Native California languages as semiotic resources in the performance of identity

In communities whose heritage language use is extremely restricted, community members often make use of linguistic resources drawn from languages of heritage in the performance of identity in spite of their non-fluent knowledge of those languages. In some cases, this work is done intralinguistically, in conversations which take place in the heritage language; in other cases, however, resources are drawn from the heritage language into communication which otherwise takes place in the dominant language. Such performances rely in no small part on processes of intertextuality for their interpretation. Given that Native Californians are engaged in multiple communities of practice, any particular deployment of a linguistic resource can be interpreted through a relationship to any one of a number of texts. Thus, these performances of identity are complicated by the differing interpretations of these semiotic deployments by interlocutors; these complications are sometimes used positively in doing border work among overlapping communities of practice, while at other times they lead to misinterpretation. This presentation focuses on three such deployments of endangered Native California languages of heritage as semiotic resources: the use of memorized speeches in public settings; the deployment of Native language gendered discourse markers in otherwise English-only speech; and wide variation in the production of, among other things, agreement markers among fluent speakers of Kawaiisu. In each case, speakers negotiate their own and their communities’ understandings of their deployment of these linguistic markers relative to the understanding of such uses by outsiders who are also party to the interactions in which they are used.