

## **abstract**

this article highlights and discusses the protocols/processes followed in pursuing a doctoral dissertation that broke with the traditional tone and conventions of english academic writing while decolonizing its syntax using examples from his own culture and language the author privileges indigenous knowledge that illustrates the limitations of current thought about academic freedom from abstracts international to a university research ethics board there is much work to be done in opening up freedom of expression when it comes to the english language the positive news comes from the dissertation usage statistics that shows a worldwide interest

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## **key words**

nisgaa indigenous decolonizing architecture post secondary syntax dissertation  
freedom of thought and expression indigenous architecture indigenous knowledge  
academic freedom sovereignty intergenerational trauma indian residential schools

# decolonizing syntax: an indigenous dissertation

simgigat<sup>1</sup> sigadum haanak' (pronounced sim/gig/gat sig/a/dum han/ak)  
[translated: honourable men and honourable women] luugigyoothl way' (pronounced  
loo/gig/e/o/thl/why) gisk'ahaast ñiiy (pronounced gis/gas/knee) wilp daaxan ñiiy  
(pronounced will/p/dack/an//knee) nisgaa ñiiy' (pronounced nis/ga/knee) git gingolx  
(pronounced git/gin/goal/th) luu-am'aamhl gagoodim wilgaa'sim (pronounced  
lou/am/th/l/ga/god/dim/will/gaa/a/sim)

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in my language i said my name is luugigyoo |calm waters| of the killerwhale house of  
daaxan of the nisgaa village of gingolx [translated as kincolith |place of skulls| and that i am glad  
to be here [literally, means my heart is glad to be here]

meaning that i am glad to be present my name luugigyoo situates me close to the  
village i have come in from the ocean and am in their waters

i want to acknowledge the traditional ancestral unceded territory of the indigenous  
peoples upon where you happen to be reading this article just as i acknowledge the traditional  
unceded territory of the ts'elxwéyeqw [pronounced chill quay ick] nation where i am editing this  
article having written the first draft in sudbury ontario where i was at the time an associate  
professor of architecture

the elders of the nisgaa nation taught that introducing oneself is to start a relationship off  
in a good way and that is what i attempt to do each time i write if you have read or heard  
this opening multiple times in different settings then you will be familiar with the protocol

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<sup>1</sup> a note about my writing style since i defended my dissertation *indigenous architecture through indigenous knowledge*: (Stewart 2015) i have added another layer of meaning to my use of the nisgaa language where i use nisgaa i provide plain english phonetic pronunciation to assist in reading the language i use plain english because nisgaa is not represented by the international phonetic alphabet (ipa) symbols so i am using a phonetic system based on plain english (as a non linguist)

this is the traditional formal oral introduction to an audience that i privilege as the readers of this article in this way i write as i speak and i am speaking to each of you

for those of you who might have not read any of my writing in the past four or five years i want to preface what you read here with an explanation as way of transition into my own syntax

the university examiner said when i read your dissertation it was like i was hearing my grandfather speak in the longhouse

to myself i thought success to the professor i said t'ooyaksiy niin |thank you|

the above exchange took place april 23 2015 at my oral defense in sty-wet-tan hall inside the first nations longhouse at the university of british columbia [ubc] while my intent was to write my dissertation like i was speaking i could not have scripted a better outcome for my oral defense i had a palpable response to his words the words coming from the university examiner affected the whole crowd in the room it set the tone for what happened over the next two hours it heightened my senses and allowed me to focus on the content of the questions without worrying if the people understood what i was trying to do in my writing

the context within which i write work play and live shapes my thoughts and exploration of ideas i am a husband father brother nephew uncle grandfather cousin living within a colonized space in a land that is now known as c\|a\n\|a\|d\|a<sup>2</sup> i am

nisgaa by birth and know that my great grandfather was born at a time before the federal indian

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<sup>2</sup> i will continue to disagree with the notion of this country until such time as it acknowledges its foundation on policies of genocide eliminates its policies of genocide within its borders and stops supporting policies of genocide internationally for more on this see stewart (2015)

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act was written or a reserve was surveyed in my nation he lived to see many changes and lived through a profound culture shock he also lived to know that i was born though we never met he knew that his son my ye e |grandfather| wrote a letter on behalf of his daughter my mother requesting that the government returnus it never happened but that is another adawaak |story|

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i try to imagine what life must have been like when my great grandfather was born he would have had a freedom that we have not known since reserves were not set up in the nisgaa nation until 1888 i have walked the trails to the river where he would have walked i have talked to the fallen cedars and asked them if they had seen my great grandfather and his sons the wind blew through me and i felt him there with me

i wrote a 149 page freeform **shaped-text** dissertation researching and privileging the use of indigenous knowledge in architectural design i experimented with format and punctuation in the body of the dissertation as i do in this article with no capital letters no periods no commas only space to give pause and emphasis to the thoughts being conveyed and words written as if spoken

it was not like i consulted a list of formats and chose one that i liked i experimented with my writing i tried different approaches and read authors who also experimented in english my writing was/is organic in that the rules of grammar have been deconstructed and remain oral/aural

my own personal principles of punctuation began in high school when i could/would not comply to indenting paragraphs i wrote fully justified neither left nor right justified who is on the left and who is on the right anyway? that was my beginning voice

part of the experimentation in my dissertation was also precipitated by my explorations in poetry where i was comfortable writing in lower case it seemed natural it did not need abstract rules i reasoned that i did not speak in capital letters or lower case so i questioned why do i needed to write in such a colonizing/foreign/academic manner i also believed in my blood memory in my cultural thinking/language patterns inherent to being nisgaa i did not need/want the history of european printing house conventions shaping/dictating my writing i have also come to know that nisgaa is not the only language written without punctuation capital letters or academic formatting

as i began researching for my dissertation it was not an alternative style and format that i sought but truth i did not have a choice i wanted to remain true to myself as an indigenous person a member of the killer whale house of daaxan of the nisgaa nation i was trying to free myself from the western conventions that kept my mind restricted / shackled / blinkered / controlled for the twelve years i spent in public school and the twentysomething years i spent pursuing postsecondary education

the written format of my dissertation was a limitation i accepted i pushed the boundaries of writing conventions and found that some speakers and writers of english found my style and format unacceptable but most heartening were the many more who found the experimentation

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of writing heartwarming and exciting the intent was to make people think about what they were reading and get them to ask why the english language had/has so many rules of grammar / controls built into its usage that create(d)(s) hostile/adversarial/hierarchical/belittling assessment systems that educational institutions use(d) to control students and by extension society

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nisgaa does not translate well into english and vice versa there are many words in english for which there is no nisgaa equivalent for example hole punch or computer or ear buds currently have no nisgaa equivalent not that there are not new words being created there are but the process is slow there may however never be english words that translate into nisgaa and that is lukw'il aam [pronounced local am] |very okay|

i wrote my dissertation in a style and format that resonated with me with the support of an awesome supervisory committee one of the keys to successful dissertation writing i found kindred spirits in my thinking and writing without whom my process would have been much more difficult this was the relationship that was at the heart of my affordance ( the relationship between the university environment and myself that allowed me to complete this dissertation) the committee members included dr michael marker[chair] dr nancy mackin dr peter cole dr patricia o'riley plus the unofficial participation of my program chair dr hillel goelman though not a member of the committee he asked to receive all emails i sent to my committee and attended all committee meetings he was a great asset the affordance was assisted by the symbiosis of the graphic images shaped text and the orality of the nonpunctuated words

together they created as that one university examiner said a dissertation that read as if spoken by his grandfather in the longhouse the result was magic pure magic

looking back to the start of my phd studies at ubc there was an acknowledged new relationship with first nations being spoken about by the then president of the university [there have been three presidents since i first began doctoral studies in 2010 but that is another discussion for another time] though by the time i submitted my dissertation there had been little done to test the perceived new relationship this was the first dissertation to radically push the boundaries of writing at this university although pushing boundaries is not new for indigenous students especially given the fact that first nation peoples were not allowed to attend high school in c\an\ad\ until the repeal of the indian act in 1951 and it was not until 1972 that funding subsidies became available for grade 12 students to attend college/ university thereby increasing the number of indigenous post secondary students the road has been slow and it is only in the past twenty years that the growing number of indigenous university graduates have begun to translate into university faculty positions it is with the support of indigenous faculty that students have begun to push boundaries by submitting alternative dissertations as for example jennifer mervyn being the first metis doctoral student at ubc to submit a film or videographic ethnography as a dissertation<sup>3</sup> and then across the country

alfred metallic was the first mi gmaw doctoral student to write and defend his dissertation entirely in the mi gmaw<sup>4</sup> language

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<sup>3</sup> woolley pieta (2006) ex-street kids thrive in doc *the georgia straight*, april 27 2006 retrieved from <http://www.straight.com/article/ex-street-kids-thrive-in-doc-0>

<sup>4</sup> Y file *york university's daily news* (2010) phd student defends thesis in mi gmaw language a york first retrieved from <http://yfile.news.yorku.ca/2010/11/24/phd-student-defendsd-thesis-in-migmaw-language-a-york-first/>

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in considering the acknowledged non affordance where people on the behavioral research ethics board [breb] told me that what i was doing was not possible that it was outside the conventions of standard academic writing they were not willing to see any possibilities for writing other than what they had been taught in the public and university school systems and for which they were now the gatekeepers i submitted to them examples of experimentation done in english by a host of writers i gave them names of people who experimented with their writing people such as samuel beckett bill bissett sherilynn calliou peter cole ee cummings rishma dunlop william faulkner james joyce cormac mccarthy bp nichol marcel proust roy miki josé saramago gertrude stein and lynne truss they said that type of writing was not acceptable for a dissertation

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it was a matter of my perseverance to make a submission to graduate and postdoctoral studies or so i thought because before i could submit i had to do my field work and write the dissertation it was a matter of taking one step at a time i was constantly having conversations with myself telling myself to take it slow that my writing would take shape in its own space and place

before i was allowed to go into the field to do my research the university had a rule that a research plan needed approval from their behavioral research ethics board and it turned out they were not supportive at all and in fact presented themselves through their then chairperson as hostile in a gate keeping circle the wagons mentality when they first denied my submission i wrote back to them and tried to explain my intentions but that fell on deaf ears



my supervisor then made an appointment for him and i to attend one of their meetings we arrived before the start of the meeting and mingled with the members in the meeting room the chair person arrived as the meeting was to start and asked us to leave the room and so we waited seated in the hall outside the room we waited for an hour before the chair of the committee came out to speak with us he said the committee was not going to meet with us and we would have our answer soon we were stunned and i felt very put down in a put in my place kind of way the breb committee did send a letter yet again denying my submission and suggesting since it appeared i did not know the english language that i employ an editor... my supervisory committee met to discuss the options one option we discussed was not to make a submission to the behavioral research ethics board but for me to go ahead with my research and write up knowing full well that the faculty of graduate and postdoctoral studies would ask if I received approval from the research ethics board that was the most risky of options we discussed as there would be a high possibility that my dissertation would not be accepted for review by the faculty of graduate and postdoctoral studies concluding that the decision was mine as i was the one to be affected weighing the risks i decided to resubmit the application using standard academic english my application was approved without further delay

part of the dissertation submission process is to have the writing format approved by the faculty of graduate and postdoctoral studies so i submitted a draft for review once I had three chapters written once the review was complete i was called to a meeting with the associate dean of the faculty and the head of dissertation formatting along with my committee chair dr michael marker

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the dean prefaced his comments by saying the two official languages at the university are english and french he then said he 'slogged' through my submission he found my writing very difficult to read because of the formatting and my use of the nisgaa language

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i provided a glossary of terms as required by the university but he said he wanted to rip it out so he would have it every time he came across a nisgaa word he asked me to be more sympathetic to the reader and asked me to translate every nisgaa word and phrase where they occurred in the dissertation after a bit of discussion i agreed to provide the translations

he also asked why i wrote as i did with english supplied as the translation to a nisgaa word or phrase i replied that i wanted to privilege the use of nisgaa as an indigenous language he asked that in the preliminary pages [roman numeral pages] that i write english first and nisgaa as the translation after more discussion and hesitation i agreed i wondered if this was going to be the beginning of a slippery slope where in the end i would not recognize my writing he also asked that the chapter headings be written in english with nisgaa translation and a precis be written in standard academic english and placed at the beginning of every chapter he asked for no other changes in the body of the text and so the body of the dissertation remained as i had written it

before the oral defense was scheduled my committee and i came up with three potential names of external examiners however because my dissertation was not finalized as quickly as i had hoped due to the editing process and the first external examiner was unable to review it as he was then busy and asked if i could wait another month and then he could review it at the time i was trying to complete everything in time for may graduation so i declined his offer the second reviewer was also unavailable by this time so it went to the third reviewer who accepted the task and he turned out to be a very exacting external reviewer he was a

member of a neighbouring first nation who had pursued undergraduate and graduate studies in architecture and a doctorate in anthropology which led me to hope that his architecture training and his indigeneity would afford him an understanding of my intent

typically the external reviewer submits three questions to the supervisor to be asked of the candidate during the oral defense in my case the external examiner submitted twelve questions plus a fully annotated copy of my dissertation which my supervisor did not mention until after the defense and it was a couple of months after that before he gave me the annotated copy when he mentioned he had received the annotated dissertation from the external examiner he said that this was never done in the time since my graduation teaching in a university and being on a graduate supervisory committee i found myself wanting to annotate the thesis i was grading though i was pleased to only ask three questions at the oral defense as i had already submitted my comments and edits to the committee chair

at the time of my own dissertation review i did not know if indepth annotations were a good thing or not reflecting on it now i see it in a positive light as someone who was trying to assert his knowledge in what he must have thought was constructive criticism and to be fair not all his comments were negative

one of the most exciting/exacting outcomes of my dissertation was the media attention it all started from a comment by a daughter of a long-time friend of mine to her husband who told his father who told his best friend who happened to be a reporter for the national post i received a phone call from the reporter so yes they passed on my phone number asking if what he heard from his best friend was true that i had not used punctuation in the body of my

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dissertation what flew through my mind at his question was to clarify exactly what i had done but instead i thought the clearest answer was to say yes so i said yes and the reporter went on to write a front page article for a national newspaper that ran in all eight of the national post newspapers across the country many on the front page the headiest of all if that was not enough was to have the story picked up by cbc the ny times the paris review and academics in england france brazil and aotearoa [new zealand] i was asked by the academics in france and brazil if they could translate pieces for their classes i said of course as i wanted the dissertation to be of greatest since the initial media frenzy i also have been a guest speaker at events both public and academic

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the success of my dissertation for me has been its acceptance by the indigenous and academic communities of course with success comes controversy some of the newspaper articles that were posted online brought all manner of comments from the most racist to the most supportive and welcoming everyone is welcome to have their opinion and i welcome all discussion but it has made me question what makes people want to share their ignorance having said that it has brought me a fitting conclusion to the whole dissertation experience that the dissertation was/is being read at many different levels the most obvious and visual reaction of course was/is the punctuation controversy which garnered hundreds of comments which the reporter warned me not to read the next level which surprised me were the linguists who debated the merits of my writing style and brought out some helpful information about what I was trying to do its been over three years since the oral defense and at the time of this writing there have been 8,475 downloads of the dissertation with over 14,000 views there appears to be a correlation between speaking events views and downloads

it took some months after the defense before substantive feedback on the actual dissertation

content was received i have been overjoyed at the conclusion to this journey and know that i am going to be busy researching writing and speaking about the existence of indigenous architecture and the use of indigenous knowledge in its making within the context of a new paradigm of an assertive indigenous academy

saa bax |the end|

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## bio

dr patrick robert reid stewart is a member of the killerwhale house of daaxan of the nisgaa village of gingolx his hereditary nisgaa name is luugigyoo |translated as calm waters| he is principal of patrick r stewart architect in the province of british columbia on the west coast of c\an\ad\ he is also an adjunct professor in the school of architecture at laurentian university in sudbury ontario

patrick completed his phd at the university of british columbia the title of his dissertation is *indigenous architecture through indigenous knowledge: dim sagalts' apkw nisim* |together we will build a village| (2015)

he is the chair of the provincial indigenous homelessness committee in british columbia and chair of the indigenous communities sustainable design task force for the royal architectural institute of c\an\ad\

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