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[00:00] background music

Derek Bruff: [00:06] This is "Leading Lines," I'm Derek Bruff and I'm happy to have with me here Stacy Johnson, one of our "Leading Lines" producers and a colleague here at Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching. Hi Stacy.

Stacey Johnson: [00:16] Hi Derek.

Derek Bruff: [00:17] I'm glad to have you here.

Stacey Johnson: [00:18] I'm glad to be here.

Derek Bruff: [00:20] Stacey, You've been on the podcast before and we've talked about your other podcast that you run, "We Teach Languages".

Stacey Johnson: [00:26] Yes.

Derek Bruff: [00:27] Can you remind our listeners a little bit about "We Teach Languages"?

Stacey Johnson: [00:29] I would love to, so I'm a language teacher and my podcast has grown out of the work I do teaching graduate students who are going to be language teachers and working with language teachers on campus. In this case, I recently was told by a colleague of mine that there's this amazing indigenous language teacher trainer at the University of Oregon named Robert Elliott, who I had to meet because of all the great work he's doing, specifically around using technology to help indigenous language communities revitalize and document and preserve their culture and their heritage through language.

[1:09] So, we decided to split the interview between "Leading Lines" and "We Teach Languages", where the really language teaching focused stuff is on "We Teach Languages"

and the more technology focused part of our conversation made it to “Leading Lines”.

Derek Bruff: [1:22] That’s great. And we’ve, we’ve done this before a couple of times where we had a crossover episode of some sort. You often talk with folks who are doing really interesting things with technology. And so we’re happy to feature another one of your guests from “We Teach Languages”.

Stacey Johnson: [1:36] Yes, somehow most of my episodes happened to be with language teachers. And I’m going to make sure that we put links to the other language teacher related episodes in the show notes so that if people listen to this one and they love language teaching and they want more of it they can go ahead and listen to my other episodes.

Derek Bruff: [1:53] Absolutely. Yeah. Well, and we’ll link to “We Teach Languages” too, which has quite the following.

Stacey Johnson: [1:57] And if you love listening to Robert Elliott, and you want a little bit more on Friday that “We Teach Languages” episode with him comes out as well.

Derek Bruff: [2:05] That’s great. Well, I have to say that I think I first heard about language revitalization efforts on yet another podcast, The World in Words podcast, hosted by Patrick Cox, which I listened to for a long time. Patrick has a new podcast called “Subtitle”.

[2:21] And so if our listeners are interested in this kind of work, I would encourage them to listen to “Subtitle” or, or go back to the World in Words archive. I think the language revitalization efforts are just really amazing actually. As we’ll hear from Robert, sometimes he’s working with languages that don’t currently have speakers.

Stacey Johnson: [2:39] Yeah, it is really, really remarkable. And a lot of the languages that he works with are actually in the geographical area of the University of Oregon, which is a place that has the Pacific Northwest in general, just has incredible diversity of indigenous Native American languages there.

[2:56] And so the effort of trying to preserve those languages and make sure that young people in the communities are being raised with a full knowledge of their heritage, language and culture is one of the missions of the institute where Robert is a technologist and a faculty member.

Derek Bruff: [3:14] And I would say that this episode, the conversation we're about to hear with Robert, is a little less about the how we use technology to support teaching and education, which is kind of where we spend most of our time and "Leading Lines", but it's very much about why we use technology and why it's important and why the work is important. And so I'm really happy to have your conversation with Robert on "Leading Lines" today.

Stacey Johnson: [3:24] Yeah, I'm really glad to share it. And if folks who are listening may want to chime in or talk about similar work that's happening in their communities, I would love to get a conversation going.

[3:44] background music

Stacey Johnson: [3:50] I thought a good way for us to get started would be just for you to introduce yourself and tell us where do you work and how did you come to work there?

Robert Elliot: [3:58] So my name's Robert Elliot and I work at the Northwest Indian Language Institute, or NILI, at the University of Oregon in Eugene, Oregon. And I've been with NILI for about ten years now. At NILI we work with language revitalization, working predominantly with endangered languages from around the Pacific Northwest. But we also work with languages in Alaska, Mississippi and Florida.

[4:31] I've worked, I've been on a, did a workshop in Costa Rica. We've been to France and Spain and worked also in Poland. So, you know, there's endangered languages around the world, which is something that I'm not always aware of, being focused mostly on North American indigenous languages, but it is a global phenomenon, this language loss that the world is currently experiencing.

[4:56] So, the flip side of language losses is language revitalization and that's what we do at NILI. NILI is not the only institute that works off of language revitalization. There's not very many of them, but there's a couple. For example, AILDI in Arizona is one and there is CILLDI in Alberta, Canada is another one.

[5:17] So those are both institutions that are affiliated, AILDI with University of Arizona and CILLDI with University of Alberta. So, they're also kind of an academic and community of collaborative types of projects. And then there's of course, other private places that, for non-

profit places that are involved in language revitalization.

[5:37] So, there's places around, one of the reasons NILI began in the first place was that there were a number of teachers of indigenous language of Oregon that had gone down to Arizona taken part and loved it and thought it was fantastic. But they wanted something closer to home and something that was a little more focused on the specific issues of the languages here.

[6:00] So that's how, you know, 22 plus years ago NILI was founded because members of these communities came to the University of Oregon and they said, hey, you've been making your careers as anthropologists, as linguists off of our communities. But at the same time, our languages are not thriving and you're writing these books that are not accessible to us, or these publications, and they're not helping us at all so can you do something to help us with our languages?

[6:30] So I think that what people can do is of course, if they're interested, they can attend something like a summer institute which AILDI has, which NILI has, they can get academic credit, if that's something that's desirable. Typically, what you'll, you'll get at one of these kinds of institutes is you'll do a lot of work off of your language.

[6:50] So like linguistics classes in the morning, language class from your specific language, and then we usually have classes around pedagogy. Last year, one of the things was on classroom management that was, was taught at immersion. And then there's technology classes, which I'm teaching usually in the afternoons. And sometimes people have options like a, like maybe a hand drawings materials instead if they're kind of afraid of technology.

[7:17] One thing I've seen through the years is just this change in attitude towards technology. I mean, we've all seen that with our general population. But when I first started working with NILI there were a lot of teachers who were kind of afraid of technology and didn't really have a lot of the basics. And so I had to really work with them to get up to speed on just some of the basic stuff.

[7:40] But now more and more as we're getting younger language revitalizations, people in their twenties and thirties, that are coming more and more to this, you just see people that are really good with technology and jumping in and doing all kinds of interesting and taking it to levels that I don't even know. Sometimes like, oh, I didn't know you could do that. That's

great. Thanks for teaching me.

[8:03] So that's always my favorite part when someone takes something I've introduced and then they run with it and they do something way above whatever I was even thinking you could do with it. And that's, that's the fun part for me.

Stacey Johnson: [8:13] How did you come to work at NILI?

Robert Elliot: [8:15] So I was actually trained as an ESL instructor. I went to grad school in San Francisco Bay Area and worked with ESL there for maybe ten years before we moved to Oregon. Since my father is native, he's Navajo, but he was separated from his mother when he was two years old. So when we moved to Oregon, I was always interested in, in the NILI, that we had this institute on campus.

[8:45] And so at first I just started volunteering with NILI helping out with filming and technology stuff because that's one of my specialty areas within language as a, as a language teacher trainer and language educator. Technology was one of the areas that I've been working with. So I started working with that. And there was a huge need for help with technology within the language revitalization community.

[9:12] There's a lot of things that can be done with technology to both document, but also to use technology as a teaching tool because of course, you're very aware of this. It helps to really share the information and spread the information very easily so that speakers in these communities are very, there's, there's not very many or a lot of times it's just on documentation so that their time and energy is constrained of the native speakers, fluent speakers.

[9:40] And so, by using technology, you're able to kind of make it easier for learners to get access to the speakers that do remain or in some cases there are no speakers that are still surviving. And so we can get the information, get the input, get the audio or video or whatever you have through technology to, to learners.

[10:03] Anyway, I started working there, volunteering and then they asked me to be on a project, and then it was two projects, and then eventually, about eight years ago, my entire position was moved over to NILI. And so I became developing some online courses that we did there and on different projects and then became an Associate Director about five or six

years ago.

[10:27] So we have one Director, we have two Associate Directors, and we have an Immersion School Teacher Specialist who are all part of the faculty staff, they're permanent. Then we have a number of graduate students and undergraduate students who, who work at the Institute. So on any given day, you'd see, usually you'd see a good little buzz around the office that there's a lot of people coming and going and doing projects and working on things and yeah, so I haven't looked back since.

[10:56] I also do teacher education at the University of Oregon, where I teach a lot of technology classes and other types of classes for future language teachers. One of the things about the University of Oregon, it's the LTS Language Teaching Studies Program through the, through the linguistics department.

[11:12] And it's not an ESL program, it's not a French program, it is intentionally designed to be for multiple languages, including indigenous languages. So we have, for right now, we have two speakers of two, I'm sorry, three speakers of different languages from North America who are masters students within that program.

Stacey Johnson: [11:33] That's awesome.

Robert Elliot: [11:34] Yeah, it is. So we do have a number of ESL people that are trained to become ESL teachers, French, Spanish, things like that, but we are intentionally for lingual, multilingual unit and supporting indigenous languages.

[11:50] And there's not very many places around that have that and having NILI on campus and having me as a faculty member in both, both NILI in the indigenous language work, and also being able to work with students who are becoming teachers of indigenous languages, I think that's pretty unique and pretty, pretty lucky to have all of that at Oregon.

[12:10] And so we're hoping that we can continue to, to be a leader, I would say with helping spread the idea that there's a lot of minority languages out there that are very similar in a lot of the teaching stuff overlaps with teaching majority language, teaching a major language. But there are differences, there's, there's differences between language revitalization or even a less commonly taught language.

Stacey Johnson: [12:35] I mean, one of the differences that pops into my mind immediately as a Spanish faculty member is just I have access to an uncountable number of authentic resources at any given moment on the internet that an indigenous language teacher would have to work much, much harder to have access to that, those authentic examples of language and community as well.

Robert Elliot: [12:59] Right. I mean, one of my mentors, Phil Hubbard back at Stanford. He just, he did a presentation recently talking about how there are so many resources on the internet for languages. And there's just this open, open access to so much stuff. And I was thinking, yes, except not in all cases, not for, not for all languages.

[13:19] Yes, of course, for, for English and for some other languages, they definitely have access to it, the world has completely changed teaching, but not only that, but I mean I think about with indigenous languages. I'm fluent in Swedish because I lived in Sweden for five years and you know, it's not a major language, it's a smaller language.

[13:39] There's some 8 million speakers of Swedish. But I know that when I'm here and I've been away from Sweden for long I don't get a lot of chances to talk with people. There's not a lot of people I run into on a daily basis that are Swedish speakers. Every once in a while, I will and they'll be very surprised that you can speak this smaller language. But the thing is I can always go back to Sweden and I'm completely immersed in the language when I'm there.

[14:07] I'd hear on the radio, you hear it everywhere, in the store, walking on the street, on the bus, whatever. And so there's a homeland that this language is continuing to go, continuing to thrive, there's a vibrant community of speakers there.

[14:21] But with indigenous languages, that's one thing that I find that is so important is that the, the land that we're on here, often maybe on the reservation or even in the school, so this is the land, the traditional homelands of the people, and the traditional homelands where these languages are spoken. So, this is the place, and there is no other place that you can go back to, to get fully immersed within the language.

[14:50] So, you said that indigenous language teachers don't have the same access. But one thing that teachers of Native American languages typically have to do because of that lack of resources out there. So, they have to wear so many different hats on any given day, they have to do everything, so they're often learning the language. So maybe there's an elder that they

work with that they're, they're studying language, they're getting more fluent themselves. So their learners, they're learning how to teach the language.

[15:22] They have to develop materials on the language. They have to advocate with their departments and with the community on the language. They're organizing the community to get involved with supporting language initiatives. There have to be documenters of the language and linguists, they have to be able to analyze.

[15:39] And so just the number of hats they have to wear, the number of roles that they, they have as teachers. It's not just a teacher. There's just this large number of things that they have to be able to and be ready to, to try to take on and switch multiple times throughout the day.

Stacey Johnson: [15:55] The one role that you mentioned that seems like the most different from what I typically see language teachers doing is the documentation piece. Like a Spanish or French or Arabic or Swedish faculty member would never have to also be documenting the language as they're teaching it and learning it themselves because they're such extensive documentation already.

Robert Elliot: [16:21] Yea.

Stacey Johnson: [16:22] I don't even know how you would learn to do that. Is that something that you do at your center that you teach? How to do language documentation?

Robert Elliot: [16:30] So a lot of times it depends on what the community I mean, yes, we do teach that at the Northwest Indian Language Institute at NILI. We have a summer institute, we do a lot depending on what a tribe or community asks us that they need. And so a lot of stuff that we do is tailored around needs that they have, including what sometimes would be considered documentation.

[16:54] One thing I think about is we have nine federally recognized tribes in Oregon. We have other communities of native people that are working sometimes off of their language, using their language, revitalizing their language. And one thing I think is that each tribe, each community is so very different than the other one in what their language situation is like, so some tribes have speakers, some tribes have no speakers that are left, some have 20 plus languages that were spoken on that tribal community originally and some have maybe one language that was spoken.

[17:30] So, but a lot of times they are confederated tribes, and particularly in Oregon so you see multiple languages on a single reservation or a single tribe. And so, one of the things that sometimes people need to think about, make a decision upon, is how are we going to deal with which language are we going to be working on?

[17:50] Which one are we learning within our community? Do we learn all of our languages, do we choose one? Those kinds of decisions have to be made by somebody who's in charge of the language priorities within, within a community.

Stacey Johnson: [18:02] Yeah, I'm imagining that your role as a technologist is enabling for a lot of those decisions, right? Like what can be done with the technology that we have available?

Robert Elliot: [18:14] Yes.

Stacey Johnson: [18:15] I mean, I would just love to hear about maybe some specific ways that you've been able to see technology help people do that kind of work in their communities.

Robert Elliot: [18:24] So, I can describe, you know, there's all kinds of different projects, but let me describe one of my favorite projects that I was involved in. And that was working with high school youth, tribal high school youth, to design materials. And specifically, what we ended up doing was designing e-books that contained audio, and video sometimes, and images.

[18:49] And so, we're designing the e-books in language that could be used by the preschool immersion programs. So, it's multi-generational. The high school youth often had to consult and work with elders or speakers, fluent speakers of the language. So, they had to, you know, look up to their elders to make sure that they were saying things correctly, they were pronouncing things correctly, that their ideas were working.

[19:16] There was a big project-based learning initiative, so this happened over a couple of years and we built a small library of, I think about 12, 12 e-books or so. And the students got to be involved with, like, conceptualizing the project conception of what kind of books they wanted to make. And I would drive out to this was that the confederate tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation out by Pendleton, Oregon on the east side.

[19:43] So, it's about six hours from where we are in Eugene. So. it's a multi-day stay. I would go out and work for 3 about 3-4 days with the high school youth. We build a book and then I'd return home and do the rest of my stuff that I do and then go back up about once every, every month or two I'd return back there and we do another book.

[20:04] And then one of the bright spots was, I remember from that project was when the high school students were able to bring that book back, the e-books back, to the Immersion School students. They sat with them and they showed them the books and a lot of the books contain images and even audio from even the, the preschool children, and they had some of their own audio in there and they had speakers that they knew and images from their community there. And so that was really a highlight of that particular project.

[20:35] The other thing was we were able to present the project at national, a couple national conferences. And some of the high school youth are able to go with us to listen, one in Anchorage, Alaska, at the NIEA, National Indian Education Association Conference.

[20:51] And we had two of the high school youth that came up and presented in front of a crowd of 60/70 people that were Indian Native American educators and a lot of them were language teachers. And so, they got the chance to really promote themselves and promote what they were doing and share those ideas.

[21:13] So yes, that was a really interesting project and a lot of the kids that I worked on that project with have now gone off to college and every once in a while, I'll hear from them and how they thought that the technology skills that they gain from that and project management skills, I guess.

[12:30] And how the chance to present at conferences and stuff were eye opening for them and help them move along with and think about being language leaders and what language means for them as individuals, and as members of a particular ethnic group and a tribe and what that, what the language means.

Stacey Johnson: [21:47] So that's fantastic. I can't help but think about how those high schoolers are going to go on to become like community advocates because that project helped them bring together, they're like the images and the voices of their community with the value of their language. And now we get to have their voices leading, leading the way for the next group of high schoolers that'll come after. Yeah, I love that so much.

Robert Elliot: [22:15] Yeah. There was a lot of, there's an element of, you know, I had to go in and do some training with them too because they're all really great with their phones and they know they're comfortable with technology, but they don't always know specifically how to do like say, Audacity and audio editing or image editing or how to get, we built websites to put the stuff up.

[22:37] So there's all these tools that you needed to know how to do that they knew you could do it, but most hadn't. Most of them had never really known how to do that. So that part of the, you know, there's technology education involved with that too. So I think they left with a really good set of skills.

[22:57] And, and then that, that identity part, I think is really big for Native youth. Just knowing your language grounds you and helps you know who you are. And there's a lot of research being done about language as a protective factor for at-risk youth, things like drug abuse or alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy and stuff.

[23:16] Some studies are showing that kids that are grounded in their culture, they know who they are. They're, they're more tethered and they're grounded and can, can resist those, those factors that can sometimes have people drift away when they don't really fully know who they are or what their heritage is. They can sometimes feel lost in the world and the greater world. So, so ya, language, I think is really important.

Stacey Johnson: [23:43] That is the point of stripping groups of people of their language and culture is to dismantle community and all of the social supports that unite people, right? So it's, I mean, it's awesome to hear that there's research that says that language revitalization and, and that culture and language work can actually help to rebuild some of the damage that's been done previously in the community.

Robert Elliot: [24:08] Yeah. So sometimes they talk about well-being, I guess, language and well-being, and language and culture and well-being. And people have known intuitively that that's important but being able to actually have Western evidence.

Stacey Johnson: [24:23] That is data.

Robert Elliot: [24:24] Is provable to grantees and those that are in control of some of the where the monies go from the government. I think that that adds a lot to the argument, to

the case, because sometimes you hear people say like, who cares if this little language dies? It's like, what does that matter? If no one speaks it anymore?

[24:46] Languages come, languages go. It's like only 300 people on that tribe so it doesn't affect very many people anyway. You know, you hear arguments like that. And I think for us that our language educators, those that are, those of us that work with language, we know that knowing your heritage and knowing your background is so important.

[25:03] There we're the, the government boarding schools starting in the 1870s, I believe, and Colonel Pratt the Ex Civil War general, I believe, who was involved in starting these and government boarding schools that were throughout the country and up through Canada, they had them as well.

[25:23] And the, the saying was, "kill the Indian, save the man", was what they used to say because, and so the children were sometimes sent there by their parents, but often coerced or physically forced to go to the boarding schools and where they were not allowed to speak their languages, not, not allowed to practice their religion.

[25:45] Their hair was cut, they were Westernized, so to speak. So sometimes I think of that as a very strong force in eroding the base of native cultures and native peoples.

Stacey Johnson: [25:57] Absolutely.

Robert Elliot: [25:59] And something, the part of the history that people don't often think about or know about. So, I heard somebody once said that, well, you know, language revitalization, what you're doing, that's social engineering

Stacey Johnson: [26:10] More than genocide though?

Robert Elliot: [26:12] Well, that was exactly what I was thinking. Well what about all that social engineering that was going on as a government policy for over 100 years. That those schools and they were, they were terribly effective.

[26:26] One thing, I think that's kind of ironic, there's Ruth Spack who did a lot of research in writing, in ESL writing, I believe, I believe I remember her from when I was getting my MA degree, but she also wrote a book on the boarding schools. And I remember reading that

book is so interesting as a language teacher and teacher educator, because there's so many things that they did in those schools that were, that we see today and we think of as being innovative and new types of language education.

[27:00] So they would do things like they would build, they would go out outside and do projects. They would build little landscapes on the inside with sand and dirt to mimic the land and the territory and then they would teach language through, through some of these like project-based learning or just some that stuff that we think is so innovative and knew they were using it back then without sustained that same names that we have now.

[27:25] And so, I kind of find that ironic now to be reintroducing that to teachers to indigenous language teachers. Sometimes when I'm like, hey, here's these things that you can use and a lot of these same tools to help restore your language. And a lot of these same tools were used originally to strip people of their language.

Stacey Johnson: [27:45] I think this is such an important point, though. Nothing you can possibly do in a language classroom is inherently more equitable. Things are only as equitable as the framing that we bring to it, as how much we examine our own biases, as how much we honor student identities.

[28:03] And so, the idea that project-based learning can be used to eradicate people's language and culture in one context. And the same tool could be used to redevelop it, revitalize it in another context, makes perfect sense because it's the intention of the user of the tool and not the tool itself, right?

Robert Elliot: [28:24] Right. So any tool can be used or misused, I think. And it also reminds me of, I believe it's the Wampanoag people of Massachusetts who had been working off of revitalizing their language, where I think they haven't had speakers for like a 100-150+ years.

[28:43] And so they've, you know, one thing that those are often what we call sleeping languages and sometimes they'd been called by linguists in the past dead languages. But I think a lot of people feel that the, the, naming of it as a dead language is not, well, not sensitive for one, but not accurate.

[29:00] Because as long as there's a community that potentially could revive the language, wake the language up and bring it back, or are interested in it as a cultural marker, it's, it's

not dead. It's, it's just waiting there, dormant, waiting to be, to be revived if there's little community that's interested in doing that, if there's, if there's documentation.

[29:24] So, my understanding what the Wampanoag people, because it was in the east coast, I think a lot of language loss happened a lot earlier. And as the country moved westward, expansion to the, towards the west, native peoples got affected a little bit later in the timeframe.

[29:40] In fact, out here in the far West, I think Oregon, California, it was the 1850s on. And so, you've, you've have people that are alive now that remember that maybe their parents or grandparents might have been around at the time when the original changes were occurring to the lands out here.

[30:04] So it seems like a long time ago, 150, 160, 170 years ago, but you can probably go to two people, maybe three people, three generations back and there's a memory there. So anyway, in the east coast though, a lot of the, the tribes were affected a lot earlier with language loss.

[30:23] And so, the documentation, of course, they didn't have audio recording and, and things like that. So, a lot more of the documentation is around written language and, and a lot of that is scarce and hard to, hard to come by, but for the Wampanoags I think that they, there was some missionaries that came through to translate the Bible into the local languages.

[30:42] So, here's another irony is that now some of those translations are able to be harnessed for language revitalization because there's a lot of rich language that's in there and you can pull out things that you don't have access to otherwise. So, the irony was that the, the tool of the Bible being used to convert the indigenous people is now being used to re-establish their identity at a, you know, two hundred, three hundred years later down the line.

Stacey Johnson: [31:14] Well, this has been honestly, this is the second time I've gotten to talk with you and both times I felt like, oh, we could probably, I could probably just listen to your stories indefinitely. This is fantastic.

Robert Elliot: [31:26] Yeah. Who knows I can probably talk all day about this.

[31:32] background music

Derek Bruff: [31:34] That was Robert Elliott, Associate Director of the Northwest Indian Language Institute at the University of Oregon, interviewed by my colleague and “Leading Lines” Producer, Stacey Johnson. Stacey is also the Host and Producer of “We Teach Languages”, a podcast all about language teaching and language learning.

[31:52] And if you’d like to hear more from Robert and Stacey, I encourage you to check out the upcoming episode of “We Teach Languages”, which features more of their interview together. We will have links to that in the show notes for this episode, links to Robert and his work, Stacey and her podcast, “We Teach Languages”, as well as some of the past episodes we’ve had here on “Leading Lines” that were crossovers with “We Teach Languages”.

[32:15] I’m really excited about the community that Stacey’s developed through her podcast and I’m glad we get to intersect with that community a little bit here today on “Leading Lines”. You will find the show notes for this and every episode of “Leading Lines” on our website, LeadingLinesPod.com.

[32:29] We’d love to hear your thoughts on this episode and any kind of work that you’re involved in around language revitalization and the role of technology in doing so. This is important work and we’d love to hear more from our listeners about how technology can support that work.

[32:43] You can reach us via email at LeadingLinesPod@Vanderbilt.edu or on Twitter @LeadingLinesPod. “Leading Lines” is produced by the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching and the Jean and Alexander Heard Libraries. This episode was edited by Stacey Johnson and Rhett McDaniel. Look for new episodes the first and third Mondays of each month. I’m your host Derek Bruff.