Cognitive Linguistics and the Study of Indigenous Languages

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There has been a long tradition within the nearly four-decades-old cognitive linguistics (CL) movement of analyses that champion linguistic diversity, constructional specificity, and meaning as the starting point in any analysis of language. Much of this research has been based on data from unfamiliar and minority languages, a significant number of which have focused exclusively on languages spoken by those regarded as Indigenous peoples. Because most Indigenous languages are oral, and the speech communities have been small and highly interactive, these studies have been able to bring fresh data to the cognitive/functional/typological table—and, possibly, even served as an initial and continuing inspiration to the entire movement in the first place, as I will detail here.

However, the alarm bells of language endangerment—especially of small Indigenous languages—have been ringing more and more loudly in both scientific and popular media for the past 20-30 years. There is a natural fit between linguistic description, documentation, and analysis informed by a CL approach and the linguistic and pedagogical training so needed by speakers and learners of endangered languages. Cognitive linguists have much to offer language documentation, sustainability, and L2 pedagogy efforts since some of the core tenets of the field are based on analysis and promotion of actual usage, the ubiquity of metaphor and metonymy in lexicalization and constructionalization, and the primacy of situated and embodied interaction. Emphasizing the role that context, cognition, construal, convention, culture, communication, and language change all play in the framing and interpretation of linguistic expressions is something that cognitive linguists know how to do very well. It's also something that a new generation of CL practitioners need to commit themselves to as the first generation of cognitive linguists begins to fade from the scene and, with them, the memory of how the field came to be in the first place.