

1 Why Revitalize?

Lenore A. Grenoble

Introduction

There are a great many reasons to consider revitalization, and more than one can be a decisive factor in deciding to take this on. Language revitalization is often packaged as having the goal of creating new speakers of the target language, of building new domains for language use, and of creating a future generation of speakers. This view is overly simplistic. Although creating new speakers is an important goal (and potential benefit) of revitalization, the notion of a speaker is complicated, and achieving fluency in a language requires a lot of work. It can be very liberating to reconceive the benefits and goals of language work to focus less on creating new speakers and more on the broader advantages that revitalization can bring.

Different people have different ideas about why they want to revitalize, and there is no single right reason. It is also important to keep in mind that the motivations for revitalizing can change as one goes along. Revitalization is a dynamic, fluid process. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that revitalization is not just about language: it is a social movement and brings benefits to society as well as to individuals.

The decision to revitalize is often a personal one; it requires time, commitment, and tenacity. But at the same time many people may decide to revitalize to benefit not only themselves, but their family, or their larger community or network of friends and acquaintances. And there may be pressure from friends and family to revitalize, or not to. This chapter provides an overview of common motivations to revitalize, and a discussion of the potential benefits of language vitality. One over-arching impetus for revitalization has to do with *identity*: defining and claiming identity for an individual or a collective group is one of the most compelling reasons for language work. And for many, it also involves reclaiming rights to self-determination and control over one's life.

The motivations listed here can be unified under the larger umbrella of identity, but it is important to consider each individually, to understand them better, and to think of how they can both be used to encourage

revitalization work, and manipulated to serve its end goals. They are divided into six broad groups that encompass a range of social, psychological, and physical categories/stimuli:

- (1) connecting with ancestors, the past, and cultural heritage;
- (2) healing;
- (3) building community;
- (4) knowledge and culture;
- (5) well-being; and
- (6) cognitive benefits.

As these labels suggest, the categories overlap and, even if the motivation for revitalization comes from one specific area, the resulting benefits are considerably broader.

For clarity, I list these reasons to revitalize as separate points, but it is useful to keep in mind that the benefits are interconnected and a benefit in one area can spill over to another area. This is one reason motivations may change as people revitalize, because they recognize (and need) different benefits at different times. Moreover there are benefits to being bilingual, and these benefits also intersect with the benefits of revitalization. If revitalization moves people from being monolingual to bilingual, they will enjoy the advantages of being bilingual. Being bi- (or multi-) lingual has benefits that are independent of language revitalization: being bilingual in two majority languages brings not only the obvious social benefits of being able to communicate with more people, to interact with them more directly, but also cognitive benefits in improved performance in school, along with physical and mental health benefits. This is important to keep in mind at the outset, as many people mistakenly fear that learning one language interferes with speaking another, and see this as a reason not to revitalize, or not to speak an Indigenous language with their children. This is not true. There is ample evidence that bilingualism is an advantage.

Overall language vitality is related to a combination of factors –social, political, demographic, and practical – and all are usually at play at once. Of greatest relevance are the social and political factors: the use of the language in a wide variety of domains, including the home, schools, places of worship, government offices, on the streets, in stores, in the workplace (broadly defined). The availability of the target language in these various domains is not always the decision of individual speakers, but is often determined by the language and education policies. This is linked to the social prestige of a language, which is in turn related to speakers' motivations to use the language, and also connected to the economic power of a language: does knowing the language bring job possibilities or hinder them?

Finally practical considerations can also determine whether a language is used. These include such factors as whether the language has a written

form, an orthography that makes it keyboard-friendly (for text messages, emails, and social media), a standardized form that is taught in the schools, is used on signage, and so on. This is not to say that any of these are requirements for a language, but rather, if a standardized form has already been sorted out, it may be functionally easier to get it into textbooks and on public signs than if it hasn't, for example.

As this list makes clear, language use is a social act, and revitalization – by its very nature – involves social transformation. The transformation may be as basic as bringing use of the language into some domain where it was not previously found, or had not been used for many years. But it may involve massive social change if it involves the (re)introduction of language use (and thus language rights) in education and administration, and increased presence and voice in matters of governance. And this is one reason that revitalization efforts are sometimes (often?) met with resistance by authorities (local or national) as they are viewed as a kind of empowerment that may be threatening. Some governments see revitalization, as well as Indigenous language use more broadly, as steps towards self-governance, autonomy from existing powers. One argument against revitalization that is often invoked is the idea that it costs too much. But in fact research shows quite the opposite. A relatively small investment in the use of local or Indigenous languages has big financial payoffs: it improves educational outcomes and improves health and well-being. It thus is more cost-effective to invest in people at an early age, to produce adults who contribute to society.

From this perspective, revitalization is not a sociolinguistic process but a sociological one, and the changes it brings may not be just locally significant, but regionally or nationally. This is a strong view, but it underscores that language revitalization is both social and political, and brings a host of potential benefits and hazards that are not, at first glance, directly related to language itself.

Revitalization is an active process, and the kinds of benefits you gain from it will depend on the investment, at an individual level, at a community level, and at a larger societal level. Because it is an active process, the goals, motivations, and benefits can and often do change over time. One of the core motivations for revitalization is to claim, or reclaim, identity. This is a consideration that drives many revitalization efforts, and in some sense is an overarching motivation that encompasses the separate points given here.

Stories and oral histories have been, and continue to be, important vehicles for teaching about one's self, for learning what it means to be a member of society, how to deal with adversity, to face challenges, and to celebrate accomplishments. These are important aspects of identity and resilience, which are acquired and accessed through language. For example,

in their report on the Mi'kmaq and Maliseet/Wolastoqi immersion programs, Tompkins and Murray Orr¹ discuss community activities and benefits in revitalizing language in two First Nations groups in Canada. They note that the benefits are often framed in terms of academic impact, but they find in interviews with participants, language and identity are closely linked. They find that participants in the program evaluate knowing the language as the single route to learning to be a member of the culture. By the same token, the more children are exposed to the culture, the more they learn the language. The two cannot be separated.

1. Connecting with your Ancestors, the Past, and Cultural Heritage

Language revitalization is often a first step in cultural revitalization and reinvigorating cultural traditions. Speaking the language of one's ancestors is one obvious way to make a connection with the past, with linguistic and cultural heritage. In some cases this can mean being able to speak directly with living relatives, elders, or other people. Speaking to them in their native tongue, your ancestral tongue, is rewarding for both sides, and opens windows to closer understanding of your heritage.

In other cases there may be no speakers of the language, but the cultural heritage lives on in prayers, stories, and songs, and in many cases in written historical documents, not only from ancestors but also from outsiders, such as explorers, missionaries, and colonizers. In order to understand these texts, knowledge of the language is critical. Language revitalization often goes hand-in-hand with cultural revitalization, and connections with the past provide a stepping stone for creating a new cultural future.

As this implies, motivations for revitalizing a language can be spiritual. Language is used for spiritual purposes, to communicate with the gods, spirits, or supernatural beings. Sacred language is an important part of many cultures. While in some cultures, only certain people have access to sacred language, in others, all people do. In many societies language is the primary means for communicating with the spirits or gods, and even in places where a new religion has come to replace the old beliefs, it may not have done so entirely. In Siberia, Indigenous peoples are often Christian, but many communities still have shamans and practice animism alongside Christianity. Shamans communicate with the spirits in the ancestral language, and people need to communicate with the shamans in that language too.

The close connection between spirituality and culture is hard to understand without the ancestral language, as these connections are often

¹ J. Tompkins and A. Murray Orr, *Best Practices and Challenges in Mi'kmaq and Maliseet/Wolastoqi Language Immersion Programs* (Dartmouth, Nova Scotia: Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nations Chiefs Secretariat, 2011), www.deslibris.ca/ID/230705.

expressed, maintained, and negotiated through language. For some, spirits or gods can only be addressed in certain kinds of speech: specialized sacred language, or special words, or more simply in the ancestral language itself. For many Indigenous peoples, nature, spirituality, and language are deeply interwoven.

Breton provides an interesting counterpoint, illustrating that religion and language are intertwined in a variety of ways. Breton is a Celtic language, closely related to Cornish and Welsh. It is spoken in Brittany (Breizh in Breton) in France. The most up-to-date information of the total number of speakers puts it at 206,000, based on a poll conducted in 2007.² (This figure is deceptively high, as most speakers are elderly and the language is considered endangered.) There is a strong association between Catholicism and the use of 'good' traditional Breton. Although this attitude has led to stereotypes and strong ideologies about who counts as a speaker of Breton, it has also served as a protective factor, and has helped foster revitalization.³

Some revitalization programs are aimed at what Leanne Hinton calls the 'missing generations': people of parental and professional age who are not able to teach their children their ancestral language because they themselves do not speak it, but their parents, family members, or elders do. The Master-Apprentice Program⁴ (also known as Mentor-Apprentice) is just one example of a program that specifically partners adults with elders to learn the language, thereby also building stronger, closer connections with at least one member of a generation that spoke it and used it in daily life. Some examples are discussed in Chapter 15. Such bridges are important for building connections that extend far beyond the language itself (a fact which pertains to most or even all revitalization). And this speaks to another motivation for revitalization: passing the language to your children (and their children), and to future speakers. This helps restore links between generations, heal possible ruptures, and nurture cohesion and well-being in the community. In this sense, connecting with generations is not only backward-looking, but forward-looking as well. Connecting with the past may not alone be sufficient motivation for younger (or even older) speakers to revitalize, but understanding history and heritage is an important part of (re)claiming identity.

² Published in TMO-Fañch Broudic 2009. *Fañch Broudic. Parler breton au XXI^e siècle. Le nouveau sondage de TMO Régions* (Brest: Emgleo Breiz, 2009), www.fr.brezhoneg.bzh/5-chiffres-cles.htm.

³ J. L. Davis, 'Intersections of religion and language revitalization', in S. D. Brunn (ed.), *The Changing World Religion Map* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015), pp. 1091–101.

⁴ L. Hinton, 'The Master-Apprentice language learning program', in L. Hinton and K. Hale (eds.), *The Green Book of Language Revitalization* (San Diego and New York: Academic Press, 2001), pp. 217–26.

2. Healing

Many Indigenous peoples cite healing as a primary reason for revitalization. They often feel (with good reason) that their languages were forcibly taken away from them, along with rights to self-determination and to deciding one's destiny. Revitalizing language is part of a larger process of decolonization, cultural revitalization, and reclaiming the right to determine one's fate. Colonial language practices have had a deleterious effect on local language vitality in many places. The forced imposition of a colonial (national) language and assimilation to a majority culture resulted in many people feeling a loss of self-worth and pride. These practices have left deep and painful scars. Reclaiming one's language is an important means to combating the colonial legacy.

Healing implies overcoming trauma, and sadly there are too many people around the world who have suffered traumatic experiences where use of their language is concerned.

In the late nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth century, in different parts of the world (including Australia, Canada, the Soviet Union, the USA, and Scandinavia), children were forcibly taken away from parents to live in residential or boarding schools, in the name of 'civilizing' them. In these schools they were often actively punished for speaking their language. This was not only painful for them but also became a driver behind language shift, as they actively avoided teaching their language to their children so as to protect them from these painful experiences. They suffered further damage by being separated from their families; in many cases children returned to their home communities as strangers, unable to speak the local language and having forgotten the local culture. The impact of the residential system cut to the very core of local societies. This also occurred, and continues to occur, in less extreme circumstances in normal day schools, with children punished or ridiculed for speaking their language.

Research has shown that many people in North America do not recognize the term 'historical trauma' per se, but speak about it in their own words, referring to it as 'disturbing times' or 'the events the ancestors went through'. They also speak about trauma with specific reference to language ('I don't understand my talk, my language') and talk about sorrow and loneliness of the soul.⁵ Language revitalization can be a direct goal, with

⁵ K. M. Reinschmidt, A. Attakai, C. B. Kahn, S. Whitewater, and N. Teufel-Shone, 'Shaping a *Stories of Resilience Model* from urban American Indian elders' narratives of historical trauma and resilience', *American Indian and Alaskan Native Health Research* 23/4 (2016), 63–85. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5820/aian.2304.2016.63>.

reclamation of the language as healing. And it can be the means to an end, since language is a vehicle for culture. In addition, research shows concrete benefits for psychological and physical health related to reinforcing a sense of identity in close connection to the use of the heritage language (see section 5 of this chapter).

Healing through revitalization goes beyond language-specific trauma; it is an important means of building resilience. Using a language can be a means of reclaiming and regaining control of one's fate; it can be an act of political resistance, resistance against linguistic and cultural assimilation, against the very act of colonization. The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples declares that all peoples have the right to self-determination: Language revitalization can be a deliberate reclamation of that right.⁶

3. Building Community and Social Change

People often begin revitalization with the goal of learning to speak their ancestral language, but then find that the benefits extend far beyond linguistic abilities. Often the very act of revitalization brings people together, creating closer community ties.

In Native North America, people used to say how the video rental truck was a major cause of language shift. Instead of coming out of their homes in the evenings to talk to one another, people would rent videos and stay home and watch them. The videos were eventually replaced by the Internet and widely accessible video content (on programs such as YouTube), but the effect has been the same. Community-based revitalization programs bring people together: in classes and workshops, in planning sessions, and in events celebrating the language. Even where groups of people convene to practice a few phrases, the very act of coming together builds stronger social ties and a sense of shared purpose and therefore community. These programs offset some of the isolating effects of modern society.

Active engagement in community language revitalization also helps create leaders and build research capacity in the community. Some community language activists – Daryl Baldwin of the Myaamia Tribe, and Jessie Little Doe Baird of the Wampanoag, both in North America – have received formal linguistics training to help them do the language work more effectively. They have brought these skills to their communities and put them to work in supporting youth to create future leaders.

⁶ For some concrete examples about current work and successes, see the *Healing Through Language Project* at <https://holisticnative.org/our-projects/healing-through-language/>.

4. Knowledge and Culture

Language and culture are deeply intertwined, and knowledge of all kinds is packaged in language and cultural practices. Certain kinds of knowledge are packaged in the words of a language, and other kinds of knowledge are packaged in larger communicative practices. For example, a large number of studies have been done documenting knowledge and use of plants in traditional medicine; this work is of interest to scientists and health care specialists searching for cures for diseases that are still unknown in Western medicine. Oftentimes knowing the name of a plant will tell you about its uses. In many languages, the common name for *Euphrasia* gives a clue to its usage: in English it's 'eyebright'. In my own fieldwork in Greenland, I found that many people knew its name but not its use. It's called *isiginnaq* < *isi* 'eye' in Kalaallisut (Greenlandic); the name does give a clue here even though the usage was forgotten, but people would guess that it has something to do with eyes or vision just based on the word.

Reindeer herders have a rich vocabulary for referring to the reindeer and to the herding practices themselves, and these vocabularies can and do vary across different herding cultures. It is not just that the words vary, but what is named, and how it is named, can vary from language to language. The Evenki people of Siberia have a complex vocabulary for different kinds of reindeer, varying with age, sex, and their use in the herd, while in the Northern Sámi of Norway, the labels include categories for colour, body shape, and size in addition to age, sex, and use. In both cases, the complex lexicon encodes important information for identifying different animals for different purposes. Both groups often say that you need to know the language in order to know how to herd reindeer.

The words we use for food tell us what people eat, how they collect it, prepare it, and how they serve and eat it. Many cultures have food taboos, some for particular life cycles (e.g. foods that are banned during pregnancy); some items are eaten in certain communities but banned by one group; and in some communities women cannot eat certain foods, or only members of the royal family can eat certain foods. Food preparation in many cultures connects mothers to daughters, older women to younger women, in communities where it is women who prepare food. These specialized ways of speaking provide all kinds of information about cultural practices involving an important aspect of human life, and the knowledge that accompanies these practices.

Culture is often reflected in the ways people speak, not only the words people use, but also in how people talk about things, what they say when, and to whom. This can be as basic as the ways you greet people, joke with them (or not), or how you thank others or express gratitude, or praise. A more complicated area is child-rearing practices and the ways of speaking (or not) to



Figure 1.1 Traditional healing knowledge transmitted in Nahuatl. Engaged Humanities project field school, San Miguel Xaltipan, Mexico. Photo by Justyna Olko

children. This is a core part of cultural transmission that may be lost in contexts where the last native speakers are great grandparents. In addition, there are sacred ritualized uses of language that are found in religious contexts and provide information about the gods, cosmology, and greater spiritual and philosophical questions. In many places, language is used to communicate with spiritual beings, be it a shaman's special language found in many different communities in Siberia, or the use of Hebrew in Jewish religion. Cultural practices thus vary from very elevated to what may be seen as everyday and mundane (see Figure 1.1).

People often talk about languages as providing windows into ways of thinking and different worldviews. Language is powerful; using language can provide access to knowledge, and some kinds of information can only be accessed by using the language. Language revitalization is not just about language, but accessing these different ways of living and being, connecting with culture and the world.

5. Well-being

Both physical and mental well-being are known to be affected by language revitalization. Improved mental well-being is probably the more obvious outcome. People who actively participate in language revitalization report a

better mindset and higher levels of self-esteem than before, even when they do not learn much of the language, maybe even just a few words or greetings. There are good reasons for this. Many groups who have lost (or are losing) their language suffer from trauma. This trauma can be the result of a host of causes, but frequently in endangered language communities the trauma involves a history of colonization that has had deep psychological effects and low levels of self-worth. Language revitalization means taking control, reclaiming something that was taken from you, something that was lost. It means taking time to invest in yourself and your family, your circle of friends, and your community.

Moreover, language revitalization often brings people together and unites people in a common goal of learning and using a language. It usually involves building stronger community ties, with a shared purpose. In North America, many Native groups report that those people who are committed to using their language meet more frequently, coming together to practice and learn the language. Even when they are not, strictly speaking, learning the language, they often acquire at least some basic phrases and words, perhaps some greetings, songs and learn the language in symbolic ways. Critically it brings people together. This shared experience of doing language work together connects people, and that helps create an overall positive sense, not only of yourself, but of your culture and heritage.

Thus it is no surprise that people who have access to their language have improved mental health, lower suicide rates, and lower rates of substance abuse than do comparison groups in similar communities who do not use their language. In addition, there is evidence that having access to your ancestral language improves physical health, in terms of reducing the rate of cardio-vascular disease, lowering blood pressure and hypertension, and lower rates of diabetes. These benefits are tied to many things, including living a traditional lifestyle (e.g. by following a traditional diet, which is generally healthier than a Western European diet that is higher in fat, sugar, and salt), more physical activity in engagement with the land and traditional life, and more access to the land. Perhaps some of the health benefits to revitalization come from the fact that it helps (re)connect people with *place* (see Figure 1.2).

But even studies in Australia and Canada that take into account lifestyle factors show that active engagement with language improves both mental and physical well-being at the individual level and the larger societal level. This is a strong motivation for language revitalization.

People in many parts of the world speak of ‘taking back’ their language. It is an active process that involves taking control of their lives and their own well-being. Jane Juuso, a Sámi researcher and educator in Norway, has done much to advance Sámi language learning for adults by making use of



Figure 1.2 Indigenous communities that lose their languages often face a youth suicide problem. Suicide prevention program, Shoshone Reservation, Fort Hall, Idaho. Photo by Justyna Olko

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. Juuso identifies certain language barriers that hinder learners from actually speaking, and thus dubs them silent speakers. Originally published in Norwegian and Sámi, her informative how-to-book has been translated into Swedish and English, and the program is being implemented by First Nations Peoples in Canada.⁷ It has proven to be a very effective mechanism for helping people overcome their fears of speaking and making mistakes.

Children who receive mother-tongue education show improvement in overall well-being across the board. A 2012 study by UNESCO shows that they have greater self-confidence, higher test scores, lower school dropout rates, and are less likely to repeat grades. These are advantages that extend to their broader community, with improved social well-being and a greater integration into society. More broadly, research shows similar benefits come from having access to the heritage language, in mother-tongue

⁷ J. Juuso, *Tar språket mitt tilbake/Valddan giellan ruovttoluotta* (Varangerbotn/Vuonnaabahta: Isak Saber senteret, 2009).

programs, language teaching programs, and in other venues for hearing and speaking the target language. Studies in different parts of the world – Māori in New Zealand, Mi'kmaq in Canada, Hawaiian in Oceania – show that Indigenous-language immersion programs improve acquisition of the majority language too (see Section 6).

Programs that are embedded in the local language and culture are highly successful in improving the well-being of children and parents. Consider, for example, the Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative in Canada. When it was launched in two Ojibwa (Anishanabeg) schools in southeastern Ontario in 2009, the schools had very low success rates in reading proficiency: Only 13 per cent of the children in Grade 3 at the two schools met or exceeded standardized tests for reading in Ontario. By 2014, approximately 70 per cent of the children in Grade 3 were performing at the average for Ontario in reading, and 90 per cent met the writing standard, performing at better rates than the province as a whole.⁸ Moreover, the number of students classified as having 'special needs' (a term used to describe children with physical, mental, or behavioural problems – or often who have a different mother tongue) in kindergarten through Grade 3 dropped from 45 per cent to just 19 per cent, and in Grades 4–6, the number went down to only 4 per cent (from 24 per cent). The children did not really have special needs or learning difficulties, they just needed better teaching.⁹

These are measurable successes because they involve standard tests. But there are numerous less tangible benefits: increased parent engagement, increased family and community engagement, increased pride in the local language and culture, and overall heightened value of local community practices and ways of knowing and learning.

6. Cognitive Benefits

Linguists often hear that parents opt to raise their children to be monolingual speakers of the majority language so that they will perform well in school. They are afraid that bilingualism will disadvantage their children, or afraid that knowledge of the home language will in some way interfere with learning the majority language, and will inhibit a child's

⁸ J. Friesen, 'Aboriginal literacy pilot project dramatically improves test scores', *The Globe and Mail*, first published 24 February 2015 and updated 12 May 2018. See also Martin Family Initiative. 2019. *Model Schools Literacy Project*, www.themfi.ca/programs/model-schools-literacy-project.

⁹ See J. Geddes, 'The new program that has First Nations' reading scores soaring', *Maclean's* June 2, 2015, www.macleans.ca/education/the-new-program-that-has-first-nations-reading-scores-soaring and Martin Family Initiative, *Model Schools Literacy Project*, Montreal, 2016: Copyright © 2016 Martin Family Initiative / Initiative de la Famille Martin, www.themfi.ca/programs/model-schools-literacy-project.

performance. There is ample evidence that this is not the case at all and that quite the opposite is true. Studies such as those by the psychologist Ellen Bialystok¹⁰ repeatedly show that there are cognitive benefits to a bilingual brain. These benefits include a shorter processing time, an increased attention span, and a greater ability to multi-task than monolinguals. A number of experiments have shown that bilinguals perform better in tasks requiring focused attention. This probably comes from a kind of necessity: current research indicates that in the bilingual brain, both languages are activated and accessible at the same time. Rather than interfering, this helps bilinguals think in a more focused manner, with faster processing than monolinguals.¹¹

Parents often fear that education in a native language will hinder the child's progress and acquisition of the majority language, but studies show that the opposite is true. Children who are educated in immersion and bilingual programs outperform children in monolingual educational programs in standardized tests. (Note here that these programs use the native language as the language of instruction, it is not a secondary subject or a tool to get children to perform in monolingual programs.) There is some controversy as to why this is the case: does knowledge of the home language provide some sort of cognitive ladder that enables performance in the other language? Or are children who receive initial schooling in the home language better adjusted (emotionally, socially) so that they are better prepared for formal education and thus able to perform well on tests? Although much of the research focuses on the use of a national language and a major immigrant language (such as English and Spanish Dual Language Immersion (DLI) in the USA, English and French in Canada), there is ample research with the same findings for Indigenous languages: Sámi in Northern Norway, and Cherokee and Navajo in the USA, are just a few examples.¹²

Another long-term benefit is that bilinguals show delayed effects of dementia and Alzheimer's disease compared to monolinguals of the same age, suggesting that the bilingual brain is more resistant to this kind of

¹⁰ See E. Bialystok, *Bilingualism in Development: Language, Literacy and Cognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). For a review of recent studies, see E. Bialystok, Fergus I. M. Craik, and Gigi Luk, 'Bilingualism: Consequences for mind and brain', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 16 (2012), 240–50.

¹¹ See e.g. E. Bialystok, 'Cognitive complexity and attentional control in the bilingual mind', *Child Development* 70 (1999), 636–44. www.sfu.ca/~jcnestbit/EDUC220/week5/Bialystok1999.pdf.

¹² The American Council for Teaching of Foreign Languages has compiled a number of resources and a bibliography of representative research: www.actfl.org/advocacy/what-the-research-shows.

decline. More research is needed to determine whether bilingualism is preventative, i.e. that bilinguals are less likely to suffer from Alzheimer's, or (what is more likely) that the processing advantages of bilingualism offset the effects of the disease: bilinguals have improved cognitive capacity that enables them to function normally for longer even with Alzheimer's or dementia. That is, bilingualism appears to have an inhibitory effect on mental decline. Regardless it is clear that bilingualism brings an advantage of improved mental capacity and quality of life throughout the lifespan, an advantage that extends well into advanced age. It is a lifelong gift and a strong motivation for revitalization and multilingualism.

Conclusion

Language loss often occurs because of a combination of stressors on speaker populations, including displacement from one's homeland, which can involve forced migration due to colonization patterns, cultural disruption, and historical trauma. The combination of these stressors can seem overwhelming. But there are multiple potential benefits to revitalization, which is an important means to offset these stressors to improve overall well-being and to reclaim one's rights to self-determination.

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

- Biddle, N. and Swee, H. (2012). The relationship between wellbeing and Indigenous land, language and culture in Australia. *Australian Geographer* 43(3), 215–32.
- Evans, N. (2010). *Dying Words and What They Have to Tell Us*. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell.
- McDermott, B. (2014). Language healers: Revitalizing languages, reclaiming identities. *Cultural Survival* 38-1. www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/language-healers-revitalizing-languages-reclaiming.
- Meek, B. A. (2010). *We Are Our Language: An Ethnography of Language Revitalization in a Northern Athabascan Community*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press.
- Oster, R. T., Grier, A., Lightning, R., Mayan, M. J., and Toth, E. L. (2014). Cultural continuity, traditional Indigenous language, and diabetes in Alberta First Nations: A mixed methods study. *International Journal for Equity in Health* 13(92). doi: 10.1186/s12939-014-0092-4.
- Walsh, M. (2018). "Language is like food": Links between language revitalization and health and well-being. In L. Hinton, L. Huss, and G. Roche, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Language Revitalization*. New York: Routledge, pp. 5–12.
- Wyman, L. T., McCarty, T. L., and Nichols, S. E., eds. (2014). *Indigenous Youth and Multilingualism: Language Identity, Ideology and Practice in Dynamic Cultural Worlds*. New York: Routledge.

1.1 Endangered Languages and Well-being

Patrick Heinrich

General findings in language endangerment indicate that it is always dominated communities that undergo language shift, and that there is ‘nothing to gain’ in language loss. You lose more than ‘language’ in the strict sense of the word. Language loss is accompanied by the loss of knowledge, loss of linkages to the past and cultural achievements, loss of aesthetic possibilities, or loss of cultural autonomy. Such kind of loss does not leave communities undergoing these transformations unaffected. Every community undergoing language shift has its very own history of ‘not being well’ and ‘not doing well’. An interesting contribution to how to study such problems has been promoted in Japan in recent years, where sociolinguists have been pondering the establishment of ‘welfare linguistics’. Welfare linguistics starts from the view that language diversity *is always* related to some kind of inequality. Therefore, welfare linguistics identifies (1) the mechanism of oppression or exclusion and (2) studies strategies for how to cope with this. (3) It acknowledges alternative practices and (4) promotes them. Welfare linguistics is an emancipative endeavour. Language can promote or inhibit well-being (‘welfare’). That is to say, an endangered language in itself is not the solution to the problems of a shifting community, but it can be made into a solution. This requires insights into the four points outlined above.

Studies in well-being conventionally distinguish between economic, physical, and psychological aspects. Language maintenance and revitalization can contribute to all of these three components. In Okinawa (Japan), we can witness a new wave of products, services, and media outlets that employ Okinawan and, hand in hand with this trend, there are new employment opportunities for speakers of Okinawan. For example, nurses and caregivers speaking Okinawan are much sought after because older people with dementia respond better to their first language, Okinawan, and many nurses and caregivers whose Okinawan skills are lacking volunteer for Okinawan language classes. Okinawa is also known for having the highest life expectancy in the world. Longevity is usually portrayed to be the result of a healthy diet and a relaxed lifestyle. However life expectancy in Okinawa has been sharply declining for more than three decades now, and it is dawning on many that those who ‘eat and live well’ are actually speakers of Okinawan. The decline in physical health is concurrent with a decline of Okinawan language, culture, and lifestyle. Finally, the connection between an endangered language and mental well-being is seen to be strong enough that a project studying this link in the case of the Barnjarla community in Australia received one million Australian dollars of funding in 2017. This is unconventional, because ‘the cure to the ills’ of minorities was traditionally seen to lay in their closer assimilation to the majority (e.g. more and ‘better’ English). Now reviving the Barnjarla language is seen as a means to improve Barnjarla well-being.

Focussing on language and well-being is not simply a new research perspective. It’s potentially a game changer. Modernity brought social mobility, and with that

came a focus on ‘merits’, that is, acquiring the necessary skills to climb the social ladder. Smaller languages and their speakers do not fare well in such a setting. Indigenous languages became marginalized and relegated to (nonthreatening) functions such as ‘tradition’, ‘heritage’, or ‘local identity’. We know that language revitalization cannot succeed when endangered languages are only attributed such folkloristic functions. One way to improve the prospects of an endangered language and its speakers is to link it to ‘well-being’. A number of factors affecting well-being have already been identified. They include income, work, marriage, health, education, housing, job satisfaction, community relations, leisure time, or crime rate. The fact that so many factors can affect well-being implies that the exact role of language in well-being will differ from case to case. In general, however, we can assume that Indigenous languages function as a protective layer for the well-being of community members. Losing them decreases well-being.

In 2007, I asked my Okinawan language teacher, Chie Inamine, if she sometimes regretted not having raised her children in Okinawan. She gave me the following answer: ‘We live in a merit society, and all we care about is merit. Merit, merit, merit. And then language has to adapt to this fixation. With my grandchildren I will not fall into this trap. I will provide them with Okinawan language skinship.’ Skinship (*sukinshippu*) is a widely known and used linguistic innovation on the basis of English in Japanese. It refers to intimate but nonsexual relations, where it is ok to have physical contact. A prototypical skinship relation is that between a mother and her baby, where physical contact reassures and comforts the baby and where we can see a very deep physical and psychological tie between both. Inamine applied this term to language when I interviewed her on education. In my understanding, she seeks a closer more intimate tie between the younger and the older generation, because by educating the former through Japanese a more distant relation was created than through Okinawan. Distance is not something abstract in this context, but something which affected the well-being of speakers like her and those who do not speak the language. There is an emotional and psychological gap between the generations. In Inamine’s comment we have in a few words, the welfare perspective on an endangered language. It needs promotion and further study.

1.2 Benefits for Communities: The Case of the Black Tai Community in Thailand

Sumittra Suraratdecha

Several years ago I started a sociolinguistic project on linguistic and cultural rights in a Black Tai community in Phetchaburi province, Thailand. The community represents a typical marginalized ethnic group where suppression and stigmatization is present. Thailand is a hierarchical society where ethnic minority peoples are placed at the lower end of the social hierarchy. Belonging to the lower end of the hierarchy means that ethnic minority communities face stigma and discrimination, socially, ideologically, and linguistically. The Black Tai

people in Thailand are descendants of former captives of wars from Muang Thaeng during the reign of King Thonburi, in the Rattanakosin period, circa 1779. Today, this is the location of Dien Bu Phu in northwest Vietnam. The Black Tai people refer to themselves as 'Lao Song', however they prefer other out-groups to call them 'Black Tai' as the word 'Lao' has connotations of suppression, insult, and disdain. Incidents of discrimination, abuse, and rape were also recorded in the history of the Black Tai.

My project started out with the aim of examining the Black Tai linguistic and cultural reclamation movements in terms of the rights that social groups claim to express themselves linguistically and culturally. I also wanted to investigate the psychological outcomes of these movements in terms of well-being.

As an outsider researcher, I was concerned about whether the Black Tai, both adults and youths, would be willing to share stories of their history and talk about acts of discrimination or prejudice they have faced. However, despite my initial concern over how to elicit such stories in a non-threatening way, responses to a simple question: 'Could you tell me about the Black Tai people in this community?' unexpectedly revealed so many stories describing discrimination and historical stigmatization experienced by all generations. Adults talked about how they were discriminated against by non-Black Tai and how embarrassed they were about their own identity as a Black Tai in Thai society. Younger generations talked about how they were teased at schools by their peers who belonged to different ethnic groups. All the stories about incidents in their everyday lives came out naturally in their narratives.

After years of working with different ethnic communities in Thailand, my colleagues and I shared a similar observation, namely that most of the people we worked with were elder members of the community. Our big question was: What if there is no next generation to inherit all of this invaluable linguistic and cultural heritage? Subsequently a long-term Participatory Action Research (PAR) project was initiated in ethnic communities in Thailand, including Black Tai. A number of local community members, particularly youth members, were actively engaged in all stages of the project. Through planning, conducting, observing, and evaluating the research process, local participants absorbed and learned through direct experience how to be an active learner and how to conduct local research by themselves (see Figure 1.2.1).

The overall outcome of the PAR project can be divided into two levels: community and self. At the community level, the community network is stronger than ever before. The PAR approach provided an opportunity for a range of people – including local government officers, community leaders, members, elders, and youths alike – to engage in all stages of the research. This created a sense of ownership among participants, and community ties and networks were restored and strengthened as a result. After the PAR project was complete, the wider community, including those who did not participate in the project, became more active and interested in learning local knowledge. Additionally, the community was able to write a successful proposal for a community development grant. Other local organizations and media have taken an interest in working with the



Figure 1.2.1 Revitalization workshop with young people. Photo by Sumittra Suraratdecha

community, or sharing stories of their success. The community now talks about their heritage with pride and encourages others to be proud of their own roots as well.

At a personal level, all members have a better attitude towards their language and culture and more self-esteem. They have also learned to be active thinkers and learners through the PAR process. Not only did youth members learn about their linguistic and cultural heritage through the PAR project, they also learned other life skills like decision making and team-working etc. From informal interviews and observations over five years, the overall well-being of the community has increased. For example, the elderly people are a resource with essential knowledge and skills, yet their skills were forgotten thanks to a formal education system that distances learners from their immediate learning environment. These resources are now recognized once again. The greatest benefit of all, however, lies in community human resource development, and witnessing the seeds of youth participation sprout from the young people who no longer avoid eye contact when talking, and are no longer ashamed to be who they are. They now serve as youth leaders who represent their community and continue to work on its development in school, university, or community projects, sharing their priceless linguistic and cultural knowledge with the whole of society (see Figure 1.2.2).



Figure 1.2.2 Linguistic and cultural revitalization program for all generations: Raising silkworm. Photo by Sumittra Suraratdecha

1.3 Language Revitalization Benefits in Wilamowice¹³

Justyna Majerska-Sznajder

When we started our activities connected to the revitalization of Wymysiöeryś culture, we encountered three main difficulties, based on different attitudes among the inhabitants.

- The youngest generation was of the opinion that Wymysiöeryś is not a practical language so there's no point in learning it.
- The middle generation saw Wymysiöeryś culture as grounds for ridicule – as had been repeated since the 1950s by neighbours from the surrounding villages.
- The oldest generation, the one that was most hurt by their fate, the one that still remembered repression related to Wymysiöeryś, did not want to use Wymysiöeryś for fear that the persecutions would return.

¹³ The writing of this capsule has been supported by the Project 'Language as a cure: linguistic vitality as a tool for psychological well-being, health and economic sustainability' carried out within the Team programme of the Foundation for Polish Science and cofinanced by the European Union under the European Regional Development Fund.



Figure 1.3.1 Performance by the Wilamowianie Dance Group. Photo by Robert Jaworski, Polish Theatre in Warsaw

What did not help was the attitude of the local authorities, whose officials originated mostly from the surrounding villages, where the distinct Wymysiöeryś culture was derided. Their views were shaped by their upbringing, so discrimination from the 1950s translated into ongoing negativity on the part of the local authorities. The situation would probably have stayed the same until today if the Faculty of ‘Artes Liberales’ of the University of Warsaw had not engaged in revitalization activities. In 2014, the first international conference was organized in Wilamowice – and parts of it were in Wymysiöeryś. It raised the prestige and status of the language among the local inhabitants and authorities, who until then had considered our activities nothing but a flash in the pan. It also fell to us to change the attitude of the oldest generation – some of whom we invited to present on Wymysiöeryś culture and their histories during our various meetings and events. Thanks to this they became aware of the interest in their culture and realized that public use of Wymysiöeryś is not only unpunished, but even welcome. This helped them work through their trauma related to the persecutions.

Through various activities, e.g. theatre performances by the ‘Ufa fisa’ group, and song and dance by a local folk ensemble (see Figure 1.3.1) we have managed to make Wymysiöeryś trendy among our youth, who also started understanding our

actions as their contribution to the conservation of their cultural heritage. They derive joy and happiness from continuing the traditions and the heritage of their ancestors. The oldest inhabitants are visited by young people to talk together and it makes them feel needed. They not only get practical help from the young people but also feel appreciated and heard – they can count on people who will gladly listen to them. We have managed to awaken the Wymysiöeryś identity in both the youngest and oldest inhabitants – and this is one of the most important markers of Wymysiöeryś culture. Thanks to that people have gotten a better acceptance regarding their own feeling of belonging. The biggest remaining challenge is the middle generation, the one that was brought up in compulsory Polish. They are the parents who have the greatest influence on effective learning of Wymysiöeryś among the youth, because they can either forbid or allow them to attend the classes. Thanks to several meetings and psycho-linguistic lectures they no longer consider learning Wymysiöeryś a waste of time, and are more conscious of the benefits of multilingualism (this is rare in Poland). A different approach to being Wymysiöeryś was also helpful – we reclaimed those aspects that previously subjected us to ridicule, changing them into assets.

We have also taken it upon ourselves to disseminate the knowledge about the persecutions and the dire fates of inhabitants which have until now been taboo. This subject has been broached many times in the public sphere and recently work has been done to collect documents and memories of the inhabitants regarding this time period. Thanks to this we can hope that (at least to a certain extent) the sufferings of the people who survived the persecutions will be recompensed. We can also hope that others will be more aware of the history and will understand that it is not a reason for shame.

The actions of Wymysiöeryś organizations related to revitalization also have a significant effect on the well-being of Wymysiöeryś. They are very strongly mobilized and engaged in community activities – thus maybe conforming to the archetype of Wymysiöeryś mainly sticking together in a closed circle. These organizations are the only ones that meet the cultural needs of the inhabitants because the local authorities have little to offer in that regard. Taking part in these activities helps to create social bonds, but participants also feel happy because through their actions they are creating something for Wilamowice – and this is one of the markers of local ideas of well-being for Wymysiöeryś. Such actions also result in measurable benefits – like in the case of the Song and Dance Ensemble ‘Wilamowice’ whose members get the chance not only to participate in its performances and travel with the group (for many members this is their only chance to travel) but also to further their own personal development through visits to museums and places of interest. Membership of such organizations also allows elderly people to remain physically fit longer and becomes a way of distancing oneself from problems as well as a means of relaxation. We also know about cases where the help that the older generation provides in the revitalization process has stopped the progression of dementia and served as a kind of rehabilitation.

The last type of benefit is economic. The local authorities have finally noticed the opportunities for the development of the region on the basis of Wymysiöeryś culture, and thus more and more local initiatives are starting. Huge support was

provided by a project to promote the commercialization of findings from research on linguistic revitalization, and the related idea of the creation of a tourism cluster – all thanks to Bartłomiej Chromik, back then a doctoral student with a background in economics. Our activities have thus enabled the inhabitants to develop language-related tourism and, consequently, economic activity. Thanks to their participation in linguistic documentation, the youths who know Wymysiöeryś can be employed in tourism and so they begin to see knowledge of Wymysiöeryś as an economic asset.

1.4 Reading Ancestral Texts in the Heritage Language

Justyna Olko

The Nahuas first adopted alphabetic writing for their own purposes in the sixteenth century, so writings in Nahuatl go back many centuries. However, speakers of Nahuatl do not have easy access to the histories written by their ancestors. Knowledge of the long history of writing in Indigenous languages is not part of the Mexican educational program and although documents are kept in archives they are usually only explored by professional scholars. Therefore our team began to organize workshops in which native speakers and new speakers could read and discuss the colonial Nahuatl documents written by their ancestors (see Figure 1.4.1). In this way we have started together to awaken a historical memory

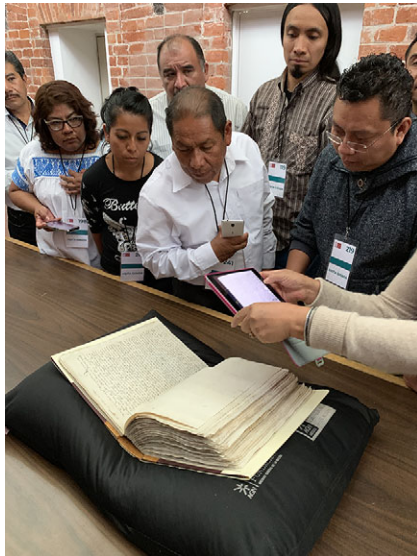


Figure 1.4.1 Participatory workshop on reading Nahuatl historical texts in modern Nahuatl, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico. Photo by Justyna Olko

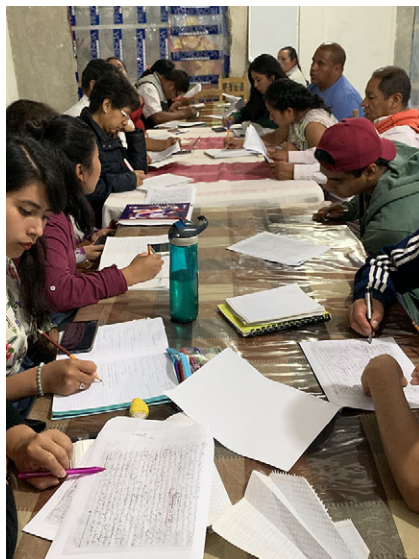


Figure 1.4.2 Participatory workshop in the community of San Miguel Xaltipan, Mexico. Reading a colonial document from the region. Photo by Justyna Olko

and raise awareness of the legacy of minority communities. It is a valuable way of strengthening their identity and raising both their self-esteem and the prestige of their heritage language, which has proved especially promising in the case of speakers of Nahuatl.

The workshops have been carried out every year since 2014 (since 2015 in the Mexican National Archive – *Archivo General de la Nación*). Each time some thirty to forty speakers of Nahuatl from diverse communities in Mexico City and the states of Mexico, Puebla, Tlaxcala, Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Veracruz take part in the activities, which are conducted entirely in Nahuatl. During these events all participants speak in their own variants of the language, which additionally contributes to language revitalization. They not only work collaboratively on the transcription, translation, and interpretation of the texts, but also personally examine the original documents, which turned out to be a deeply emotional experience. For this collaborative reading we choose colonial texts that are vivid testimonies of Indigenous capacity to act; for example, defending local autonomy and rights, demanding removal of Spanish officials, etc. (see Figure 1.4.2). Exposure to this information can be an important source of empowerment for modern activists. These ancestral writings allow Indigenous readers to experience a degree of continuity with the past by giving them the opportunity to see their ancestors' actions as examples, which might inspire them to take their own individual and collective initiatives. In

other words, the texts make it possible for readers to 'empower themselves to come to grips with the conditions of their living'.¹⁴

When planning these activities, we intentionally attempt to select texts from the regions or places from which specific groups of participants originate. Connecting to the past through these places allows Indigenous people to personally experience the degree of continuity between older and modern heritage tongues and culture. During these encounters the Nahuas from different regions often compare their vocabulary and joyfully experiment with terms that do not exist in their own variety. Yet another aspect of language use that these sessions have stimulated is reevaluation of the purist attitudes shared by many speakers of Nahuatl today. Participants often recognize that Spanish influence goes back many centuries and that some loanwords became part of their language a long time ago.

Links with the past are of vital importance in many Indigenous communities: ancestors are conceived of as the source of knowledge and strength for the living. Severing links with the past has profound consequences for identity, self-esteem, and self-awareness. Therefore, opening a dialogue with the ancestors and the testimonies they left can provide an empowering stimulus to reclaim historical identity and inspire social change in the present, including the revival of language use.

¹⁴ Y. Kalela, *Making History: The Historian and Uses of the Past* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 164.