Indigenous language resilience: From learners to speakers

Across the world Indigenous and minority languages are disappearing at a rapid rate. Long-reaching effects of harsh assimilation policies, as well as effects of internalized stigma and shame among individuals, have led to significant language endangerment in many parts of the world. As a response to this loss there is a process of revitalisation and reclamation of languages in a range of geographical and cultural contexts. Indigenous language use itself seems to contribute to cultural, community and individual resilience, and in this project, we explore what supports the resilience of language learners and speakers. Through a comparative analysis of Sápmi and 3 additional cases, we will identify factors that promote or hinder use of Indigenous languages and investigate how individuals transition from learners to speakers. Using multimodal and participatory narrative research methods, we will explore how individuals experience this process, and drawing on nexus analysis approaches we will examine how environmental factors across scales impact this transition. When reclaiming an Indigenous minority language, speakers find themselves in a space of tensions and possibilities as they may feel empowered while also facing internalized hurts from the past; hence, Indigenous language learning and Indigenous multilingualism are characterized by challenges that second and foreign language speakers do not face, and which have not been sufficiently addressed in language acquisition scholarship. There is a need for more knowledge about such complexities of language reclamation processes, how learners and communities may be resilient in the face of these challenges and how they attempt to resolve these inherent tensions. A deeper understanding of the transition from learner to speaker will shed light on language learning in general (including second language acquisition and multilingualism) and has the potential to inform school-based revitalisation programmes and policies.