

"We preserve the sounds in our language": in conversation with Larry Grant and Sarah Ling

Fenn Stewart

*On March 23, 2018 I met with Larry Grant and Sarah Ling to discuss local projects to increase the recognition and visibility of **hən̓q̓əmin̓əŋ**, the ancestral language of the **xʷməθkʷəy̓əm** (Musqueam) people.*

Fenn Stewart: I was hoping that we could talk about some of the projects that the two of you are doing . . . Sarah, you emailed me today about [the **hən̓q̓əmin̓əŋ** street signs recently unveiled on the University of British Columbia's Vancouver campus].

Sarah Ling: A lot of these events correlate to one another. It doesn't just start from scratch. Larry has been working at this for years—more so than I have. I think it's a good perspective to take, when these kind of unveiling events happen, that a lot of effort has been put in prior to those moments.

FS: Will [the new street signs cover] the whole of campus? How many new signs will there be?

Larry Grant: No, there will only be about ten signs . . . And it's not on any of the streets that have names, actual human names. It's like Main Mall, West Mall, East Mall, Memorial Road . . . Because there's very few, if any, roads or streets that are named after human beings in our culture, as **hən̓q̓əmin̓əŋ** people. And it's a colonial thing to name buildings, streets, after human beings . . . For a while there [the street signs project] was kind of a challenge in the sense of how are we going to do this, because we can only do it without actually putting names on there. And many of our names are family names. And we don't have a right to use our name—I have a name that I use, but I don't have a right to say ok, put this on a street sign out here. The name actually belongs to the family. I'm just privileged to use it, as long as I'm respectful to the name. And then if I start to get rambunctious and do things that are not respectful for

the name, then my family can say, okay, we're going to have a ceremony, we'll have a gathering, and we're going to take that name off you, and you can't use it any more. So that was something that was a challenge and we had to talk with the university people and explain that to them ... In the community of x^wməθk^wəyəm, as a boy, it was a dirt road. Crown Street came down, and about a block and a half past Marine Drive—then there were no more signs ... [Roads] were never named until we put in a subdivision and then they started to. The city wanted road names. So the names at x^wməθk^wəyəm are from different sites or different areas in our history. Like səḥaʔq^w, səḥaʔq^w, it's Kits Point ... For us to be out here at UBC it was a challenge—to say no, we're not able to [name roads after people]. Even though we want more recognition and more visibility, certain things we're not accustomed to doing. And that was a challenge ... The Main Mall is called "the road where everybody is" because that's the main road. Then the other road is "facing towards the mountains" ... the road going around the perimeter is called "going around the perimeter, along the perimeter." That's significant of the way we have directions, direction indicators. Because we do not have the cardinal points of the compass. Our references are "going upriver, coming down river, going with the tide or against the tide, with the current, going up from the beach, or coming down to the beach, or going out to sea away from the beach." There are no cardinal point directions in our directions. So that's another challenge ... I always tease Henry [Yu, professor of History at UBC] that the Chinese wouldn't give us the compass [laughs] ... So we didn't use the compass as reference points ... It won't be all the streets, because many of the streets are named after prominent alumni and I don't know what process there is to change street signs. Because I know in the City of Vancouver it might be a ten year process to change the name of a street. And in those ten years you'd have townhouse meetings and have a lot of trouble ... I'm working with the City of Vancouver to name public spaces right now. Heritage Vancouver has a project going too, along with the City of Vancouver—so they're parallel projects, but regarding the same issues. And the other trick there is, colonial political issues that we're saddled with—since Confederation—muddies up the whole issue of family connections. The colonial isolation has created pockets of different colonial political ideas of self-identity, and identity to land. So that's the other issue that pops up ... We do have a working relationship with our relatives. On a colonial political scale we might be at odds with each other that way, but on a familial level we're not at odds with each other. So it's something that we have to work out ourselves. But it's something that is coming in more and more since

the Truth and Reconciliation process has begun. And that's one of the ways that we can get more visibility and acknowledgement that there was a society here prior to colonial contact. And that's an issue that many, many, many people from other areas—and even in Canada, from Canada—are not aware that this area was populated by Indigenous peoples of xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Skwxwú7mesh, and səliłwətaʔ, and probably scəwaθən and qícəy̓ and kʷikʷəłəm ... Anglicization of many of the traditional words makes it appear that no one was here, and yet there was. And to be able to use the NAPA, the North American Phonetic Alphabet, which is a derivative of the International Phonetic Alphabet, that indicates it's a language other than English, even though we're using all of the English word symbols. They're not familiar to first language speakers of English because they did not learn how to use their dictionary, they didn't have to use their dictionary ...

When we [were] naming the largest building, the final building in Totem Park [Residence at UBC], we had to do a presentation at the Board of Governors [about the həŋqəmiŋəm names gifted by Musqueam to Student Housing and Hospitality Services to use for the houses at Totem Park Residence]. And the Board of Governors, all very highly learned people, the question popped up—which is a normal question—can you phoneticize it? Well, how do you phoneticize phonetics? [laughs] If you open up your dictionary—and I know you all know how to use a dictionary—you look at the pronunciation guide. And that's what we're using as a pronunciation guide, because we need to preserve the sounds in our language, not the way of spelling. In English, the way of spelling is preserved but not the way of pronouncing it ... To me, it's more important for us [to preserve the sounds], because if you change the sounds in the word, you change the meaning of the word. In English, there are so many different dialects of English, it really doesn't matter. But in our həŋqəmiŋəm dialect—there's only three major dialects, and we're one of them: the downriver dialect of həŋqəmiŋəm. And the linguists call it “Halkomelem,” but our old people say that's not what we speak, it's həŋqəmiŋəm. And that's important for me in the sense that if I don't argue it's həŋqəmiŋəm, then I'm saying that it doesn't matter what my mom told me, doesn't matter what my grandparents told me, doesn't matter what my great-grandparents told me. The colonial linguist is insisting it's “Halkomelem” and our community keeps saying no, it's həŋqəmiŋəm—Halq'eméylem is upriver dialect, not downriver. And by using our orthography—the NAPA—or the First Nations Unicode that's derived

from NAPA and IPA, we preserve the sounds and our way of representing the sounds in our language. Not the way other colonial linguists want to represent it. And the way we use it is to preserve the sounds in our dialect ... If we use other methods, the English speaker defaults to the English way of pronunciation. And we see that all the time, and we hear it all the time when we're doing the language classes and having to reinforce over and over and over again, the vowels. We only have five vowels, and that's it. English has probably 30 vowels. They always say it's AEIOU, but AEIOU has about half a dozen variations in how it's pronounced, so there are more than half a dozen vowels in English—but it's not recognized. It's not considered important enough, because it doesn't change the meaning of the English words. But in *həŋqəmiŋəŋ* it does change the meaning of words and this is why we insist on using the First Nations Unicode font, orthography, for it.

FS: I spoke to Sarah about the fact that our magazine is called *The Capilano Review*, because we used to be funded by [Capilano College, now Capilano University]—speaking of examples of words which are then spelled with English letters ... Many people, including myself, do not pronounce “Capilano” properly—and there's also the issue of the university and the magazine and so many places in the Lower Mainland using this word, and not having permission, and not understanding it, and not saying it properly. It turns it into a totally different word. A friend of mine from North Van told me he grew up thinking it was a Spanish name ...

LG: I call it “dumbing down”—you “dumb down” because the English-speaking person says, I can't pronounce it. Ok, you leave this part off and leave that part off, you come close enough. We know what you mean, but you're not meaning what you're saying. That has happened with different names, but with *qiyəplenəxʷ*, which is anglicized to “Capilano,” *lenəxʷ*—the *xʷ* at the end—is not a sound that's important in English, but it's important in *həŋqəmiŋəŋ*. So they end up leaving it as an “o,” “Capilano,” but it's *qiyəplenəxʷ* ... It took me probably 20 years to be able to be conversant, at an elementary level of English, so after four tries, trying to make sounds that you're not familiar with, why should I dumb down? You should try harder and harder and harder, just like our ancestors did to learn how to speak English, and speak it properly, or accurately ... I don't think it's fair to different languages and different cultures to simplify words ... because you are changing the meaning of it. And I find

that hard to digest ... We as little children have learned to have muscle memory. So, as adults, learning someone else's name ... We just need to move different muscles in a pattern ... There are many, many sounds in our language that are identical to English sounds, but the consonant clusters are different. There's clusters there without vowels. So the English-speaking voice tract is not accustomed to moving in that manner, and they have a challenge to pronounce our words. And it's only a manner of learning which muscles to control to be able to make the correct sounds, sequence of sounds.

FS: I'm really grateful for the work that you two have done [putting sound and video clips of *həŋqəmiŋəm* words online]. Hearing somebody say [a word], and being able to press it over and over again is really valuable, if you don't have a teacher with you.

SL: I think that's really the best way to learn, is to hear speakers of the language for how the sounds should be pronounced.

LG: There's a rhythm in there ... If I'm reading, it comes out a little different than a student reading it ... If you're able to read a language that's foreign to you, with the sound representations, you may not catch the rhythm that is in there just from the text. Being literate is not enough ... I can remember being in a class where I could read it, and this is in the Yukon, I was sitting in that class and I could read it—but I didn't get the rhythm or how the accenting shifted. And listening to an older person that was there just say it, I went, Oh! It's got a lilt to it. And it's not really represented in the text. The accent is there but the lilt is not there. And that really made a big difference in our teaching class. Being able to access that word list over and over. Each word that you wanted to hear you could actually punch on it. When we first started it was a cassette tape ... It really helped the students having the ability to pronounce the words as accurately as they do now. It takes a while. Takes a while to get that muscle memory to work ...

FS: And when children learn from their parents they have that opportunity to hear words over and over and over again ... [Sarah,] did you take the *həŋqəmiŋəm* language classes?

SL: I took them early in my Master's. That's where I started to work with Larry on various projects. I think it was important for us to share those pronunciation

clips with the residents at Totem Park because much of what Larry was talking about earlier was one of the biggest hurdles we had in 2010, when we first named **həmləsəṁ** and **qələxən** [the Houses at UBC Totem Park Residence that were gifted **hənqəmiṁəṁ** names by Musqueam]—is to get across the point that these are important sounds that you will lose once you anglicize the words. And so that became a long discussion with members of the university in order to get those names approved and to be used day to day. But I think showing them the different tools that are out there, especially with technology, and reminding them that students are very engaged, and are here to learn different points of view, was important—and not just to generalize how [the students] might react was important.

FS: When you consider that many students at UBC already speak many languages, and have learned many languages ... Perhaps they weren't giving the students enough credit.

SL: I don't think so, no. It was about, you know—"international students might not engage well, or even domestic ..." and the arguments were not totally thought out ... We speak about the importance of even seeing the symbols to know that it is a different language, and it's actually the ancestral language here. So those symbols are important to have visibility—it's not only the sound but to have that formal signage recognized within the city ...

FS: Are there any projects that you're aware of, in elementary schools nearby, for **hənqəmiṁəṁ**?

LG: Not at the moment. There is an initiative to have Indigenous languages in the school system but that's another five to ten years down the road, I believe. In our area, it's the human resources. And the other issue is working around union rules, because that's a challenge to be a part of a union workforce and not being a certified teacher per se, other than being a language teacher. That's something that we have to work around. We don't have that many certified teachers. And if they are certified teachers they're teachers on call, they're not employed.

SL: I don't remember what grade level, but recently in Prince Rupert they've started to teach **Sṁalgyax** language in the public school. So that wasn't in place when I went to school.

LG: It just started.

SL: So they must have—perhaps some more instructors. And it's a relatively small city, so it may be more feasible to do in a small town.

LG: *S̓m̓algy̓ax* has—we don't have any first-language *hən̓q̓əmin̓əm̓* speakers, but *S̓m̓algy̓ax* does still have maybe a handful. And they have a very large catchment area of *S̓m̓algy̓ax* ... But here ... we can teach, but having the human resources is the challenge. In *x̣ẉməθḳẉəỵəm* there's a department of four now—there's two full-time and two part-time, and then we're doing stuff like what I'm doing right now—stuff that I did just before coming here—doing a welcome—or being involved in projects with the city and things like that. The Truth and Reconciliation calls to action has created a whole new—I would say explosion—of the need and the want for Indigenous content, including language ... It's overwhelming, the requests that come now. It was overwhelming already, because you go from a department of one and a half to two and a half to three and then four ... And then teaching at the university level, and then trying to research things and work with different projects, it's overwhelming. The road to burnout is real easy. And it's hard, it's very difficult to say no to a lot of things because it's needed stuff. But it's also ... an economic thing too, not being able to attract someone ... Is it viable, economically viable, to concentrate on language and culture without a job? The resources, the financial resources are not there to support three or four people to come on board full-time. The attraction is not there. And then there's other issues that come into play ... The trauma carried from Indian Residential School survivors. That trauma is passed on without realizing that you've passed it on. And a lot of it is just through body language. And I know you as a parent know that—that if you turn your back on things, that two-year-old perceives that pretty quick. And realizes every time he says something like this, you turn your back on him. You don't say anything, you just turn your back or turn your head. That child perceives that. And that is the trauma—that's the challenge to work beyond, accepting self—the value of self, and the value of what comes with self, originally, that has been marginalized, since contact 'til now. And all of a sudden it's being opened up. And you can see that trauma appear in the classroom. It's disheartening—in the sense of, well, you're working with someone that's traumatized, and there's nothing you can do, because you're not a trained psychologist, and you have to be careful how you tread. And that's something that we see as teachers in the classroom. How do you make it important enough to come to ... Now that [some government] funding is available, how do you pull out the people that might be able to move

in that direction? Right now there might be half a dozen schools in British Columbia that are immersion schools, in the different languages, and some of them have survived on their own, without funding from the government, without funding from the community—they'll do fundraisers and things like that and just tough it out, and work with family members. Those are the ones that will hopefully get a piece of that funding right away to alleviate that stress, that financial burden ... They're trying to create language legislation for this Liberal federal government to be able to pass into law, before the end of their term ... I know in my life that a lot of the people that did go to Indian Residential School just turned their nose—they want no part of it— anything to do with it—no language in my life—because they were punished so severely as children, as little children. They may have been conversant when they were six years old, but when they left residential school at fifteen, no-one spoke it. They would never speak. Not even utter "thank you." Could not even say that. That's how deep that goes. And these are the grandmother generations, the grandkids don't hear it, the language. Any traces of it coming from the grandparents. And every child picks up on that. They know the major language that is being spoken within the house ... So that's how deep it goes. And we have to try to figure out how to work beyond that ... We do have a comprehensive community plan, and without any fail one of the top three things that's important is to learn the language. But it's a lifelong commitment—it's not four semesters and you're on your way. It's four semesters and then another forty years ... It's a lifelong thing. A lot of students become aware of that and say, Oh, I don't want to do this the rest of my life. And you say, Well, you have to! It's all part of life—it's life-long learning!