

Saving Languages

An Introduction to Language Revitalization

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1 Language revitalization as a global issue

1 Introduction

Over the past fifty years and with increasing frequency, innovative programs have appeared around the world with the aim of revitalizing languages that are at risk of disappearing due to declining numbers of native speakers. The nature of these initiatives varies as greatly as the languages that are their targets. In some instances, they are nearly national in scope, such as the efforts to preserve Irish, yet in other instances they involve small communities or even a handful of motivated individuals. Many of these programs are connected to claims of territorial sovereignty, though cultural sovereignty or a desire to maintain a unique ethnic identity is just as often the explicit goal. While in one context a revitalization effort may be centered around formal education, in another it may be focused on creating environments in which the language can be used on a regular basis.

Although tremendous variety characterizes the methods of and motives for reinvigorating languages, revitalization, as a general phenomenon, is growing and has become an issue of global proportion. There are now hundreds of endangered languages, and there are few regions of the world where one will not find at least nascent attempts at language revitalization. This comes as little surprise when considered in light of the confluence of several socio-historical factors. First, language death and moribundity (i.e. the cessation of children learning a language) are occurring at an exceptionally rapid rate. While the precise number of languages in the world is difficult to determine (see Crystal 2000:2–11 for a concise discussion), and predicting the total number of languages that will cease to be spoken is harder still (Whaley 2003), there is a general consensus that at least half of the world's 6,000–7,000 languages will disappear (or be on the verge of disappearing) in the next century. As Crystal (2000:19) points out, “To meet that time frame, at least one language must die, on average, every two weeks or so,” a startling fact, to say the least.

Whereas the phenomenon of language death has been present in all epochs, the rate of decline in linguistic diversity is probably unique to

our time, perhaps only rivaled by the loss of linguistic diversity believed to have happened during the agricultural revolution 10,000 years ago (e.g. see Maffi 2001). Given this high rate of language death, we must recognize that a significant proportion of communities in the world today are confronted with the loss of a language that has traditionally been an integral feature of their identity. In many such instances, efforts are being made to halt the process of language shift and to promote the usage of a heritage language.

The sheer number of threatened languages cannot alone explain the ever-expanding number of language revitalization initiatives. To this we must add a second major socio-historical shift, the general trend towards recognizing the rights of minorities, both as individuals and as groups, within modern nation-states. Particularly since the end of the Cold War, there has been a collapse of hegemonic patterns in many portions of the world that had actively, and explicitly, worked to suppress cultural difference, and as a consequence in many places ethnic groups and minorities have increased flexibility in pursuing their own political agendas (Kymlicka 1995). In a very real sense minority communities have been emboldened to pursue territorial, political, and cultural rights. Though this has meant a burgeoning number of ethnic conflicts (Moynihan 1993), it has also meant rethinking human rights at a basic level to include the protection of such things as the choice of language. Consider, as just one example, language from Article 5 of UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, which states: "All persons should therefore be able to express themselves and to create and disseminate their work in the language of their choice, and particularly in their mother tongue; all persons should be entitled to quality education and training that fully respect their cultural identity." Similar statements can be found in declarations from many transnational organizations, such as the European Union, the Organization for American States, and the Organization for African Unity, as well as in recent legislation in a number of countries. Though the effectiveness of these proclamations and laws in ensuring cultural rights is a matter of some debate, there is little doubt that they have encouraged ethnic communities around the world to pursue activities that assert their cultural identities, and these activities often include programs to promote heritage language use.

A less understood factor that has had a role in the increased interest in language revitalization is "globalization." Very broadly defined, globalization is "a process of increasing international integration of economic life" (Whaley 2003:969); it is characteristically accompanied by the adoption of neoliberal political structures, at least to some degree. As the process has transformed or eliminated traditional political and economic

barriers among nations, there has been a greatly enhanced ability for information, money, people, goods, and services to move between regions. Because of the political and economic might of the United States, it is hardly surprising that mass consumerism and American pop culture have now spread to most regions of the world.

Most discussions of globalization have concentrated on the modernizing and assimilatory effects that such forces have on communities, both big and small, as individuals in the communities are brought into the international economic system and are exposed with increasing regularity to languages of wider communication, the national culture of the state in which they are embedded and non-traditional economic habits. Much less examined is the fact that globalizing forces have triggered reacting forces as some people seek to assert, or better to reassert, their unique cultural identity. More often than not this effort to underscore uniqueness is represented by a "traditionalist" constituency within a community that finds itself interacting with a "modernizing" constituency which advocates greater integration with a regional, national, or international community. A great many language revitalization programs have emerged as a consequence of these dynamics. Since language is a visible and powerful indicator of group identity, it has accurately been recognized as an important way to maintain links with one's cultural past and to protect one's cultural uniqueness in the present.

This picture of broad social, historical, and economic trends that have prompted the appearance of numerous language revitalization programs is necessarily both simplified and incomplete, but it provides a general context for the implicit question underlying all portions of the book: How can language revitalization efforts be successful?

2 Assessing language vitality *capacity for survival*

Assessing and understanding language vitality is a complex enterprise, as a large number of intertwined factors enter into it, yet the degree of language vitality is the basic indicator used in determining the appropriate type of language revitalization program. 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. Moreover, assessing changes in language vitality over time provides the easiest measure of success for attempts to revitalize a threatened language.

As interest among linguists in issues of language endangerment has increased over the last two decades or so, there have been a number of different studies focusing on how to assess language vitality. One of the most comprehensive comes from the collaboration of linguists in

UNESCO's Ad Hoc Group on Endangered Languages.¹ They have worked together to create a document entitled *Language vitality and endangerment* (UNESCO 2003), which lists nine factors in language vitality. The UNESCO Ad Hoc Group is very clear that the nine factors need to be considered in conjunction with one another, a point which we also would like to underscore here. As we discuss in Chapter 2, the particulars of each individual language situation will mean that some of the factors are more relevant than others.

- Factor 1: Intergenerational language transmission
- Factor 2: Absolute number of speakers
- Factor 3: Proportion of speakers within the total population
- Factor 4: Trends in existing language domains
- Factor 5: Response to new domains and media
- Factor 6: Materials for language education and literacy
- Factor 7: Governmental and institutional language policies, including official status and use
- Factor 8: Community members' attitudes toward their own language
- Factor 9: Amount and quality of documentation

As is clear from this list, the first three factors have to do with the numbers of speakers of a language, as well as their distribution across generations and throughout the population. Factors 4–7 identify how and where the language is used. Factor 8 addresses perceptions about the value of a language by its speakers. Factor 9 identifies the material that has been produced about a language.

Even under quick review, it becomes clear why one cannot separate the influences of these factors from one another. For example, the use of the language in both new and existing domains (Factors 4 and 5) is very much dependent upon community attitudes, as well as governmental policies. Factor 9 is somewhat of an oddity in this list since the existence of language documentation is not an evaluating factor *per se* in assessing language vitality; reasonably good documentation exists for some languages that are extinct, whereas there is poor documentation for highly vital languages. Rather, the level of vitality helps in assessing the urgency for new language

¹ The document was vetted and refined in a working symposium held in Kyoto, Japan in November 2002. The group members who contributed to the document are listed in Appendix 3 of the UNESCO guidelines (UNESCO 2003): Matthias Brenzinger, Arienne Dwyer, Tjeerd de Graaf, Colette Grinevald, Michael Krauss, Osahito Miyaoka, Nicholas Ostler, Osamu Sakiyama, Maira E. Villalón, Akira Y. Yamamoto, and Ofelia Zepeda. Some readers may object to what would appear to be a heavy reliance on UNESCO guidelines in this section. We have used these guidelines as the starting point for our discussion precisely because they have been endorsed by a relatively large group of linguists from around the world.

documentation and, in addition, may influence decisions about the viability of a language for revitalization. Simply put, a seriously endangered language should be documented as quickly and as thoroughly as possible.² The more extensive the documentation, the easier revitalization (or even reclamation) will be in the future should a community desire it. This is not to say that documentation must necessarily precede revitalization, but rather that revitalization efforts rely on dictionaries and descriptive grammars, recorded speech, and so on.

For assessment purposes, the fundamental question for vitality is the size and composition of the speaker population. Intuitively, it would seem that the larger number of native speakers of a language, the more likely it is to be maintained and be healthy (Factor 2). However, a large number of speakers does not guarantee vitality because speaker population must be considered in relation to other speech communities. For example, nearly 200,000 people speak Tujia, a Tibeto-Burman language in southern China, a number that would place it well within the “safe” range for some measures of language endangerment (e.g. Krauss 1992). However, in nearly every community where the language is spoken, Tujia speakers are outnumbered by speakers of another language (typically a dialect of Chinese) by a ratio of 10:1. Indeed, only 3 percent of ethnic Tujia are able to speak the language, and probably less than half that number use it regularly. Clearly, Tujia is endangered despite a speaker population that dwarves most in the world. Therefore, absolute speaker numbers, though an important demographic, are not a good diagnostic for determining the vitality of a language.

At least equally significant is the percentage of the total population which can speak the target language (Factor 3); language shift is indicated if a large percentage of the (ethnic) population speaks a different language instead of the local language, as in the case of Tujia just described. Note that this does not mean people speaking one or more languages in addition to the local language; multilingualism is a reality for much of the world. Instead, Factor 3 is concerned with the percentage of the community which does or does not know the local language. The higher the percentage for a particular region, the greater the vitality of the language in most cases.³

² We consider language documentation to be one of the primary roles of linguists (see also Newman 2003). We discuss the relationship between documentation and revitalization in Chapter 3, section 8, and the role of the linguist in Chapter 7, section 7.

³ Though in general learning second (or third, or fourth) languages in addition to a local language does not serve as a good indicator of language shift, there are regions of the world where it does, particularly those where multilingualism is not the norm (e.g. the United States).

The intergenerational transmission of a language (Factor 1) is typically, and appropriately, used as a benchmark for whether a language will maintain its vitality into the indefinite future. In the broadest of terms, one finds three types of situations. In the first, all generations, including children, have fluent use of the language. In the second, the language is used by parents and grandparents but not the children, though children know the language; and in the third category, only the grandparent/elder generation would maintain knowledge of the language. This kind of characterization is helpful as a way to frame the issue of intergenerational transmission and to highlight the fundamental fact that only when children are acquiring a language does it stand much chance of long-term use. For a language to be vital, it must be actively used by children.

Intergenerational transmission, however, is not necessarily uniform across a speaker population. In one village children may regularly use a local language, but not in another. In one family children may be discouraged from using a local language, while next door it may be an expectation. In these ways, there may be a dwindling number of children overall who learn a language (not a good sign for long-term viability of the language), yet there are pockets of robust use (which may cause one to deem it vital). The dynamics of intergenerational transmission are perhaps more important to understand than any other relevant factor in assessing the need for language revitalization.

In light of this fact, we pause in our discussion of the UNESCO factors in assessing language vitality to present a more finely grained categorization system for intergenerational transmission. Krauss (1997) employs a helpful ten-way distinction.

- a the language is spoken by all generations, including all, or nearly all, of the children
- a- the language is learned by all or most children
- b the language is spoken by all adults, parental age and up, but learned by few or no children
- b- the language is spoken by adults in their thirties and older but not by younger parents
- c the language is spoken only by middle-aged adults and older, in their forties and up
- c- all speakers in their fifties and older
- d all speakers in their sixties and older
- d all speakers in their seventies and older
- d- all speakers in their seventies and older, and fewer than 10 speakers
- e extinct, no speakers

Given the caveat that there may not be uniform patterns across a speaker population, a language is healthy and has high vitality if ranked (a),

somewhat less so at (a–), and by level (b) is already endangered where revitalization is required if the language is to survive. As one goes down the scale, the language is increasingly endangered and closer to complete loss, making it more and more difficult to implement a revitalization effort.

Is such a detailed scale necessary in assessing language vitality for a particular situation? At some level perhaps the answer might be no, since it is quite clear that at stage (b) the language is already on a clear path towards moribundity. However, the scale (and others like it) have some important uses. First, it is helpful for indicating the comparative vitality of a language spoken in different places. For example, Inuit is robust and safe in Greenland, where nearly all children learn it (a), but varies in Canada from safe to endangered (a in the east, b in central, and c in the west of Canada), to Alaska (b–c), and in Russia, where Inuit is seriously endangered (d), with only a couple of remaining speakers (Krauss 1997:26). In some cases, such information can be employed to make decisions about where a language revitalization effort should be focused, or where fluent individuals are most likely to be found. Furthermore, the scale is a helpful guide in assessing the feasibility of different sorts of revitalization programs, a point we take up again in Chapter 7 and very important in determining the urgency for language documentation.

Returning to the factors in language vitality outlined by UNESCO, yet another diagnostic is the range of domains where the language is being used. Simply put, the “stronger” a language, the more domains in which it is found. Thus a healthy, vital language is used in a range of settings with a wide variety of functions, and the most healthy language would accordingly be a language used for all functions and purposes. Extinct languages are found at the opposite end of the spectrum, no longer spoken at all and used in no domains. (Note that there are some languages which are no longer utilized for conversational purposes, but are used in some domains, frequently religious. This suggests degrees of extinction, a matter we consider in section 3.) In between the two ends of the scale are a variety of intermediate stages, with languages used in limited settings. A prime example is provided in situations where individuals use one language primarily in the home and for casual social encounters, but another language as the primary means of communication at the workplace, at school, and in public and/or official settings.

Domains are often geographically determined, with one (local) language used in the local community, whether that be socially, in stores or service encounters, for educational purposes, and in forms of public address. A different language (one that is regionally or nationally dominant) is used outside of the community, and only this language is used for education, government and commerce outside of the local setting. It is common

for this to be a situation of stable bilingualism that can occur over a long period of time, with the use of each language having clearly defined domains.

The UNESCO guidelines for assessment recognize six levels of usage in existing language domains: (1) universal use; (2) multilingual parity; (3) dwindling domains; (4) limited or formal domains; (5) highly limited domains; and (6) extinct. Universal use refers to the active use of the language in all domains. Regardless of whether speakers are multilingual or not, they feel comfortable using the local language in any setting. Multilingual parity indicates the use of one or more dominant⁴ languages in official and public domains versus the use of non-dominant languages in private and more local domains. As was just noted, stable bilingualism often arises in this situation, and as a result it is not uncommon in many places in the world. It is somewhat misleading, however, to consider this multilingual *parity*, as the terms *dominant* and *non-dominant* suggest in and of themselves. The dominant language is generally favored by more people in absolute terms, while the non-dominant one almost always has a more restricted speaker base and in most cases is not learned as a second language by first-language speakers of the dominant language. Moreover, as UNESCO (2003) points out, the dominant language is often viewed as the language of social and economic opportunity. Therefore, there are pressures on speakers of the non-dominant language to shift to the dominant language, but not *vice versa*. Parity, then, must be understood to be a stable balance in domain use for individual speakers, and not as a descriptor of the more general relationship between the languages involved.

The next three levels represent incrementally decreasing use of the language, beginning with the category of dwindling domains. The local (i.e. non-dominant) language is used increasingly less, with the marked and significant shift occurring when parents cease to speak the language at home. This, of course, most often effectively ends intergenerational transmission, and children no longer learn the language. The next level is the use of the language in only limited or formal domains, such as religious ceremonies, rituals, and festivals. The domains included here often involve the elderly generation, and the UNESCO definition states that these limited domains may include use in the home where the elderly (grandparent) generation is present. One diagnostic of this level is that, although people may continue to understand the language, they cannot speak it. The next step beyond this is very limited domains, where the language is

⁴ The terms *dominant* and *non-dominant* are found in UNESCO (2003); see section 3 for our discussion of terminology.

used only on very restricted occasions, and only by particular community members (such as tribal or religious leaders, generally of the elderly generation). Here the use of the language is ritualized, although there may be people who have some memory of it. Finally, extinction occurs when the language is not used in any domains.

In cases of language attrition, a language has been moving along this scale, since it is used in fewer and fewer settings with fewer and fewer functions (and, usually, by fewer and fewer speakers). As this correctly suggests, the relationship between language and domains is a dynamic one for many local languages, and thus the trends of change are relevant. If a language is used in increasingly fewer domains, it is a sign of lessening vitality. Alternatively, if a language is used in an increasing number of domains, it shows signs of returning vitality and may even be gaining ground over other languages.

Related to the issue of current use in domains is the question of whether the language is used in new domains as they emerge (Factor 5; see section 1.2). If, for example, a store is established in an agrarian community for the first time, the relative vitality of a language is signaled in the choice of language use there. Is it the language used by the farmers with their families and in their work, or is it the language used when farmers leave the community and sell their produce at a market in a nearby town? The latter signals a greater stress on the local language; not only is a new language being brought into the daily experience of the community, but there is now present in the community a symbol that all spaces of economic exchange belong to the non-local language. As the actual number of domains increases, if use of the language does not expand into these new domains, that is a signal of declining vitality, for although the absolute number of domains in which it is used remains steady, the relative number has decreased.

New domains are often created in the modern world with the emergence of new technologies and media. Some local languages have been used in radio broadcasts around the world, far fewer in television broadcasts, and almost none in major films. As these media come to isolated regions, they become domains of usage that make quick inroads into a social space previously connected to local languages. For example, the advent of video rental trucks, which distribute videocassettes in Native American communities, has been cited as contributing to language attrition. These trucks have provided easier access to videotapes of major Hollywood productions to even relatively remote communities in the US, not only facilitating the spread of English but effectively creating yet another domain where the Native American language is not used. The internet offers another example of the emergence of a new domain which is accessible for some

communities in the world, in particular in Europe and North America. While the internet might potentially supply a creative way to increase local language use (indeed, many revitalization efforts see it in just this way), the fact remains that the internet, at this point, is overwhelmingly dominated by a handful of languages. Therefore, it is a difficult matter to co-opt it as a domain for local languages. Even if some web sites arise which employ a local language, speakers of the local language will make greater use of the internet in a non-local language. Thus, the presence of a language in any given domain does not in and of itself guarantee vitality. The greater consideration is how much the language is used in that particular domain: thirty-minute weekly radio broadcasts, a website, or a page in a newspaper which is otherwise written in the national language may have powerful symbolic value, but they do not translate into signs of high vitality.

A critical domain for language usage is education. In regions where a nationally (or regionally) administered education system exists, the languages of education become a key determinant of language use in other domains. When mandatory schooling occurs exclusively in a national language, the use of local languages almost inevitably declines. When local languages are part of the formal educational process, they typically maintain a higher degree of vitality, though here again the amount a specific language is used plays into the equation. Many schools which purport to have local language education teach the language as a secondary subject, and the curriculum as a whole is taught in a language of wider communication, yet "Education *in* the language is essential for language vitality" (UNESCO 2003).

In most cases – anywhere where formal schooling takes place – this requires literacy in the local language, and so the extent of literacy is yet another marker of language vitality (Factor 6). Ideally, for sustaining vitality in a local language, all subject matter needs to be taught in the language, and pedagogical materials must be available to teachers and students. This in turn mandates the existence (or development) of discipline-specific materials, which in turn requires technical terminology in the lexicon of the language. In terms of ranking the correlation between the availability of such materials and language vitality, again there is an overall continuum with a fully developed literacy on the one end, with the language used in writing and reading in all domains, especially education and governmental and other official business. In addition, a wide range of written materials exist and are used, such as literature, religious texts, newspapers, textbooks, dictionaries, and so on. On the other end of the scale is a lack of literacy, no orthography, and no written language. Identifying the different levels in between these two end points is complicated. UNESCO recognizes four intermediary levels. These focus on the

existence of written materials and the role of the schools in teaching literacy. In most basic terms, though, the fewer written materials, the less they are taught, the higher the level of endangerment.

There is, of course, a high degree of local variation in the development and use of literacy, as is clear in several case studies (Chapter 4) and is discussed in Chapter 5, where we focus on literacy. The existence of an orthography does not mean that the community has access to local language literacy, just as the existence of written materials does not ensure that they are being read. Some communities may have multiple orthographies, and multiple literacies. The picture is further complicated by the fact that in many cases of language attrition, part or even all community members may be literate in the language of wider communication but not in their own language; beliefs about the appropriateness of the local language for literacy may interfere with its development. At the same time, others may adapt their knowledge of literacy in the language of wider communication for use in the local language. In language attrition and endangerment, the potential and actual roles of different written languages need to be considered in assessing vitality and the role of literacy.

In addition to numbers of speakers, domains of use and degrees of literacy, attitudes toward a language are critical in assessing language vitality (Factor 8). We provide an overview of the possibilities here and discuss methods for obtaining data on language attitudes in Chapter 7. Language attitudes exist on multiple levels: at a national, governmental level; among the majority population (if there is one); and finally, at a local, community level. Governmental and institutional attitudes are often influenced by, and even determined by, the attitudes of the majority population. Moreover, these same attitudes can have an impact on how (minority) communities view themselves, their cultures, and their languages. The governmental attitudes are often reflected directly in language and education policies and in policies which determine the allocation of financial resources. They can be indirectly reflected in the media, which can manipulate perceptions of any given group and its language. Many nation-states see the value of a language in state building; the underlying idea is that a single language has a unifying effect and has great symbolic value. This stance has an impact on national policy, as it gives priority to only the national language. We consider such national-level variables in depth in Chapter 2, section 2.2. Here we outline UNESCO's framework for assessing the relationship between attitudes as articulated by governmental policy and language vitality.

UNESCO (2003) differentiates six levels of treatment of the local language vis-à-vis the national language: (1) equal support; (2) differentiated support; (3) passive assimilation; (4) active assimilation; (5) forced

assimilation; and (6) prohibition. Equal support is defined as *all* languages of a country being treated as assets, with explicit policies in place to encourage the maintenance of these languages. Though conceivable, and therefore worth including on the list, this strikes us as an ideal which is rarely maintained with regard to local languages. Even in situations where equal support of languages is codified in legislation or a constitution, actual government practices belie a very different set of objectives. The second level on the list, differentiated support, is more common; here “non-dominant” languages are protected by governmental policies but are not used in all the domains where the “dominant” or official language(s) are found. Instead, the local languages are more often used in private domains, often with encouragement from the government. Canada, though imperfectly, serves to illustrate this type. English and French are equally supported by the Canadian government; local languages receive varying degrees of support. Bilingual education is mandated nationwide for English and French. The government, however, does not promote the use of First Nations languages in school, such as Cree or Ojibwe, which are not recognized as official languages of Canada. Even so, there is a greater level of support for them in the form of federal funding and legal protections than in many countries.

Both of these levels can be distinguished from passive assimilation, whereby there are no governmental policies to assimilate minority groups, but similarly there are no policies of support, and so a dominant language functions, by tradition and convenience, as the language of wider communication. As a consequence, local languages do not enjoy prestige in most domains, nor are they used in domains where the government plays a significant role. The final three levels – active assimilation, forced assimilation, and prohibition – differ in terms of degree of governmental intervention to coerce people to give up their local language in favor of the approved official language. In all four of these levels, one expects to find declining vitality in local languages barring some sort of language maintenance or revitalization effort.

The ways in which the government addresses issues of language policy can have an impact on a group’s attitudes toward its own language. Local attitudes toward the local language are critical in language maintenance and revitalization; negative attitudes are often at least part of the motivation behind language shift (although governmental policies of any level of assimilation can play an active role as well, of course). For revitalization, ideally all members of the community will have a positive attitude toward their language and culture, but more often the attitudes will vary among different people. If most members have a negative attitude, it is difficult to imagine a successful revitalization program getting underway. Indeed, the

negative attitudes of any core group of people, even a numerically small one, can prove to be a major impediment to revitalization and to overall vitality. For this reason, we encourage assessing language attitudes before starting a revitalization program (see Chapter 7).

As we have seen, assessment of language vitality needs to take into account a complex set of interrelated factors: size of speaker community, intergenerational transmission, domains of language use, and attitudes on a variety of levels. While it is difficult universally to rank the importance of these factors, as they affect one another and have different levels of import in different circumstances, the one factor that tends to rise above the others is intergenerational transmission: once the children stop learning a language, it is in a precarious state. In cases of rapid or accelerated language shift, disrupted transmission to children can move a vital language to near extinction in the course of a single generation. Where intergenerational transmission is strong and steady, local communities should consider maintenance programs to ensure the continued vitality of their language. Elsewhere, revitalization programs are necessary. As a general rule, the sooner they are implemented, the easier it is to reverse language shift.

3 Terminology

Though the majority of readers will be familiar with the phenomena of language endangerment and revitalization, and they will have a good handle on the terminology which has developed to discuss them, we briefly summarize the rationale for our choice of terms in this book.

As this discussion above implies, we draw a conceptual distinction between language revitalization, or what Fishman (1991) calls reversing language shift, and language maintenance, which supports a language that is truly vital. Whereas the goal of revitalization is to increase the relative number of speakers of a language and extend the domains where it is employed, maintenance serves to protect current levels and domains of use. Revitalization almost always requires changing community attitudes about a language, while maintenance seeks to protect against the imposition of outside attitudes. In theory the difference between the two is quite clear. However, in practical terms the distinction is often unimportant, as the dividing line between the need for maintenance and revitalization is inexact and, regardless, the programs involved in both can be very similar. Therefore, most of what is found in the following chapters is of equal relevance to both maintenance and revitalization situations, yet we continue to use the two terms distinctly.

The choice of labels for languages involved in endangerment situations varies greatly among authors, and so our particular choices require

comment. Language endangerment typically involves two languages (and cultures) in contact, with one replacing the other. In the canonical case, then, Language A is being adopted by speakers of Language B, and Language A is replacing Language B in the sense that fewer people use or learn B. In the case of Language B, the language has been referred to variously as the *minority language*, *heritage language*, *mother tongue*, *dominated language*, *threatened language*, or *endangered language*. Alternatively, Language A has been referred to as the *majority language*, *mother tongue*, *dominant language*, *killer language*, or *matrix language*. We have opted to avoid most of these labels here for a number of reasons.

First, *minority* and *majority language* can be misleading, and in some cases, inaccurate. *Minority language* implies the language spoken by a minority within a larger population, but in fact the status of a language as minority or majority depends very much on the specific context of use. What was historically a majority language in a given region or among a given group of people can become redefined as a minority language as geopolitical boundaries are redrawn. Second, the term *minority* suggests that the absolute number of speakers (or of members of an ethnic group) is the single biggest factor in determining language vitality. As discussed in section 1, this is simply not the case. Finally, *minority* is used to refer to both immigrant and indigenous languages, such that Spanish, for example, is considered to be a *minority* language in the United States. It is not, however, by any means endangered. Though cognizant that many of the same issues are involved, we are concerned in the present with the endangerment and revitalization of indigenous languages as opposed to immigrant languages. Speakers of the latter may also be undergoing language shift, but immigrant languages typically have a speaker base outside of the immigrant territory. By *indigenous*, however, we refer to languages firmly planted in a particular geography before the age of European colonization, roughly by the beginning of the sixteenth century.

Mother tongue is also potentially confusing. The term is often meant to indicate the language learned first by an individual, or the one typically learned first in a community. In endangerment situations, people may be learning Language A as a first language in increasing numbers, though Language B is the first language for others. To use *mother tongue* as a label exclusive to just one of the two languages is problematic.

We have also avoided use of the term *heritage language* in reference to Language B. In North America, at least, the term often refers to the loss of any language spoken by one's parents or other ancestors regardless of how many generations have passed. Thus debates around use of the "heritage language" in the United States, for example, most often center around the use of Spanish or Mandarin in the schools for those of Hispanic and

Chinese descent. As important as debates about the presence of such languages in the school may be, there is a different set of issues and dynamics involved than those involved in endangerment and revitalization.

Our preferred term for Language B is *local language*. Here, too, there is some room for confusion because non-endangered languages can be the sole language of a particular location. This is true, for instance, in Hanover, New Hampshire, where both of the authors are based. The local language of the town would clearly be identified as English if one were to ask around. However, *local language* has the advantage of drawing attention to the fact that language revitalization is tied to a particular geography, and that the people involved in revitalization desire that the language be more widely used in this location. We also find the term advantageous in being relatively neutral. Our preferred term for Language A is *language of wider communication*. Because, in nearly all cases of endangerment, Language A is used more widely, both in terms of numbers of speakers and in terms of a broader range of domains, the term is nicely descriptive, as opposed to *matrix language*.⁵ It again has the advantage of being fairly neutral, as opposed to *killer language*, which seems to us to give too much a sense of agency to the language of wider communication.

At times, however, we also refer to Language A as the *dominant language* when it is useful to draw out an asymmetry in power, use, or prestige between a local language and a language of wider communication. These asymmetries are, of course, the root cause of the endangerment of Language B, and it is appropriate to bring attention to that fact. Corresponding to the term *dominant language*, we use *non-dominant language*, *threatened language*, or *endangered language* for Language B, depending respectively on whether we intend to note the asymmetry (*non-dominant language*), the pressures on language vitality that result (*threatened language*), or the outcome of pressures (*endangered language*).

One final note on terminology is needed. There is a difficulty in deriving an adequate label for that group of people who speak (or spoke) an endangered language, as well as those who wish to revitalize a language. In some cases they form what might properly be called a speech community, i.e. a group of individuals who are united by regular interaction in a language. In other cases, however, speakers of an endangered language

⁵ *Matrix language* is a term drawn from the Matrix Language Framework, a model associated with code-switching (Myers-Scotton 1993), where it has a clear definition and stands in opposition to the “embedded language.” While code-switching does often arise in endangerment situations, it does not necessarily do so.

may not use the language with one another on a consistent basis, and in these cases there is not a real speech community, only a potential one. They may not even live in close proximity to one another or know each other well. Add to this the fact that there is not a one-to-one relationship between knowledge of a local language and the desire to speak it. It is not uncommon in language revitalization scenarios to find individuals who have an imperfect grasp of the language (or even no grasp at all) driving the revitalization forward. They want the chance to speak a language that their parents or grandparents did. On the other hand, some fluent speakers of the language may see no point in using the language and therefore make little effort to do so. Rather than create different terms for all these constituencies, we have opted to be vague in our terminology. Throughout the book, we make reference to the *local community*. By this term, we mean that group of people who have some claim on a local language, either because of historical-cultural connections to it, ethnic connections to it, or an ability to speak it. We have attempted at several points to include reminders that the “local community” is not a monolithic block, but, like any social unit, is filled with variety as well as commonality.

4 Levels of language endangerment and loss

In section 2, we discussed characteristics of languages and their speakers that interact to determine degrees of vitality. Implicit throughout that section was the idea that at some point, usually associated with cessation of intergenerational transmission, a language moves from a relatively vital state to one of endangerment. In this section, we clarify the notion of endangerment in two ways. First, we briefly discuss the different rates at which language endangerment occurs; then we provide a categorization scheme for languages in terms of their level of endangerment. In doing this, we provide additional vocabulary relevant to language revitalization. More important, we do this with an eye to developing a richer conceptual framework within which better to understand the sort of revitalization efforts that are best matched to particular situations.

Campbell and Muntzel (1989:183–6) provide a helpful taxonomy of language endangerment situations by considering the cause of attrition coupled with the relative rate at which it proceeds.⁶ This categorization is relevant to revitalization programs in two critical respects. On the one hand, the underlying cause of attrition may make revitalization more or

⁶ Campbell and Muntzel (1989) use the term *death* in their discussion, as was common practice at the time of their writing. We have substituted it with the term *attrition*, which is more current.

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less realistic; on the other hand, the speed at which loss occurs is crucial in determining the feasibility of particular kinds of revitalization. Revitalization is much more difficult – if not impossible – in instances of sudden attrition, for example, than it is in gradual attrition, which at least has the potential of being arrested.

Sudden attrition occurs when a language is abruptly lost due to the sudden loss of its speakers as the result of disease, warfare, natural catastrophe, and so on. Though few cases of sudden attrition have been well documented, it is likely that it occurred with some frequency during colonization, when people groups are known to have been decimated due to disease. The presence of civil strife and ethnic clashes in the modern world continues to raise the possibility of sudden attrition, as does the spread of AIDS.

Radical attrition is similar to sudden attrition in that it comes from a set of political circumstances which lead to speakers ceasing to use their language due to repression and/or genocide. It is a means of self-defense: speakers wish not to be identified with their ethnic group so as to avoid persecution and, accordingly, rapidly cease speaking their heritage language. One consequence of radical attrition is the loss of the age-gradation proficiency continuum which is more typically found in cases of gradual and bottom-to-top attrition.

Gradual attrition refers to the relatively slow loss of a language due to language shift away from the local language to a language of wider communication, whether that be a regionally dominant language or a national lingua franca. Most reports of cases of gradual attrition cite some transitional bilingualism, as the speaker population is in the process of shift, and it is here that one finds clearest gradations in intergenerational transmission. Because the attrition is gradual, it is often not a cause for alarm until the point where revitalization becomes quite difficult.

Bottom-to-top attrition has also been called the latinate pattern, where the language is lost in the family setting and most other domains, yet is used widely in religious and/or ritual practices. This is an advanced stage of attrition where the language is retained in those areas where its use is deemed most critical, in particular where certain ritualized texts are memorized. Because of the highly restricted but prestigious domains of use, it is sometimes difficult to assess the actual vitality of the language. In mild instances of bottom-up attrition, the language is still used spontaneously in the settings to which it has been assigned by members of the local community. In extreme cases, the only remaining knowledge of a local language may be memorized portions of a ceremony.

With this taxonomy in mind, we can now turn to a ranking of language status in terms of relative vitality/endorsement. The scale we use here is

adapted from Whaley (2003), but see also Kinkade (1991:160–3) and Wurm (1998:192). In our view, a six-way scheme is minimally required to categorize languages with respect to endangerment: Safe, At Risk, Disappearing, Moribund, Nearly Extinct, and Extinct.⁷

Safe: A language is considered safe when all generations use the language in all or nearly all domains. It has a large speaker base relative to others spoken in the same region and, therefore, typically functions as the language of government, education, and commerce. Many safe languages enjoy official status within nation-states, and as such tend to be held in higher prestige than other languages.

At Risk: A language is at risk when it is vital (being learned and used by people of all different age groups) without any observable pattern of a shrinking speaker base, but it lacks some of the properties of a safe language. For example, it is spoken in a limited number of domains or has a smaller number of speakers than other languages in the same region.

Disappearing: A language is disappearing when there is an observable shift towards another language in the communities where it is spoken. With an overall decreasing proportion of intergenerational transfer, the speaker base shrinks because it is not being replenished. Disappearing languages are consequently used in a more restricted set of domains, and a language of wider communication begins to replace it in a greater percentage of homes.

Moribund: A moribund language is one that is not transmitted to children.

Nearly Extinct: A language can be considered nearly extinct when only a handful of speakers of the oldest generation remains.

Extinct: An extinct language is one with no remaining speakers.

The final three types of languages – moribund, nearly extinct, and extinct languages – are all characterized by a lack of intergenerational transmission. The challenges facing the revitalization of these languages are particularly daunting. Not only is there an urgency to act before fluent speakers die (or, in the case of extinct languages, anyone with some experience with the language), but also many of the individuals involved in revitalization may be semi-speakers (Krauss 1997) with widely different degrees of fluency, from strong or nearly fluent speakers to reasonably fluent semi-speakers to weak semi-speakers who are even less fluent, to those with more restricted speaking competence to “rememberers,” for those who only know a few words or phrases (see Campbell and Muntzel 1989:181).

Although these categories are intuitively correct, the boundaries between them are blurred. How much does one need to know to qualify

⁷ The present scheme is very similar to the five-way system proposed in Kinkade (1991), but contains two important differences. Kinkade groups Disappearing and Moribund languages together (his label for the pair is *endangered languages*). Second, Kinkade’s equivalent to our At Risk category is more narrow, only referring to languages spoken by a small, isolated population.

as a weak semi-speaker as opposed to a rememberer? Campbell and Muntzel cite one rememberer of Chipanec (in Chiapas, Mexico) as having memorized a religious text in its entirety without being able to understand it. Such memorized texts are very important in language revitalization efforts, but they are static and do not represent living language.

Alternatively, there are cases where once-fluent speakers may find themselves in situations where they have not spoken their languages for many years. This happens when the remaining speakers of a language live in isolation from one another and simply do not have anyone to talk to in their language, such as the last remaining speakers of Yaghan (Grenoble and Whaley 2002; Hitt 2004), who live in isolation from one another or for other reasons do not speak to one another.⁸

As implied, levels of extinction and degrees of fluency (especially among semi-speakers) are of great relevance to language reclamation efforts. Disappearing languages will have fluent speakers of many ages who can be enlisted in the work of revitalization. For moribund or nearly extinct languages, this becomes increasingly less likely, and the importance of semi-speakers to the ultimate success of the process grows considerably. An extinct language may still have rememberers who, although they have no active speaking ability, may know individual words or phrases, such as greetings. Amery (2000) describes the role of rememberers in the Kurna reclamation project (Chapter 3, section 7), who were able to supply helpful cultural information. One of the surprising aspects of this project was the discovery of such rememberers; it took many several years to realize that something they had heard as children was relevant to Kurna reclamation. So, even in cases of extinction, there may be a variety of levels of lingering knowledge.

5 Why revitalization?

In the course of this chapter, we have looked at language vitality and endangerment from a number of different angles in order to bring a picture of the basic issues into view. One, however, might legitimately ask questions which are logically prior to this discussion. Why should a community opt to revitalize its language in the first place? And why should anyone care about the fate of endangered languages?

There is an extensive and widely available literature which addresses these questions. Many have responded by noting the importance of linguistic diversity to scientific inquiry and the fact that languages are cultural

⁸ Jess Tauber (p.c. April 2004) reports that there is now one remaining fluent speaker of the language.

treasures which far exceed artifacts in their value to humankind (e.g. Hale 1998; Hinton and Hale 2001); others note the significance of cultural diversity, which is fostered by language diversity, in stimulating innovative thinking, and encoding alternative ways of seeing the universe (Nettle and Romaine 2000); still others note the centrality of language in protecting and expanding minority rights (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). We would note, however, that the revitalization that we envisage is community-driven, a bottom-up kind of movement. The overall success of any revitalization program depends on the motivation of the future speakers and the community which supports them, so we presuppose some self-interest on the part of the community before engaging in revitalization efforts. We recommend a serious assessment of community goals, needs, resources, and commitment before undertaking language revitalization; the results of this assessment will provide clear signals as to what is feasible and what is required to make it feasible. We have provided a detailed analysis of these, and ways to go about thinking about them, in Chapter 7.