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Title: **Stabilizing What? An Ecological Approach to Language Renewal**

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Main questions:

- What do the words effective, language, and renewal mean when we talk about effective language renewal practices?
- How can the idea or theory of ecology help us to better understand language renewal?
- How can we rebuild a vision of language in its full social context; move beyond schooling and literacy to renew language?

Some background ideas:

- Language works through words with two basic kinds of rules: primary and secondary discourse. Discourse includes talking, conversation, speaking, and writing.
- Primary discourse is informal, face-to-face, storytelling language. It is fluid; it changes to meet the needs and creative urges of the speakers. It adapts to different people, situations, and purposes. Children first develop language through primary discourse.
- Secondary discourse is more formal and objective, more outside our personal experience. It strings words and concepts together into more complex and abstract stories. Children begin this process early and the adult world places great stress on secondary discourse.
- Secondary discourse clearly affects primary discourse. People may abandon or modify their behaviour, to conform to stories in secondary discourse that appear most 'true'.

- Cohesive and sustainable communities must achieve a dynamic balance between primary and secondary discourses.
- English and other 'standard languages' have, over time, reduced primary discourse to a minimum. Language is seen as an object, as are nature and people themselves. Secondary discourse controls truth; books and experts are the real authority.
- Every indigenous community whose language is under threat is exposed to a tangle of non-indigenous primary and secondary discourses.

Main comments and conclusions:

- To define language: Language begins with speakers, people 'doing language' together in meaningful ways, and works out from there. Language is integral and central to the ways people interact with each other and their environment. To meet the challenges of language renewal we need to discard the idea that languages are homogenous, stable things that people teach, learn, and use. This kind of modern language theory can fatally mislead language renewal projects.
- To define renewal: Language renewal is about finding ways to restore the balance between primary and secondary discourse, and with it the balance between people and nature. Language renewal concerns everyone – it's one attempt among many to re-establish control over a runaway civilization.
- To define effective: We can visualize healthy language as a tightly woven three-strand braid with many primary and secondary discourses. To remake the language braid, indigenous communities must refashion their own language to accommodate a changing way of life. They must develop new stories to replace the 'truths' the invading language tells, that objectify and disempower indigenous languages and peoples.

- The first strand of renewal: People come together to share their pain, name their oppressions, and seek their own solutions. They confront and dismantle the secondary discourses of alienation of the invading language, and replace them with their own. For example, to look closely at school curriculum – what vision of indigenous languages and people does it present to the world?
- The second strand of renewal: Reweave secondary discourse in the indigenous language. For primary discourse to thrive, the community's common heritage must include knowledge and stories in the language. Use the local language to meet the speakers' need for concepts and stories that make sense of the world in their terms. For example, create their own books rather than translate books from English to Inuktitut. Develop a new secondary discourse about the language itself, to help as many people as possible have access to the primary discourse.
- The third strand of renewal: Create new primary discourse. Explore various, creative methods such as language nests, home-based immersion, interacting with children in natural, daily, home-family-neighbourhood-community life. Be willing to accept and foster change; a new language – one with deep roots in traditional heritage combined with everyday purposes and contexts far removed from the traditional ones. Encourage learners to take ownership of the language, use it for their own purposes, and build relationships through it. For language renewal, use is far more important than form.
- Critical mass and local control help to renew and maintain language. For smaller communities this can be a challenge. To survive, language needs storytellers and knowledge-makers; primary discourse is not enough. Smaller communities may benefit from secondary discourses from a larger indigenous creative pool; translation is faster than creation. But, this must involve only indigenous languages and not happen through English.

- Successful language programs depend on strong, compelling leaders, especially women. Foster them; look to their needs and visions to develop new settings for primary discourse. Recognize family and community dysfunction as a language problem, as well as a social one. Strong families and communities create more strong people, who can then contribute truly and creatively to change.
- Language programs need to recognize and heal barriers such as negativity, death wishes, and denial. They need to find various and creative ways for speakers to enjoy using their language together.
- Standard languages such as English have advanced our knowledge of the world; they are also linked with social alienation and environmental destruction.
- To maintain the link between language and wholeness, or language and the sacred, we must tell and share stories rooted in time, place, and relationships. Language renewal forms part of a much broader movement to restore societies on a human scale and in balance with nature. When we choose the languages we speak, we also choose the kind of life our children and we will live, the kind of world we will create.