

6

FLOWS OF LANGUAGE: Intergenerational Connections and Language Transmission among *dän k'è* (Southern Tutchone) speakers

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They say when the fish go up the river their great-grandmother is at the head of the creek. And that's why they go up to visit the great-great grandmother, that fish. They come back to the same place. (Cruikshank 1991:77)

Introduction

While researching language maintenance and language practices among speakers of Southern Tutchone, or *dän k'è*¹, I came across the above words. They were spoken by Angela Sidney, a Tagish/Tlingit Elder² from the southern Yukon Territory, Canada, to anthropologist Julie Cruikshank. Angela was expressing the critical and enduring relationship between grandchildren and grandmothers among all First Nations people in the area. Threading a story of upriver migration together with ancestral connections, Sidney's words struck me as a beautiful and fitting image to describe two key processes that I was noticing among *dän k'è* speakers: their close relationships with their grandmothers, which often involved the learning and sharing of traditional language; and the persistence of the flow of *dän k'è* between generations, even as many families were experiencing a 'gap generation' between contemporary children and their grandparents. The image of fish returning upstream evoked the reconnection of young people with their Elders and ancestors, and I was reminded of how language—or communicative

pp. 115-132 in *An Anthropology of Mothering* (2011). Walks, Michelle, and Naomi McPherson (eds). Bradford, ON: Demeter Press

practice—is manifestly an act of connection. In the course of each communicative interaction that helps them acquire competence with the norms of their speech community (Schieffelin and Ochs 1984, 1996), children are being socialized by and through language.

In this paper I situate the critical role that *dän k'è*-speaking grandmothers are playing in the revitalization and maintenance of the Southern Tutchone language, by reflecting on some of the language-learning experiences among younger adults, with brief reference to the kinship and clan structures present in southern Yukon. An examination of Dunèna Dän K'è Kànidän language nest activities run by the Champagne-Aishihik First Nation in the community of Haines Junction, two hours west of Whitehorse, Yukon, as well as the evening *dän k'è* language lessons at the Ta'an Kwäch'än Council in Whitehorse in 2007 and 2008, reveals the importance of connections between Elders (especially grandmothers) and their grandchildren in language socialization. It has been acknowledged that the mother-child dyad is the critical universal relationship in language acquisition, and thus 'mothering' behaviours and language socialization are intimately linked (see Schieffelin and Ochs 1986). It is, however, apparent from the examples discussed in this paper, that grandmothers also participate in this mothering to a significant extent.

For speakers of *dän k'è*. as for many aboriginal Canadians, language revitalization is currently a crucial issue. As Crago et al. note:

Parents in communities where there is rapid language and culture change face particular discourse issues as they construct the language and culture of their homes. Among such issues are decisions about who will speak in what language to whom, as well as decisions about what patterns of language socialization will be adhered to in the home. (1998: 79)

pp. 115-132 in *An Anthropology of Mothering* (2011). Walks, Michelle, and Naomi McPherson (eds). Bradford, ON: Demeter Press

Parents' attitudes and practices regarding the home language are significant factors in language maintenance, but in this chapter, I show that it is not only mothers or fathers, but also grandparents and the children themselves who shape language usage in homes and communities (see Luykx 2003). Thus, understanding these patterns of language choice can help to trace the flows of language, and to develop an understanding of how and why languages are maintained.

Speaking like a Person

Southern Tutchone, or *dän k'è* (*kwänjè*) '(speaking) like a person', is an Athapaskan language traditionally spoken throughout a south-western part of the Yukon Territory and adjacent areas of Alaska and British Columbia by members of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation (KDFN); Ta'an Kwäch'än Council (TKC); Champagne-Aishihik First Nation (CAFN); and the Kluane First Nation (KFN). For at least the past half-century, there has been increased concern from both linguists and First Nations Elders that fewer members of the younger (under-50) generations are learning their vernacular as their mother tongue or using them as home or community languages (Norris 1996). There is no consensus on how many speakers of Southern Tutchone there currently are, due to different methods of assessing fluency; according to a recent comprehensive fluency assessment, about 40% of the respondents replied that they can speak or understand *dän k'è*. Despite this, well over half (935) of the 1580 people surveyed who identified as Southern Tutchone do not speak the language at all (Yukon Executive Council Office 2004:85). A positive trend, though, has emerged in recent statistics, which show that although there has been a decline in mother tongue speakers of Canadian indigenous languages overall, this is being partially

pp. 115-132 in *An Anthropology of Mothering* (2011). Walks, Michelle, and Naomi McPherson (eds). Bradford, ON: Demeter Press

offset by more people learning these languages as a second language. Norris reports that “in 2001, more people could speak an Aboriginal language than had an Aboriginal mother tongue [239 600 versus 203 300] It appears that this is especially the case for young people” (2007: 20). After a brief introduction to language socialization research, I focus in on the importance of grandparents, especially grandmothers, in the transmission of *dän k'è* as a second language.

Language Socialization and Language Shift

The vast majority of studies on how children acquire language and are socialized through language usage focus on the relationship between mothers and their infants. As Ochs (1983) stressed, the ways in which mothers speak to children are not a universal of mother-child interaction, but are culturally specific; language use among children is thus understood “in light of the sociocultural context” (Crago and Pesco 2008; Schieffelin and Ochs 1996). Schieffelin and Ochs (1984, 1986), Ochs (1988), and Schieffelin (1990) contributed to both the theory and the foundational methodology of language socialization. Numerous studies following these methods have been conducted over the past 25 years in many areas of the world; the understanding of minority language socialization in bi- or multilingual settings has been, and continues to be particularly critical, as it helps provide an understanding of which factors shape the language practices leading to the maintenance of these languages (Garrett and Baquedano-Lopez 2002; Schechter and Bayley 2004). It is also important to keep in mind that language socialization research may be conducted in situations of relative language vitality, but also during processes of language shift (see Fishman 1971) or revitalization (Crago and

pp. 115-132 in *An Anthropology of Mothering* (2011). Walks, Michelle, and Naomi McPherson (eds). Bradford, ON: Demeter Press

Pesco 2008:281). In these cases it becomes especially significant, as Crago et al. remind us, it “is not who can speak the language, but rather who does, to whom, and in what ways” (1998:82). In the case of *dän k’è* in Whitehorse and Haines Junction, there is a ‘gap’ generation among younger parents, generally those between the ages of 25-44; these mothers and fathers are socializing their children primarily in the majority language (English).

In 2007-2008, I spent 4 months in the city of Whitehorse, with visits to the nearby town of Haines Junction in order to conduct anthropological research for my Masters degree. Employing a blend of participant observation (acting as a volunteer teaching assistant in an elementary school and a participant in *dän k’è* language classes) and casual conversation alongside semi-structured interviews and paper-based surveys, I was able to collect a variety of different kinds of data about language practices and ideologies. Based on first-hand observations and analyses of interviews and stories collected during my research in the Yukon, I comment in the next sections on the language socialization and maintenance practices of *dän k’è* speakers, and how speakers are attempting to counteract processes of language shift.

Tracing the flows of language and bridging the gaps

In tracing the flow of language between generations, the tendency for researchers has often been to centre on the mother-child dyad (see Scheffelin 1990; Ochs 1988; and Schieffelin and Ochs 1986 & 1984). According to studies by Okita (2002) and others, in bilingual families, it is often the mother, as primary caregiver, who makes initial decisions about child-rearing and language, and can have the most effect on the

pp. 115-132 in *An Anthropology of Mothering* (2011). Walks, Michelle, and Naomi McPherson (eds). Bradford, ON: Demeter Press

preservation of a minority language within the family. Fishman (1991, 2000) has also long considered intergenerational mother tongue transmission as the most important factor in language maintenance, specifically focusing on the mother-child dyad at home.

Burton concurs, noting that “it appears that [in many cases] women may be regarded as the ‘guardians’ of a minority language and, by implication, of ethnic identity” (1994: 11).

This connection of women to the transmission and maintenance of language and other expressions of cultural identity is echoed by other authors in this volume; especially: MacDonald (Chapter 5), writing about the Stó:lô, another Canadian First Nations group; MacDonald and Boulton (Chapter 7), discussing the Aboriginal peoples of Kimberly, Western Australia; and Stone (Chapter 11), describing the mother-centred worldview among the Quechua and Aymara of the Andes. Sentiments concerning women, especially mothers, as language teachers were also echoed by the Southern Tutchone people whom I interviewed. This statement came from a young man in his late twenties:

Women carry so much. It’s their role to pass it on. Look at what [a well-known trapper in the community] is doing, what he’s passing on to his son. It’s more physical. (Ferguson 2009: 70)

The view among Southern Tutchone that women are responsible for language transmission is unsurprising, as traditionally, southern Yukon society has been both matrilineal and matrilocal. With the matrilocal pattern of residence, “the effect of such a pattern could not only be that the women residing together would usually be mothers, daughters, and sisters. The children in such a residential cluster—siblings and matrilineal parallel cousins—would be tied to one another through women” (Perry 1989:44).

Children would have traditionally been raised among their mother’s relatives and would most likely have acquired the language of her family first. Though matrilocality is not

pp. 115-132 in *An Anthropology of Mothering* (2011). Walks, Michelle, and Naomi McPherson (eds). Bradford, ON: Demeter Press

strictly followed in contemporary times, the clan/moiety system is still of foremost importance to Southern Tutchone and other First Nations people in the southern Yukon; matrilineal connections are still central to a community's collective understanding of kinship, as with a number of other Canadian First Nations (also noted by MacDonald [Chapter 5]). When I asked another speaker during an interview if she thought the high number of older women involved in language was due to traditional *dän* gender roles and the matrilineal clan connections, she responded affirmatively:

[Women are] the traditional teachers. I think probably, for this type of thing, it was probably the mothers... and the aunties, [who] would teach language, maybe how to communicate And then it was the fathers that would do the hunting, and yeah... Looking after the families (Ferguson 2009:70-71).

I do not wish to refute the importance of the mother's language usage as a crucial factor for maintaining and revitalizing languages; however, what I witnessed among *dän k'è* speakers is that the mother-child pair is simply too narrow a focus. Because of the aforementioned 'gap' generation in Southern Tutchone speakers, many children are currently not learning *dän k'è* as a first language from their mothers or fathers; most are introduced through the school system, and if they are learning at home it is from an older relative or Elder.

Following Grandmother Salmon

The close, loving relationships between grandmothers and grandchildren, frequently highlighted in both traditional narratives and life stories told by women in the Southern Yukon (Cruikshank 1991), are playing a central role in *dän k'è* language maintenance and attempts to reverse language shift. As McClellan remarks, "the Tutchone bond between grandparent and grandchild is warm, especially when the grandchild is young.

pp. 115-132 in *An Anthropology of Mothering* (2011). Walks, Michelle, and Naomi McPherson (eds). Bradford, ON: Demeter Press

Pride, indulgence, and a marked degree of reciprocal emotional dependence all characterize the relationship” (1975:407); it is not only the mothers, but the grandmothers who fill a prominent role in raising and caring for children. Again, though matrilocality is not strictly practiced any longer, grandparents are still very much involved in the lives of their grandchildren. In twelve in-depth interviews conducted with young adult novice speakers, I found that nearly all of my research participants in their twenties and early thirties had been introduced to *dän k’è* by their grandparents and, by far, most often by their grandmothers. One young man in his late twenties discussed his childhood summers spent with his great-grandmother (his maternal grandmother’s mother) at Kluane Lake.

Ben told me:

... my great-grandma would say words to me, and stuff like that, but after she passed on, I didn’t have anybody to learn Southern Tutchone from, that was close to me, so... (Ferguson 2009:37-38)

Mary Jane, a young woman in her early twenties, gave a similar account of how her grandmother spoke to her:

She spoke English too, as well as Tlingit, Southern Tutchone and Hän When it was just her and I, that’s when she would speak Southern Tutchone (Ferguson 2009:38).

In both of these cases, the language was not taught to the parents of these individuals by their own mothers or fathers, who in many cases had lost their desire to speak *dän k’è* due to mission schools³ they attended; others whose parents experienced the prohibitive attitudes of these schools had never been taught the language. The grandmothers of these young adults, who did not pass on the language to their own children, have taken it upon themselves to pass on the language to their grandchildren.

pp. 115-132 in *An Anthropology of Mothering* (2011). Walks, Michelle, and Naomi McPherson (eds). Bradford, ON: Demeter Press

Millie, currently in her mid-thirties, explained to me how she was exposed to the language in her early childhood:

[By] my mom's parents ... I remember my grandma would say like, 'Grandchild, go get me some more sugar for my tea' and I'd just go and do it, or 'Turn that light off' It's little things like that I remember just doing. But my mom didn't speak [our language] to us because they were taught not to. So that's where the break was, she did go to mission school...(Ferguson 2009:38-39).

In the late 1970s, however, the sparks of the Yukon First Nations language revitalization movement were starting to catch. As the land claims process gained momentum, the socio-political climate was also beginning to shift. Mission schools, a major reason for the drastic decline in the usage of First Nations languages, were no longer in operation; with the support of the newly-created Yukon Native Language Centre, Southern Tutchone and the other Yukon First Nations languages were reintroduced as classroom subjects within the public schools. Attitudes among the older generations were also changing. Adults, who were approaching Elder-hood at the time, had been taught not to socialize their children in these languages; however, they started to reclaim both their languages and their roles as teachers. For example, Millie's mother, who did not speak to her daughter in the language when she was a young child, is now a grandmother herself, as well as a language teacher at the local school and an enthusiastic mentor to her daughter's, and grandson's, mastery of the language. Though certainly not all Elders and older adults have re-embraced languages to the same degree, there seems to be a general movement towards actively teaching the language to the younger generations: perhaps not always to their now-grown children, but certainly to their (great)-grandchildren.

The role of "grandmothering" has recently discussed by Notermans (2004) from a sociocultural perspective and by Jamison et al. (2002) from a physical anthropological

pp. 115-132 in *An Anthropology of Mothering* (2011). Walks, Michelle, and Naomi McPherson (eds). Bradford, ON: Demeter Press

standpoint, as well as by researchers in sociolinguistics and language maintenance. For example, Ishizawa (2004) discussed the role of live-in non-English-speaking grandparents in relation to minority language maintenance among their grandchildren. American Census data indicate that the presence of grandparents who do not speak English does positively influence a grandchild's minority language use in a household of multiple generations; in particular, Ishizawa found that non-English speaking grandmothers have a stronger effect on grandchildren's minority language use than does the presence of grandfathers. This greater influence of the grandmother "may be explained by the fact that women are more likely to be caregivers and involved in grandparenthood" (Ishizawa 2004:478). In the next sections, I will describe two situations that bring grandmothers and grandchildren together to speak and learn *dän k'è*, and conclude by discussing how the actions of both demographics influence the overall maintenance of the language.

Lessons with the Ta'an Kwäch'än: Learning together

Not all contemporary Southern Tutchone Elders are fluent speakers of the language. People of the Ta'an Kwäch'än Council, especially women, have been intermarrying for a longer time with non-Natives than people in other Southern Tutchone communities, due to the proximity of their traditional territory to Whitehorse, where the majority of non-Native people settled from the Gold Rush days onward. Despite the matrilineal kinship system, the pressure to speak English within the family coupled with the prohibitive tendencies of residential schools deterred many from passing on the language. Similar tendencies of oppression and assimilation have been seen in many colonial societies, and

pp. 115-132 in *An Anthropology of Mothering* (2011). Walks, Michelle, and Naomi McPherson (eds). Bradford, ON: Demeter Press

have affected the transmission of languages, beliefs and practices; parenting became “colonized” (also noted in MacDonald and Boulton [Chapter 7]). Sophie Miller, an Elder, stated at a Southern Tutchone language conference some years ago, “The reason why I do not speak in my own language is that I lived with a white man all of my life, and therefore my children do not speak and understand Indian. You do not speak Indian to a white man ...” (Aboriginal Language Services 1996:2). There was great pressure for children of these mixed marriages to try to assimilate into non-Native society. Thus, many mothers may not have always taught their children a First Nations language, especially when their non-Native partners showed no interest in learning, or even prohibited the language outright. Colleen, in her late thirties, told me about her grandmother’s situation:

My grandmother ... married my [Scottish] grandfather and he was very opposed to having the Gwich’in language spoken at home and he didn’t want the kids learning it. He didn’t want her speaking it, and he was kind of the ruler of the [house] (Ferguson 2009:41).

Coupled with the colonial policies present in the wider community that denigrated First Nations languages, these circumstances often meant that it was no use to ‘speak Indian to a white man’. Now, however, many Elders are attending lessons along with their grandchildren to improve their language skills. This is especially the case at the Ta’an Kwäch’än Council’s language lessons, held weekly at their office in Whitehorse. As one Ta’an grandmother told me very simply: “I speak with my grandchildren and other members of my family. I want my grandchildren to know their own language”. At the lessons I attended, there were 18 learners, plus the language instructor, her own grandchildren, and her elderly mother who was her language mentor. The learners included five Elders who were grandmothers and great-grandmothers to many of the nine

pp. 115-132 in *An Anthropology of Mothering* (2011). Walks, Michelle, and Naomi McPherson (eds). Bradford, ON: Demeter Press

children who attended, along with two young adults in their early twenties, and one middle-aged woman. Nearly all of the elementary and high school children had taken some *dän k'è* at school, and had been encouraged by their grandmothers to come to the evening lessons; these evenings were a mix of structured language lessons and a sewing hour, in which grouse feathers, moose hide, beaver fur and beads were pulled out and the instructor facilitated further conversation in *dän k'è*. Interestingly, the children's parents did not attend, though they often appeared toward the end of the lessons to drive the children and Elders home. These language evenings seemed to be an activity that female Elders and older adults enjoyed with their grandkids; learners reported that few older men had ever invested time in the lessons in the last few years, and I never met a man older than thirty at any of the lessons I attended. Thus, in the case of *dän k'è* speakers, even though there are no monolingual speakers left, and even Elders show a range of speaking abilities, Elder grandmothers are still central figures in the attempts to transmit the language to their grandchildren.

Language Nests and children's language usage

Another significant venue for grandmother and child interaction in language learning is the language nest program, *Dunèna Dän K'è Kànidän*, established in Haines Junction by the Champagne-Aishihik First Nation. This institution, in providing a rich environment for young children to be exposed to *dän k'è* language and knowledge, is showing promise in motivating increased *dän k'è* usage in the community. It also provides an institution for intergenerational collaboration among members of the community; as MacDonald (Chapter 5) also notes, these types of connections are highly valued by mothers in the

pp. 115-132 in *An Anthropology of Mothering* (2011). Walks, Michelle, and Naomi McPherson (eds). Bradford, ON: Demeter Press

support they provide in helping to nurture the community's children. *Dunëna Dän K'è Känidän*, or 'Children are learning the Native way (of speaking)', is modelled after the *Te Kohanga Reo*, or 'language nests', of New Zealand. Maori nests were first created in the early 1980s in response to growing concerns by speakers that the language was being used only in the restricted domains of the ceremonial meeting places and church (King 2001:121). A typical morning at the nest, located at the CAFN daycare centre, would involve small groups of four or five children being given a structured language lesson by a female Elder, using the curriculum and vocabulary being taught in the school program. Playtime is spent in the company of the participating Elders, who speak *dän k'è* with the children. This playtime helps increase the children's receptive fluency. According to the CAFN language coordinator:

I try to get at least two Elders in at the language nest because that's what they'll do, so while they're playing they can hear it ... there was a little 2 year old ... [one of the Elders] asked the little girl to go get her plate and put bannock on it and she said it all in the language and that little [girl] went over and came back and gave it to her ... [that Elder] is really good because she incorporates it into their playing... (Ferguson 2009:51).

Perhaps what is most significant about the language nest is not only the ways children are using the language within the nest with the female Elders, but how they are speaking *dän k'è* to others, outside of the nest environment – especially with their non-fluent parents. A few adult women I interviewed (teachers at the school in Haines Junction as well as the mother of one of the children in the language nest) shared stories with me about the success of the children in picking up the language from the Elders as well as attempting to use the language with others. Though the language coordinator and the teachers commented that children weren't often heard speaking the language with their peers, many were responding to adults both verbally and non-verbally and attempting to use the

pp. 115-132 in *An Anthropology of Mothering* (2011). Walks, Michelle, and Naomi McPherson (eds). Bradford, ON: Demeter Press

language with their parents. From what I was told, the children were using a lot of basic vocabulary to greet and interact with parents, describe things they saw happening, and express wishes and desires. The CAFN language coordinator shared the following story with me:

My cousin [told me that] ‘[My son] kept going to the window last night and he was saying “*Yäw níkhyäw, yäw níkhyäw*”, and she said ‘Oh yeah, yeah, yeah’ and she kept shutting the curtain. I told her, ‘He was telling you it was snowing outside’ and she was like ‘What?!’ and I said, ‘He was telling you it was snowing outside, *yäw níkhyäw* is snowing’ and ... she couldn’t believe that her little guy who was just learning how to speak [in English], she thought he was just mumbling, but he was actually telling her it’s snowing outside.

The little boy is just one of many children who have been trying to speak *dän k’è* with their non-fluent parents. I remember a little girl leaving the classroom at lunchtime with her mother saying: ‘*Sùgnèn ch ’ü ye tadhäl yanìli!*’ (‘I want bannock and soup!’). Her mother praised her speech, though she could not converse with her daughter beyond replying ‘Aghay’ (‘Yes’). Other cases have been documented wherein children have inspired their parents to learn heritage languages; for example, Watahomigie and McCarty present the response of a mother whose child was learning Hualapai, an indigenous language of Arizona: “that turned me around again. So I really got into it, and it was interesting to know my own language, how to write it and speak it” (1997: 106). The children, as semi-speakers themselves, do not provide the required linguistic input or communicative environment necessary for adults to fully learn a language, and so this may not be considered ‘true’ language transmission. Moreover, despite the fact that mothers and other adults will not acquire language from their children per se, the children’s instigation of these communicative interactions is socializing, and extremely

pp. 115-132 in *An Anthropology of Mothering* (2011). Walks, Michelle, and Naomi McPherson (eds). Bradford, ON: Demeter Press

important for the motivation they provide for parents to take action in learning and using other languages in their daily lives.

Settings such as the language nest are another way to unite grandmothers and grandchildren, and provide another venue and context for the transmission of a minority language. The language nest, as with the Head Start programs involving grandparents offered in the Stó:lô First Nations community (also noted in MacDonald [Chapter 5]), help to create new spaces for Elders to pass on their knowledge. The success of the nest, in that it is helping to catalyze instances of child language usage outside of the nest, is also an especially potent reminder that language socialization between generations does not flow exclusively from the Elders down. With *dän k'è* speakers, the language has been flowing from the oldest generation to the children thanks to the practices of Elders, especially grandmothers; but now some of these children are making attempts to influence the language behaviours of their non-fluent parents. The actions of these children have captured not only the attention of parents—especially mothers—but also language teachers and planners, who are working to try to reach out to the gap generation and help divert some of the language flow to them.

Conclusion

Indigenous minority groups in Canada and elsewhere have faced similar pressures of linguistic assimilation through educational systems and other government policies and institutions, and negotiate similar issues, such as generational gaps in transmission and a lack of fluent Elder speakers. Language socialization is a mutually negotiated form of connection, and language transmission can follow many different streams. These

pp. 115-132 in *An Anthropology of Mothering* (2011). Walks, Michelle, and Naomi McPherson (eds). Bradford, ON: Demeter Press

processes are shaped not only by mothers, but by Elders and child learners, and by the relationships these three generations have with each other. As MacDonald and Boulton (Chapter 7) point out, understanding mothering means not only to understand the mother's actions, but also the role of the child or infant in the relationship, and also the multiple people who may also provide care for the child.

A 'gap' generation of speakers has often been seen as a broken link and a threat to the continued maintenance of a minority language (see Fishman 1991). At the same time, the strong connections between grandmothers and grandchildren as language users are currently very much at the forefront of *dän k'è* revitalization and maintenance efforts. Moreover, it is the strength of the connections between these dedicated grandmother salmon and their grandchildren swimming back upriver spreading the language that is bolstering the efforts and hopes of many *dän k'è* speakers, enabling them to address what McCarty and Watahomigie deem "the challenge ... to expand [language promotion] efforts to touch even more widely and directly the home language policies of speakers and their families" (1998:321). Southern Tutchone language planners are paying attention to these lessons as they attempt to reach out to potential speakers in all generations so that their language will reach a critical mass. Parents who are part of the 'gap' generation didn't comment extensively on these efforts, other than they mentioned that they thought it was really positive what their mothers – the children's grandmothers – were doing, and that their children were learning (with their Elders) did inspire them to seek out more opportunities to learn, so that they in turn could (grand)mother others, in time.

As the case of *dän k'è* reminds us, language socialization processes are adaptable and dynamic, and will shift to allow language to flow around obstacles to its

pp. 115-132 in *An Anthropology of Mothering* (2011). Walks, Michelle, and Naomi McPherson (eds). Bradford, ON: Demeter Press

transmission. In other words, “mothering” behaviours associated with language socialization are not limited to those who are either biological mothers or adoptive caregivers of the mother’s generation. The focus on only the mother-child dyad is not sufficient, as it is critical, as MacDonald and Boulton (Chapter 7) note, that all generations be considered; it is also important that the active nurturing behaviours among all community members be recognized (also noted in Stone, Chapter 11). Grandmothers are playing a “mothering” role, and engaging in “mothering” by interacting with young speakers of their grandchildren’s generation in order to ensure that the younger community members have opportunity to learn *dän k’è*. As well, the efforts of the children to spread their newly acquired language knowledge by using it with their ‘gap generation’ parents is inspiring those individuals to take more interest in learning *dän k’è* for themselves, so that perhaps they too can engage in a linguistic (grand)mothering role, in time.

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Endnotes

1. Throughout this paper, I use the terms *dän k’è* and Southern Tutchone interchangeably; *dän k’è* refers to the Southern Tutchone language, except in direct

pp. 115-132 in *An Anthropology of Mothering* (2011). Walks, Michelle, and Naomi McPherson (eds). Bradford, ON: Demeter Press

quotes or excerpts that use 'Southern Tutchone'. 'Southern Tutchone' always refers to the people whose language is *dän k'è*.

2. In Canadian aboriginal communities, the term Elder simply refers to an older person; however, some definitions also refer to the individuals spiritual and cultural leadership and knowledge (see Stiegelbauer 1996).

3. See Haig-Brown (1988), Miller (1996), Milloy (1999) for a discussion of the history and impact of residential schools in Canada. Residential schools are often referred to as 'mission schools', especially in the Yukon, as they were run by Anglican, Catholic – and, in the case of the Whitehorse school – Baptist missionaries. The last mission school in the Yukon, the Baptist Indian residential school, closed in 1968. Until its closure in 1975, however many Yukon students were sent to the Lower Post Residential School located in Lower Post, northern British Columbia.

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