European powers often sought to define their relationships with indigenous peoples through the use of treaties or other written agreements such as land deeds. As records of agreements between speakers of different languages, these documents were necessarily the work of translation. We can appreciate more deeply the nature of that translation when we recognize that treaties existed in dialogue with people, places, and things that embodied and enriched these texts.

For instance, in the late seventeenth century, English colonists used land deeds to ratify the purchases of lands that they made from Wabanakis in coastal Maine. These English legal instruments include references to Wabanaki places, and translating those place names in the specific context of these deeds allows us to understand more clearly what Wabanakis were agreeing to when they signed such documents. Understanding place, then, becomes a key to understanding text. In another instance, the meanings of early eighteenth-century treaties become much richer when we recognize how people enacted those texts. Loron, the Wabanaki translator at English treaty conferences in the 1720s, did more than just convey meanings across the language divide. At successive meetings to discuss those treaties, he reminded English listeners of what they had agreed to. For him and his Wabanaki compatriots, the act of translating meanings also meant embodying them.

Both of these examples come from Anglo-Wabanaki relations in the Northeast, but the panel organizers would gladly join others who study other regions and empires. Such a comparative discussion would help us better appreciate how translation of words depends in part on how those words manifest themselves in the physical world.
“Markers of Property and Persistence: Wabanaki Place Names in Context”
Joseph Hall, Bates College

Place names provide clues about the values and the activities that connect a people to a place. The place names of Wabanakis—the indigenous peoples of northern New England and eastern Canada—evoke a particular set of relationships to the region. Some names suggest how people traveled by describing the good portages and the dangerous rapids. Others mark good locations for gathering or growing food. All of them describe how Wabanakis lived in their homelands.

In determining the meanings of many of these place names, translators have not considered the contexts within which these words appeared in English records. Instead the words float, like butterflies with pins through them, above discrete points on a map. We can find some context for these names in land deeds from the late seventeenth century, when Wabanakis of the lower Kennebec River sold some of their lands to the English. In those deeds Wabanakis frequently referred to portage routes. Upon closer inspection it becomes apparent that the portages marked the boundaries of a sale but were not actually themselves part of the transactions. In at least one case Wabanakis made this point explicit when they reserved a portage from the land they were selling.

By using portages as boundary markers, Wabanakis were doing more than telling the English of good places to carry canoes from one body of water to another. They were also demarcating the lands that remained part of their travel routes. Historians of land sales in New England have long noted that Indians and English colonists frequently misunderstood what they each meant when they used the words “buy” and “sell” in relation to land. By translating Wabanaki place names within the context of these land sales, it is possible to see some of the ways that Wabanakis were simultaneously ceding land and declaring that they had no intentions of leaving it.
“The Career of Loron: Translating—and Embodying—Treaties”
Ian Saxine, Northwestern University

For the eighteenth-century Wabanakis, treaties were a series of acts, not documents. To be sure, Native diplomats appreciated the significance of translating agreements into English and Wabanaki. But because the Wabanakis subscribed to a practice of diplomacy emphasizing reciprocity and ritual, and relying on oral transmission of knowledge, the human translators involved in treaty making embodied the agreement.

This paper traces the parallel careers of a treaty and its unsung Wabanaki embodiment. The treaty—actually a trio of agreements between Massachusetts and the Wabanakis everyone referred to as “Dummer’s Treaty” and signed in 1727—fused Native expectations of reciprocity with seventeenth-century land deeds, forming the basis for a more peaceful Anglo-Wabanaki relationship. The treaty began the rise of a Wabanaki orator named Loron. As the principal Native speaker there, Loron had helped craft the agreement and by 1750 could lay better claim to remembering it than any other Wabanaki. In a culture that relied on oral history, this gave him great power. When successive Massachusetts governors met with the Wabanakis, Loron took the lead in reminding them of their obligations under Dummer’s Treaty. Loron invoked his role as a peacemaker in subsequent negotiations with Massachusetts. As the years passed, Loron became the living embodiment of an agreement that protected Wabanaki sovereignty from colonial trespassers. In the first major treaty after his 1752 death, the Massachusetts governor seized on Loron’s absence to push a novel interpretation of Dummer’s Treaty, dragging the frontier into a renewed era of violence and Native dispossession.

Investigating Loron’s relationship to Dummer’s Treaty, and the remarkable—though temporary—success of both, we can see that Loron filled a dual role. He came to both personify the treaty and serve as its principal translator and defender. Loron’s career can give us insight into how Wabanakis understood both their own and the colonists’ diplomatic processes, and how they managed to translate their knowledge of both into a workable peace.