Language Maintenance and Revitalization

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Introduction/Definitions

Language maintenance and revitalization (henceforth LMR) are two related activities. Unlike most of the other topics in this handbook, these are fundamentally fields of practice. A great deal of research has been done on these two topics, but the vast majority of it is designed to improve practice. In fact, a great deal of the work in this area is done by individuals in Education and Applied Linguistics.

The term ‘language maintenance’ is normally used in situations where community members still speak their language on a daily basis, and transmission is still occurring in the home, but where signs of incipient language shift and/or loss are present. In these situations, knowledge of the language is not the central problem; rather, the issue is diminishing usage. In this article, ‘shift’ refers to changes in the daily patterns of language use in an entire community – most commonly, using a competing language more and more frequently to the detriment of the community language. The term ‘loss’ refers to changes in language proficiency among individuals or across generations due to diminished frequency or domains of usage. These losses typically involve diminished vocabulary, loss of less common and/or more complex grammatical patterns, and diminished range of speech registers. Language maintenance strategies generally involve social, political, and economic responses, including language planning and promotion, which are designed to change the ‘language ecology’ (Haugen 1972, Mühlhäusler 1992) of a community such that domains of usage are maintained or expanded. These responses typically also target the language ideologies within the community, since they have crucial influence on the frequency of language usage.

The term ‘language revitalization’ is used in situations where in-home transmission of a language has ceased. For the younger members of the community at least, the problem in these cases is knowledge of the language. For this reason, language revitalization strategies always include as one of their components a focus on second (henceforth L2) language teaching and learning. In many situations, revitalization efforts can still draw on language knowledge existing among the older members of the community, but in the most extreme cases this may not be so. Language revitalization efforts must also confront problems of usage: intergenerational transmission ceases due to extremely reduced usage of a language in a community, at least among the
child-bearing generation, and usage may have virtually ceased among the entire community. In such settings, getting younger L2 learners to actually put their newly acquired knowledge of the language into regular usage can be a daunting challenge.

In this article, the initial discussion will focus on recovery of language knowledge, in revitalization contexts. These processes are well understood in their general outlines, and have been implemented widely in the world. Because they are narrowly focused on language per se as a code for communication, they are relatively easier to implement than processes that seek to address issues of language ecology, ideology, and usage. The latter force one to confront the much broader array of social, economic, and political factors that govern language in its richest sense, as a cultural implement for living in the world.

**Historical Perspectives**

The field of LMR is quite new, and the anthropological component is newer still. Language promotion projects were widespread in nineteenth-century Europe, linked to Romanticism and Nationalism, and language revitalization efforts occurred in locations such as Israel and Ireland, with varying success. Language scholars were often key participants in these projects. However, the academic study of LMR projects per se within the fields of linguistics and anthropology, and more particularly the effort to critically evaluate and improve on the methods used and to begin intervening in such projects as expert practitioners, expanded globally and became formalized primarily in the 1990s. The impetus for this was the recognition of rapidly increasing language shift and endangerment around the world. This recognition began in earnest in the 1970s and 1980s, both in academia (Krauss 1992), and among many minority and indigenous communities, particularly in North America, Australia, and Polynesia. A debate began about possible and appropriate responses to endangerment. One possible response is to try to maintain or revive everyday usage of endangered languages. It is this effort that gave birth to the field of LMR. One of the most widely cited early contributions to the field was Fishman 1991, and Hinton and Hale 2001 is also widely cited. Since that time, research and publications on the topic have greatly expanded. Among LMR projects themselves, long-term efforts with Irish, Welsh, and Scots Gaelic have drawn much attention. Two of the most widely cited recent programs are those of the Māori in New Zealand/Aotearoa, and of the Native Hawaiians (early summaries of both are in Hinton and Hale 2001).

The first researchers involved in this field were primarily linguists, and as a result larger socio-cultural issues surrounding LMR were often given little attention or ignored. Early approaches tended to treat LMR from a narrowly linguistic perspective. This led to a number of weaknesses in academic understanding and in the development of specific projects. More recently, anthropological approaches have become much more prominent, leading to major re-evaluations of both theory and practice. Most fundamentally, these include a recognition that language shift is a symptom of broader and deeper socio-cultural shifts, which must be addressed in order for LMR projects to have chances of long-term success.

**Critical Issues and Topics**

The central issue in the field is the question of how broadly language endangerment is the same from language to language, and thus how broadly a general set of methodologies can be applied to address this problem. Early contributions to the field, such as Fishman 1991, tended to assume a fair amount of uniformity, so that a single ‘grid’ could be applied to evaluate conditions and responses. With increasing research, the vast differences between language situations have been recognized, and increasing attention has been paid to local ethnography in LMR.
A second issue is the study and development of effective methodologies for imparting language knowledge. There is much debate over the value of home-based as opposed to formalized, school-based approaches, as well as over specific methodologies within these categories.

A third issue is how to increase actual usage of languages by speakers, as opposed to increasing speaker knowledge. Many earlier responses to language endangerment have assumed that a language is being prevented from being used, due to lack of a writing system, unavailability of government services in the language, or actual prohibitions. In the case of situations such as boarding schools, where a language is literally banned from use, this can indeed be the case. Much recent research, however, shows that language shift now most typically occurs because speakers find another language more useful and/or prestigious, not because they are directly prohibited from using their language. Thus giving speakers the right to speak their language via legal means, or increased possibilities of speaking it via the development of literacy or government services in the language does not necessarily affect their need or motivation to use it and identify with it when the overall language ecology and ideologies in a community make some other language more dominant and attractive.

The problem of speaker motivations is now increasingly understood as the most crucial barrier to successful LMR. Motivations are directly tied to language ecology and ideology. The latter always reflect underlying socio-cultural conditions, including politics and economics. Thus LMR is fundamentally an anthropological, political, and economic problem, not a linguistic one. Since language shift and loss are symptoms of broader and deeper shifts in a community, attempts to address the symptom through language-specific interventions, without addressing the underlying causes, are unlikely to be successful. At the same time, language-specific interventions can begin to alter language ecologies and ideologies on their own, increasing knowledge, utility, and prestige of a language. Two key questions confront practitioners of LMR: first, are these language-specific interventions ever sufficient to reverse language shift on their own? and secondly, if not, how can such approaches be combined with socio-cultural and socio-economic action in order to allow indigenous and minority language communities to flourish, in all aspects of life, with their language?

These questions raise two final issues. The first question is whether language shift should be resisted at all (Ladefoged 1992). Individuals in communities seek fundamentally to survive and prosper. As part of their daily practice and interactions, they make large numbers of instrumental evaluations and choices about how best to do this. These choices, aggregated over the community and over time, can lead to language shift. If, in fact, the current language is less efficacious within the language ecology of the community, so that the community is shifting languages in order to maintain or increase survival and prosperity, then why try to reverse that shift? There are a number of responses. Typically, individual choices about language usage and shift are not truly “free” choices, but are heavily influenced by socio-cultural and socio-economic inequalities and oppression. Most generally, language shift usually indicates socio-economic and socio-cultural stress on a community, which may or may not actually be alleviated by the shift. Efforts to maintain the language, in the context of broader community revitalization measures, may serve to alter or reinvigorate internal community organization, identity, processes, and resources in ways that actually provide a more effective response to the stresses.

Secondly, even if LMR is desirable, a number of scholars have argued that it is in fact impossible or at least extremely difficult (Edwards 2007). The socio-cultural forces driving shift are so powerful and pervasive, and perhaps so embedded in global processes of transformation, that local, language-specific resistance will be futile, and the smaller the speaker community, the more impossible the resistance will be in the absence of near-complete isolation. The most common response is that in an increasingly globalized world, the desire for stronger forms of
local identity may actually increase, and language has always been one of the most powerful markers of identity. If this is true, LMR is likely to be primarily a bottom-up popular movement, however, rather than a top-down planned or expert-assisted process.

Current Contributions and Research/Practice

Home-Based Revitalization Strategies

Revitalization techniques can be divided into home- and school-based strategies. One home-based strategy is self-paced and self-motivated language learning by individuals, for usage in the home and transmission to children. While there are examples of this process being effective for selected individuals, most people lack the time, self-discipline, or ability to learn a language independently as adults, outside of formalized instruction settings, to a point of high proficiency. Thus this approach on its own is unlikely to be effective for community language revitalization in the classic sense of return to fluent usage and home-based transmission. On the other hand, it can be very valuable for raising the status of the language in the community and beginning to alter language ideologies, building support for more intensive or formalized programs.

A modified version of such home approaches are Master-Apprentice programs, pioneered by Leanne Hinton in California, and since used in many locations in the world (Hinton et al. 2002). The basic approach is for two individuals to spend several hours together per day, using only the target language, as they go about daily activities. The focus is much more on immersion into the language than on formalized instruction. One major advantage of this approach is that apprentices acquire vocabulary and structures immediately useful for daily life. Such programs also serve to (re)ideologize the language as a useful tool for social interaction, rather than merely an abstract form of knowledge. These programs often involve payments to the participants, sometimes in lieu of other jobs. They also normally involve some form of administrative oversight and guidance for the participants, offering them special interaction techniques and activities to facilitate learning. The programs can be supplemented by more formalized instruction for the apprentice. Successful versions normally run for at least a year, often longer. In this manner, apprentices can attain high proficiency in the target language. Successful programs also often provide symbolic community support and encouragement to the team(s) in the form of ongoing or periodic special recognition, honors, opportunities to play meaningful roles in social or ceremonial events, and similar positive feedback. In general, programs involving multiple pairs working simultaneously, with chances for broader interaction among the pairs, are preferable to only one or two pairs.

One obstacle to the success of these programs is unstable funding and inadequate administrative guidance. Loss of funding to pay the pairs is an obvious problem, but in addition, without regular oversight and encouragement, pairs can gradually lose momentum and slip more and more into the dominant language, or become stalled at a certain stage of learning, continually engaging in the same limited set of activities. Because such programs require a great deal of emotional and intellectual commitment on the part of both members of the pair, lack of community moral support and positive feedback (including opportunities to use the language in ways that provide symbolic capital) can also be very damaging. Finally, due to socio-economic pressures on many minority communities (job loss, elder care needs, transportation limitations), maintaining pairs over long time periods can be challenging.

The primary weakness of Master-Apprentice programs is that even when effective, they produce only limited numbers of fluent speakers. They also rely on a method that places high
School-Based Revitalization Strategies

School-based approaches vary in their intensity. At the lowest level are language classes using methodologies similar to “foreign” language programs. This method is almost never effective on its own at producing highly proficient speakers. Even in the case of languages such as French or German, with long traditions of classroom teaching, very few American college or university programs can produce fluent speakers in four years without the aid of study abroad (i.e., immersion) opportunities. Such programs can, however, produce speakers who, with access to immersion situations, can attain fluency very rapidly. The same is true for high-quality university programs in minority/indigenous languages. At K–12 levels, high-quality, language class-based learning can be an effective feeder into immersion opportunities, provided the language is still used in some places or by some age groups as a daily language. But there is little evidence that K–12 foreign language teaching on its own, as actually practiced in real schools, can produce fluent speakers of endangered L2 indigenous or heritage languages.

More intensive than language classes are bilingual programs, in which two different languages are used for classroom instruction, typically a target indigenous/local language and a national language. This obviously offers more intensive exposure to the target L2. Recent research suggests, however, that where the target language is used for less than 50 percent of instruction (or even perhaps less than 80 per cent), full competency in that language is unlikely to be acquired, at least in revitalization (as opposed to maintenance) situations— and moreover, full competency in all registers of the national language, particularly “academic” ones, may also be impeded (May and Hill 2008).

Most intensive are preschool language ‘nests’ and immersion programs. In language nests, the target language is normally used 100 percent of the time, and the focus is on language acquisition. In immersion schools, the target language is used at least 80 percent of the time and up to 100 percent. The goal of these schools is comprehensive education, but through the medium of the target language. Typically however, the schools have a secondary goal of culturally sensitive education that attempts to validate the local community and draw on its cultural resources to enhance learning. Such immersion schools, at least for indigenous languages, were originally pioneered by Māori language revival workers and educators in New Zealand (King 2001), and soon copied by Native Hawaiians (Wilson and Kamanā 2001). The model has since spread widely around the world. There is ample research to show that in true immersion schools of this sort, students can acquire full fluency in the target language, in all registers. Moreover, once the second/national language is introduced, the students are able to transfer language skills to it from the target language with relative ease, and often test at least as well in the L2 as comparable students from the same community attending monolingual schools in that language, while also achieving higher graduation rates (Johnson and Legato 2006; Wilson, Kamanā, and Rawlins 2006). It is clear, however, that the L2 does need to be formally taught at some point, especially the more “academic” registers: these are not necessarily fully acquired by students simply as a by-product of being surrounded by the language outside the school (May and Hill 2008).

The key advantages of immersion programs are that they can produce relatively large numbers of fluent speakers, and that for the teachers and students involved, the domains where the language is used are part of their daily existence anyway, and thus not additive burdens. In addition, once in operation, immersion schools provide for a routinization of language learning that does not impose as high an individual burden on either teacher or student as Master–Apprentice
programs. Additionally, the schools create an obvious new domain for language usage, and can contribute to greatly raising the status of the language in the community.

There are a number of obstacles to the success of immersion schools. These include shortages of financial and human resources, especially lack of trained teachers of an appropriate age; factors of economies of scale, which make such programs incrementally more expensive, especially in smaller language communities; legal and political impediments imposed at regional or national levels; demographic problems such as widely dispersed speakers and situations where speakers are a minority in any given community; and parental hesitations, especially with regard to their children adequately acquiring the national language, along with lack of reinforcement in the home when the parents are not speakers. Students must also remain in the schools eight or more years to fully acquire the language.

Immersion schools do have a number of potential weaknesses if not supplemented by other language initiatives: the language can be ideologized as primarily a school language, whose usage is limited to that domain; students can be isolated from remaining fluent elder speakers, leading to two different varieties of the language in the community, one used for daily home purposes by elders, and one used for school purposes by young people and a few teachers (with the latter often employing many neologisms completely unknown to older speakers); and the language can be ideologized as a type of abstract knowledge, known but not necessarily used outside the school, or even in the school outside of formal classroom settings.

**From Knowledge to Usage: The Issue of Language Ambivalence**

It is clear that several of the above strategies can produce fluent speakers of endangered languages. These language-focused efforts may, however, be seen as begging the larger questions of language ecology and social conditions. After all, when language shift begins, language knowledge and ability are not issues in most cases. The shift occurs because speakers find decreasing reasons to actually use the language in question, due to changes in language ecology, which reflect even deeper social and cultural changes. With the exception of some boarding school situations, problems of language acquisition and ability are rarely the cause of language shift – they are the result of it. Thus, going in the opposite direction, addressing issues of acquisition and ability alone is unlikely to cause a reversal of language shift.

For effective revitalization, regular usage must develop within the home and community, and then the language must be transmitted in the home. No type of language revitalization strategy among those described so far has shown good, proven results in moving from ability to usage. This is because the strategies tend to address language itself, rather than the larger socio-cultural conditions that led to language shift, and which are often still in place. Certainly in Hawaii a number of L2 learners have begun raising their children with Hawaiian as an L1 home language, but that number is certainly less than 10 percent of those with knowledge of the language. Given how recently the program began, it is too early to tell if and how much this number will increase; most speakers are still in their early twenties or younger, and have not yet had children. Nevertheless, even within immersion schools, there is a tendency in at least some schools for older students (grades 7–12) to use English increasingly, as well as Hawaiian among themselves, outside the school, or even outside of class.

The reason for this behavior, in immersion-based revitalization settings, is that there are typically relatively limited domains for usage outside the schools, so even immersion school students find themselves using English heavily in daily life. The result in many cases is ambivalence towards the language. Very often, this ambivalence involves a contrast between affective attitudes towards the language, where it is highly valued as a form of knowledge and a symbol
of identity, and judgments based on use-value, which often lead to negative evaluations of the daily utility of the language. More generally in LMR settings, it is common to find large differences between overtly expressed attitudes regarding a heritage language (often highly favorable – see Fishman 1997) and actual language behavior, as measured by criteria such as daily usage, or effort committed to learning the language. It is especially important for outside consultants to recognize this potential gap between overt meta-linguistic attitudes and linguistic behavior, and not be misled by overly rosy expressed attitudes.

In summary, language shift occurs due to declines in the utility and status of a language. Unless the local language ecology is changed so that status and utility increase again, there is little reason to expect shift to reverse, no matter how much language acquisition occurs. Gaps between increased knowledge and actual usage reflect lagging (or unchanged) language ecology conditions, and thus lags in utility and status. In many cases where revitalization strategies have failed due to inadequate interest or commitment from sufficient numbers of members of the community, this failure can be understood in terms of ambivalence specifically, and problems in language ecology and ideology more generally.

Ideological Clarification

Due to the existence of language ambivalence, the process of ‘ideological clarification’ is highly desirable at the initiation of LMR projects. This involves frank discussions about the attitudes and goals of the community, in a context that attempts to look realistically at language ecology, reasons for language shift, and the possibilities for effective response to that shift in the context of available community resources. In the abstract (in response to surveys, for example), many individuals in revitalization contexts will indicate that their goal for their language is fluency among all in the community. When confronted with specific choices on the allocation of community and individual time and money, however, many people may be unwilling to commit the necessary resources to achieve the abstract goal. In general, most people vastly underestimate the time required to reach high proficiency in a language, and this is especially the case for heritage languages, since people often feel they have a ‘genetic’ ability to speak or quickly learn their heritage language. To give another example, a fairly common sentiment in Native American communities is that parents want children to know their tribal heritage language (fluently if possible), but would actually be quite content for the children to speak English or French as their everyday language. This preference mirrors the current situation of many Native American elders, who are fluent in their tribal language, but use French or English as their common daily language. Of course, the fluency of these elders is due to their having grown up in a setting where the tribal language was also the daily language; there is no way for the children of today to acquire such fluency if the daily language of the community is to be English or French. In summary, language ideology is a complex subject, and language ideologies within endangerment settings are if anything even more complex, and not uncommonly contradictory.

From Core Activism to Community Success

The very decision to initiate LMR efforts illustrates an incipient positive shift in language attitudes, and possibly in language ecology. The efforts themselves can contribute to additional positive shifts. Among younger Hawaiians, there is now a new-found prestige associated with the ability to speak Hawaiian. A key obstacle facing revitalization efforts that remains unresolved, however, is how to expand the interest and energy (and impressive achievements) of the few – the core revivalists – to the many – the broader population. Language ecologies function
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Impressive revival efforts may occur within a minority of the language community, while the majority may remain merely supportive from a distance (happy to see the language ‘doing better,’ but also happy that someone else is doing this). In many cases, there are one or two successful, long-running immersion schools in a language community (Blackfoot, Navajo, Mohawk), yet little or no expansion of such programs has occurred. Unless the majority of the community is willing to embrace revived acquisition and especially usage, the revitalization effort faces great long-term obstacles. Most revival movements are too recent to judge whether the energy of a minority can achieve a tipping point where the language is revitalized among the majority in the community. The longest-term revitalization effort is in Ireland, and certainly such a tipping point remains very distant at present. On the other hand, within the Aanaar Saami community (and perhaps other Saami languages), this tip seems to have occurred recently, and quite rapidly, though in a community where language retention was much better than in Ireland.

Language Maintenance

By definition, language maintenance involves a situation where language knowledge is not yet a problem, and thus where language acquisition is also not yet problematic. Rather, most typically, domain loss has begun to occur, or new domains (the internet, for example) have arisen where the language is disadvantaged. Other common signs of incipient language shift are failure of some younger members of the community to acquire the language, or incomplete acquisition (language loss), with unsuccessful acquisition of the full range of registers, structure, or vocabulary. While in some cases (especially these latter ones), school-based or other strategies may be needed to reinvigorate acquisition, the principal focus in maintenance situations is the need to address and reverse changes in language ecology and the status and utility of the language. These changes are what drive the shift away from the language, and only by addressing them is this shift likely to be reversed. In this respect at least, language maintenance and language revitalization share similar concerns.

There are a number of arguments in favor of language maintenance, many of which have been expressed in the context of the language endangerment literature, but they are equally applicable to situations of maintenance: issues of human rights, including linguistic rights; the value of linguistic and cultural diversity and the role of languages in forming ethnic identities; forms of knowledge intimately or perhaps even inextricably tied to specific languages and communities; the value of languages as foci of linguistic, social, and cognitive research; and the intellectual and historical achievement, which any language embodies. For maintenance efforts specifically, a much more immediate argument is that the more fully children acquire their L1, the more easily they are able to acquire an L2 as well, and conversely, failure to acquire L1 fully can inhibit acquisition of L2.

Once leaders or communities make a commitment to language maintenance, there are a number of status-raising techniques that can be used. One of the most common of these is the introduction of writing, since literacy is often associated with high status, especially in diglossic situations. This also creates new domains of usage for the language. A related strategy is development of religious materials in the language, since in many communities the religious domain has very high status. Thus a number of communities, such as the Sakun in Nigeria, have specifically requested Bible translations so that Christian religious practice can be shifted into the local language (Michael Thomas, pers. comm.).

Direct promotion and raising of the visibility of the language can also be used: advertisements, posters and the like; language awards; honoring of speakers; naming of streets, buildings, and
other sites using the local language; and installation of signs indicating these names. Conversely, efforts to eliminate negative pressures on the language from external (often governmental) sources can obviously be extremely important, with the most obvious steps being passage of laws to recognize and protect the language.

In addition to targeting high-status domains, generalized domain increase is probably the most common target of language policy and planning initiatives. One key domain is education, with many communities requesting use or expansion of their language in the education system. Another common target domain is public services. Especially in relatively large minority-language communities in Europe, the right to receive government services in one’s own language has been a key demand. Media is also another common target domain. Strategies include: subsidies for publication of books or production of films; prizes for writers, songwriters, or film-makers; government subsidies for dubbing or subtitling movie and television productions from outside the language community; and efforts to insure translations into the local language (such as Catalan) rather than having to rely on Spanish translations, are examples of this kind of approach. Unfortunately, actual implementation of policies existing on paper remains problematic. These strategies can also be used within smaller communities (‘Bambi’ dubbed into Arapaho, ‘Star Wars’ into Navajo), but in these cases, the effort is more often symbolic, since economies of scale prevent the regular dubbing of enough material to truly maintain the utility of the local language in this domain.

All of the above efforts help generate social capital for a language. Ideally, this is easily convertible into economic capital. Private enterprise, however, is one of the hardest domains for LMR efforts to penetrate. Education, government services, or subsidized media are all amenable to political pressure. Governments are often willing to accept additional expenditures at the margins to benefit subgroups of citizens and voters. Private businesses and corporations are much less willing to increase expenditures at the margin unless clear benefits (i.e. more customers) will accrue. Thus one of the key areas of current research and practice is potential linkages between minority languages and economic profitability, such as through cultural tourism.

Conversely, a system that requires relatively little subsidy is the internet, an area where little research has been done regarding language maintenance, but which has great potential to reinforce minority language communities, especially those that may be highly dispersed or heavily intermingled with national-language speakers. The internet can be used to deliver language instruction, but it is likely more important as a new domain for language use. This can range from Wikipedias in indigenous languages, of which there are now dozens, to texting, Facebook pages and ‘apps’ that are language-specific. The Hawaiian Leo Ki web initiative, which began in the 1990s, was a key early example of this process, as are the websites for East Cree in Canada, which again seek to create on-line communities (http://www.eastcree.org/cree/nc/). One Cree site seeks to explain and overcome differences between various dialects, and even different Cree languages, in order to foster a greater sense of common language awareness, and thus a larger language community (http://www.atlas-ling.ca/#). In the case of very large communities, especially in Europe, there are a plethora of internet sites and communities.

Main Research Methods

LMR is a fundamental example of applied linguistic anthropology. Researchers are often direct participants in efforts to produce specific changes within communities, not just to study the changes. In other cases researchers may not be direct participants, but they still seek to provide applied understanding of how to best accomplish the goals of LMR, including measurements of the effectiveness of projects. A third, newer type of approach is much more theoretical in
its orientations: the study of the socio-cultural and linguistic processes that surround and arise from LMR efforts (see Meek 2010). The ways in which communities attempt to confront and change language ideologies through direct intervention provide extremely interesting examples of social process. In all cases, participant/observation ethnographic methodology is central.

Each of these approaches raises problems. For the third approach, many communities are resistant to studies and projects that do not contribute some specific results applicable to the community. Such feelings may be exacerbated when the focus of the study is an LMR effort: the community is struggling with the language, often in the context of a shortage of adequate applied expertise in linguistics and anthropology, so the presence of a researcher who is perceived as simply documenting the struggle, without contributing directly to the success of the project, can lead to negative feelings.

Effective evaluations of community and academic efforts can also be problematic, due to the interests of both the community and the researcher. In the case of both, grant money has frequently been obtained for the purpose of LMR and often both parties hope to continue obtaining such funding. In a field highly driven by ‘on the ground’ social outcomes and changes, there is a powerful incentive to over-report good results and under-report poor ones. Academics with long experience in this field are aware of pervasive ‘cherry-picking’ of good results and the production of “feel-good” stories that do not match the reality of the situation.

Even where an academic researcher may not be directly involved as a collaborator, communities are often resistant to evaluation efforts. LMR is extremely difficult, with high failure rates so far. Language shift is often a traumatic experience for communities. The demand for positive news is very high, and reporting of negatives can be extremely discouraging to all concerned, potentially even threatening community willingness to continue projects. The popular media, in particular, is full of misleading stories of language revival, which largely celebrate the effort and good intentions of the moment, with virtually no critical evaluation of results.

In addition to participant observation, other methodologies are used. Surveys and interviews are often employed, but must be treated with care (see ‘ideological clarification’ and ‘language ambivalence’ above). Language documentation methodologies are central to many projects. Education progress and outcomes assessments, via testing, are a growing and desperately needed component of this field: there remains a major shortage of such critical, quantitative evaluation. Teacher training and curriculum development are also often key contributions from academic practitioners.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Currently, the biggest gap in this field is the availability of language skills testing before, during, and after specific LMR projects, as well as actual language usage measurements. A great deal of work relies on self-reporting by speakers and learners, often in terms of vague criteria. Where language ideologies are positive, there are strong incentives to over-state knowledge and usage, and the opposite is also true.

Related to this is a need for better outside evaluation by granting agencies of the overall results of projects. Practitioners of LMR are aware that quite large amounts of grant money are devoted to unrealistic, predictably ineffective, or poorly carried out projects. This is not unexpected: the field itself is relatively new; the tasks involved (socio-cultural and ideological manipulation) are enormously difficult to achieve in any kind of planned way; the success of projects ultimately hinges on the totality of day-to-day, moment-by-moment behavior and motivation of the majority of individuals in a community, making change much harder to achieve than in the case of medical interventions, economic loan
programs, targeted human resource development, or many other projects where relatively
discrete locations, individuals, or behaviors are involved; and LMR involves collaborations
between academic personnel and communities, where the production of academic knowl-
edge is not the primary goal.

Finally, the tension between activism and academic study that most LMR work involves
needs to be much more carefully examined and considered from theoretical perspectives.

**Future Directions**

There is no reason that LMR must be conceived only in terms of the classic goal of first-
language fluency within the community. Given the large number of obstacles facing many
communities around the world, it appears likely that LMR efforts will fail in quite a number
of cases, at least in terms of this goal. It may be more reasonable for communities to set a goal
of continued use of the language in just a few domains. These can often be domains with
high symbolic value (prayers, songs, ceremonies, personal introductions, personal names, place
names). In many Native American communities, these are precisely the last domains where the
language is currently used. With such limited usage, there is no way that fluent speakers can
continue to be produced, so the language in these domains may either be memorized or highly
formulaic in the future, or limited sets of vocabulary and structure specific to the target domain
might be learned. Alternately, these domains could come to use a simplified version of the lan-
guage, learned by certain individuals especially involved in the domains, though possibly not by
all, or most, of the community.

Another domain that might be a focus is basic familiarity with vocabulary and common
phrases, perhaps taught in school. Fluency is not needed for languages to retain high sym-
boitic value, nor to maintain at least some links to the linguistic past. Where large amounts of
natural discourse have been recorded, another potential goal would be passive access (perhaps
enhanced by subtitles, bilingual editions, and annotations), which would allow traditional nar-
ratives, speeches, and other genres to remain alive for future generations.

While many or most communities would likely be disappointed at the thought of their lan-
guage becoming a Latin or an Old English, those languages and literatures continue to play a
vibrant role in modern culture, even millennia after their speakers have passed away. This is not
to suggest that this is the necessary or only future of endangered languages but a more diverse
and realistic discussion of possible futures would often be beneficial, and indeed, can actually
invigorate language efforts. When the only goal under discussion is fluency for all members of
the community, or return to daily usage of the local language, a combination of ambivalence
about the goals, and despair at the likelihood of reaching them given current conditions, can
lead to gloom, mourning, and frustration. This can actually debilitate potentially useful lan-
guage maintenance and documentation efforts in communities where classical revitalization
faces overwhelming obstacles.

Emerging new technologies will almost certainly play an increasing role in LMR efforts. The
use of the technologies themselves is proliferating rapidly, from learning software for Navajo,
Chitimacha, and other languages, produced by the private company Rosetta Stone, to the use of
sites such as YouTube and Facebook by numerous individuals. The potential for new domains
of usage and entire new communities organized around and through these means is enormous.

Finally, it may be that the classic goals of LMR are impossible except in a few exceptional
circumstances – this remains to be seen. More narrowly, attempting to accomplish these goals
as part of direct interventions in which academic researchers from a formal field called ‘LMR’
play a major role may prove to be a vast over-estimation of the potential of academic expertise
to effect social change, especially in a domain where the issue that must be confronted involves collective individual behaviors dispersed across the entire realm of social life.

Related Topics

7 Language Ideologies (Kroskrity); 8 Social Subordination and Language (Huayhua); 9 Language Socialization (Paugh); 10 Studying Language Acquisition in Different Linguistic and Cultural Settings (Stoll); 11 Language Socialization and Marginalization (García–Sánchez); 19 Language and Political Economy (McElhinny); 22 Language in the Age of Globalization (Jacquemet); 29 Language Endangerment and Revitalization Strategies (Brittain, MacKenzie); 30 The Politics of Language Endangerment (Meek).

References


Further Reading and Resources

There are dozens and perhaps hundreds of websites devoted to the LMR. One that is especially recommended for Native American languages is: www2.nau.edu/jar/TIL.html.

An earlier text that provides a world-wide perspective on LMR from an applied, community-oriented perspective is Hinton and Hale 2001.
A more recent book that covers one particular LMR project in detail (Aanaar Saami in northern Scandinavia), again with a very applied, community-oriented perspective, but also includes numerous “info boxes” at the end with extensive references to virtually every major sub-topic within LMR, is Olthuis, Kivelä, and Skutnabb-Kangas 2013.


A recent book that looks carefully at the anthropological issues surrounding LMR in one community in Canada is Meek 2010.