Proving Your Language is “Language”:
Overcoming the Colonialist Mythologies Faced by Indigenous Signed Languages

Dr. Erich Fox Tree
Department of Religion and Culture
Wilfrid Laurier University
Waterloo Ontario

While sociolinguistic and demographic realities contributing to language endangerment make the stabilization, let alone the revitalization, of nearly every indigenous language of the Americas is an uphill struggle, the situation for indigenous signed languages is especially onerous because of the persistence of academic and popular myths about aboriginal signed languages and sign communities that most western scholars abandoned decades ago when discussing spoken or oral-auditory languages. Foremost among these is the oft-still-repeated claim that most indigenous sign languages of the Americas (or indeed, around the world) are not, in fact, “real” or “complete” languages: a claim that harkens back to the claims of early European explorers and some missionary linguists, who argued that Native Americans spoke in under-developed and unsystematic strings of animal-like sounds, in order to justify European claims that indigenous people were something less than human. As beings who supposedly lacked language, Native Americans were believed to lack rationality and the capacity to organize socially, make law, and control their own labor, property, or resources. Drawing on my experience working with indigenous sign languages of Mesoamerica that K’ichee’an Mayas call Meemul Tziij, this paper outlines how this and other durable myths about indigenous sign languages continue to be obstacles in the documentation and stabilization, let alone their promotion and revitalization, of indigenous sign languages in the Americas; how these myths came to dominate and persist in the field of sign-linguistics; and how linguists and other scholars can chip away at these myths through the combination of everyday use of media technology to observe and document the languages, and to contest the myths. While the paper critiques myths relevant to most indigenous sign languages of the Americas, it draws on examples from my own work investigating and documenting indigenous sign languages of Mesoamerica that K’ichee’an Mayas call Meemul Tziij. I outline the awkwardly unexpected process of proving that Meemul Tziij varieties not only constitute a complex or family of real languages, but ones that defy persistent myths about Native American sign languages and which. I also argue that they powerfully demonstrate the importance of Native American languages for scientific study. Among other things, Meemul Tziij varieties may constitute the world’s oldest documentable sign languages. An apparently deep historical relation between Meemul Tziij and the pan-tribal “Sign Talk” of the North American Plains offers new, unexpected evidence for cultural contact between Mesoamerica and North America in the Pre-Columbian era. The similarity of modern Meemul Tziij signs to gestures represented in ancient iconography may offer a new key for translating or understanding the origins of gestures in ancient Mesoamerican artwork and some hieroglyphic writing. Perhaps most importantly, the case of Meemul Tziij offers a radical and prestigious alternative to the defamatory un[der]recognition embodied in persistent claims that indigenous languages are not real language.