From the Special Issue Editors

In this issue, a variety of authors, each concerned about the transmission and acquisition of an indigenous language or languages, reflect on the experience of using digital technology. The results are very different in substance from what gets talked about when the emphasis is not so directly on teaching and learning.

Recent initiatives (OLAC, IMDI, E-MELD) aimed at the promotion of language documentation -- something that is of primary concern for languages where transmission and acquisition are not assured -- stress the work that is needed to define and propagate standards. Somehow, a robust common tradition must be established, with sufficient flexibility to accommodate all languages and all types of linguistic records, but with sufficient uniformity to allow linguists and other researchers to find their way about in the vast proliferation of data on indigenous language that must now be achieved.

The present authors give primary attention to cultivating their own gardens, elaborating digital solutions for the use of their various language communities, interested above all in the interaction of these new media with the linguistic and intellectual development of their own communities.

The authors review a wide range of digital technologies, and the implications for language communities are likewise wide-ranging. The introduction of computers into children's classrooms is examined by the developers of Computer-Aided Ndjebbana in the Australian outback (Auld) and Fabula in western Europe (Edwards, Pemberton, Knight, & Monaghan), who consider how taking possession of computer systems can develop children's self-reliance and ability to deal with the complexities of the languages they are acquiring. The uses of computer networking have given the Choctaw a new means of arranging language-instruction for adults (Haag); but it is interesting that, in assessing its success, the leading consideration is its political expediency for the one who makes it happen, the tribal Chief.

Other articles stress how, in the case of various digital and electronic technologies, resolute use has succeeded in integrating communities around their languages in new ways. The Naskapi have overcome the idiosyncratic nature of the Cree syllabary to bring greater control of their own publishing and literacy (Jancewicz and MacKenzie). Villa tells how an individual's quest to record Navajo has generated an authentic archive of audiovisual texts, transcending the recorder's own competence in the language. And McHenry explores the ironies of control and self-determination implicit in the attempt to turn the Internet to the benefit of Native American languages.

All these are important aspects of digital technology for indigenous languages and the people who speak them, or would like to. But the concern is always, in essence, introverted: Each examines the question of what the technology can do for a particular community. This is perhaps part of the shared presumption in favour of "authenticity," noted by Cazden. Decisions are made by the community and for the community, in the light of the community's own experience. No one asks the question "How can we keep in touch, or on a par, with what these technologies are doing for languages the world over?" Even Fabula, aimed at several minority European languages, does not look across to what its children will be encountering in classes for majority languages.
Yet, the technology being applied here is not home-developed. Typically, as all the articles note, it is introduced by outsiders to the communities and is often customized for the languages by outsiders. Indeed, as McHenry implies, there is fair scope for neocolonialism here. Certainly, it is not the technology pushing the developers towards an introverted approach.

There are hints of the standards which could be being applied in the review articles which complement this issue. Cotter reviews IrishNow! from Transparent Technology, a company once famous for its offer (at a price) to apply its techniques of language teaching to materials in any endangered language. By contrast, Dyck notes that Kanatawakhon-Maracle's Tsi-Karhakta, a Mohawk course, loses touch with the established Iroquoian grammatical terminology and over-simplifies its description of the language. It would help learners, after all, to have independent structures to which new material can be related. Likewise, use of a non-standard orthography with learners is hard to defend. This avoidance of common standards might be one cause of a point noted by Halm in her review of Chambers and Davies's ICT and Language Learning: a European Perspective, namely that "the development of teaching materials and approaches to language teaching, [are] areas which are not considered valid for research by many universities."

Now, in taking this somewhat perverse approach to these various papers, we are not trying to lessen the fascination of the diverse stories that they tell or the value of their analysis of the problems that arose and the solutions that were found. But diversity such as we have here is a major challenge for any useful set of standards: The attempt to apply standards can only emphasize, and bring to our attention, what is really distinctive in the new experience. An example of the kinds of comparisons that can usefully be made is seen in Román-Mendoza’s review of Uschi Felix's Beyond Babel: Language Learning Online. It forces the standards proposed to meet higher criteria of adequacy. We cannot allow the set of grammatical categories proposed, say, for European languages, to pass as de facto adequate, just because only the European languages have been subjected to this kind of analysis.

Paradoxically, it is only by knowing, embracing, and measuring themselves against the standard practices of language technology, that indigenous languages will be able to have their rightful influence in improving them and educating us all. Let the big technology companies confront the experience of Computer-Aided Ndjebbana, and see how well their products met the challenge. There are over 6,000 more cases they haven't yet thought about.

Sincerely,

Nicholas Ostler
Foundation for Endangered Languages

Jon Reyhner
Northern Arizona University