While this conceptualization may be more sensitive in terms of cultural relativism

in allowing all individuals to determine their own perspective on the rights of humans based on their own value system, this system is in contrast with the idea that certain human rights are universal and guaranteed.

In support of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Karl Vašák distinguished three broad categories of human rights norms in his 1977 commentary. Vašák divided these norms into *civil-political* which encompass physical and civil securities such as freedom of religion and freedom from enslavement, *socio-economic* which include social and economic needs like the right to fair wages and adequate shelter, and *collective-developmental* which involve the rights of minority groups in matters such as self-determination, the use of heritage languages, and more (Vašák 1977). In terms of language revitalization, this third and final human rights norm is essential. While language has considerable cultural significance for identity and as a framework through which speakers interact with the world, this conceptualization of language use as a human right and a developmental norm is especially significant for endangered and oppressed languages.

Clarifying Vašák's view that language rights represent a distinct category of human rights, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization published the viewpoint of Fernand de Varennes that language rights are an integral part of human rights (De Varennes 2001). De Varennes explains the imprecise nature of conceptualizing language rights as a separate entity from human rights: "language rights of minorities are an integral part of well-established, basic human rights widely recognised in international law" (De Varennes 2001). Since language rights are inherent to human rights which are already included in international law, any additional recognition of specific minority language rights would be superfluous and suggest language rights are not guaranteed to all humans. Rather than advancing the cause of heritage language preservation, De Varennes argues that the exclusion of minority language rights from a general conceptualization of human rights serves to deny the inherent rights of minorities.

The terminology used to describe languages with dwindling speech communities has been shifting in recent years to more accurately encapsulate the circumstances and varying reasons for this language shift. The current global language crisis examined in Gerald Roche's 2020 work for UNESCO raises awareness that "at least half of the languages used today will

most likely no longer be used by the end of the century” (Roche 2020). This crisis is not entirely due to natural language evolution or shift; rather it is inherently tied to language rights, and more broadly, collective-developmental human rights. While dominant languages have historical connections to social and economic mobility, the speakers of under-represented and under-studied languages have faced many challenges from outright persecution to stigmatization, which have consistently been accompanied by inequitable allocation of resources, respect, power, and more (Roche 2020). Since these languages are under-represented in the population at large, governmental institutions including the education and justice systems have also played significant roles in historically disadvantaging speakers of minority languages.

Yet, the terminology of ‘language endangerment’ has failed to convey these dire conditions and substitutes more nuanced terms in favor of one borrowed from evolutionary biology. The use of ‘endangerment’ to describe language shift implies that other languages have more speakers and more prestige due to their superior ‘fit’ for their environment, reminiscent of Darwinian ‘survival of the fittest.’ In reality, those attributes are bestowed on dominant languages by institutions of authority that have historically oppressed the speakers of what may be considered ‘endangered’ languages. While terms like ‘language oppression’ may be a closer approximation of the reasons that the Seneca language is no longer widely spoken, some may find fault in this description since the revitalization programs for Seneca are currently thriving and strongly supported. In this study, where possible, more descriptive phrases will be used that merely point out the size of the speech communities rather than allude to the various causes of or factors relating to language endangerment, oppression, and death.

In an attempt to clarify a potentially fraught linguistic situation, language revitalization refers to efforts through which the learning and use of heritage languages with dwindling speaker populations are expanded and passed on to future generations of a particular culture. This contrasts Wesley Leonard’s 2019 framework for language reclamation, which “describe[s] and theorize[s] efforts by Indigenous communities to claim their right to speak their heritage languages and to set associated goals in response to community needs and perspectives” (Leonard 2019). While revitalization focuses on the continual expansion of speech communities, reclamation focuses on the right of minority groups to use their traditional language. Leonard draws attention specifically to the goals of the speech communities for whom the language

represents part of their heritage and culture, rather than academics who seek to obtain language documentation for intellectual pursuits that may be inaccessible to the traditional speakers of the language in question⁴. Although the focus of this study deals primarily with the sociology of the Seneca bilingual road signs as part of a larger, more complex linguistic situation, there is an element of reclamation occurring through the bilingual signage as markers claiming the right of the Seneca to use their heritage language on their territories. These public displays of the Seneca language serve as indicators that the indigenous population is still there and retains their sovereignty evident through the use of their heritage language on their own land.

Furthermore, in recognition of the diversity of the indigenous populations in North America, I acknowledge that these group names - American Indian, Native American, First Nation, indigenous, etc. - are not universally accepted. In order to be sensitive to these issues, I will follow the customary terminology in the field of linguistics and the most widely accepted terminology. Since terms such as 'Indian' have been reclaimed by certain groups including the Seneca Nation of Indians, that term will be used when referring to official names or quotations.

⁴ In recognition of the goals of minority speech communities, Ladefoged's 1992 opinion-piece in *Language* acknowledges that linguists and speech communities may have contradictory views concerning the revitalization of traditional languages (Ladefoged 1992). However, that discussion is beyond the scope of this study and has limited relevance to Seneca language revitalization.

II. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Oral Histories

The role of the bilingual signs in western New York first became apparent to me through a local news story by David Figura in 2016 where Jessica Robinson, the former deputy director of the Seneca Nation of Indians Department of Transportation is quoted explaining the multifaceted value of the signs. She notes that “language is integral to Native culture, history, and future. Signage is one facet or tool in preserving language as well as to educate the public and acknowledge [the] Tribe’s connection to the land as well as their sovereignty as nations across the country” (Figura 2016). Based on the information provided in the news story, I contacted the named representative who referred me to her former supervisor, Jody Clark, who was said to have been deeply involved in efforts to introduce bilingual signage to Seneca territory. In actuality, she is the former director of the Seneca Nation of Indians Department of Transportation and a member of several national committees promoting indigenous bilingual signage across the country. She was generous enough to provide an oral history of the process of securing signage in the Seneca language as well as other matters of Seneca history, language, and culture. In a phone call that lasted several hours, she spoke at length about her experiences on national committees advocating for indigenous language representation across the United States. She also supplied me with the contact information for other language advocates to consult for more information, for which I am extremely grateful.

Based on the information provided by Jody Clark, I reached out to Seneca community organizer, Flip White, who is currently the Project Director for the Seneca Language Nest educational program for young Seneca language learners. The Seneca Faithkeepers School was initially started in 1998 by Lehman “Dar” Dowdy and his wife, Sandy Dowdy, on the Allegany Reservation in order to combat the disappearance of the Seneca language and the accompanying loss of cultural heritage (Herbeck 2004). In several extensive phone calls, I interviewed Flip White about the Seneca language revitalization efforts for young speakers and their families on Ohi:yo’, the Allegany territory. He was very encouraging of the ongoing revitalization and shared with me that the program has recently received a federal grant to support the expansion of

its services to a wider range of age groups and other modalities of language learning. The federal funds also support the development of a Seneca language-learning app *Memrise* that would make the information more accessible to parents of children at the Language Nest school, other interested parties, and the Seneca community in general. He emphasized the stark contrast between the past residential schools in the area that punished Seneca speakers for the use of their heritage language, and the current efforts in the community to bring the Seneca language back through a kind and loving communal process. His candid expression of language ideologies and attitudes towards the various forms of Seneca language revitalization has been invaluable to this research and is also greatly appreciated.

Since both the Seneca Nation and New York State are considered sovereign entities within overlapping territory, the question of who has jurisdiction over the bilingual signs on state roads crossing the Seneca territories is complex. While the public outreach for the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) declined to comment on the topic of the Seneca bilingual signs, an Assistant Regional Design Engineer for Region 5 of the NYSDOT who was involved in the process, Sanjay Singh, provided further information from the state government on the collaborative process of introducing the bilingual signs to Seneca territory and state roads. Although the “decision to include bilingual signs and other SNI [Seneca Nation of Indians] cultural enhancements resulted from collaborative consultations between NYSDOT and SNI officials,” the NYSDOT takes responsibility for future maintenance of signage whereas the SNI is responsible for the maintenance of artwork.⁵ He stated that funding for the projects on Seneca land are provided in part by Federal Aid and the Nation itself. Singh also shared references for cultural artwork displayed on the territories as well as an image of a bilingual sign commemorating Chief Cornplanter⁶ Memorial Bridge on the Allegany territory, which can be seen in Figure 2 below.

⁵ This information is taken directly from personal communication via email with Sanjay Singh on March 22 and 29, 2021.

⁶ Chief Cornplanter was a notable Seneca warrior and leader who advocated for Iroquoian neutrality during the American Revolution and later acted as a mediator between the Seneca and the United States’ government. Part of the territory near the Allegany River that he received in 1795 as a land grant has since been flooded by the Kinzua Dam Project (“Cornplanter” 2021).



Figure 2: Bilingual sign on the Allegany territory shared by Sanjay Singh via email on March 22, 2021.

2.2 Fieldwork

While the bilingual road signs may not be the most well-known or longest-lasting aspect of Seneca language revitalization, they are the most publicly visible. It is this accessibility to the public that appealed to me as a resident of Tonawanda. Through public records, maps, blogs, and other information, I located several bilingual signs on the Cattaraugus territory in the Irving area. I photographed bilingual signs for Cattaraugus Creek, one of which appears on each side of the bridge over the creek, seen in Figure 3 below. In addition, I took a photograph of the Seneca language on a highway overpass entering the Cattaraugus territory which can be seen below in Figure 4. I also noted several signs in the Seneca language marking some local businesses and residences, though I was asked not to photograph or share images of the private signs.



Figure 3: My photograph of a bilingual sign on the Cattaraugus territory on January 10, 2021.



Figure 4: My photograph of a highway overpass entering the Cattaraugus territory on January 10, 2021.

Examination and comparison of the Seneca signs from various areas reveal differences in the orthography used to represent the Seneca language. In addition to varying usage of diacritics symbolizing nasal vowels, glottal stops, and vowel accents, the capitalization also changes based on the location and information conveyed, which is evident in the publicly posted images in Figures 5 and 6 below. Compared to American English road signs which historically used exclusively capital letters up until a recent change by the Federal Highway Administration expected to be implemented across the country by 2015 (Copeland 2010), the Seneca orthography only uses capital letters at the beginning of certain words and never uses all-caps even for road signs. These orthographic details reflect regional differences in the language and the variety of written expression that exists for the Seneca language. Although Seneca speakers

had historically recorded their laws and history through wampum strings consisting of various patterns of shells and sinew, a Presbyterian missionary developed a Roman-based alphabet and typographic system for the Seneca language in the late 19th century (Borgia-Askey 2010, 38-55). However, this written record for the language has not been universally accepted by all current Seneca speakers, leading to the diversity in orthography seen today. The attention to detail visible in the bilingual signs shows the consideration and care that went into the translation processes for the Seneca signs with input from language experts in each region, which cannot be said for all bilingual signs that feature minority languages.



Figure 5: Photograph by Roger Green of a bilingual sign entering the Allegany territory and publicly posted to <https://www.rogerogreen.com/2016/08/08/western-new-york-seneca-nation>.



Figure 6: Photograph by Todd Smith of a bilingual sign on the Allegany territory and publicly posted to Pinterest at <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/432275264234751490/>.

III. CONCLUSIONS

3.1 Impacts of Bilingual Signage

While I initially hypothesized that the bilingual Seneca signs supported language learning efforts by providing public displays of the heritage language, the interviews that I have had with members of the Seneca community have demonstrated that there are a variety of linguistic, cultural, and economic impacts. More than a mere acknowledgment of Seneca sovereignty on their land, the signs represent a physical, publicly accessible, and visible marker of Seneca territory that has numerous intangible benefits. Speaking as a non-Native resident of Tonawanda, it can be difficult to know the exact boundaries of the current Seneca territory or ancestral homeland. The signs provide a marker in the public sphere for community and non-community members to increase awareness of the local indigenous population.

As a result of the visible markers of Seneca territory, Jody Clark noted that travelers through the area make more deliberate efforts to support the local economy when they are made aware of the indigenous presence. This contributes to significant stimulation of the tribal economy since the area relies in part on funds from tourism. Even though bilingual road signs may not be typical examples of tourist attractions, their public presence leads to intentional support of other tourism initiatives and local businesses.

Since the Seneca bilingual signage has come about largely through the efforts and fundraising of the Seneca community and community organizers such as Jody Clark, they are a visible source of pride for the local community. For a language that has been systematically stigmatized, the public display of Onöndowa'ga:' Gawë:nö' represents the cultural heritage of the area and its indigenous inhabitants as well as a visible symbol of the ongoing language revitalization. The signs themselves, of course, do not create new speakers or further language revitalization in the traditional sense, but they do offer support for existing representations of the Seneca language as well as increasing awareness of the continued presence of the language. Considering the views of language rights discussed previously, the usage of the Seneca heritage language in the public sphere shows how collective-developmental human rights are actually realized in modern times. Although the NYSDOT maintains that the signs have been a

collaborative effort between the state and tribal governments, the experiences of advocates for indigenous signage reveal how non-Native governmental forces have tried to limit the kinds of signage that are allowed to display indigenous languages. Since road signs can be divided into informative (place names, hospital, parking, etc.), regulatory (one-way, yield, stop, etc.), and warning (merging lane, roadway conditions, road work, etc.) signs, indigenous language advocates have met resistance to any forms besides informational signs, which represents a challenge to collective-developmental rights in the public sphere. In spite of this challenge, there are still regulatory signs available in the Seneca language, such as the bilingual stop sign on the Allegany Reservation shown in Figure 7 below with a capital letter only at the beginning of the word as well as markings for nasal and accented vowels and glottal stops.



Figure 7: Photograph of Seneca stop sign on Allegany territory publicly posted on January 20, 2017 to https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0b/S%C3%A1%C3%AB%27he%27t_stop_sign_in_Seneca.jpg.

3.2 Comparison with Other Bilingual Signage

There are a variety of other language revitalization programs occurring around the world which are too numerous and diverse for the scope of this study. Including but not limited to the other nations of the Haudenosaunee or Iroquois Confederacy, the Potawatomi Nation, the Wampanoag, the Diné or Navajo Nation, the Cherokee Nation, the Three Affiliated Tribes of

North Dakota, the Pawnee Nation, Native Hawaiians, and Maoris (i.e., indigenous New Zealanders), the depth and breadth of indigenous language revitalization is on the rise on a global scale (Borgia-Askey 2010). While further discussion of these revitalization programs must be relegated to future studies, it is important to note that only certain groups have attained signage in their heritage language regardless of their interest in having bilingual signage.

Historically, the United States does not have an official language, though the English-Only Movement has gained significant attention as a topic of recent debate. In spite of constitutional issues regarding freedom of expression, “to date 18 states have enacted laws designating English as the official state language” (Padilla et al. 1991). In addition to xenophobic motivations for such a policy, the intended effect of a national language policy infringes on the human rights of the many sovereign indigenous nations within the United States. For the Seneca community to display their heritage language in the public sphere as well as on the signs of private businesses indicates their continued presence in the region and as such it represents a challenge to those who would prefer that they communicate only in English or cater to those who are unfamiliar with the local language. Bilingual public signage acts as a literal and figurative signpost, a tangible and observable focal point for language rights and conceivably for language tension as well.

As a public record of the community reactions to the Seneca bilingual signs, the respect for these signs is demonstrated through a total lack of vandalism or theft. The same cannot be said for monolingual signs on the territories as well as bilingual signs that feature minority languages elsewhere. Through the past fieldwork of my thesis advisor, Dr. Brian Joseph, I have been made aware of the bilingual Albanian-Greek signs in Southern Albania where signs in the minority language of the region, Greek, have been defaced, as seen in Figure 8 below. Although the linguistic circumstances of Greek in Southern Albania and Seneca on the Allegany and Cattaraugus territories in New York State differ in many ways, the contrast between the community reactions to the bilingual signs is representative of drastically different language ideologies concerning the use of minority languages in the public sphere.



Figure 8: Photograph of a vandalized bilingual sign in Southern Albania reproduced with permission from Dr. Joseph.

Additionally, the regional differences in the Seneca language reflected in the bilingual signs show a level of consideration and mindful engagement with the Seneca community that has not been common across all bilingual signage. A variety of publicly accessible bilingual signs show evidence of translation errors or entirely inappropriate attempts to represent the minority language of the region. Specifically, the English-Welsh bilingual sign shown in Figure 9 below has gained popularity recently for the improper translation into Welsh displayed. Rather than a Welsh translation of “No entry for heavy goods vehicles. Residential site only,” the Welsh exhibited on the sign reads “I am not in the office at the moment. Send any work to be translated” (Cycling Wales 1996).



Figure 9: Photograph of an improperly translated Welsh bilingual sign in Swansea which was publicly posted to <https://cyclingwales.co.uk/badlytranslated.html>.

While there is an unfortunate lack of quantitative evidence to directly support the impact of Seneca bilingual signs on the revitalization of the language, there is a clear symbolic value to the signs for Seneca community members in addition to many intangible benefits. Since the language is used in specific contexts such as the bilingual road signs and the Seneca Faithkeepers School, one could compare the linguistic situation to that of liturgical Latin used exclusively in Catholic church services. Just as the Seneca Faithkeepers School initially promoted the use of Seneca for the Longhouse religious ceremonies (Herbeck 2004), the Catholic Church utilized Latin exclusively for religious services for many years. When the Second Vatican Council officially allowed masses to be conducted in vernacular languages in the 1960s, the move was met with criticism from some who mourned the loss of liturgical Latin to express their faith (Kennedy 2011). If the language did not have significant value in that context, then its loss would not have incited attention, criticism, and other commentary. Although the Seneca community's intentions are to expand the use of their heritage language beyond ceremonial and educational settings, which differs notably from the intentions of those worshipping in Latin, the Seneca language as it is used in specific contexts has a clear value even if it may not be apparent to those outside of the community.

3.3 Further Areas for Research

I am extremely grateful to the language advocates and community organizers who generously shared their expertise and experiences with me, though if time and circumstances permitted, I had hoped to interview other active Seneca community members about the bilingual signs. A community survey of attitudes towards the Seneca bilingual signage would also help elucidate the language ideologies of the area concerning the revitalization of the heritage language. For future studies, I would like to focus more on the varying language revitalization programs occurring throughout the world and the similarities/differences in their goals, methodology, and outcomes.

REFERENCES

114 Cong. Rec. 2016. Public Law 114-221.

<https://www.congress.gov/114/plaws/publ221/PLAW-114publ221.pdf>. Accessed on April 6, 2021.

Borgia-Askey, M. 2010. An Overview of Language Preservation at Ohi:yo', the Seneca Allegany Territory. Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

Bowen, J. 2020. Onöndowa'ga:' Gawë:nö'. <https://senecalanguage.com/community-classes-now-available/>. Accessed on March 30, 2021.

Copeland, L. 2010. ALL CAPS? Not OK on road signs, federal government says. *USA Today*. https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2010-10-21-road-signs-all-caps-lowercase_N.htm. Accessed on May 2, 2021.

"Cornplanter ." 2021. *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. *Encyclopedia.com*. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/cornplanter>. Accessed on April 30, 2021.

Cycling Wales. 1996. <https://cyclingwales.co.uk/badlytranslated.html>. Accessed on April 6, 2021.

Delgado, Q. N.d. Learning the Seneca Indian Language. <https://www.learningthesenecalanguage.com/>. Accessed on March 30, 2021.

De Varennes, F. 2001. Language Rights as an Integral Part of Human Rights. *IJMS: International Journal on Multicultural Societies*, 3(1): 15-25.

Faithkeepers Montessori School. 2021. <https://faithkeepermontessori.com/>. Accessed on April 4, 2021.

Figura, D. 2016. Bilingual Road Signs: Growing trend on state roads crossing Indian lands. *Advance Local Media LLC*. https://www.newyorkupstate.com/news/2016/10/bilingual_road_signs_growing_trend_on_state_roads_crossing_indian_land.html. Accessed on April 4, 2021.

- Goodhart, M. 2008. Human Rights and Global Democracy. *Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs*, 22(4): 395-420.
- Herbeck, D. 2004. Seneca Faithkeepers School Tries to Keep Alive the Tribe's Traditional Ways, Language. *Canku Ota 114*.
https://web.archive.org/web/20150402120836/http://www.turtletrack.org/Issues04/Co06052004/CO_06052004_Seneca_Faithkeepers.htm. Accessed on April 30, 2021.
- Kennedy, P. 2011. Christianity: An Introduction. *I.B. Tauris*.
- Ladefoged, P. 1992. Another view of endangered languages. *Language*, 68(4): 809-811.
- Leonard, W. 2019. Musings on Native American Language Reclamation and Sociolinguistics. *Social Science Research Council*. https://items.ssrc.org/sociolinguistic-frontiers/musings-on-native-american-language-reclamation-and-sociolinguistics/?_cldee=am9zZXBoLjFAb3N1LmVkdQ%3d%3d&recipientid=contact-0a6f7b0eac02dd11bef0001cc477ec70-4da6265f8f5746c6975e8530c0406a7b&esid=583f41dd-dade-e911-a97f-000d3a34afa9. Accessed on March 30, 2021.
- Mithun, M. 2012. Challenges and Benefits of Contact among Relatives: Morphological Copying. *Journal of Language Contact*, 6(2):243-270.
- Mithun, M. 2006. Iroquoian Languages. *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, 6:31-34.
- Murray, A. 2015. Reclaiming Traditional Seneca Culture. *The Allegheny Front*.
<http://archive.alleghenyfront.org/story/reclaiming-traditional-seneca-culture.html>
 Accessed on March 30, 2021.
- Padilla, A, et al. 1991. The English-Only Movement Myths, Reality, and Implications for Psychology. *American Psychological Association*.
<https://www.apa.org/pi/oema/resources/english-only>. Accessed on April 30, 2021.
- Roche, G. 2020. Towards a New Language of the Global Language Crisis. *UNESCO*.
<https://catedra-unesco.espais.iec.cat/en/2020/11/23/50-towards-a-new-language-of-the-global-language-crisis/>. Accessed on March 30, 2021.

Vašák, K. 1977. Human Rights: A Thirty-Year Struggle: the Sustained Efforts to give Force of law to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. *UNESCO Courier* 11:29-32.

Wallace, A. 1969. *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Links to publicly posted photographs:

Figure 5: <https://www.rogerogreen.com/2016/08/08/western-new-york-seneca-nation>

Figure 6 : <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/432275264234751490/>

Figure 7 :

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0b/S%C3%A1%C3%AB%27he%27t_stop_sign_in_Seneca.jpg

Figure 9: <https://cyclingwales.co.uk/badlytranslated.html>