

## Using and teaching language nesting methods for

### Nuu-wee-ya' / Dee-ni' Wee-ya'

Carson VILES

Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians (Che'-mee-dv-ne) & Chinook Descendent

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper shares the author's experience as a learner of Nu-u-wee-ya' / Dee-ni' Wee-ya', a Dene language from southern Oregon and northern California which has multiple dialects, is critically endangered and is undergoing revitalization. Using his journey as a learner and teacher of Nu-u-wee-ya' as a foundation, Viles shares his perspectives on using a home-based revitalization method developed by Zalmāi ʔəswəli Zahir and provides reflections on approaches for building and maintaining an active speech community. He also discusses some of the challenges facing community-based language work. The paper shares context and history about the experience of the Dee-ni' / Dv-ne / Tv-de / Daa-da community and the ongoing efforts in the community to revive culture and language.

#### RESUMEN

Este artículo comparte la experiencia del autor como estudiante de Nu-u-wee-ya' / Dee-ni' Wee-Ya', lengua Dene con varios dialectos, proveniente del sur de Oregon y el norte de California en lo que se conoce como los Estados Unidos. La lengua está gravemente en riesgo y bajo esfuerzos de revitalización. Con base en su trayectoria como estudiante e instructor de Nu-u-wee-ya' / Dee-ni' Wee-ya', Viles comparte sus perspectivas sobre el uso de un método de revitalización basado en el hogar desarrollado por Zalmāi ʔəswəli Zahir, y ofrece reflexiones de cómo construir y mantener una comunidad de habla activa. Viles analiza algunos retos a los que se enfrenta el trabajo de revitalización basado en la comunidad. Este artículo explora el contexto y la historia de las experiencias de la comunidad Dee-ni' / Dv-ne / Tv-de / Daa-da y sus esfuerzos para reavivar su cultura y su lengua.

## 1. OVERVIEW

This paper shares my experience as a learner of Nuu-wee-ya', a Dene language from southern Oregon and northern California. Shish-ta' hii-xuu-shi' Drew Viles. Shish-sru' Mary (Service) Viles waa-'uu-shi. Hii-k'waa-ga' Ada (Carson) Service waa-'uu-shi. Hii-ta' Robert Service waa-'uu-shi. Shk'ii-daa-naa-ye' wee-ni Nuu-wee-ya' 'uu-nvshlh-ts'it. Che'-mee-dv-ne nvsh-li. Shda'-ye' Che'-mee-dvn ghii-daa-la, Sv-k'wee-che'-dvn ghii-daa-la, Chet-xuu-dvn ghii-daa-la.

*"I am related to the language through my dad, Drew Viles, and he by his mother Day-sri Mary (Service) Viles. Our family is descended from the Che'-me (Joshua) band from the mouth of the Rogue River through my great-great-grandfather Frank Carson (son of Ada DePoe), and Sv-k'wee-che' (Sixes River) band through Julia Skelly (matriarch of the smaller Brown family at Siletz). We have family connections to Chit-xu (Chetco River), as well."*

Our family is enrolled at the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians, an incredible community representing 27 bands of Indian peoples—a diverse set of cultures and languages—who were forcibly removed from across western Oregon to the Siletz Reservation in the 1850s.

Our language isn't very well known in the grand scheme of things, so in this paper I talk about my language and community and share my perspective on the history of our revitalization movement. After giving that context, I talk about my revitalization experience. Specifically, I talk about using Language Nesting, a language learning method conceived by Zalmai ʔəswəli Zahir, a prominent Lushootseed teacher and linguist. He is also the founder of the Multilingual Institute (MI), an organization dedicated to supporting Native language teachers and speakers as they create online classes for reclaiming domains and conversation (Zahir, 2018).

Language Nesting is a commonly used term across many communities and, as part of his philosophy on language revitalization, Zahir provides one clear approach for creating Language Nests in your home. The method is simple and can be done by any motivated person to create results. It centers on building Language Nests—dedicated spaces where you speak only the target language—self-narrating daily activities, and holding conversations in your language with other learners. I have participated in this style of class as a teacher, learner, and materials developer.

In my experience working with other Native language revitalizationists, including at MI, we shared ideas about how to assess our own speech and progress, spoke and learned each other's languages, and shared materials that we've developed. Over time, I gained an interest in tracking my language use. After being encouraged by Zahir and others, I began to explore using a stopwatch to track and deliberately increase my daily time spent speaking Nuu-wee-ya'. I tracked my daily language usage

in my Language Nest (the bathroom), noting what I talked about, and for how long. I used this language tracking as a tool to motivate myself to increase my daily language use. To provide insights to other learners and contribute to an evidence-based approach for language revitalization, I'm sharing this information here. As a side effect, you as the reader will also get to learn about how often I shower!

In this paper, I also discuss my role as an online teacher. I believe that if you want to be part of a speech community, then you need to speak and ideally find others to speak with. By building your own language use and expanding to include others, you help to create a speech community. Since our language is critically endangered, part of that effort includes teaching other people strategies to help them speak Nuu-wee-ya' in their daily lives. With all that in mind, I share my own experience with reclaiming domains and Language Nesting, then discuss my experience running an online class to teach others how to create Language Nests and build speech community.

Before diving in, I want to say that I am just one person out of many people working to continue our language, dances, ceremonies, and lifeways. As a young person, I offer my experience with the hope that it contributes to our collective effort at language resurgence and not to represent myself as an expert or authority figure. To anyone from my community reading this paper, I hope you find something useful here, and please forgive me for any misrepresentations, misunderstandings, or mistakes you find. I am doing my best and my intention is to be helpful, not to offend!

## **2. A LITTLE ABOUT NUU-WEE-YA' SPEAKING-COMMUNITIES AND OUR JOURNEY TO KEEP SPEAKING OUR LANGUAGE AND BE OURSELVES**

I'm going to share my understanding of my heritage language and my people, based on conversations with my own family, with elders and language teachers, with contemporary and older archival materials, and with other language revitalizationists from neighboring communities. I want to be clear that this is my perspective. I am not someone who has been trained in our oral history formally or empowered by my community or ancestors to keep our history in any official way, and I'm also not a professional historian or linguist.

Nuu-wee-ya' is a Dene language made up of several dialects historically spoken in many villages within a roughly 125 mile north-south stretch of coastal land between Bandon, OR and Wilson Creek, CA. This homeland also extends up the watersheds of rivers, creeks, and coastal lakes, including the upper Coquille River, Floras Creek and Lake, Sixes River, Elk River, Euchre Creek, the Rogue River, Illinois River, Galice Creek, Applegate River, Pistol River, Chetco River, Smith River, Lake Earl and Wilson Creek. Our lands are bordered by Miluk people to the north, Upper Umpqua, Takelma, Shasta, and Karuk peoples to the east, and Yurok people to the south. For many of our people near those borders, villages historically featured bilingual communities, with families from multiple language groups represented.

We are world renewal people, an identity based on belief systems and ceremonies that are shared with some of our relatives to the south. In many ways, our people are the northern tip of a continuum of basketry, art, spirituality, and stewardship practices that extends south into California. We are a convergence point between those practices and the practices of our neighbors and relatives to the north. Perhaps not coincidentally, our ancestral lands are a noted area of biological diversity and ecotones, transition zones for several ecosystem types found to the north and south of our homelands.

Starting in the 1850s, the Nuu-wee-ya'-speaking community was split across several reservations in Oregon and California. Over the last century, we have seen the passing of a generation of first language (L1) speakers, with the exception of Loren Me'-lash-ne Bommelyn, a Tolowa man who has worked with elders to create the first dictionary of our language and who continues to champion language activism and provide leadership in the community. There are still living heritage speakers, people who grew up bilingual but do not actively speak today; most are middle-aged or elderly. There's also a growing group of L2 speakers (people who started learning as adults) and some heritage speakers who are also language learners. We have a large corpus of archival material, both written and recorded, that teachers and linguists use to support revitalization.

A contemporary revitalization movement has been growing in our community since the 1970s, working both with L1 speakers and archival materials. Although this contemporary movement can be traced to a community of passionate people in the 1970s, it blossomed from the work of previous elders and community leaders. Work towards language, culture, and community wellbeing has been continual in our communities over the last two centuries (and beyond!), as documented by oral history and in archival records. For example, an elder at the Yakama Indian Reservation shared with me that elders at Siletz reached out to them to ask for help with language revitalization in their community as early as the 1950s.<sup>1</sup>

Some examples of our elders' methods for perpetuating our culture and language are:

- teaching Nuu-wee-ya' in our communities and families
- collaborating with other Native language, culture and ceremony continuation movements
- continuing to practice our arts and associated teachings within our families
- passing down accurate oral history
- practicing our ceremonies and lifeways
- sharing language and culture materials with ethnographers and others
- traveling to visit each other at different reservations and elsewhere
- maintaining our relationships to our ancestors and homelands

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<sup>1</sup> Personal Communication.

- advocating to the US and state governments about the importance of our language

These efforts have been ongoing, even in the face of the many obstacles that have impacted our community. I feel it is important to remember how the work today is part of a long chain of work in our community and that revitalization isn't something "new." Rather, it is part of a bigger push for community and cultural wellbeing and continues the philosophy of our ancestors about how we take care of the world. We are connected to our ancestors by the work we do!

Now I'll list some obstacles our communities have faced. I present these in a rough timeline, although a lot of the things in this list are still happening.<sup>2</sup>

- A campaign of genocide by military personnel, militias and settlers throughout Dee-ni' / Dv-ne / Tv-de / Taa-da homelands, which included a state-funded genocide program in California that paid private citizens by the scalp
- the still-unexplained failure of the US government to ratify and honor several treaties negotiated in good faith by people at Siletz and brought back to Washington DC
- widespread and violent forced diaspora from our homelands by private militias and the US military
- decimation of our homelands by natural resource extraction industries including gold mining, logging, fur trade, commercial fishing, and more
- an era of repeated, forced relocations to various reservations under concentration camp conditions
- failures by the US government to fulfill their trust responsibility to our peoples after we were removed to reservations<sup>3</sup>
- laws restricting the movement of our people off-reservation and militarized police action against people running away to our homelands<sup>4</sup>
- state-sanctioned programs to kidnap children and incarcerate them at boarding schools

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<sup>2</sup> This is based primarily on the following sources: Bommelyn (2011); Schwartz (1997); Viles (2005); oral history shared with author by Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation and Siletz tribal members; Tolowa Dee-Ni' Nation (n.d.); search results from Lewis (n.d.) using keywords *Rogue River*, *Tolowa*, *Trail of Tears*, and *Tribal Termination*.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, elders at Siletz have shared memories how rations promised to our people were regularly not delivered, often inedible, and included deliveries made up entirely of flour swept up from factory floors. Oral history shared with author, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Lucy Smith, a noted cultural leader and Nuu-wee-ya' speaker, had to live in hiding as a child after her mother ran away from Siletz to raise Lucy near her ancestral village. In a recorded Nuu-wee-ya' interview done by John Marr, Lucy detailed her escape and the regular patrols of soldiers who would round up Indian people at that time. John Marr Transcriptions, Siletz Tribal Language Program.

- Settlers kidnapping Native children for indentured servitude, and the failure of the government to intervene
- criminalization of our religion and failure to prosecute violence by private citizens done to Indian people while practicing ceremony
- intense missionization and state-sanctioned assimilation and relocation programs into early-to-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century,
- the 1950s-era termination of the federal recognition of several tribal governments representing our peoples
- biased policing of our lifeways including hunting and fishing
- destruction of our sacred sites (e.g., blasting prayer rocks in our rivers)
- widespread opposition by some state agencies and special interest groups to restoration of the tribal status of several tribes in the 1970s and 1980s
- BIA's imposition of ineffective governance structures on newly-restored tribes
- widespread bigotry against our people in the states of Oregon and California

Unfortunately, these horrors are not unique to our people, but I feel it is important to contextualize the climate of our cultural and language revitalization. It is amazing to me that our community has continued to work to pass down our language and culture in the face of so many obstacles.

Revitalization is often talked about as an independent, isolated, and new effort in our communities that relies mostly on linguistic expertise. News stories talk about Native people who are “bringing back their language,” like we just recently came up with the idea. Even back home, people even talk about me and others who work on revitalization efforts as “language people.” By sharing some of our history, I hope to show that our peoples’ efforts today are connected to our ancestors’ work for community wellness. Anyone can be a “language person,” and one of the best ways to pitch in is by speaking our language. In my mind, that’s how our history and our elders’ legacies connect to Language Nesting in your own home.

### **3. VILLAGE IDENTITY AND DIALECT IN NUU-WEE-YA'**

For us Nuu-wee-ya'-speaking people, village identity is a core part of who we are. By village identity, I mean the collection of people who descend from a series of villages along the stretch of land I defined above and who have distinct identities and stewardship responsibilities. Collectively, we are a diverse Dv-ne / Dee-ni' / Tv-de / Daa-da (these are four ways of saying person across our three dialects!) society who steward our respective village territories, share ceremonies, practice our lifeways together, and collaborate to keep our world in good order. Hence, village identity is one of the core ways we identify ourselves as Nuu-wee-ya'-speaking people.

In contrast, dialectal variation in our ancestors' speech and the area where people lived (e.g. Rogue River Indian) have been two key identifiers used by non-Native linguists, ethnographers, and US Indian Agents to describe us. The mismatch between our heritage village as part of our identity (e.g. I am a Che'-mee-dv-ne / Joshua band person), scholarly materials describing dialects, and the terms for our peoples used on reservation rolls has led to Nuu-wee-ya'-speaking people being inconsistently named in existing literature and in the archival record. Our peoples' experience of repeated removal to reservations makes the situation even more complicated because people are also identified by the reservation to which their family was removed (e.g., I'm a Siletz person). In a language revitalization context, this makes it very confusing to distinguish dialect from village-level variation in Nuu-wee-ya'.

You may hear people in my community talk about their "bands," which are the villages or tribes they come from. The current terms for our bands were formed by the village names listed by the Indian agents who administered reservations. Today citizens say "I am Chetco." or "I am Tututni." as if they are separate people, while in fact these former towns were speakers of our common Dene language with strong kinship ties. In former times, people identified with the village or town they came from, the collective villages in an area who shared stewardship responsibility to the same homelands, and our collective identity as Nuu-wee-ya' speaking people. For example, my family comes from the town of Che'-mee-dvn, which was one village out of several that belonged to the Yaa-shuu-wi (Joshua) collective at the mouth of the Rogue River, which in turn was part of the broader Dee-ni' / Dv-ne / Tv-de / Taa-da community.

It is challenging to look back on archival notes and sometimes challenging to talk to people in the community when there are so many competing terms and different ways of talking about our experience. This is especially true because some terms come from the community while others were imposed on us from the outside and, in some cases, adopted by the community to help explain our history.

Many people are working to clarify the situation, both for the benefit of our family histories, and to help our linguistic work. Jaeci Hall, a Tututni learner and linguist, proposes breaking the many village varieties into dialect groups based on some regular differences in how people talk (Hall, 2021).<sup>5</sup> One difference is how verbs are conjugated. For example, a person from Tuu-tuu-dvn says *ch'ii-ya* 'you eat', while a person from Nii~lii~chvn-dvn says *ch'aa~-ya~* 'you eat'. The regular difference is that in the north, second person 'you' is marked by an [i], while down south it is marked by a nasal [~] on the vowel. Another difference is the inventory of phonemes (meaningful sounds) in each dialect. For example, someone whose family is from Bvn'-yuu-k'wvt / Cape Blanco-area would use a [t'] ejective barred-l

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<sup>5</sup> Hall is also a contributor to this volume, and the author and Hall have also collaborated extensively together, including on the ILDA Nuu-da' Mv-ne' Archive: <https://mc.miamioh.edu/ilda-nuuweeya/about>.



sound to say [t'et] 'night' while someone from 'Ee-chuu-let / Lake Earl area would use an ejective [t'] and say [t'et]. There are also some differences in vocabulary that Hall notes. Based on her research, Hall groups Nuu-wee-ya' into three large dialect groups: northern, southern, and eastern. The northern group includes Sixes, Euchre, Joshua, Tututni, Mikwanu, and Chasta Costa bands, the southern dialect includes Tolowa and Chetco bands, and the eastern includes Galice and Applegate bands.

I think this is a helpful way to teach our community members about our language. Explaining this way groups our dialects based on how the language works, which gives people clear guidance about how to talk and promotes understanding across dialects. It leaves room for us to remember and center our village identities in our work and helps the community move past what is frankly a confusing and inconsistent academic discussion about labeling our peoples.

Elder speakers at Siletz and Smith River have also shared perspectives that all dialects are mutually intelligible by L1 speakers. Some of these elders shared in recent memory and some of their contributions were written down by ethnographers. In my own experience as a learner of both southern and northern dialects, I consider Nuu-wee-ya' to be a single language with three major dialect groups. This interpretation differs from the opinion of at least one prominent linguist who worked on Tututni extensively (Golla, 2011). However, I feel obligated to share that many people at Siletz and the Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation remember that the primary informant for that linguist, Ida Bensell, regularly traveled to Smith River to speak Nuu-wee-ya' with Amelia Brown, a Tolowa person. So, while it can be hard as an L2 learner to understand a different dialect, we all have something to look forward to when we become more advanced speakers.

Given where our community is in our multi-generational journey to revitalize our language, I felt it was important to share some of the things above. Our revitalization effort will be stronger when we share an understanding in our community that 1) L1 speakers of the different varieties of Nuu-wee-ya' can understand each other, which means the dialects are mutually intelligible, 2) our people have a practice of identifying ourselves by our ancestors' villages and by groups of villages that worked closely together (called bands), and 3) Nuu-wee-ya'-speaking people have a common heritage as people who lived alongside each other, speak the same heritage language, practice the same ceremonies, and care for the same lands. That's why I prefer using the names Nuu-wee-ya' or Dee-ni' Wee-ya' when speaking about our language. Nuu-wee-ya' means *our language* or *our words*, and Dee-ni' Wee-ya' means *Dee-ni' peoples' words or language*. There's a lot of strength in bringing together our diverse villages and histories into one movement. That's a lesson that our ancestors have shown us again and again.

#### **4. MY JOURNEY AS NUU-WEE-YA' LEARNER AND LANGUAGE RESEARCHER**

I began learning Nuu-wee-ya' in 2007 while in high school after connecting with classes offered by the Siletz Tribe. Prior to that, I was vaguely aware that my ancestors spoke a language other than



English but knew little about it. After starting classes through Siletz, my oldest brother Nick and I quickly became enamored with language learning and practiced together as speakers over the next several years, taking classes offered by the Siletz Tribes' language program. During that time, we were also lucky to learn from Loren Me'-lash-ne Bommelyn, a Tolowa (southern dialect) culture bearer and language speaker, through the University of Oregon's Northwest Indian Language Institute (NILI).

Then, while I was an undergraduate at the University of Oregon, I became more involved in language revitalization. I continued taking classes from my own tribe and in Tolowa offered by the Bommelyn family through NILI. During this time, I explored academic theories about language revitalization and linguistics to better understand my own language and how to develop resources for myself and other learners. I worked together with Lushootseed and Ichishkiin learners to form multilingual language sharing nights, where we learned each other's languages and took part in immersion activities to create space for us all to spend time speaking. I also took part in a grassroots effort to start a Nuu-wee-ya' preschool for two families. While the preschool was short-lived, our efforts were successful in other ways. The greatest benefit was our immersion in the language for several hours, which was a pivotal time for me. I experienced what it felt like to live a day where Nuu-wee-ya' was my primary language of communication (Viles, 2013). I also realized that to revitalize our language, we must stay focused on speaking and removing barriers to daily speech. We don't necessarily need big investments in infrastructure or multi-faceted programs. While those things can be helpful, language revitalization can only be successful when individual community members speak the language every day to the best of their current abilities.

Following my college graduation in 2013, I took part in a multi-year grant with my brother Jerome Viles and Jaeci Hall to transcribe and make available thousands of pages of archival documents and several hours of linguistic audio recordings of L1 Nuu-wee-ya' speakers, focusing especially on the northern and eastern dialects. At the time, Loren Bommelyn's work on the southern dialect was the basis for nearly all available learning materials. Gilbert Towner, an elder from Siletz, had produced a small amount of material based exclusively on the northern dialect. The Siletz Tribe's language program had included some northern dialect vocabulary into their learning materials as well.

Jaeci, a student of Gilbert, came together with Jerome and I, who were learning the southern dialect, to access additional archival materials. This project was housed at the NILI under the guidance of Janne Underriner. The project focused on transcribing and digitizing the majority of language materials that remained unavailable to the revitalization community. We were also working to better understand the diversity of village varieties, an issue that, as discussed above, had caused tension between scholars of linguistics and within heritage communities. We wanted to help build a coherent, vital, and contemporary speech community.

The DEL grant supported Hall's doctoral work, including her research on dialect, and supported the three of us in collaborating with the Myaamia Center to launch a digital archive of Nuu-wee-ya' language materials, using the Indigenous Languages Digital Archive (ILDA) software.<sup>6</sup> This archive features transcriptions and digitized images of thousands of pages of archival language material and audio clips of dozens of hours of archival audio recordings. The archive is designed to act as a source for language teachers and learners to use as they develop dictionaries and learning materials. It is a digital research space to help the community to reclaim archival language material that hasn't been easily available for the last century. Ironically, the project pulled me away from my focus on speaking my language in my community and so after completing the grant, I turned my focus back to finding effective ways to build habitual use of Nuu-wee-ya' into my daily life.

## 5. MY JOURNEY USING RECLAIMING DOMAINS AND LANGUAGE NESTING

My experience of developing language materials on the one hand and committing myself to speaking my language daily on the other hand, led me to work more closely with my friend and mentor Zalmai Zahir. Zahir is a linguist and extremely proficient Lushootseed speaker who developed a method to increase his daily use of Lushootseed, which is now being applied by other Native languages on the West Coast. Zahir describes his method as creating Language Nests, reclaiming domains, maintaining a language journal, and promoting conversations in one's target language (Zahir, 2018). This work is also described by Regan Anderson, an Ichishkiin learner, teacher, and language revitalizationist who participated in the same community of practice centered at the University of Oregon (Anderson, 2015). Below, I highlight a few aspects of Zahir's approach to help frame our work in Nuu-wee-ya' and describe my journey using this method.

Zahir describes a Language Nest as a physical space in your home that acts as a dedicated space for your heritage language to live. In this nest, "adult learners will use the language [exclusively]," creating an expectation that helps learners maintain motivation (Zahir, 2018, p. 156). Language Nests are created by gradually shifting all the activities you do in a particular space into your language. Zahir calls each activity in a physical location a domain and the process of using only your target language during that activity "reclaiming a domain." For example, in my bathroom, I first reclaimed the domain of washing my hands. I wrote a "cheat sheet" to look at in case I forgot any vocabulary (see appendix for a similar example) and committed to self-narrating in Nuu-we-ya' while washing my hands and not using English during that activity in my bathroom.

Zahir notes that "the overall goal...is to get [learners] to use the target language" (Zahir 2018, p. 156). Rather than a focus on learning about your language, this method is primarily concerned with

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<sup>6</sup> Nuu-da' Mv-ne'. ILDA Digital Archive. <https://mc.miamioh.edu/ilda-nuuweeya/about>

getting you to use your language in your home and daily life. This method sees motivation as a key factor for learners of endangered languages. A central part of the method is normalizing the setbacks we face as we revitalize and better understanding the complex motivations for learning our heritage language, which will help us maintain motivation as we move forward.

Learning your heritage language as a Native person is not the same as learning a “major” language in school. Materials aren’t always available, for example. There can also be a lot of feelings involved with working on your language when it is endangered. For instance, there’s conversation in our communities around saving our languages, which can put a huge amount of pressure on a new language learner. Add to that the fact that many of us are learning in our spare time, after work, and in the context of our daily lives, and you can see how it might be overwhelming to start.

For the first five years I was learning Nuu-wee-ya', I remember feeling guilty that I wasn't doing enough and that I was learning southern dialect first instead of the way my grandma heard the language. I believe it is common in revitalization for many different pieces of our family experience to collide with our daily life stresses. When you also stop and consider educational aspects like learning styles, classroom anxiety, etc., it can be a challenge to start the journey of speaking your heritage language. The Language Nesting method gives a simple focus which I found helpful especially when feeling overwhelmed. Practicing domains builds a habit which gives a clear objective: speak your language. This is accompanied by the perspective that revitalization is a marathon, not a sprint.

Picking areas to learn and speak where we are highly motivated to use the language makes it easier to carve out time. At the same time, recognizing that we will have “hills and valleys” as learners and speakers can be liberating! Instead of focusing on how successful we should be, this method focuses on finding areas of your life where you are motivated to speak the language, and then gradually committing yourself to using the language in those areas. This method also invites us to take activities that we already do every day, like showering and cooking, and use them as a space to speak our language. In doing so, it takes the burden off the speaker to “find” time to speak the language and, instead, makes the most of the time we already set aside for chores and other habits. Zahir’s method encourages us to balance passion with being kind to ourselves during our hills and valleys, so that we can encourage long-term growth in our speech and avoid burning out.

## **5.1 BUILDING A BATHROOM LANGUAGE NEST**

After being invited by Zahir to participate in the Multilingual Institute, I undertook a year-long effort to make my bathroom into a Nuu-wee-ya' Language Nest. After a few months of practicing my domains, I recruited a group of participants and led online classes to share this method with others. Below, I describe the approach I used, show a limited dataset demonstrating the advances in my language use, and share reflections from our online Nuu-wee-ya' speaking group.

Before trying to teach others, I committed to reclaiming domains and creating a Language Nest in my own home. Because self-narration is a major aspect of this method, and the bathroom is a place where I am typically alone, it seemed a good place to start. To track my progress, I tallied on a sheet of paper each time I performed a domain (e.g., washing hands, drying hands, taking a shower, or brushing my teeth while self-narrating in Nuu-wee-ya'). Every two or three weeks, I would record my paper tallies into an Excel document, which gave me a running total of how many domains I was self-narrating each day. From there, I averaged the amount of time it took me to narrate each domain. Using the averages and Excel chart, I estimated how much time I was spending each day in the language. I added one to two domains per week, and I stopped adding new domains when I reached thirteen. After twenty-nine weeks of recording bathroom domains, I stopped tracking my daily usage.

Reclaiming domains and Language Nesting are the two parts of a two-step process. In the first step, you reclaim a new domain each week. To reclaim a domain, you 1) prepare a worksheet with a list of sentences you'll say when doing that activity, 2) pin that sheet up in the room where you do the activity, 3) set your expectation to self-narrate in your language every time you do that activity in that room, and 4) do the self-narration! At first, you may need to look at your worksheet and read as you self-narrate. Eventually, you'll use the language enough to do the domain without looking at the worksheet. You may also begin to add additional sentences and new vocabulary. Once you have all your daily activities converted into domains, you do the second step: transitioning into a Language Nest. That means you commit to speaking only your language in that room. You still self-narrate your domains, but in addition you stop speaking any English at all in the space.

In my case, I had transitioned my bathroom into a Nuu-wee-ya' Language Nest one year after starting to reclaim domains. In total, the process to commit to all thirteen of my domains in the bathroom took six months, including the time it took to develop domain templates (i.e. the worksheets or scripts to guide me in case I forgot vocabulary). It took me another six months to formally transition my bathroom into a Language Nest. At the time, it seemed like a big mental hurdle. Looking back, I could have jumped into a Language Nest sooner!

To make the transition to a Language Nest, I 1) told Zahir and my peers that I was going to stop speaking English in my bathroom a few weeks before (this meant I was "on the hook" with my peers), 2) put up a small sign outside my bathroom that said Nuu-wee-ya' shaa naa-ch'ii-'a 'only speak Nuu-wee-ya'', and 3) told my partner, who I live with, and my close friends, that I wasn't going to speak English in the bathroom anymore. If you build a Language Nest in your own home, I'd encourage you to commemorate when you transition the room to a Nest with a small sign and by telling people close to you and any of your peers in the language community.

The chart below shows how many minutes I spent in the language (y axis) and what week it was (I tracked 29 weeks). On my tenth week, I spent roughly 175 minutes self-narrating Nuu-wee-ya' in the bathroom. That was my peak in my language usage in the bathroom. If I were to do it over again, I would have aimed for a Language Nest after 10-15 weeks, which corresponds with my highest language usage.

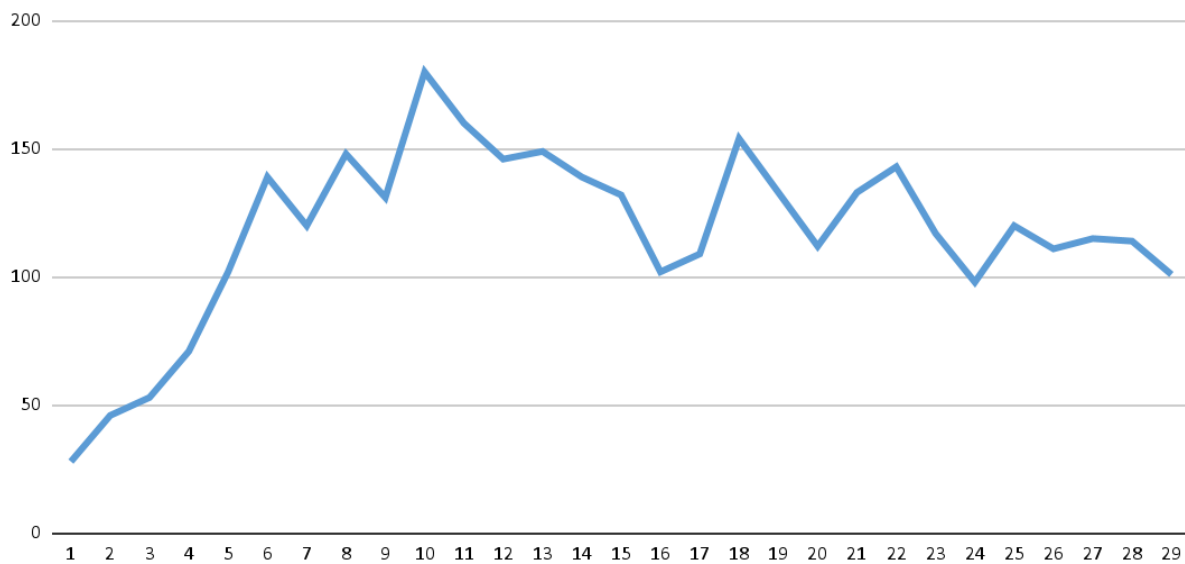


Figure 1: Bathroom domain weekly language use (in minutes per week)

When I started this process, I thought the bathroom would be a good place for a Language Nest because I mostly spent time alone there and so had a lot of control over what language is used. The chart above shows that it worked to quickly scale up language use in the bathroom. However, it also shows that language use decreased after ten weeks and then leveled off at between 100-150 minutes per week. While difficulty maintaining motivation was a factor, I believe there is another explanation for the drop in language use: within my routine, I don't spend much more than 20 minutes a day in the bathroom. After making a big push to increase language use in the bathroom, I fell into my daily routine, which dropped my language use back a bit.

Having a Language Nest created a supportive atmosphere in my life to expand my language use by 1) keeping Nuu-wee-ya' fresh in my mind and 2) by providing a dedicated space within my home for Nuu-wee-ya' to reside. While I worked to create a bathroom Language Nest, I also started practicing domains in the kitchen. I didn't keep track of how much time I spent speaking Nuu-wee-ya' in the kitchen but have used the same method of gradually adding domains. I also did not track my time conversing in Nuu-wee-ya' with peers, my partner, class participants, or my dog. Together,

domains in the kitchen, a Language Nest in the bathroom, and Nuu-wee-ya' conversation with others combine to form most of my language use. Most of my Nuu-wee-ya' conversation comes from the classes I've been leading (more on that below) and from phone calls with a small group of other learners. I also make a consistent effort to talk to my dog in Nuu-wee-ya'.

I consider the bathroom Language Nest a success for many reasons. First, I still speak only Nuu-wee-ya' in the bathroom. Second, I increased my daily language use significantly. Third, I have found that it is mentally easier to be brave about taking on new domains and speaking Nuu-wee-ya' more frequently, and I am reclaiming domains in the kitchen. However, I've also found the kitchen a little harder to do, because my partner and friends speak mostly English and we spend a lot more time together in the kitchen than we do in the bathroom. Fourth, I have moved rentals three times since writing this paper, and my bathroom Nest has stayed consistent. It provides a consistent space and routine to speak my language, like a foundation for me to build on. Because Nuu-wee-ya' is critically endangered, it is hard to find a place where you "automatically" speak Nuu-wee-ya'. A Language Nest gives me that whether or not I'm able to find other people to speak with. Fifth, I learned about the advantages and drawbacks of using the bathroom as a Language Nest. Learning about what does and doesn't work for you is important when you're doing self-directed language learning. Approaching the work with curiosity helps to keep your focus on the practical: what does and doesn't work for you, and not on thoughts of self-judgement and doubt. Learning one's heritage language as a Native person in the US can be an emotional and personal process, and developing skills—like curiosity—to manage those emotions is a part of our work.

Looking with curiosity, rather than judgement, I would share that the main drawback I see with a bathroom domain is that I spend less than 30 minutes a day in the bathroom, limiting the amount of language I am likely to use. Another drawback is that there aren't very many social opportunities to bring others into the language of the bathroom, as opposed to a Nest like the kitchen. That said, the bathroom is an easy place to start, where you as the speaker have a lot of control. In that way, it is a lower risk, lower reward place to start, when compared to the kitchen.

By presenting this information, I am hoping to do more than give people a rough idea of how much time I spend in the bathroom per day! My goal is to demonstrate the steady growth in my language use that I saw with this method while also acknowledging the ups and downs that came during the process. Likewise, I want to highlight how a Language Nest supports a stable level of language use and that adding domains and conversation help increase daily language use even further. Finally, I want to make a simple point: home-based language use varies along with your daily life. Hectic days (think brushing your teeth while putting on clothes to make it to work), days spent outside or at a friend's house for dinner—all these ordinary events can change how much time you spend in your

Language Nest. Knowing this can help a learner adjust their expectations of themselves (it isn't a bad thing to have a social life!) and provide the feedback we need to stay motivated to speak more frequently and be grounded in our own life experiences.

## 5.2 RUNNING AN ONLINE LANGUAGE SPEAKING GROUP

After roughly six months of practicing domains in my own home, but before adopting a Language Nest, I began running an online course to support other Nuu-wee-ya' speakers. Each course lasted ten weeks, with Fall, Winter and Spring sessions. During fall 2020, I led one group, and then during winter 2021 I ran an introductory and advanced speaking group. After losing some participants during the second half of winter term, we combined the two groups into a single spring 2021 class. After that, I experienced some burnout, juggling my personal and work life with running online classes, and took two terms off. Since then, I've resumed classes.

Classes meet once weekly for an hour during which we split our time evenly between reviewing a new domain for participants to adopt at home and practicing semi-scripted conversations with each other. We focus on learning techniques for speaking Nuu-wee-ya' every day, and on building habits that facilitate using the language instead of focusing on proficiency. Of course, proficiency increases as usage increases! This may seem like splitting hairs, but maintaining a focus on using and speaking the language is critical. After all, isn't the goal of revitalization to build spaces where we use our language every day? Don't we want to find friends, family, and peers to use the language with? And how can we do that without focusing on speaking our language?

Because we don't have an established speech community for Nuu-wee-ya', each learner plays an important part in building a speech community through their own habit of daily use. Each Language Nest becomes another place where the language lives and helps reintroduce Nuu-wee-ya' into our daily routine. We each become hubs in a web of speakers, and the more connections we have between each other and the more we speak, the more resilient that web becomes. Language Nests are like a fire to keep us warm. From there, we can stretch ourselves to make connections, hold conversation times, and generate excitement in the community. However, we have control over our own space and language use, which helps build consistency for each person individually and for our speech community.

Because I already had experience as a learner and teacher of Nuu-wee-ya', I had advantages in adopting this method. I had experience interpreting archival notes to research new words and phrases and I had access to a large collection of existing Nuu-wee-ya' teaching materials and vocabulary focused on the home (including the bathroom). I also benefited from Zalmi sharing Lushootseed language templates for many bathroom domains and having access to a dictionary of Tolowa (the



southern-most dialect of Nuu-wee-ya').<sup>7</sup> Part of my intent in writing this paper is to make it easier for others to adopt this method, too. See the appendix for samples of the materials that I and others have collaboratively developed and for contact information. I invite any Native language learners interested in accessing more materials to contact me—I am happy to share materials to help as you learn Nuu-wee-ya', or help you adapt them for your own language.<sup>8</sup> I'd also like to acknowledge Zalmi Zahir, who generously did the same for me and many others, and the Bommelyn *Da'-ye*<sup>9</sup>, who have constantly shared with our speech community their time, words, and the materials on home-based learning they have created.

## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS: WHERE WE'RE HEADED AND LESSONS LEARNED

Throughout this paper, I've shared some of my experiences and thoughts from my journey using a particular Language Nesting method. I'd like to close this paper by highlighting some of the lessons learned and challenges that I see ahead for myself and for my speech community.

### *Language revitalization is part of my community's effort to build wellbeing*

Language learning can be enjoyable and fun, but it can also bring a lot of pressure and guilt (think: am I doing enough to help my culture continue?). Remembering that language revitalization is a social activity that can be done together with your roommates, friends, family, and ancestors helps put the emphasis on doing things in a way that is good for your life and also fun. Wellbeing is important, and the lessons we have about living well can also apply to language work, like taking small, positive, and consistent steps, as opposed to getting on a “kick.”

Although my Language Nest is in the bathroom, where I usually practice alone, it is part of a strategy to create spaces where Nuu-wee-ya' is used daily, and to support developing a speech community. Focusing on being part of an active speech community helps me remember that I'm not responsible for saving my language alone. Instead, I'm starting to see language work as something I'm lucky to do. I'm lucky to be part of such a wonderful community. Our community as Dee-ni' / Dv-ne / Tv-de / Taa-da people is full of wonderful people and sharing in that community is a lot of fun and meaningful in many ways.

One of the things I appreciate about this method is how it feels connected to pragmatic value systems from my own community. A teaching shared in our community is that when you learn

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<sup>7</sup> The current iteration of the Tolowa dictionary is hosted by the Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation and was developed based on earlier, print editions by Loren Bommelyn and Bernice Humphreys, as well as the work of Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation Language Department staff. See: <https://www.weeyadvn.com/tolowa-dictionary/>.

<sup>8</sup> I can best be reached through the Nuu-da' Mv-ne' non-profit, at [nuuda.mvne@gmail.com](mailto:nuuda.mvne@gmail.com)

<sup>9</sup> *Da'-ye'* means family.

something, it is up to you to pass it on to others. The act of learning and in turn teaching connects us to each other and keeps things moving forward. These values in our community give us essential guideposts for successfully doing this work. Building our own recognition of the value of our community's teachings is a very motivating piece of this work, and one that I believe to be tied to our wellbeing as Native people.

*It's a marathon, not a sprint*

There's a lot of media coverage about language revitalization that focuses on language endangerment as a disaster. Think about all these words: dying, death, emergency, saving, vanishing, extinct. That framing puts a lot of pressure on us "language people" to make something happen, fast! I used to think of that pressure as motivating, but now I'm starting to wonder if it can also be harmful to our work. Burnout is a concern when you're trying to take on the world and save your language. Remembering that we are part of a long-term effort to perpetuate our culture helps me to slow down and stay focused on doing a good job, as opposed to rushing to "finish" the job.

*We can't do this alone and need to find ways to encourage new and existing community participation*

All the focus on how endangered our language is can also be very discouraging to community members who want to learn and speak. There are real issues in my community that are obstacles to learning Nuu-wee-ya'. There aren't many materials, for example. I want to avoid making others think that working on the language means that you must dedicate your whole life, become a linguist or archivist, or have a special relationship with an L1 speaker. That's a pressure I've felt in my own life and talked about with a lot of other learners. It isolates us all. Positioning language workers as "the language people" who are willing to sacrifice everything for our mission separates us from the rest of the community. For others who may be on their first step in learning, it can create an intimidating atmosphere, even if those of us doing language work don't mean for it to be or aren't expecting that from learners.

All that said, I would like to see our communities extend a lot of support to those people who are dedicating their life to language work. There have been times in my life that I've seen how language workers are isolated and trying to move mountains on their own. I hope that we can remember and recognize the work that those folks are doing for our community!

*We need to build speech communities with motivated people*

Because we don't have a robust speech community yet, we need to adopt methods that allow motivated people to independently increase their language use, while also promoting social connection between people. That's not intuitive for people who grew up in a monolingual, English-dominant culture. I experienced a surprising amount of discomfort when I first started doing immersion

activities. Being uncomfortable forced me to think about social expectations in the United States around speaking English. One opinion I heard growing up in Oregon was that it was rude to speak in a language that not everyone in the room can understand. I didn't realize how much those social expectations would impact my comfort speaking Nuu-wee-ya' or other languages. As a teacher, I remind myself that people need support as they learn how to cultivate new speech communities. As a learner, I remind myself that dedicating time to speaking Nuu-wee-ya' with other learners—despite the awkward or anxious feelings it can cause—is the most fundamental part of revitalizing our language. If we aren't speaking, we aren't revitalizing.

The work of groups like the Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival (AICLS) and the Living Languages Alliance demonstrates how powerful a focus on building a speech community can be. My learning was only possible because of the efforts of others to create community and encourage language use in my daily life. The Language Nesting method Zahir has shared offers a concrete way to do that. It empowers individuals to gain skills to speak their language daily and fosters opportunities to converse in the language through semi-structured conversations. It also includes dedicated time to talk about the social parts of revitalization, such as navigating conversations with roommates about Language Nests, confronting your own discomforts with trying to speak new words, and learning how to build good habits.

*Language revitalization is just as much about social networking as it is about linguistic analysis and language teaching*

Speaking our languages needs to be about communication and daily speech if we're going to revitalize our language. It doesn't help anything to teach people grammar and vocabulary if we don't create opportunities for social connection and daily language use. I've been calling this "teaching about the language," because it focuses on teaching students what they need to know to talk correctly, but it doesn't give them any strategies to use the language in their lives. Instead, we can help people learn strategies (like reclaiming domains!) to speak their language.

*Shu' nuu-xwaa-nin-la!*

I want to end this paper with a big "Thank you!" Thank you to all the ancestors and language speakers who worked to make sure that their people's language continues to be spoken. Thank you to all the learners who are speaking their people's language. A big thank you to everyone who was involved with creating and editing this volume. And thank you to the readers for being part of the conversation that we are having about revitalization. Dv-ne da'lh naa-ghaa-ch'it-'aa-le', *it will be so that we will speak our language(s).*

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## APPENDIX: SAMPLE LANGUAGE NESTING MATERIAL

Please note that the formatting has been changed to accommodate this publication format. Notably, I have changed the font, and would suggest that you use an 18 point font or larger with your own materials at home, which makes them much easier to use.

### Sample Domain: Brushing Teeth

#### Shghu' nashlh-de

#### I am brushing my teeth

- |   |                                     |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| 1. wu'lh-nal-de / wu'lh-naa-tr'vl-de 'vshlh-chut. | I take the toothbrush.              |
| 2. wu'lh-ch'vl-wvsh 'vshlh-chut.                  | I take the toothpaste.              |
| 3. wu'lh ch'vl-wvsh wu'lh-nal-de k'wvt nush-lhe.  | I put toothpaste on the toothbrush. |
| 4. wu'lh-ch'vl-wvsh shu' nush-'vsh                | I put the toothpaste away.          |
| 5. shghu' nashlh-de                               | I brush my teeth.                   |
| 6. tr'esh-she                                     | I spit it out.                      |
| 7. shda' tvl-xvt mvlh nashlh-de.                  | I wash (rinse) my mouth out.        |
| 8. ja' tr'esh-she.                                | I spit it out.                      |
| 9. wu'lh-nal-de nashlh-de                         | I wash (rinse) the toothbrush.      |
| 10. wu'lh-nal-de shu' nush-tish                   | I put the toothbrush away.          |

### Sample Conversation: What did you eat today?

Dee-la ch'v-k'ee-sii-ya/Dee-la taa-ghit-na'?

What'd you eat/drink?

1. Jii-sres-dvn dee-la ch'v-k'ee-sii-ya?

What did you eat today?

2. \_\_\_\_\_ ch'v-k'ee-sish-ya

I ate \_\_\_\_\_

3. Jii-sres-dvn dee-la taa-ghit-na'?

What did you drink today?

4. \_\_\_\_\_ taa-ghvsht-na'

I drank \_\_\_\_\_

### Sample Food List

xas-chi'	<i>carrot</i>
tr'v-nee-lha	<i>carrot (also word for Indian carrot)</i>
des-chuu-svn'	<i>elk meat</i>
ch'vs-svn'	<i>deer meat</i>
saa-chvn-tuu-'i'	<i>acorn soup</i>
taa-svlh	<i>soup (general)</i>
ch'ii-k'vn taa-svlh	<i>chicken soup</i>
see-mee-t'aa-ghi	<i>oyster, rock oyster</i>
ch'vs-sre'	<i>strawberry</i>
saa-bv-li ghus-tr'elh	<i>toasted bread</i>