

Failing American Indian Languages [Abstract]  
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This article critically examines the mediating role of scholarly expectations and the unexpected in the management—and transcendence—of failure/success as these concepts relate to language revitalization. Deloria remarks that, “expectations tend to assume a status quo defined around failure, the result of some innate limitation on the part of Indian people. Success is written off as an anomaly, a bizarre little episode that calls up a chuckle” (2004, 231). As a series of episodes, this article begins with a popular misconception regarding American Indian Englishes, the perception of dysfluency read as the failure of American Indians to acquire English. Portrayed across a range of media, these representations of mythical speech encourage an expectation with consequences, at least for young First Nations students who dare to produce a nonstandard utterance for a teacher of standard training. The next episode depicts indigenous languages as shifting toward nonexistence. A commonly recurring institutional line, the discourse of elders often reinforces this conception with the emerging expectation being one of language death rather than a more complicated scenario of language change and linguistic diversity. Again younger generations are depicted as failing to acquire a language, in this case their ancestral tongue. These expectations coalesce in the third episode, the (eventual) failure of language revitalization. Given the “inability” of younger generations of Indians to acquire any language fluently, how could language revitalization ever succeed? Chuckling, one might say, *dene yéh dene zaagi laat’ā*.

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