

Research documents Cherokees who face backlash despite efforts to revitalize language

September 23 2015, by Mike Krings



Cherokee watch. Credit: Roy Boney Jr.

Cherokee has been one of the most successful language revitalization efforts in the U.S. of the last several decades, yet a generation exists that was not taught the language when they were young, and they can face questions about their character and dedication when they try to learn as adults. This generation often has children who have been taught Cherokee through an immersion program started in 2001 and have helped contribute to its revitalization through technology, among other things.

Lizette Peter, associate professor of curriculum and teaching at the University of Kansas, has co-authored research analyzing "the

negotiation of speakerhood" and the revitalization of Cherokee. In their paper, Peter and Candessa Tehee, a citizen of Cherokee Nation, interviewed citizens of the tribal nation about their experiences with Cherokee throughout their lifetimes. Many individuals in their 20s and 30s were never taught the [language](#) as children. Now, when they attempt to learn or show interest, they report sometimes being criticized for their "non-native" language use or facing skepticism that they are truly Cherokee because they don't speak the language.

Those criticisms have discouraged many from learning, which can be detrimental to the revitalization efforts.

Peter and Tehee conducted their study in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, among Cherokee users of all ages and language abilities. While exploring how generational differences in ideologies affect how the language is taught, learned and revitalized, they discovered attitudes ranging from the misconception that teaching children in Cherokee would hold them back academically to others who recognize the value of teaching and revitalizing Cherokee among all age groups. The study participants' attitudes toward the language showed little consistency in understandings of [language proficiency](#) and revealed tensions around what revitalization models should prevail.

The thirty-something [generation](#) reported in many instances that no matter how much they have dedicated themselves to reclaiming their [cultural heritage](#), and even though they have largely contributed to the language's survival, they don't always feel they are recognized as Cherokee speakers.

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Cherokee emoticon. Credit: Ryan Mackey

"A number of the people involved in the study are parents of the children attending immersion schools or are Cherokee learners themselves," Peter said. "We are interested in how language has become, for this generation, iconic of a sense of 'Cherokeeeness' for them and their families."

One area in which these young adults have taken the lead is in appropriating technology to spur the revitalization of Cherokee. A written version of Cherokee, known as the syllabary, has been adapted for use in everything from texting to online forums to a Cherokee version of Wikipedia to the development of emoticons in the language's unique characters. The proficiency with which these individuals use the language in these technological spaces, Peter and Tehee argue, presents a new challenge to traditional notions of speakerhood.

"Their powerful and contemporary projections of Cherokee language and identity serve to solidify this generation's legitimate claim to speakerhood, at least in the community's perception of them if not their own," the authors write. As the parental generation assumes a more prominent role in the community, the authors argue that notions of speakerhood will continue to evolve. In future research, they plan to

further analyze prevalent ideologies to understand how these individuals continue to influence the revitalization effort.

"Have they changed their perspectives now that they've found a niche for themselves within the Cherokee revitalization cause?" Peter asked. "We want to find out if they have overcome any negativity they have faced and how they have influenced others in their generation to claim their linguistic and cultural heritage."

Provided by University of Kansas

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