

Linguistic Cages and the Limits of Linguists

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Language documentation has largely been driven by the needs and goals of the community of (external) linguists, with less attention to the needs of communities of language users and potential speakers. The result is a mismatch between the materials produced by linguists and the needs of communities. Yet in order for any revitalization program to be successful, it must be driven by the community. The present situation calls for a reassessment of the goals and methods of linguistic research on endangered languages, with a need for research agendas to be collaboratively determined, with potential results shaped from the ground up by communities themselves. The varying differences between individual situations and between individuals within single communities means that there will no be single solution across all language settings.

We have been observed, noted, taped, and videoed. Our behaviors have been recorded in every possible way to Western Science, and I suppose we could learn to live with this if we had not become imprisoned in the anthropologists' words. The language that anthropologists use to explain us traps us in linguistic cages because we must explain our ways through alien hypothetical constructs and theoretical frameworks.

—Cecil King (Odawa)
(cited in Ranco, 2006, p. 64)

We have reached a time in the history of language revitalization when it makes sense to step back and assess where we are, what we have learned and how we can best work together. There are simply not enough linguists and not enough language activists for us to be able to afford to work separately or, even worse, at cross purposes. That said, it is important to keep in mind that linguists and language activists generally have fundamentally different goals and different attitudes about the best way of accomplishing them. In most, if not all cases, language shift is the result of a history of colonization, unequal power relations, and other imbalances. This is the background against which language revitalization takes place, and for an external linguist to ignore this background is not only disrespectful and mindless, it can be very detrimental to the work that both sides want to accomplish. For many communities language revitalization is a primary goal, and in many instances a pressing one. Language documentation and description—generally the primary goals for linguists—are at best secondary goals for communities. Yet these goals need not be mutually exclusive. Moreover, the history of Western science means that many external linguists are guilty of building linguistic cages as charged by Cecil King above, and it takes a deliberate, focused effort to rethink paradigms of research and Western methodologies so as to ensure that community members are full members of research projects and

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their questions and issues create and drive research agendas even when external linguists are involved.

In the 15 plus years since Hale et al. (1992) published the now famous call to arms to linguists to work on endangered languages, much has changed in the way that linguists approach this field, and yet much has remained the same. First, it can be noted that for linguists the study of endangered languages as a movement, by which I mean a concerted effort to work against time, is considerably more recent than work by communities on revitalization. Linguists have, of course, been studying languages that happened to be endangered for a long time, but the publication of Hale et al. (1992) is seen by many as the beginning of their involvement in language revitalization. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when language revitalization began as a widespread phenomenon. The current Māori revitalization movement can be traced to the 1970s, with the inception of the first tribal program (Whakatipuranga Rua Mano ‘Generation, 2000’) and the opening in 1977 of the first bilingual school, and the subsequent opening of the first Māori language nest (Te Kōhanga Reo) in 1982, although its roots go back to the 1970s as well (King, 2001, p. 121). Mohawk revitalization began in 1970, with Mohawk language instruction introduced for 15 minutes per day and found its real impetus as a response to the French Language Charter, or Bill 101 (see Grenoble & Whaley, 2006, pp. 86-94). Linguists often cite the 1992 publication of Hale et al. as the call to linguists to study endangered languages. Even though the Māori revitalization movement was probably not the first revitalization program, it is certainly one of the most visible internationally and marks the beginning of a broader trend among communities to take back control of their languages, a trend (or a battle) that continues today.

In this paper I outline linguists’ changes in attitudes and approaches and consider the possibilities and challenges of their work. I focus on two distinct groups, external linguists and community-member language activists. A third group, community-member linguists, is generally well-positioned to work on language revitalization and constitutes a valuable resource in revitalization. Many (external) linguists see training more community members in linguistics as key to this work. Still, many community linguists face some of the same challenges as external linguists. Those who are anchored at academic institutions outside of the community may need to face the same kinds of research and teaching expectations that external linguists do, and yet may feel even greater pressure from their communities to spend all or most of their time doing revitalization work.

At the outset I should say that it is a mistake to think of any of these as entirely homogenous groups. Linguists who work with endangered language communities show varying degrees of expertise, commitment and sensitivity to the issues. Different individuals have different strengths and different interests. At the same time, although there are similarities across communities, there are differences, and often very significant ones. Each community needs to be considered both individually, in its own right, and with respect to other communities. The experience of language shift and the need for language revitalization is an

important bond. As Ahlers (2006, p. 60) argues, “the situation of language endangerment and existence of ongoing revitalization efforts is contextually relevant to all Native Americans; it is part of the landscape of their use and knowledge (or non-knowledge) of their heritage languages.” The commonality of experience can unite people. In fact, the similarities between communities can mask differences, and it would be foolish to think that an approach which succeeded (or failed) in one instance will necessarily have the same impact in another. By the same token, it is not the case that communities themselves are homogenous or necessarily united in their goals, ideas, attitudes and so on. There can also be tremendous individual differences within single communities. As a result, there is no one-size-fits-all solution, and it may be that different groups within different communities will choose to take different paths. This can fracture a community or it can help foster mutual respect; it all depends on how the community as a whole handles these differences.

As an example, in the Mohawk immersion program at Kahnawake, about half the families in the community enroll their children in the Mohawk immersion school and about half do not (although more would enroll if there were adequate resources; see Hoover, n.d.). Initially, however, when the program first began, there was hesitation among some families to enroll their children, fearing that language immersion might be detrimental to their overall development. Thus attitudes have changed over the course of time owing to the success of the program, although some households still opt out. While the “success” of a revitalization program is difficult to define, let alone measure, the Kahnawake immersion school is one of the most successful revitalization programs I know. Hoover and the Kanien’kehaka Raotitiohkwa Cultural Center (n.d.) report the results of a questionnaire-based survey conducted in Kahnawake to measure language proficiency and language attitudes. They found an increase in language use among the youngest generation, clearly a result of language revitalization efforts. Specifically, community members aged 60 and over showed a fluency rate of 88%. In contrast, those from ages 20 to about 40 showed only 20% fluency. A marked increase was found in the younger generations, ages 19 and less, with fluency rates of about 50%. While it should be noted that the survey covered a relatively small number of people—a total of 369 households were included in the study—the fact is that such small numbers reflect the reality of language endangerment. The increase in language use among the youngest speaker group is a clear result of active revitalization measures. But if the community had insisted on total participation, resistance could have made any program too charged to implement; somehow, differences were negotiated. That said, for every story about how different parts of communities have successfully negotiated these differences, there are at least as many about communities whose programs have become stalled because the difficulties caused by such differences.

Ethical linguistic research starts with community involvement. In fact, it is imperative to keep in mind that “non-involvement in a community is not a neutral position, but rather one that can reflect a particular political stance” (Garcia, 2000, p. 91). Linguists and community members need to work together and yet mis-

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understandings on both sides can quickly make that collaboration more difficult than it needs to be. In the remainder of this paper I map out my understanding of some of these differences. They can be ameliorated by a basic awareness of the differences, mutual respect and ongoing commitment to collaborating, which includes renegotiating goals and strategies as projects develop.

The community and revitalization

In order to be successful, a revitalization program must be driven by the community of people who do or will use the language. This almost always requires one or more language activists, or “drivers” (see e.g., King, this volume). Successful drivers are leaders with good organizational abilities and sensitivity to both individual differences and collective needs. Before beginning a revitalization program, it is critical to conduct an honest assessment of goals and resources (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006). Resources are very broadly defined here and include, first and foremost, the key resource: the number of speakers, with an assessment of their levels of knowledge of the language and of their commitment to learning and/or using the language. Part of the assessment should include a study of language attitudes, as these can have a profound affect on the viability of any revitalization program. An evaluation of literacy, in the target language as well as in the language of wider communication, is also critical. All of these are areas where linguists can offer help and expertise and can be valuable collaborators. Assessment of other resources and factors, including financial resources, the potential impact of religion (see e.g., Parsons Yazzie, 2003) and the possible reaction from local and regional governmental offices is also very important, but linguists are of less help here. External linguists who have worked in other settings and other communities can, however, offer the knowledge they have gained there which may be very useful. But again, I cannot overemphasize that experiences from elsewhere do not necessarily translate into successes in other communities; external linguists are well advised to be careful not to confuse such knowledge with solutions and not to appear to be dictating solutions to community members.

Linguists: What they can contribute?

Linguists can be valuable colleagues in language revitalization programs. This is very clear in those cases where the language is under-described and a community does not have the necessary materials or teachers to teach the language. Linguists are specifically trained in elicitation and linguistic analysis. They are trained to take large amounts of linguistic data and make sense of it, to find the rules that govern how each language operates. They are not, however, trained in language pedagogy or the development of pedagogical materials, things which often interest communities above and beyond everything else. They are not trained to write textbooks. If anything, they tend to be trained to write linguistic descriptions that far too often are inaccessible to the communities who want to use them most. Oddly enough, perhaps, linguists are not even trained in creating dictionaries or even orthographies. Instead they are trained

to use the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), which does a generally good job of capturing a language's sounds but requires specific training. Languages are not written in IPA; linguistic transcriptions are. Many communities who are working on language revitalization want dictionaries above and beyond and everything else, and linguists are not trained in dictionary making. I do not know of a graduate program in the United States that includes a course in building a lexicon, although they all have courses in semantics. Here we see a wide gap between linguistic theory and practice among language users. This is an ongoing problem for documentary linguists who find that the training and demands of their profession, coupled with the fact that they use a technical metalanguage in their research, cuts them off from the very people they work with.

What emerges from this is that the training of linguists needs to change to meet the demands of both documentation and revitalization. Canonical field methods classes often focus on elicitation techniques and basic description. The resulting linguistic descriptions generally fall short of meeting the interests of language learners who want pedagogical materials, which have an entirely different focus. Only recently, and in limited places, has training included the use of technology. Because technology is changing rapidly, it is difficult for linguists to keep up with all the changes unless they are deeply interested in technology itself.

Moreover, traditional field methods classes have also failed to discuss how to work in communities. This stems from a number of reasons—pressure to work on language description coupled with lack of time; the overall differences between individual communities and sites can make it hard to generalize; and just a general lack of attention to the importance of this aspect of training. The push for language documentation has changed this, and a number of non-canonical programs have been developed outside of the rubric of more standard doctoral (Ph.D.) programs in linguistics. Ph.D. programs change slowly, and in the face of this relative inflexibility a number of alternative training programs have sprung into existence. The inauguration of the Ken Hale Chair at the 2005 Summer Institute of Linguistics marks a serious commitment on the part of the Linguistic Society of America to recognize the value of such work and to teach a field methods course during the Institute. In 2008 the University of California, Santa Barbara, launched a summer training Institute on Field Linguistics and Language Documentation (InField) to help fill in the gaps. Similar programs are taking place outside of North America. One on-going program is the Endangered Languages Academic Programme (ELAP) at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. This program, which specializes in language documentation, has recently added a track in language revitalization (<http://www.hrelp.org/courses/>). The birth of such programs is strong evidence of a new way of thinking in linguistics and a new way of training future linguists.

Further evidence comes from the funding agencies which support the documentation of endangered languages. Most of these now require that linguists collaborate with communities. These days, it is difficult to get funding without taking community considerations into account. Key funding agencies for work

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in endangered language communities, such as the Endangered Languages Fund, the Foundation for Endangered Languages, and the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project, specify the need for a relationship with the community and put a premium on work done by communities. A few excerpts from their websites make this clear:

The **Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project** (<http://www.hrelp.org/>) has among its explicit goals the need “to create a repository of language resources for the linguistic, social science, and language communities,” the intent of this is to create resources which communities can use for their own purposes (such as revitalization programs or creating pedagogical materials). HRELP gives priority to “projects that will document social and cultural contexts as well as formal aspects of languages, and projects that are likely to enhance expertise in field linguistics, including among members of language communities.”

The **Foundation for Endangered Languages** (<http://www.ogmios.org/home.htm>) “is keen to see the work it supports benefit directly the linguistic communities under study” and applicants are required to state how they plan to collaborate with communities. Furthermore, “all proposals are welcome, but in making awards the Foundation is especially keen to support work within endangered language communities themselves.” Although the wording here supports the general presupposition that external linguists, not community members, will be applying for funds and conducting the work (note the statement about “communities *under* study,” FEL does continue to say that “as part of this policy, FEL is prepared to comment on draft proposals from communities or community linguists, pointing out weaknesses and potential remedies (without prejudice) before the selection.”

The **Endangered Language Fund** (<http://www.endangeredlanguagefund.org/>) similarly states that it “provides grants for language maintenance and linguistic field work. The work most likely to be funded is that which serves both the native community and the field of linguistics.”

Strategies for success

One key step in successful collaboration is what can be called prior ideological clarification (to use a term borrowed from Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer, 1998; see also Kroskrity, this volume), not only within the community but also, critically, between community members and linguists. Specifically, the various parties or stakeholders need to clarify what their own goals are, what the challenges are, and what the priorities will be. If this is truly a joint process, the stakeholders can then move to determining how to approach their goals and how to overcome potential obstacles. This ideological clarification must be an ongoing process in any collaborative venture, as goals, challenges and opportunities will inevitably shift as the work progresses.

Smith (1999, pp. 126-8) identifies four key aspects of the community-oriented research projects:

- (1) The community defines the needs and definitions of the research;
- (2) they must be collaborative;
- (3) the process of research is as important as the outcome; and
- (4) local institutions must be involved and help coordinate the research.

These are critical and important themes, and clearly follow on the research-ethics paradigms for indigenous research. For university-based indigenous research programs, she suggests five principles:

- (1) That we, as indigenous academics, promote research that will “make a positive difference,”
- (2) that we develop research that will influence indigenous education policy;
- (3) that we train indigenous researchers;
- (4) that we disseminate research to our indigenous communities through publication and contact; and
- (5) that we create an environment for change within the institution where we work. (Smith, 1999, p. 131).

True collaboration requires that all linguists be aware of both sets of principles and work with community members to achieve them. They are ambitious and will not be achieved quickly, but even the act of working toward them will have a tremendous impact.

All of that said, perhaps the single most important component for successful collaboration is mutual respect, mutual respect for differing goals, differing approaches, and differing methods.

Conclusion

Language revitalization is frustrating, slow, and difficult, and yet of the utmost importance. Learning a language is hard work under the best of circumstances and students generally need strong incentives to learn a second language to a point of real proficiency. For most students in the United States of America, language programs try to provide strong external incentives, like a study abroad program in the country where the language is spoken. One of the reasons that in-country immersion programs are often very successful because student learners are forced to use the language to communicate. In communities where there is a need for language revitalization, you inherently do not have the best of circumstances. Revitalization usually takes place in situations where language attrition is underway, so the target or local community language often needs to be learned as a second language, even sometimes by the language teachers (see e.g., Hinton, 2003).

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There are special needs in language revitalization that are simply not found in other second language programs. These include the need to create a community of speakers, not a problem if the target language is Spanish or French. Successful revitalization centers around the need to create a need for the language and initial attempts to do this may feel forced or artificial to learners, who have functioned their entire lives in a language like English (see e.g., Noori, this volume). For this reason, so many revitalization programs begin with ceremonial uses of language, which do not translate well into another language and whose import is deeply anchored to the original language.

There are also a number of myths surrounding language learning, which are generally conflicting but collectively stand in the way of successful revitalization. A very common one among potential speakers is that since the language is part of their heritage, they are hard-wired to learn it or that it is in their blood or DNA and so it can be easily learned. In fact, of course, how hard or easy it is to learn a language depends on the individual, how different or similar the first language and second language are, how well the individual learns languages in general (a skill which decreases in people beginning at about age 12), levels of exposure to the language and how motivated the learner is. An often reported misconception is that the children will naturally learn the language because they always have. That is true only if it is being spoken to them. Alternatively, many potential speakers are overwhelmed by the thought of learning their language, convinced that it is “too hard” to learn. Unfortunately this idea is often spread by well-intentioned linguists, who have worked to overcome the stigma attached to indigenous languages, including such erroneous ideas that they have no grammar, are not real languages and so on. Linguists can do much to dispel or create such myths, but they must first be aware of them and the impact of their rhetoric (Hill, 2002, p. 120).

Ranco (2006, p. 73) asks whether it is possible that “indigenous traditions be involved in the subjective making of ethical relationships, as opposed to being only the object of them?” This question lies at the heart of the issue of collaborative work. Although it requires a complete rethinking of research paradigms on the part of external linguists, I do believe that we are now in the process of doing that. Through better training, increased sensitivity and respect, we can hope that the notion of linguistic cages created by external scholars will cease to exist.

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