Languages Endangerment and Revitalization Strategies

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1 Introduction

Linguists believe that there are between 6,000 and 7,000 living languages in the world today (Grenoble and Whaley 2006). At least half of these are endangered and are not predicted to survive the twenty-first century (Crystal 2000). When a language ceases to be spoken, it is referred to as a dead (or extinct) language.1 A living language is a dynamic system of communication, which is transmitted from generation to generation, changing over time as it adapts to meet new communicative needs. Generally speaking, a language is considered endangered when the likelihood arises of it ceasing to be used in this manner. The downward slide from full vitality toward death is referred to as language decline. Death is not the inevitable end point of decline, but it is a possibility if the process is not arrested. In this chapter we present an overview of the causes of, and responses to, language decline. We focus on the issues we feel best able to address given our experience and training, referring the reader onward to the relevant literature for those issues that have been dealt with comprehensively by other authors.2 We begin with a word about what we mean when we use the term “endangered” with reference to languages.

A commonly used measure of language vitality is the five-way classification system developed by Kincade (1991: 160–163).3 This system, and others that exist, make divisions based primarily on speaker numbers. Endangered languages occupy the mid-point on Kincade’s scale. Below we present David Crystal’s summary of Kincade’s classification system:

- **viable languages**: have population bases that are sufficiently large and thriving to mean that no threat to long-term survival is likely;
- **viable but small languages**: have more than approx. 1,000 speakers, and are spoken in communities that are isolated or with a strong internal organization, and aware of the way their language is a marker of identity;
- **endangered languages**: are spoken by enough people to make survival a possibility, but only in favourable circumstances and with enough community support;
- **nearly extinct languages**: are thought to be beyond the possibility of survival, usually because they are spoken by just a few elderly people;
extinct languages: are those where the last fluent speaker has died, and there is no sign of any revival.

Crystal (2000: 20–21)

Of these five categories, only viable languages are not threatened. We will use the term endangered in a broader sense to refer to languages that are viable but small, endangered or nearly extinct. We mean, quite generally, any living language that is not indisputably viable. We take Cree, for example, with 87,000 speakers (Statistics Canada 2006), to be viable but small and thus endangered to some degree. Although Cree has many more than 1,000 speakers, we consider it to be a small language by virtue of the fact it is generally spoken in isolated communities by people who are “aware of the way their language is a marker of identity”. As Brittain and MacKenzie (2012) explain, Cree cannot be described as a viable language, nor does it fit well into the endangered category.

Kincade’s classification reveals the correlation that exists between speaker numbers and language vitality: the lower the speaker numbers, the more endangered the language. Generally speaking, this is true, though, as we will see in section 5, speaker numbers are not the only factor considered in determining the vitality of a given language. It will suffice to say for the moment that there are languages that have several millions of speakers yet face an uncertain future. For example, although there are an estimated 4.25 million speakers of Tibetan living in the People’s Republic of China (henceforth China), concern has been expressed over the future of this language (among others, Tourndre 2003) as it faces considerable pressure from Mandarin Chinese. Although legislation exists to prioritize Tibetan in much of the territory in which Tibetans live (e.g., in the Tibetan Autonomous Region), in practice, increasingly, Mandarin is widely used as the principal language of education, commerce, and the work place. Conversely, there are languages that have relatively low speaker numbers that are not necessarily (highly) endangered (e.g., Cree): each situation is unique and must be evaluated in light of the constellation of circumstances affecting the people who speak it. This fact notwithstanding, speaker numbers are important, so let us consider the conditions under which a language would lose speakers.

Broadly speaking, this happens either when speakers of a given language fall victim to some catastrophic event resulting in loss of life (e.g., genocide or famine), or when people abandon the language they grew up speaking in favour of a new language. This latter scenario, referred to as language shift (Fishman 1991), is the most common underlying cause of language decline today. Most, if not all, cases of language shift involve moving from a small language to one that is larger (in speaker numbers). It is not immediately obvious why people would go to the trouble of replacing one language with another, but in identifying the underlying causes of language shift, we uncover the strategies required to revitalize declining languages. We provide more in-depth discussion of these two related issues in section 4. Over the past several decades that language loss has become a focus of concern, strategies have been developed to address the issue: language maintenance strategies are designed to halt language decline, preventing further loss, and language revitalization strategies, with a rather more ambitious goal, are aimed at reversing decline, moving a language from a state of endangerment to one less precarious. While technically maintenance and revitalization strategies can be differentiated in terms of projected outcome, in practice they are often the same. For this reason we do not distinguish between the two; we will refer to any set of measures employed to address language decline as revitalization strategies.

2 Historical Perspectives

As long ago as 1925, in the first issue of the journal Language, the American linguist Leonard Bloomfield made reference to the loss of the indigenous languages of America:
one may mention the American Indian languages, which are disappearing forever, more rapidly than they can be recorded.

Bloomfield (1925: 4)

The principal response to language loss in the early twentieth century was documentation, the compilation of dictionaries, grammars and texts for specific languages (and, where relevant, their various dialects). To this day, documentation remains the cornerstone of language revitalization; more generally, within the discipline of linguistics high priority is given to the goal of documenting every human language. The more endangered a language is, however, the more urgent is the need to document it.

In the 1970s a more organized and creative response to language loss evolved in many parts of the world (Janse 2003, Wurm 2001). To documentation as a response were added a variety of new strategies aimed at turning around the fate of declining languages. These new approaches to saving languages laid the foundation for the relative proliferation of organizations and projects that have characterized the field from the 1990s onwards. Wurm (2001: 8) observes:

About 1970, there started a re-awakening of a feeling of ethnic identity among speakers of small and minority languages in quite a few parts of the world, with speakers of such languages taking an increasing interest in them, and being more and more concerned about their preservation and maintenance. This coincided in the 1970s and later, with a change of attitudes of speakers of dominant metropolitan languages, and government policies guided by them, from negative to positive or at least neutral in several important areas in the world, such as Australia, Japan, Canada, parts of Europe, (e.g. Britain), Scandinavia, the former Soviet Union after the collapse of communism (in particular in Siberia), and quite recently also in Italy.

Joshua Fishman, founder and editor of the International Journal of the Sociology of Language, was an early contributor to the field, publishing a number of influential works (Fishman 1987, 1991, 2000). Other early contributions came from Denison (1977), Dorian (1977, 1981, 1986) and Edwards (1985). Dorian (1989) brings together the work of a number of researchers in the field, more than a third of whom tackle the difficult subject of how the grammars of declining languages change (language obsolescence). By the 1980s, work highlighting the plight of specific endangered languages was appearing, drawing attention to the scale of the problem and to the need for an organized response (among others, Elmendorf 1981, Schmidt 1985). With the 1990s and the advent of the internet came a venue well suited to the fast-moving target that is the study of endangered languages, and the founding of many of the major not-for-profit advocacy organizations. In 1995, in the United States, the Endangered Languages Fund (ELF, www.endangeredlanguagefund.org) was instituted; 1996 saw the creation in the United Kingdom of the Foundation for Endangered Languages (FEL, www.ogmios.org); Terralingua (www.terralingua.org), the focus of which is the preservation of biological and cultural diversity in general (language included), was founded in 1996. The 1990s also saw the beginning of legal action to protect the rights of speakers of endangered languages. The idea of linguistic rights was first formalized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on December 10, 1948 in reaction to the events of the Second World War. A number of other important documents have since been formulated, notably the 1996 Barcelona Universal Declaration on Linguistic Rights. As any quick search of the internet reveals, there are now a large number of bodies devoted to saving endangered languages, many of which are grassroots community-based organizations.
We conclude this section with a brief mention of one of the earliest and still one of the most prominent associations involved in saving languages: SIL International (henceforth SIL). Founded in 1934, SIL is a Christian missionary organization, the principal goal of which is to translate the Bible into every language. As the basic toolkit of the translator is a dictionary and a grammar, SIL was one of the earliest to specialize in language documentation. It is now a leader in the development of tools for language documentation and translation, and is, consequently, prominent in the field of language revitalization. The SIL on-line inventory of the world’s languages, *Ethnologue* (www.ethnologue.com), has become the de facto global watchdog of language vitality. Contemporary linguistic enquiry is a science and, like all scientists, linguists are motivated to pursue knowledge in their field simply for the sake of contributing to the pool of scholarship. The scientific community in general is uneasy with motivations other than this. It is not surprising, then, that the prominent role a religiously motivated organization like SIL occupies in the field of language revitalization is the subject of ongoing debate within the linguistic community.8

3 Critical Issues and Topics

The first, and arguably the most important, question to address in discussing endangered languages is: Why should we care about language loss? If we see language shift as merely the replacement of one system of communication with another, there is no case to be made for revitalization. Language shift is, however, much more than this, as language and culture are so intimately bound to one another. Cree writer and director Jules Koostachin explores this interconnectedness in her 2010 documentary film *Remembering Inninimowin*, which provides a very personal perspective on language loss. Language shift is, however, much more than this, as language and culture are so intimately bound to one another. Cree writer and director Jules Koostachin explores this interconnectedness in her 2010 documentary film *Remembering Inninimowin*, which provides a very personal perspective on language loss.9 Reflecting on the film-making process, Koostachin (2013: 76) observes: “Inninimowin carries the traditional knowledge, customary laws, identity, spirituality, and everything that is sacred to the Inninuwak [the Cree people]; it embraces our ancient stories, our ceremonial practices, and the ancestral teachings originating from the Mushkegowuk area”. More generally, it is not difficult to make the case that any reduction of the world’s linguistic diversity is an impoverishment of our common heritage as a species; among others, see Crystal (2000: 27–67), Hale (1992a, 1992b, 1998), Hinton (1994, 2001), Mithun (1998), Nettle and Romaine (2000: 10–23) and Woodbury (1998).

Other issues and topics we regard as critical we deal with in subsequent sections of this chapter. In section 4 we discuss the causes of language decline, and responses to it (revitalization strategies). In section 5 we provide a brief overview of methodological frameworks used to assess language vitality, and we conclude, in section 6, by making five recommendations for future action in the field.

4 Current Contributions and Research

Causes of Language Shift

Language death is not a phenomenon unique to the contemporary world. We know from historical records that many once vibrant languages are no longer spoken (Ancient Greek, Latin, Ancient Egyptian, etc.). Language death is normal, in other words. What is unprecedented is the current scale of the phenomenon, the alarming rate at which linguistic diversity is diminishing. An urgent question to address must then be: What are the causes of language shift?

Let us first rule out the possibility that some languages are intrinsically better than others, and that language shift is the result of people choosing to replace an “inferior” language with
one that is “superior”. Although languages differ from one another in terms of vocabularies and grammars, all languages are equally good systems of communication: this is taken to be axiomatic within the field of linguistics. We might prefer one make of car over another because we favour a more powerful, fuel-efficient engine, but we take “the machinery” of each language, the inventory of words and the grammar rules by which these are assembled into meaningful utterances, to be optimally designed for the purpose of communication. No language falls into decline because it is not a very good language, just as no language thrives because it is. Let us consider what factors contribute to a language becoming very successful – having hundreds of millions of speakers. In doing so we can see how, in the absence of these factors, a language can lose ground.

The most successful three languages in the world today are Mandarin Chinese with 848 million speakers, Spanish with 399 million, and English with 335 million. Each of these languages has at least one nation to call its own: respectively, these are China, Spain and England. All three languages are also spoken by millions of people in other countries and in many cases they enjoy official language status, so they are used for government administration, education, commerce, and so on. As official languages they accrue support and prestige that advantages them even further over any smaller competing languages. Mandarin, Spanish and English coexist with smaller languages in many countries. Most Cree speakers, for example, are now bilingual in English, one of Canada's two official languages. The larger official language opens the door to further education and to a wider range of employment and business opportunities. The smaller Aboriginal language, which is not the language of wider communication in Canada, can be used in fewer contexts, even while, we stress, it is no less good, intrinsically, than English or any other language. People move themselves and their children toward the larger language for pragmatic reasons, to secure equal access to opportunities. The smaller language may lose ground as it comes to be used in a diminishing number of everyday situations (domains). To exacerbate the problem, while the smaller language often faces decline in an environment of linguistic diversity, the larger language thrives in its role as regional lingua franca. The geographical area occupied by an endangered language, by contrast, never coincides with the national boundaries of a country; such languages coexist with one or more larger languages. From this it follows that endangered languages tend not to have official status. In cases where an endangered language is an official language, official status is likely to have been designated in an effort to revitalize a declining language that is a significant marker of national identity. A good example of this latter situation is Irish (Gaelic), the first official language of the Republic of Ireland. Language shift is a particular problem for populations who are bilingual in languages of unequal vitality, as in the case of speakers of small (endangered) languages where the second language is a larger language of wider communication (e.g., Cree-English bilinguals). In these situations of unequal competition, the smaller language is not necessarily doomed to marginalization, but the potential certainly exists as the domains in which it is used are encroached on by the larger language. In sum, language shift tends to occur in situations where more than one language is available, and people make the shift when they come to perceive that the larger language affords them wider access to opportunities. Although the decision to shift may appear to be voluntary, it is in fact made in direct reaction to external pressure. No language shift is entirely voluntary.

People shift from one language to another because the new language is, very generally speaking, more beneficial to them in some way. Hinton (2001: 3) observes that a language “that is not a language of government, nor a language of education, nor a language of commerce or of wider communication is a language whose very existence is threatened in the modern world”. The people who speak smaller languages may come to perceive them as a hindrance to their
advancement in the world, or to that of their children. In theory, a language can be lost within a single generation if there is widespread displacement of it in the home environment and children are raised in a new language. This breakdown in intergenerational transmission can result in rapid language shift. A language that is no longer learned by children is referred to as moribund (Krauss 1992); moribund languages are in a serious state of decline. In Wurm’s (1998) system of language vitality classification, the next step after moribund is extinct.

In some cases it is very obvious that the decision to shift is made under extreme duress. The suppression of language, an important marker of national or cultural identity, is a tool commonly wielded in the colonial context where the goal is to oppress and assimilate “troublesome minorities”. The notorious residential school system of Canada, for example, created an abusive environment in which Indigenous Canadians were forced to stop speaking their languages and to adopt instead English or French (Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). An estimated 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Métis children were forced to attend the 130 schools that operated in Canada throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the last closing in 1996 (A history of residential schools in Canada, CBC documentary, 2008).

As Koostachin (2013: 75) points out, the term “language loss” fails to describe the devastating impact of the residential school system on Canada’s Aboriginal languages: this is not language loss but language severance, a deliberate and abrupt cut in transmission. The psychological trauma suffered by survivors of residential schools reverberates down through the generations, a legacy that continues to feed the decline of the country’s Aboriginal languages. It is this legacy that is explored by Koostachin in Remembering Inninimowin. As a young child she left the Cree-speaking community into which she was born, and moved south to Ottawa with her family. Although her mother’s first language was Cree, she was a survivor of a residential school, and chose to raise her children in English. Her feelings toward her own language and culture came to be so intimately bound up with the abusive environment of the school that she decided not to pass the language on to her children. This family’s story is a common one: we have heard similar personal stories told by Inuit elders in Labrador, now among the last few hundreds of speakers of the dialect of Inuktitut that is unique to the region. While in these cases the decision not to pass the language on to the next generation ostensibly lies with the speaker, coercion lies at the root of the decision.

In practice, language shift is likely to be the result of more than one factor, some quite obvious, others perhaps harder to articulate. In some cases speakers of a language for which little formal documentation exists may undervalue their language, perhaps feeling that it “has no grammar”. Just about any library you search through is likely to have at least one shelf full of English grammars, but there are still languages that have not been documented, and for these there is no book of rules. A commonly held misconception is that if there is no grammar book for a given language, there is no grammar. The fact is, there is no such thing as a language that does not have a grammar. The grammar is the mental set of rules a speaker uses to produce and understand his or her language. When these rules are presented in book form, we refer to the book as “a grammar”. The absence of a grammar book can be taken by a speaker as evidence that his or her language is structurally deficient. While this seems unlikely to be a sufficient catalyst to shift languages, it can be a contributing factor that stacks the odds against the survival of the smaller language. For this reason, we feel it is important to create written grammars and dictionaries for endangered languages, and to make oral literatures available as written texts, in the original language, and in translation to reach a wider audience. A well-documented language that has a literature of its own acquires prestige among its speakers as well as among members of the dominant culture who do not speak the language.

We close this discussion by considering two situations that encourage language shift, which have arisen as people have become more mobile. We see this in situations of urban migration,
with movement occurring from smaller communities that speak an endangered language to
town centres where the language of the dominant culture prevails. The new arrivals are moti-
vated to adopt the language of the culture into which they move. We also see the conditions
for language shift displayed in what we will call “two-language homes”. Take the case of a
home where one parent is a Mandarin speaker, the other a French speaker – if this family lives
in Germany, the language of the home, in which the children will be raised, will be German.
This is the only practical solution in this situation. When the two parental languages are endan-
gered, however, the shift contributes to decline. Drawing again on examples we are aware of in
Canada, a speaker of Cree and a speaker of Ojibwe (both are Algonquian) who share a home,
for example, are more likely to adopt English as the home language than either Aboriginal lan-
guage, creating an English environment for their children. In Newfoundland we find the end
result of this process: in the Mi’kmaq community of Miawpukek, the shift to English began
during the twentieth century with the marriage of (mostly) non-native men and Mi’kmaq
women. This created English-medium households, a situation that resulted in the decline of the
Aboriginal language to the point that today there remain only two elderly fluent speakers in the
community (Jeddore 2000).

Having considered some of the principal causes of language shift, we now turn our attention
to some of the measures that can be taken to revitalize a declining language.

**Responses to Language Decline**

It is the fundamental right of the speaker to determine what becomes of his or her language and
so the decision to address language decline comes in the first place from the speech community.
Careful planning, tailoring the response to the specifics of the situation, is then crucial, with time
running out and financial and human resources generally being scarce. We have already discussed
documentation as an important tool in the fight to save languages. As this work has been the
focus of our professional lives, we begin this section by making some additional observations on
the importance of good documentation. We then discuss a number of other revitalization strate-
gies that are often implemented in tandem with documentation. We recommend to the reader

Good documentation of a language, in all the principal dialects involves the creation of a
comprehensive dictionary and grammar. Additionally, as many different kinds of texts as pos-
sible should be recorded. We use the term “text” broadly to refer to any linguistic performance,
whether written or captured in audio-visual format. Ideally, a record should be made of all the
many different ways people use language. Thorough documentation takes years to complete
and requires collaboration between speakers and linguists, the latter usually bringing to a project
funding, training (for members of the speech community), access to technology, and access to
the wider community of language activists. If documentation is thorough, even if a language
dies, the record that survives allows for scholarly study. It also opens up the possibility of lan-
guage revival – bringing an extinct or moribund language back into everyday usage – a process
that is referred to as language reclamation. The best-known and most successful case of language
reclamation is Modern Hebrew, which was revived from moribund to become Israel’s first
language. A smaller-scale and more recent example is the reclamation of the Massachusetts lan-
guage Wôpanââik (Eastern Algonquian), which was initiated in the 1990s with the establishment
of the Wôpanââik Language Reclamation Project, a collaboration of the Wôpanââik Nation and
linguists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Next we consider the total immersion model of revitalization, an appropriate strategy to
apply in the case of languages that have become moribund. Total immersion programs create
an environment in which the endangered language is used exclusively, allowing the re-establishment, albeit on a small scale, of intergenerational transmission. Early childhood language immersion programs, so-called language nests, take advantage of the fact that children are proficient language learners (Krashen 1998). Hinton (2011: 298–299) provides a comprehensive overview of the history of language nests, beginning with their first implementation in the late 1970s and early 1980s in New Zealand and Hawaii. One of a number of strategies employed in the revitalization of Māori (Austronesian, New Zealand), the Māori Te Kōhanga Reo program (King 2001) has been the inspiration for numerous similar programs (Hawaiian Pūnana Leo). Andersen and Johns (2005) describe a language nest program initiated in 2001 in the Labrador community of Hopedale. The nest was one of several initiatives adopted by the community in an effort to reverse language shift for Labrador Inuktut, a moribund dialect of Inuktitut. Although a good language nest is guaranteed to produce young speakers of the endangered language, careful planning and long term investment is required to ensure that the children have life-long opportunities to use the language; ideally they will go through all levels of education in the language, and then go on to use it in their place of employment. Committing to a program like this is, clearly, a serious undertaking that requires expertise and funding.

The Master-Apprentice program, developed in 1992 to address critical decline among the languages of California, focuses on the adult as the language learner. This now widely adopted model is essentially a one-on-one language immersion program where fluent speakers (masters) are partnered with committed learners (apprentices) for a set number of hours a week in an immersion environment fashioned out of everyday life. The ultimate goal is for the apprentice to become fluent enough to pass the language on in their own home, to re-establish intergenerational transmission. The Mentor-Apprentice Program offered by the First Peoples’ Cultural Council Language Program in the Canadian province of British Columbia is a good example of this model. The COOL project (Cayuga: Our Oral Legacy), which supports the highly endangered Iroquoian language Cayuga (spoken in Ontario), offers both language nests and Master-Apprentice programs. Clearly, these two strategies complement one another and are best offered in tandem with one another.

For less critically endangered languages, partial immersion or bilingual programs are appropriate. In this model, school children are offered education in the smaller language some of the time – for a certain number of hours per week throughout their schooling, say, or for all classes in just the first few years. The rest of the time, the language of instruction is the larger language, the wider language of communication. We find such arrangements in a number of Cree-Innu-Naskapi communities in Canada, for example. In these programs, the home is still regarded as the environment in which the child learns the language so the child is presumed to be starting his or her education already speaking it. In situations where the home does not offer a learning environment, the endangered language should be offered as a second language. A problem we have noticed is that, in situations of language decline, within a single community there can be significant variation in the extent to which the smaller language is used in the home. In homes where a shift from, say, Cree to English is underway, children can arrive in a Cree-medium class unable to cope and will quickly fall behind through no fault of their own. In short, within a single community it is often the case that the partial bilingual model is appropriate for some children, while others need to learn the language as a second language. It is crucial, in our opinion, that both systems be made available and for educators in bilingual communities to assess the language skills of children entering school so they can be streamed into the appropriate system. The creation of these assessment tools is usually a collaborative effort between community educators and academic linguists and educators.
5 Main Research Methods

A methodological framework is required in order to systematically identify types of language endangerment, and measure the extent of decline. We began this chapter (section 1) by considering Kincade’s five-way classification system, according to which Mandarin Chinese, English and Spanish, the world’s top three languages, are clearly viable. But what tools do we have at our disposal to determine degrees of language endangerment? How do we distinguish between Kincade’s languages that are small but viable, endangered, and nearly extinct? And how do we make finer distinctions within each of these categories? We have already noted that absolute speaker numbers provide no more than an approximation as to language vitality. We need a systematic way to measure degrees of decline in order to design the most effective response. As Grenoble and Whaley (2006: 3) put it, “[a] language spoken by several thousand individuals on a daily basis presents a much different set of options for revitalization than a language that has a dozen native speakers who rarely use it”. UNESCO (2003) recommends assessing language vitality by investigating the following nine areas:

1. intergenerational transmission;
2. absolute numbers;
3. proportion of speakers within total population;
4. trends in existing language domains;
5. response to new domains and media;
6. materials for language education and literacy;
7. governmental and institutional language policies, including official status and use;
8. community members’ attitudes toward their own language;
9. amount and quality of documentation.

UNESCO 2003, as presented in Grenoble and Whaley (2006: 4)

We touch on some of these issues in this chapter but we refer the reader to Grenoble and Whaley 2006: 3–13 for comprehensive discussion of all nine criteria.

6 Recommendations for Practice and Future Directions

We close our discussion of endangered languages and revitalization with five recommendations for future practice.

Technology

Technology offers significant potential for the promotion of small languages. To maintain language vitality the focus must be on youth, who are also the primary users and developers of technology. The language should be available in forms that are accessible and appealing to everyone, but the focus, we suggest, should be on young people. Over the past 45 years dictionaries for the various dialects of East Cree and Innu have evolved from unpublished word lists to comprehensive published print versions, and these are now available as downloadable apps that are updated on a continual basis. Accompanying images and sound files that illustrate dialect pronunciations allow speakers with low literacy skills to search for words via English or French and to simultaneously read and hear new words. In the 2013 launch of the 27,000 word Innu dictionary in the Innu community of Sheshatshiu, Labrador, high school students were introduced to the book version and the app version. Although the students welcomed both forms
of the dictionary, it was the app that captured their interest. Using the kinds of technologies young people are comfortable with to make the language accessible should, we feel, be a focus in the future.

**Speaker Language Activists**

We would also like to see many more speakers (and “semi-speakers”) of small languages becoming language activists – the people who lead language revitalization projects. There are at present not nearly enough opportunities for these important people to undertake the training they need to assume this responsibility. Speakers have more credibility within their own communities than the academic linguists, generally community outsiders, who tend to head the revitalization teams. There are not many speaker activists because so few places exist offering appropriate training programs. An example of the kind of program we would like to see more of is the Community Linguist Certificate offered by the Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute (CILLDI), an initiative established at the University of Alberta in 2000. Participants require no previous knowledge of linguistics, but will be “speakers or semi-speakers of their Indigenous language, and they will have an abiding interest in preventing the loss of their language”. Another model program of this type is the Certificate in Aboriginal Language Revitalization, a community–university initiative offered by the University of Victoria’s Department of Linguistics and the First Nations En’owkin Centre. The kind of training an academic linguist undergoes, with its focus on mastering theories of linguistic analysis, requires a commitment of years, usually culminating in a Ph.D. The academic linguist may be schooled in the theory and practice of revitalization strategies, but this is generally viewed as a secondary area of specialization. The speaker activist only requires a basic knowledge of formal linguistics. Committing to a regular linguistics program would not only be a waste of time, it would not provide the appropriate training. In any language revitalization project, there will always be a role for the academic linguist as consultant, but ideally the speaker activist will lead the project.

**The Primacy of Literacy**

We also recommend taking a critical look at the current attention focused on literacy in promoting endangered languages. Documentation work generally presupposes either a community that is already (partially) literate, or one that will become literate. The language is not only recorded for posterity, but so that speakers can use the materials that are the end result of the work as reading material and models for writing. Literacy is viewed as an important tool in the fight against language loss. The promotion of literacy, however, can be very costly, diverting scarce funds away from initiatives that could promote the spoken language. This is especially a danger where the revitalization project relies heavily on the school system. If there is no common writing system, the materials will have to be produced multiple times, in each of the community orthographies. A common writing system allows for the economic production of materials, but it is not always feasible to pursue this goal. Writing systems tend to serve as markers of community or dialect identity and selecting one to the exclusion of the rest can generate hostility. The need to have a system that covers as much territory as possible must always be balanced against the strength of community feelings on the subject. A great deal of energy has been expended on bringing consistency to communities that use more than one writing system, and to creating systems for languages that have none. Care must be taken to ensure that the time and energy expended on creating, refining, or teaching a writing system does not detract from the primary goal of revitalization, which is to ensure that people use the language to speak
to each other. It may, we suggest, be time to look to developing models that focus more on promoting the spoken language.

Improving the Promotion of Literacy

If literacy is indeed the goal, we recommend improving literacy promotion by producing more materials. We have found that, for example, in programs where Cree and Innu literacy is the goal, there is not enough reading material available to achieve the objectives. Production should be centralized to ensure that literacy materials reach the people who need them quickly and at a reasonable cost. One model that might be explored is to have a series of templates for a given language family into which specific languages, and dialects, can insert their own materials. For example, an Algonquian literacy materials organization could provide templates for all the languages/dialects in the family. Culture-appropriate illustrations and themes could be shared, and adaptations could be made as necessary. In order to make such a model work, a well-articulated policy or procedure should be developed to ensure contributors be properly acknowledged for their work.

The Promotion of Bilingualism

Finally, we would like to see the implementation of a campaign to raise awareness among populations who are bilingual in an endangered language and a larger language (e.g., Cree-English) as to the advantages of raising bilingual children. It is often felt that children raised in two languages become confused, learning neither well, and that it is better to expose them to just one. Bilingualism is frequently the scapegoat where any concern is raised over academic achievement in the schools. The (Quebec) Cree School Board recently overhauled their Cree-English bilingual education system to reduce the students’ exposure to Cree in the classroom (Faries et al. 2010). Community decisions like this bolster parents’ decisions to choose the larger language as the exclusive home language. A substantial body of research shows, however, that one language is not learned at the expense of another and that, moreover, bilingualism appears to enhance cognitive capacity: as early as 1985 Hakuta and Diaz found strong correlations between the degree to which an individual is bilingual and how well he or she scored in cognitive ability tests. Numerous subsequent studies have found that bilingual children perform cognitive tasks significantly better than their monolingual peers; Leikin (2012), for example, finds that early bilingualism in particular, combined with bilingual education, is a strong predictor of enhanced general and mathematical creativity in children. The results of this research should be made widely available, in an accessible format, to speakers of endangered languages. There would of course be no better person to communicate this information than the language activist community member.

Related Topics

21 Language and Nationalism (Haque); 28 Language Maintenance and Revitalization (Cowell); 30 The Politics of Language Endangerment (Meek).

Notes

1 We refer to languages being “spoken” in a general sense. It is not our intention in choosing this term to exclude from consideration the many sign languages that exist.

2 We have both worked (for the past 45 years for MacKenzie, the past 25 for Brittain) alongside speakers of the eastern-most dialects of the Cree-Innu-Naskapi dialect complex: East Cree and Naskapi, which are spoken in northern Quebec, and the Innu dialects of Labrador and Quebec’s Lower North Shore.
With speaker numbers in the neighbourhood of 98,000 (Statistics Canada 2006), the language as a whole is not endangered but many of the individual dialects are in decline (Brittain and MacKenzie 2012).

3 Similar models have been developed by Wurm (1998), whose categories are potentially endangered, endangered, seriously endangered, moribund, and extinct. Bauman (1980) identifies flourishing, enduring, declining, obsolete, and extinct.

4 For further discussion of language decline resulting from mass speaker death, we refer the reader to Crystal (2000: 70–76).

5 See also Winternans (2009) who describes discussions held at the 1st International Congress of Linguists (1928, The Hague) on the topic of organizing what he refers to as “a global strategy for endangered languages”. Lack of agreement among the participating organizations led to the endeavor eventually being shelved, but the fact that the discussions took place documents awareness of the issue in 1920s Europe.

6 Crystal (2000: 167–69) lists some of the major organizations.


8 Epps and Ladley (2009) and Dobrin (2009) provide an excellent overview of this debate in particular, and of the issue of ethics in the field in general.

9 Inninimowin (Cree) is referred to in the linguistic literature as Swampy Cree. Koostachin’s home community of Attawapiskat is in northern Ontario.

10 We refer the reader to David Crystal’s excellent overview of this important issue (Crystal 2010: 6–7).


12 Although Irish is spoken by relatively few Irish people as a first language (between 50,000 and 60,000 according to Crystal 2010), thanks to its official status it is spoken as a second language by in excess of 1.6 million of the country’s 4.5 million people.


15 Mi’kmaq (Algonquian) poet, the late Rita Joe, herself a residential school survivor, articulates the language loss she experienced in like manner: in her poem I lost my talk (Joe 1989), language is something that is taken from her in a deliberate act.

16 Many languages still do not have an orthography, and many speech communities have a stronger tradition of oral rather than written narrative.


20 At the Naskapi Jimmy Sandy Memorial School (Kawawachikamach, Quebec), for example, the language of instruction is Naskapi from pre-kindergarten to grade three. Instruction in English begins in a repeated grade three transition year, continuing through to secondary five. From grade three to secondary three, students take Naskapi language classes. Cf. http://www.csdb.qc.ca/jsms last accessed June 1, 2015.

21 By “semi-speakers” we mean members of an endangered speech community who are what Hale (2001: 385) refers to as “less-than-fully-fluent” speakers. Also referred to as “passive bilinguals”, they are unable to speak the language with any degree of fluency (and sometimes don’t speak at all), but have comprehension skills. Passive bilinguals have acquired some knowledge of the vocabulary and grammar of the language and are, typically, highly motivated to support it.


23 http://www.uvcs.uvic.ca/aspnet/Program/Detail/?codeCALR last accessed June 1, 2015.

References


Further Reading


