
Jenny L. Davis. *Talking Indian: Identity and Language Revitalization in the Chickasaw Renaissance*. The University of Arizona Press, 2019. 170 pp. ISBN: 9780816540969. <https://uapress.arizona.edu/book/talking-indian>

In *Talking Indian: Identity and Language Revitalization in the Chickasaw Renaissance*, Jenny L. Davis discusses and reflects upon the dissertation fieldwork she undertook with and in the Chickasaw Nation in south-central Oklahoma. Members of the Chickasaw Nation often colloquially refer to speaking their language, Chikashshanompa', as "Talking Indian." In this 170-page adaptation of her dissertation, Davis explores the "the intersections of Indigenous community, identity, and language" by asking the principal question "what identities are being negotiated within the Chickasaw Nation in the context of language revitalization?" (4; 27). On both a practical level and a scholarly level, Davis's *Talking Indian* makes important and timely contributions to several fields, such as language revitalization and reclamation. People working at a community level to support Indigenous languages may find Davis's insights useful and relevant when reflecting upon the language revitalization projects and initiatives in which they are involved. Likewise, scholars in related fields may enjoy the ways in which Davis advances discussions not only about the relationship between identity and language, but also how language revitalization can be a lens through which to view and understand Indigenous cultural renaissances.

Davis argues that within the Chickasaw Nation there has been a "shift in the conceptualization of speaking a heritage language from something that someone *does* or a desirable skillset that someone *has*, to something that someone *is*" (28.). In this understanding, for someone who is Chickasaw, speaking their heritage language is not simply a practice they engage in; rather, speaking their language is now recognized as a core part of their identity. Throughout the book, Davis deftly interweaves her practical and theoretical discussions of, and arguments for, the importance and implications of orienting this ideological shift within the entire historical, present, social, political, geographic, and linguistic context of the Chickasaw Nation. For this reason, I urge people to read *Talking Indian* as an integrated whole. Likewise, I feel any attempt on my part to summarize Davis's claims in a short book review runs the risk of decontextualizing them as well as inadvertently rending their dynamism. For this reason, I choose to briefly highlight several elements of Davis's argument that may be of particular interest or utility to people participating in community language revitalization work or undertaking related research.

Early in her discussion, Davis positions herself as a Chickasaw Nation citizen who grew up several hours' drive from the Nation and proposes that both historical and present diaspora and de-diasporization of Chickasaw citizens contributes, in part, to the formation of Chickasaw identity as it relates to an ongoing Chickasaw Renaissance (13). Davis reflects on how, during her research, her own identity as a person of Chickasaw descent and a Chickasaw Nation citizen, coupled with her roles as linguist researcher and non-fluent speaker of Chikashshanompa', mitigated several challenges she may have otherwise faced, or threats she may have been perceived by fellow community members as posing. Ultimately, she explains that these intersecting identities helped situate her as a type of "language affiliate" and someone connected to the language who did not have any recognized expertise as a Speaker within the community (50).

In this vein, Davis addresses the importance of delineating the differences between Speakers and speakers of Chickasaw, explaining that the former (capitalized) refers to a person who speaks the language fluently as their first language, and the latter (lowercase) refers to anyone who produces language in a given context (5). It is important to note that Davis's arguments in support of capitalizing Speaker align with existing movements in related fields to capitalize the first letter in Elders as both a sign of respect and as a way to designate Elders as a category of recognized knowledge holders within their communities.

Davis argues that making the distinction between Speakers and speakers is not only important with regards to marking linguistic ability, but also because it represents specific social, political, and economic implications in terms of how language ability is valued in and by the Chickasaw community (5). As such, the process of "identifying and evaluating Speakers of Chickasaw" is performed, and thus validated, by Chickasaw Speakers themselves instead of by outside academic "experts" (41). It is useful to note how this process subverts the "paradox of expertise" in that members of the language community themselves decide what criteria determine expertise (fluency) in their language and who has sufficient expertise to be viewed as a Speaker (41). The reasoning for making this distinction also reflects an underlying argument that Davis makes throughout the book, which is that (ethnolinguistic) identity is—and perhaps should be—determined by and within the Chickasaw community and not by, or in response to, outsiders or their own expectations or evaluations.

Although Davis regularly acknowledges the complex relationship between Native identity and language and cultural revitalization, she also highlights that language is only one possible contributing element to Chickasaw identity (19). Likewise, Davis

confronts wider discussions and (negative) perceptions that Indigenous individuals who can speak their heritage language are more authentically or legitimately Indigenous than those who can't: "speaking or not speaking the Chickasaw language, on its own, neither grants nor negates being Chickasaw, but it can, for some, serve as a point of solidifying it" (22). However, involvement with Chickasaw language (whether as a Speaker or someone allied with language revitalization activities) often establishes a certain level of perceived cultural capital and prestige for those involved (26). This perceived capital has also led to increased economic capital within the community, since "if access to economic capital was a primary factor in the shift of Chickasaw to English, then economic capital must also be present to motivate a shift back towards using Chickasaw" (59). For this reason, the Chickasaw Nation has hired Speakers to work as language specialists within different organizations and departments in the community (59).

In her conclusion, Davis explains that, as a whole, her discussion illustrates how the Chickasaw Nation is actively disrupting the "linguistic double-bind" that many Native American communities come up against (144). This "double-bind" has been created through the coupling of: (a) assimilationist language policies that drastically halted the transmission of Indigenous languages with; (b) the development of ethnolinguistic ideologies that equate Indigenous language fluency with authenticity (and thereby de-authenticate people who are not Speakers) (144). Davis uses language revitalization as a lens through which to better understand Chickasaw identity as well as how Chickasaw people are leading a Chickasaw language and cultural renaissance—which necessarily entails working to profoundly disrupt this "double-bind"—on their own terms.

I find relatively little to critique about this book, but I anticipate individual readers may identify sections where they would welcome a more detailed discussion and reflection from Davis. I write this not as a critique of the depth of Davis's discussion or the length of the book, but rather to underscore how this book is relevant to a diverse pool of people (both academic and non) who may welcome further discussions of certain topics that specifically relate to their own work, research, and lived experiences. To end, *Talking Indian: Identity and Language Revitalization in the Chickasaw Renaissance* offers readers an opportunity for both scholarly and practical reflection.

Victoria Sear, *The University of British Columbia*