Indigenous language learning support for Krenak youth
Krenak Nation, Brazil
Dartmouth College
Antônio Jorge Medeiros Batista Silva (Brazil, Dartmouth, and Pearson College UWC)
Luka Faccini Zanon (Brazil, Dartmouth)
www.itchok.com

Summary
This project proposes to create accessible resources and materials for Krenak language learning in southeast Brazil. Through an online collaborative learning hub, members from the Krenak community and the surrounding diaspora will have access to a co-created resource collection, bringing back what belongs to the people – their language.

Project Description
Our project’s first seed was Antônio’s own desire to speak his Native language. From that, questions of linguistic justice and colonial legacies came to light. As linguistic students, we were quick to realise the power of the field we were being trained in. Half of the world’s languages are predicted to disappear before the turn of the century. Protecting Krenak – the people, its culture, language, and epistemology – is the first step we can take to prevent such a disaster. With the guidance of renowned Brazilian linguist Prof. Ana Suely Cabral, we could bring the Krenak community to the conversation. We could create, together, something to prevent our culture from getting lost.

Our initial idea was to create materials for Krenak language learning in the form of a textbook – which was soon reconsidered. In the initial week of the project, we had our first conversation with Krenak community members in Governador Valadares, MG. When assessing the needs of the general population and current students from the local primary school, we realized that digital means should be our direction for this project. During this same meeting, while asking how the school handles materials for teaching Krenak, Geilson Batista, our collaborator, mentioned how printed materials usually “go straight to the teachers’ drawers, and there they stay.”

Current Krenak members are already well-integrated not only into the (lusophone) Brazilian education system, but also to its intersections with the internet. Since the covid pandemic, online learning has grown out to be a key player in formal and informal education, including in Indigenous pedagogies. Thus, having found out that textbooks are not a good option for our final product, we decided it’d be better to focus our efforts on the creation of a single learning hub, fully online, accessible from anywhere.

Kjeme Itchok, which translates to Krenak Language House, is a digital archive of the Krenak language and culture curated by members of the community and invited scholars. It was designed to be a self-sustaining, living library of Krenak knowledge. There, one can both find diverse academic materials on the people’s language and culture, but also contribute to its growing resources bank. Through the website’s resource-collecting functionality, any user can add books, articles, songs, pictures, or any other material.

Furthermore, in the website, we also made public the pedagogical tools collectively constructed during our time at the University of Brasília’s Indigenous Languages and Literatures Lab (LALLI). With the generous help of Prof. Ana Suely Cabral, we devised language acquisition exercises that could be implemented either at a classroom or at one’s own home. Due to time constraints, adequate training on how to navigate these resources and apply them to the classroom environment are yet to be programmed. This is hence, undoubtedly, an opportunity to keep our work ongoing.
The project was designed to be self-sustaining after the implementation while on-site, leaving communication open to the community. The website has a resource-collecting functionality, where any user can suggest materials such as songs, articles, pictures, or any study they might find interesting.

Reflection

Although I find it hard to speak of my experience in terms of “conflicts” — since we were there to help the cause, independently of political and social affinities — we did end up running into issues during our work. The most lenient one, which required careful reflection on our project’s next steps, came up in our consultations with Krenak community members. Initially, when we expressed our interest in working with the local primary school teachers, it was brought to our attention that some members of the school leadership aren’t so fond of the idea of external researchers taking part in language revival efforts. As it happened across endangered speech communities of the world, knowledge of the Indigenous language has become a political tool among the Krenak. Knowing the language, to some extent, makes you entitled to leadership positions in cultural and political instances. Arguments about who should be allowed to teach the language, as well as which dialectal variation of it should be used, created political disputes among the community. This experience made us reflect since we clearly wouldn’t articulate with those who were not interested in articulating. Thus, we extend our gratitude to Geilson, Girley, Maycon, and Douglas — leaders in their community, who guided us through the reservation politics to ensure our work is accessible and relevant to the general Krenak public.

Thus, in our project, we understand peace through the lenses of epistemological freedom. If anything, we learnt to appreciate how others think. And in that we not only include disagreement — as in simply not sharing an idea — but ontological disconnect. Our 10-week-long intensive contact with the Krenak language opened our eyes to a different way of thinking and seeing the world. None of the “conflicts” we came across in the realisation of our project stopped us from enjoying our time and taking pride in our work. These experiences were only useful for us to grow our notions of Indigenous worldviews.

Personal Statement

Erehê anthuk pandâ, Ms. and Mr. Davis! Thank you so much. Developing such important work wouldn’t have been possible without your help. We’d also like to express our gratitude to the John Sloan Dickey Center for International Understanding and the Project’s For Peace liaison to Dartmouth, Peter Jenkinson.

It might not be easy to change the reality of language shift in modern times — perhaps even impossible. But, having gotten to know the Krenak language so personally over this summer, I know it’s an important work. Our languages hold the secrets to a better future, from climate well-being to gender equality. To ensure that the next generations have at least the chance to reclaim the worldview that lies in their Indigenous tongues is a dream of ours. And a reality we make every day at Kjeme Itchok,