

Reviving Waccamaw Siouan: Reconciling ethics, Indigenous epistemologies, and colonial data archives

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Abstract. In this paper we discuss our strategies for reviving Waccamaw Siouan, a dormant Eastern Siouan language. We first outline and categorize the challenges of reconciling ethical methodologies with colonial data sets and systems, dividing these issues into six general categories. Next, we suggest specific, action-based tenets, in five categories, for dormant language revival; we argue for creative methodological adaptations to centralize Indigenous epistemologies and ethics while dealing with multiple, incomplete sources of archival data and various logistical hurdles. Ultimately, we contribute to ongoing discussions of language revival methodologies in the Americas, and particularly in first point-of-colonial-contact sites.

Keywords. language revitalization; Indigenous languages; Siouan languages; decolonial methodologies

1. Introduction. Waccamaw Siouan is a dormant language of the Waccamaw Siouan tribe in southeastern North Carolina. The language belongs to the Siouan language family and is classified as an Eastern Siouan language, along with Catawba, its closest related language. There are few attestations of Waccamaw Siouan, with the longest, and primary, being a wordlist from 1711 containing 143 words (Lawson 1711). Likewise, little study has been done on Waccamaw Siouan prior to now, and what research has been conducted has remained largely inaccessible to the tribe despite their desire to revive the language.

Ashley Lomboy, a member of the Waccamaw Siouan tribe, Native American Council (NAC) leader, and the director of the Waccamaw Siouan STEM Lab, contacted our team in early 2023 with the goal of collaborating to revive Waccamaw Siouan. Drawing heavily on Smith's (2012) decolonial fieldwork methodologies, we began researching the colonial datasets containing attestations of the language. As we analyzed and shared this data, we rapidly became aware of several issues surrounding the data and past research, which can be divided into six overarching themes: intergenerational trauma regarding language and visibility; paucity of language data; biased, colonial content; incomplete and uneven paradigms in data; gatekeeping and inaccessibility of language and historical data, particularly for the Waccamaw Siouan tribe; and appropriate, respectful, and Waccamaw Siouan-centered representation, naming, historical documentation, and remuneration.

Our team aims to work collaboratively and rematriatively with the tribe at all times, forefronting decolonial methodologies and equitable access to data. As part of this, and in collaboration with the tribe, we have established five action-based tenets to address these challenges and center Indigenous epistemologies while still dealing with incomplete sources of archival data. The five categories of methodological, ethically-informed interventions are as follows: leveraging academic and white privileges to give data, resources, and accessibility back to the Wacca-

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maw Siouan; planning reciprocal engagement, including linguistic instruction for the tribe; engaging through a lack of ownership model for subject-area specialists; creating decolonial language models based on historical Siouan linguistics and local sister-language inspiration; and prioritizing Waccamaw Siouan visibility, wellbeing, and agency through linguistic and non-linguistic work, similarly to Sivak et al. (2019) and Zuckermann (2020).

Throughout this paper we review the historical background of linguistic research on Waccamaw Siouan and delve into details about the six main issues mentioned above, connecting some of these experiences with broader issues in the field of language revitalization and language reconstruction. We also address each of our five proposed tenets and highlight specific examples of how our practices meet these ethical guideposts. Ultimately, this paper contributes to ongoing discussions of language revival, revitalization methodologies in the Americas, and the issues and concerns that arise in first point-of-colonial-contact sites.

2. Historical background. Waccamaw Siouan is one of the eight recognized tribes in North Carolina and belongs to the Catawba/Eastern Siouan branch of the Siouan language family. It is a dormant language, though the tribe reached out to our team in spring 2023 to begin a revival project. Prior to this, there had been little research or documentation done on Waccamaw Siouan, and much of what had been done was inaccessible to the tribe.

Our work began with a trilingual wordlist with words from Tuskeruro, Woccon, and Pampticough from 1711 (Lawson). This is not a Swadesh list and contains words that are colonial-centric, such as “cow” and “lazy fellow,” and does not contain terms that would be expected, such as greetings and most kinship terms. Likewise, Lawson’s (1711) attestations for Waccamaw Siouan were provided by a non-native speaker, which may have resulted in some inaccuracies in the data. A second dataset (Adelung & Vater 1806) contains attestations from Waccamaw and Catawba, but the list has only 16 German-Waccamaw glosses. Of those 16 words two of them were not included in Lawson (1711), though when we compared the two lists, we found that the Catawba for the ‘new’ words (Adelung & Vater 1806) matches the Waccamaw Siouan from the earlier list (Lawson 1711), raising the question of whether the ‘new’ words are genuinely new or if the authors merely got the Waccamaw Siouan and Catawban translations confused. This paucity of language data makes it difficult to identify linguistic patterns in the data and to reconstruct the language. It also makes it harder for non-linguists to work with the data, as less data means more research and analysis prior to being able to create new words or develop linguistic structures, and may potentially require additional experience in methods such as comparative linguistics.

Since all the data on Waccamaw Siouan comes from wordlists, there is little to no syntactic data. Lawson’s (1711) wordlist does provide translations for a few sentences, but it is difficult to trust his recordings considering the overall inconsistencies in the data as well as the colonial-centric perspective his sentences take (i.e., “I will sell you goods very cheap” and “all the Indians are drunk”). We have been able to identify some morphological patterns in the data, but it is difficult to determine whether these are true patterns or a result of a lack of rigor when recording.

An additional issue we ran across while searching for data was the various spellings of Waccamaw by different authors. Both Lawson (1711) and Adelung & Vater (1806) utilize the spelling *Woccon*, as do Rudes (1985) and Carter (1980). The tribe, on the other hand, uses *Waccamaw*, as do a handful of other linguistic and historical texts (South 1972; Lerch 2004; Garwood 2013; La Vere 2013). As *Waccamaw Siouan* is the name the tribe uses, this is the one we primarily use as well, though it should be noted that the researchers who utilize these terms are of dubious reliability and at least one of the authors has a problematic relationship with the tribe

(i.e., non-reciprocal research and data collection). Additional spellings we found include Woccan and Wacon (Lawson 1711), and potentially Waccamawmmassus (Waccamaw Siouan Tribe). Prior to starting any linguistic work, we first needed to determine whether *Woccon* and *Waccamaw* were even the same language. The lack of consistency across linguistic and historical sources makes it difficult to find data in the first place and is something that can be particularly problematic with older datasets. For languages with more linguistic data, such as Catawba, there is a similar problem within the representation of the language due to a lack of standardized notation. Catawba, for example, has various sources that provide the following different spellings for “one”: təpɛ, dubé, dupunna, nəpé, d’no-pō-neh, nupɛ, and dəpine (Zeyrek 1983). One of the ways this shows up in Waccamaw is in how Lawson (1711) claims there are no “l” or “f” sounds in the language, but proceeds to spell multiple words with those letters. Such inconsistencies make reconstruction difficult and may require a deeper comparative analysis than would be warranted if the datasets were consistent.

Based on these experiences alone, our rudimentary findings were that the records ignore Indigenous perspectives entirely and are focused on outside Western viewpoints. This in turn has led to a biased, colonial dataset that provides conflicting information in regards to tribes and languages, and that relies on misnaming and colonial divisions. Thus far, all research has been conducted by outsider academics and has led to inconsistencies in and inaccessibility of the data.

Lack of access to historical data is one of the major barriers to revitalization and revival, and it is no different with Waccamaw Siouan. For one, research on specific languages and language families is often very complex and can be difficult for people to parse. This essentially acts as a block for community members engaging in their own revitalization efforts and research and pushes them to rely on outsider academics to access and understand aspects of their own language and culture. In this same vein, non-Indigenous scholars do not always allow tribes access to their research, despite the fact that they would not have research in the first place if not for tribe members or tribe members’ ancestors. This behavior and viewpoint is the result of Western beliefs surrounding ownership, and particularly beliefs regarding intellectual property in academia.

Beyond these issues, we also ran across datasets being paywalled. While many research journals, particularly in linguistics and language revitalization, are moving toward an open-access model, historical and colonial data is often stored in archives or other collections that do not necessarily follow these conventions. Frank T. Siebert is a scholar who focused heavily on Siouan languages and Catawba specifically in the 1940s. There is an archive with an extensive collection of his papers available for request, but for a per page fee. Siebert’s archived work often lacks a description and none of it is previewable, making it difficult to determine what, if anything, would be useful to the person searching. These two things combined make it difficult for someone without funding to utilize this research, and neither us nor the tribe has gained access to these documents as of yet.

Another barrier to consider regarding access is the language of the research. All of the data we found on Waccamaw Siouan was in English – except for the second wordlist, which was written entirely in German. Everyone on our team is coincidentally at least familiar with German, and Passmore is proficient in the language, but if this were not the case then we would have needed to rely on translation software, which can be notoriously unreliable depending on the software, or we would have needed to reach out to find someone proficient in the language. This situation is not unique to us and the language of the research may not always be one that revitalizers are familiar with.

3. Action-based tenets. From the start of the Waccamaw Siouan language revival project, our core goal has been to work collaboratively and rematriatively with the tribe and ensure equitable access to data. Considering the issues discussed in the above section, and in conversation with the tribe, we have established five action-based tenets to address challenges. As part of this methodology, we argue for creative adaptations in order to centralize Indigenous epistemologies and ethics for dormant language revival when dealing with multiple, incomplete sources of archival data as well as logistical blockers. The five tenets are as follows: leveraging academic and white privileges to give data, resources, and accessibility back to the Waccamaw Siouan; planning reciprocal engagement, including linguistic instruction for the tribe; engaging through a lack of ownership model for subject-area specialists; creating decolonial language models based on historical Siouan linguistics and local sister-language inspiration; and prioritizing Waccamaw Siouan visibility, wellbeing, and agency through linguistic and non-linguistic work. These tenets are based on the guiding principles of reciprocity, relevance, rights, reflection, respect, and relational accountability (Snow et al., 2016).

One of the most important tenets of our project is leveraging our academic and white privileges to give data, resources, and accessibility back to the Waccamaw Siouan tribe. As mentioned above, there have been issues in the past with researchers conducting historical and linguistic research on Waccamaw Siouan and then not allowing the tribe access to that data. The tribe has even said that they weren't aware some of the research existed, showcasing just how little access and reciprocity previous researchers have shown the Waccamaw Siouan. This is a familiar issue in the field of language revitalization and Indigenous studies, and unfortunately one that is still a problem. Our team combats this by providing the tribe with full access to resources as we find them. In this way, past historical and linguistic data that we can access and use for research then becomes data the tribe can access and use on their own. Related to this, we have been able to leverage our academic positions to gain access to closed-access articles through our institution that would otherwise be prohibitively expensive to obtain. In the future, we hope to use grants to access additional archive materials that we can share with the tribe.

This reciprocity extends beyond resource sharing and includes future planned reciprocal engagement projects. A long-term goal we have is to work with the tribe to conduct linguistic instruction so tribe members have the knowledge to research and revive their language without needing to rely on outsiders. Our aim with this is to provide the tools necessary for the tribe to have agency, linguistic autonomy, and to ensure sustainability of the language revival project. With linguistic instruction, tribe members will be able to take increasingly more active roles in the revival process, and hopefully will eventually be able to have the revival effort be entirely tribe-run.

As it stands, while our team is conducting the historical and linguistic work, we aim to keep decolonial models at the forefront of our efforts and base our research and data on historical Siouan linguistics. We rely heavily on cultural and linguistic practices of Waccamaw Siouan and Siouan sister-languages. One of the ways we do this is by blending contemporary and historical epistemological, linguistic, semiotic, and cultural practices in our research. An example of this is geophysical revival, or the use of water- and place-based naming traditions, which we came across while doing our historical and comparative research. Finding this connection links the Waccamaw Siouan tribe to other Siouan tribes, and thus to historical cultural practices and ways of knowing and being. Similarly, our work on the Waccamaw Siouan number system suggests a non-linear, parabolic, and cyclical expression of time in Waccamaw Siouan culture. This finding

helps Waccamaw Siouan narratives ‘revive’ and also feeds back into contemporary practices by strengthening Waccamaw Siouan science and technology instruction in the STEM Studio.

Our work on the number system has required reconstruction work, as Lawson (1711) only recorded numbers 1-12 and 20. For this we have turned to a comparative analysis of Waccamaw Siouan’s sister languages in order to determine the most likely constructs of the missing numbers. The goal of this is to create likely reconstructions while maintaining linguistic and cultural relevance. Input from the tribe is encouraged at every stage of this process and final decisions on the reconstructions rest with them. Ownership of this data rests with the tribe and not with our team, further ensuring tribal rights, respect, and relational accountability.

Beyond our linguistics research, an important aspect of our work is continuous advocacy for Waccamaw Siouan visibility. This includes things like pushing to include the Waccamaw Siouan tribe in corporate and educational land acknowledgements, as well as working with our home university to better acknowledge and support the tribe, both generally and in regard to data accessibility. Our aim is to always prioritize Waccamaw Siouan wellbeing, agency, and visibility, and ensure that our research is benefitting the tribe and working toward the tribe’s goals.

Part of this tenet includes reconceptualizing what ‘success’ means for this project. It is often easy to fall into Western thinking of success as something that either does or does not occur, but this model fits neither non-Western ways of knowing and being nor practical pathways language revival takes, and thus can be restrictive, culturally insensitive, and demoralizing (Passmore 2023). Instead, we aim to ground ‘success’ in community-based goals, which are multifaceted and relevant to the linguistic and cultural situation (Lukaniec 2017) and produce a community-up approach to revival, rather than a target-down approach. For Waccamaw Siouan, having first-language speakers is a long way off, but the tribe has set goals of greeting one another in Waccamaw Siouan and being able to use the language in the STEM studio. These goals are important to the community and should be celebrated just as much as producing proficient speakers would be. By grounding our efforts in community-centered goals, we are able to keep tribal agency at the forefront and ensure we are continually referring back to tribe’s wellbeing.

5. Conclusion. Over the past year we have worked with the Waccamaw Siouan tribe to begin language revival efforts. As outsider academics, our aim was to ensure we worked collaboratively and rematriatively with the tribe as we conducted our research. Through the process of creating our methodology and beginning research, we continuously came across six issues in the research and revival process. These issues range from intergenerational trauma to lack of and biased language data, to inaccessibility and gatekeeping of said data. The second section of this paper sheds light on these issues and we provide specific examples of how they have impacted our research as well as how they work to block the Waccamaw Siouan tribe’s attempts at engaging in language revival.

The third section of the paper highlight the five principles we established for working with Waccamaw Siouan language data in order to overcome the above challenges and ensure data equity and tribal agency. Our tenets are ethically informed and are aimed at leveraging outsider privileges to give data back to the tribe, reciprocal engagement, a lack of ownership model for subject-area experts, creating decolonial language models, and prioritizing Waccamaw Siouan visibility and agency.

While the points we discuss in this article are specific to ours and the tribe’s experience with Waccamaw Siouan revival, we also make a point to connect issues and tenets to the greater field of language revival when possible. Our aim with this paper is to not only raise visibility for the

Waccamaw Siouan tribe and language, but also to contribute to the greater discussion of dormant language revival from archival data.

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