



## LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point occupies lands inextricably connected to the Ho-Chunk people and their sacred language, *Hooçąk*, and to the Menominee people and their sacred language, *Omāēqnomenēw-wēqnaesen*, since time immemorial. We must acknowledge the deep Ho-Chunk and Menominee love for their languages and honor all those who speak and care for the Indigenous languages of Wisconsin. These other languages include: *Mā’ēekuneeweethowāakun* (Mohican), *Hulunīixsuwaakun* (Munsee), *Ojibwemowin/ Anishinaabemowin* (Ojibwe), *Ukwehuwehnéha* (Oneida), and *Bodwēwadmimwen/ Neshnabémwen* (Potawatomi). Languages are key to the past, present, and future well-being of Indigenous nations. Collectively, we share an exigent responsibility to arrest language loss due to settler-colonialism; to support revitalization efforts; and to seek linguistic justice for Indigenous peoples.

(Adapted from Enwejjig land and language acknowledgment, UW–Madison)

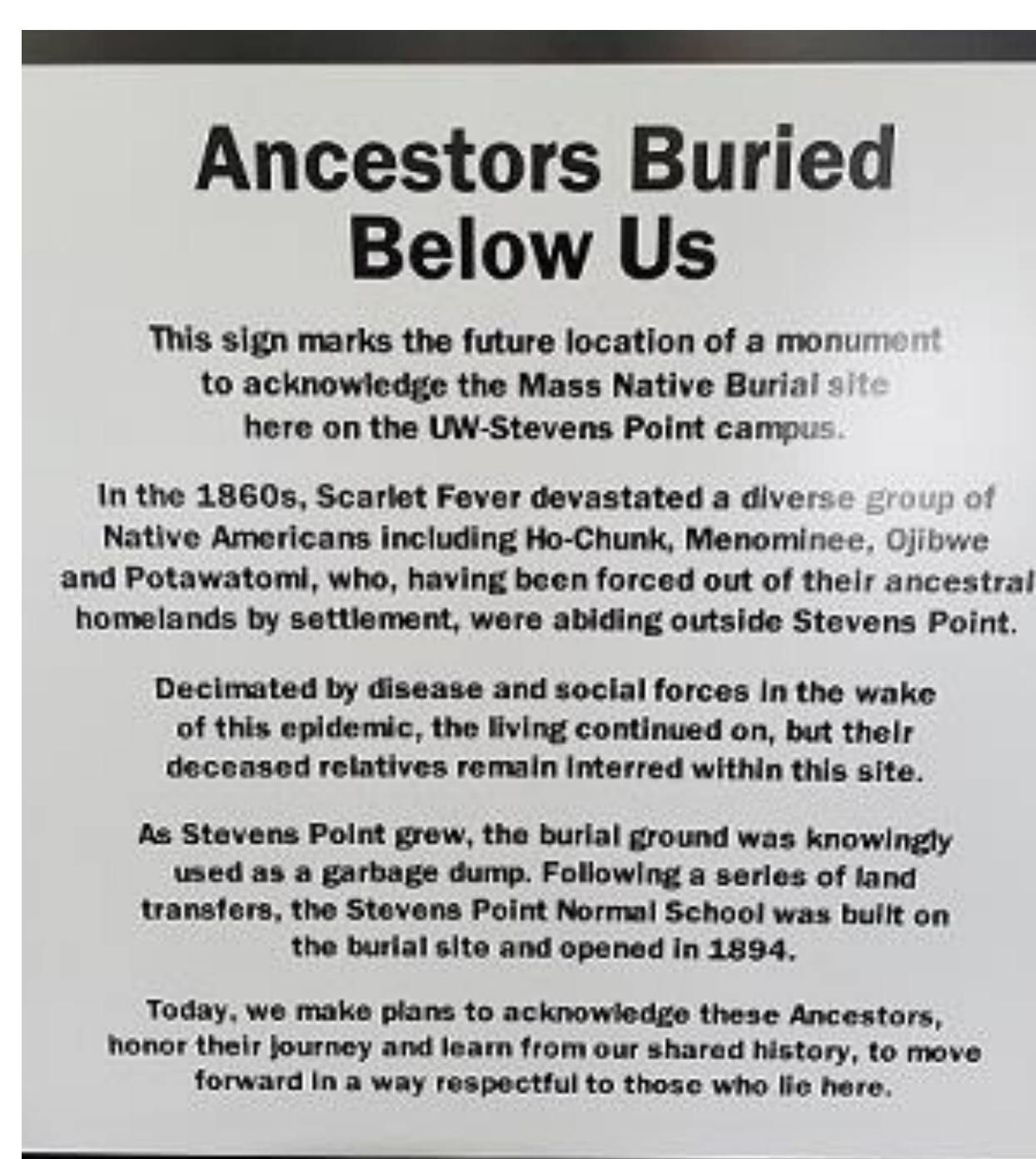


Figure 1: First image: interim marker for memorial of burial ground on UWSP campus. Second image: new mural (April 2023) on UWSP campus, created by Ho-Chunk artist Chris Sweet, acknowledging Ancestors Buried Below Us. (Stevens Point Area Convention and Visitors Bureau 2023)

## ABSTRACT

The introductory linguistics course usually focuses on studying the language of instruction. Other languages generally appear as “exotic” problem sets in textbooks, which is not accidental, as “[c]oloniality... is deeply embedded in linguistic disciplinary practice” (Deumert & Storch 2020). At Faculty College 2022, Brock emphasized teaching counternarratives as a response to powerful master narratives in our classrooms. The centering of English is, by far, the most powerful master narrative in the U.S. linguistics classroom. This project suggests one way for instructors to de-center English and increase awareness of threatened indigenous languages, to address power dynamics that exist between colonial and indigenous languages. A semester-long “Indigenous Language Project” comprising scaffolded assignments structured the course. Effects of the intervention were studied qualitatively through the comparison of a pre-test and post-test. Evidence indicates a favorable response from students and, importantly, an increase in awareness of indigenous languages and the significance of preserving them.

## BACKGROUND

As a discipline, linguistics is closely tied to the global colonial enterprise:

1. Much data was gathered by colonial governments and missionaries
2. Disciplinary “language of coloniality,” focuses on binaries of expert/speaker, text/speech, and colonial/decolonial (Deumert & Storch 2020)
3. *Linguistic imperialism* prioritizes the teaching of English and a few other colonial/politically influential languages (Phillipson 2009)
4. English language is the most studied in the world
5. English is (mostly) the language of instruction, scholarly writing, and linguistics textbooks
6. Introductory textbooks generally use English examples, with other languages often positioned as ‘exotic’ – intentionally or otherwise

## THE INTERVENTION

### Finding a counternarrative to English

At UW System Faculty College 2022, the speaker/facilitator was Dr. Lisa Brock, historian and founding director of the Arcus Center for Social Justice Leadership at Kalamazoo College. She spoke powerfully about the need to teach *counternarratives* when you teach in a discipline that has racism, sexism, colonialism, and other marginalizing practices as part of its organizing principles. I was determined to take steps to counter those elements in my own linguistic teaching.

As a white, English-speaking instructor at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in a rural area of Wisconsin, my task was to find a way to focus on the counternarrative while still embodying the master narrative. The course I chose was Introduction to Linguistics (ENGL 240). Ultimately, I decided to give my students the power to investigate indigenous languages while I guided the linguistic aspects of their work.

In so doing, I had several goals:

1. Give students agency to choose from among the more than 6,500 indigenous languages currently used around the world
2. Empower them to investigate the structural and meaning-based aspects of linguistic study, while emphasizing that *not all language research is created equal*
3. Partner with UWSP librarians to help students try to find appropriate language resources (known as *reference grammars*) that describe the language they chose
4. Encourage students to learn about the cultural aspects of the language community they chose – not just to focus on the structural aspects of the language itself (this knowledge was often non-scholarly, accessed through internet sources)
5. Alert students to the dangers facing speakers of indigenous languages through the growth of colonial languages (especially English) and the enacting of language policies that deprioritize or even criminalize indigenous languages around the world



Figure 2: UNESCO International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032) (UNESCO 2022)

To show its relevance, I tied this intervention to global and local efforts:

1. Locally, UWSP has spent several years reckoning with the fact that much of the campus is a former Native American burial ground. See Figure 1.
2. Globally, UNESCO has declared the decade 2022-2032 the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, warning that, barring major efforts, up to 90% of the world’s languages will disappear by 2100. See Figure 2.

### The assignment

Over the semester, the Indigenous Language Project (ILP) was a series of low-stakes homework assignments where students would investigate their chosen language, reporting on what they learned about the language and how it compared to English.

NOTE: Bibliography available on Hope Scroll slideshow.

The ILP assignments:

1. Introduction, listing speakers, geographic location, endangerment of the language, and regular contact with colonial or global languages
2. Phonetics and phonology, listing the sounds found in the language, including phonemes and suprasegmentals, and comparing the size and relative complexity with English
3. Morphosyntax, discussing morphological type from analytic to synthetic, affixation, other morphological processes, word order, pro-dropping, topic-comment, etc., and comparing these to English
4. Semantics, pragmatics, and lexicon, focusing on vocabulary, meaning, and special uses like honorifics and politeness strategies, again comparing with English
5. Final reflection, in which students wrote about their learning process and reflected on preserving their language

## THE STUDY

I created a survey as a pre-test and used the reflection assignment as a post-test. Students’ language background was fairly typical.



Figure 3: Languages studied by students before taking ENGL 240



Figure 4: Students' heritage languages

At the end of the semester, students reflected on their language study:

*“Language is something that connects and also can bring more of an open mindedness between people when they know more than just one language, one way of speaking.”*

*“Warlpiri should continue to be taught to children.”*

*“I often became very frustrated while gathering information on Yucatec because of the scarcity of sources surrounding its linguistics.”*

*“[T]hrough the assignments we were able to take what we learned in class and examine them through the lens of our chosen language, which was immensely helpful.”*

*“After completing this project, I feel like I better understand the struggles that led to the point of language endangerment, and the importance of keeping [Cherokee] alive and preserved.”*

**Join the Hope Scroll to express your hopes for indigenous languages! Click the QR code and go!**



## MY THANKS

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