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Reclaiming languages: Contesting and decolonising 'language endangerment' from the ground up

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1. Introduction to volume

What does it take to alter current processes of language endangerment and displacement? What makes a difference to the increasing number of speech communities around the world who experience marginalisation, discrimination, and subsequent staggering declines in the use of their unique ways of communicating? There are multiple possible responses to these questions. Some involve addressing inequalities in national, regional, and local political and economic systems, along with issues of land rights and socio-economic self-determination (e.g., McCarty 2013; Muehlmann 2009). Some relate to dismantling discriminatory language policies and associated biases in school systems and pedagogical practices (e.g., Hornberger 2008; Hornberger & King 1996; Tollefson 1991). Some involve facilitating socialisation practices in homes and communities (e.g., Hinton 2013; Meek 2010) that respect the social, environmental, and spiritual well-being associated with cultural and linguistic continuity (see McIvor, Napoleon & Dickie 2009; Oster et al. 2014; Whaley, Moss & Baldwin 2016). Some have to do with documentation and the creation of dictionaries, grammars, and archives (e.g., Frawley, Hill & Munro 2002; Gippert, Himmelmann & Mosel 2006; Linn 2014). Still others have to do with identifying, changing, or promoting public discourses and ideologies about language use (e.g., Austin & Sallabank 2014; Heller & Duchêne 2007; Hill 2002; Kroskrity & Field 2009). For all types of responses, questions arise as to whether the power structures that produce language endangerment and displacement are being meaningfully contested, or whether they are merely being reshaped and reproduced along familiar top-down lines.

The papers in this volume contribute to the increasingly interdisciplinary discussion about ways to address language endangerment by examining *language reclamation* strategies, or place-specific actions through which individuals and/or groups are countering forms of marginalisation experienced by minority language speakers and communities. Focused on such responses from the ground up, the papers illustrate practices through which linguists, educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders may contribute to or directly

engage in initiatives that support the needs and goals of language communities. These ground-up strategies emerge from and respond to the pressures and opportunities of specific contexts, and represent some of the possible answers and actions aimed at shifting power imbalances in situations of language endangerment.

In taking this approach, the papers in this volume critically examine the movement to *revitalise endangered languages*, which is often associated with certain discourses and knowledge production practices that are characteristic of language documentation, categorisation, and ethnic essentialism – arguably the most publicly visible responses to language endangerment on a global scale. Common practices such as objectifying, counting, categorizing, and ‘purifying’ languages (or cultures) have been critiqued for promoting narrow perspectives on language use and knowledge that are potentially harmful to speech communities (Dorian 1994; Jaffe 2007; Moore, Pietikäinen & Blommaert 2010; Muehlmann 2012). While documentary and descriptive linguistics have long been viewed as part of the wider social response to language decline, the ways through which these disciplines actually contribute to improved vitality of language communities have remained unclear and underexplored (Austin & Sallabank 2017; Dobrin, Austin & Nathan 2009). These critiques point to the need to pay close attention to what is being said and done around endangered languages, and how these discourses and practices affect broader goals of achieving greater social justice for members of minoritised language communities.

Language endangerment and exclusionary or essentialist approaches to revitalisation both typically arise under conditions of political domination. From the various forms of colonisation and assimilatory governance that have contributed to language displacement worldwide, to essentialist revitalisation projects that may create new exclusionary categories in the pursuit of an imagined ‘pure’ or ‘authentic’ language or culture, the imposition of homogeneous communication norms (and ensuing decline in communicative diversity) typically occurs through unequal power relations from the top down. As such, part of any solution to these injustices must go beyond a focus on language to include questioning and contesting such power relationships from the ground up. As discussed by the papers in this volume, documentation, pedagogy, public advocacy, and other forms of scholarship all have important roles to play in contesting language endangerment, but must be undertaken with a critical awareness of the power dynamics and knowledge claims that they may produce. Explicit attention to issues of power – what has been called a *critical turn* in other social science fields such as education (Gottesman 2010) and applied linguistics (Pennycook 2001) – is needed in responses to language endangerment in order to develop effective approaches to addressing the inequalities perpetuated through and in relation to language practices. While we note that critical and power-conscious approaches to language endangerment have certainly been present in some circumstances,

we argue that consideration for power dynamics must be a central concern in all initiatives that aim to counter language endangerment. In some contexts a critical turn may constitute a paradigm shift; in others it may be an amplification or legitimation of concerns that are already present.

Accordingly, this volume calls for a shift away from the vague idea that documentation and related research *might* facilitate language revitalisation, and argues instead for an active practice of supporting and pursuing language reclamation, a ‘larger effort by a community to claim its right to speak a language and to set associated goals in response to community needs and perspectives’ (Leonard 2012: 359). We argue that the promotion of minoritised languages by ground-level participants is fundamentally a political act through which participants negotiate control over linguistic authority, knowledge production, and self-definition through their linguistic practices. We join other scholars who have argued for the need to shift from a paradigm of research *on*, to research *with* or *by* members of endangered language communities (e.g., Cameron et al. 1992; Czaykowska-Higgins 2009; Smith 2012), and to avoid tokenistic forms of community participation (Cooke & Kothari 2001; Leonard & Haynes 2010). Engaging in language reclamation is challenging yet possible, whether by insiders or outside supporters of threatened language communities, by linguists or education researchers, by parents or school teachers, by voters or authorities, or by writers or editors (and many people are several of these things). The papers in this volume illustrate how processes of language reclamation can be undertaken by diverse people across sociopolitical levels, with the potential to shift colonial and other hierarchical power relations among individuals, projects, institutions, or political units.

The authors in this volume draw on insights from applied linguistics, anthropology, education, decolonial theory, and discourse analysis, among other approaches, in order to provide a dynamic and international perspective on ways that speakers, teachers, learners, linguists, and other social actors are shaping perceptions and use of endangered languages. They illustrate ways that the paradigm of reclamation can be incorporated into language documentation and endangered language research through discursive and conceptual (Leonard, Davis), methodological (Hermes & Engman, Rouvier), educational (De Korne; Czaykowska-Higgins, Burton, McIvor & Marinakis), and personal and political strategies (Hornberger). Each of these papers shows ways to contest language inequalities, which we hope readers will find relevant in other contexts.

2. Reclamation strategies

2.1. Discursive and conceptual strategies

Who gets to define (a) language and how it is spoken about in public discourse? Authority over concepts and discourses are important elements in endangered language power dynamics. Wesley Y. Leonard opens the volume with an examination of what *language* means to members of endangered language communities, highlighting contrasts among these definitions and the definition of language promoted by the discipline of linguistics. A clash in paradigms over something as fundamental as what we are trying to ‘save’ should be a serious concern for anyone involved in endangered language projects. Leonard argues that to achieve egalitarian power relations, community conceptual paradigms must be considered and respected, and the imposed perspective of language as an object must be decolonised. In the second paper, Jenny L. Davis brings to light other patterns in the ways that scholars and the popular media portray endangered languages, and introduces the discursive strategies of *linguistic extraction*, *erasure of colonial agency*, and *lasting* (framing Indigenous languages and people as perpetually disappearing), all of which create fundamental rifts with how these languages are understood by speakers and community members. Both Leonard and Davis draw attention to ways of framing and talking about language endangerment that are often taken for granted, arguing the need to be more attentive to and critical of the concepts and discourses that are broadcast by scholarly disciplines and the media.

2.2. Methodological strategies

There are a wide variety of research methods commonly employed in work with endangered language communities, and these practices continue to evolve through practitioner reflection, participant input, and emerging contextual factors. In the third paper, Mary Hermes and Mel M. Engman describe an innovative Anishinaabemowin documentation/reclamation project in Minnesota where participants crossed boundaries between traditional Western academy roles (e.g., linguist/community member, speaker/learner) and negotiated conflicting goals in conservation-oriented documentation and use-oriented reclamation. They highlight the necessary messiness of integrating these different agendas, but offer encouragement and useful guidance for other projects attempting to prioritise learning goals and to connect them to documentation objectives in meaningful ways. Hermes and Engman show how clashes in concepts or paradigms – such as those explored by Leonard and by Davis – can be dealt with head-on in a research project,

resulting in productive methodological innovations. In the fourth paper, Ruth Rouvier discusses the role typically assigned to elder speakers of endangered languages in revitalisation work, critiquing the limitations of this positioning. Drawing on her experiences in a Karuk language documentation project in California, she identifies the need to avoid narrowly positioning elders as ‘resources’ in language documentation and illustrates how their recognition as agents and potential beneficiaries of language programs was established within the Karuk project. This approach supported the reclamation goals of the project and also resulted in higher quality documentation outputs. As methodological practices continue to evolve, Hermes and Engman, and Rouvier present helpful guidance drawing on their first-hand perspectives as scholar-practitioners.

2.3. Educational strategies

The exclusion of Indigenous languages from education has been an important colonial and nationalist tool of assimilation. At the same time, initiatives to include and make spaces for these languages in education carry equally great potential to impact language practices. Language teaching is a complex endeavor, however, with essentialist and purist paradigms that may work against reclamation deeply embedded in many formal education practices. In the fifth paper, Haley De Korne analyses how teachers of Isthmus Zapotec in Oaxaca, Mexico create inclusive and participatory paradigms in their classes, making new spaces for Indigenous language use within a multilingual university context. Validating the multilingualism and dialectal diversity of the learners is an important step towards facilitating egalitarian language education in this context. While De Korne’s paper shows how individual teachers may achieve language reclamation through their pedagogical practices, the sixth paper by Ewa Czaykowska-Higgins, Strang Burton, Onowa McIvor, and Aliko Marinakis examines the role of a higher education institution in supporting language reclamation. The authors describe the process and strategies through which they have developed an Indigenous language teacher-training program at the University of Victoria (British Columbia, Canada). Prioritising community consultation and collaboration, they have developed ladder courses which can be delivered in community settings and which are adapted to the linguistic and geographical realities of Indigenous communities in British Columbia. Programme challenges include the need to provide (more) effective teaching to substantially increase the language proficiency of students. Czaykowska-Higgins et al. describe their process of developing an *Indigenous Language Teachers’ Package* curriculum resource in response to this challenge, designed to be a supportive yet flexible resource to enhance teachers’ pedagogical practices while maintaining each individual teacher’s control over how they choose to teach

their language to reflect community needs, goals, and values. Both educational cases show that resisting the purist and hierarchical ideologies that are present in language education – by which languages are essentialised and ranked according to social prestige, or taught through prescribed methods in hard-to-access institutions – is a necessary step in the creation of successful endangered language learning communities.

2.4. Political and personal strategies

The seventh paper presents Nancy H. Hornberger's portraits of three Indigenous language activists from Peru, South Africa, and Sweden that illustrate the many connections between the political and the personal. Policies at national, regional, and institutional levels are not often considered within the scope of language documentation and description projects, and yet they are key factors in language endangerment, as these cases reveal. Hornberger's paper traces connections between language education practices and politics, public display of language and culture, and research agendas, showing how each factor can play an important role in which languages are supported, and which are ignored or excluded in a given context. She examines how three Indigenous teacher-researchers have influenced the political contexts in which they find themselves, intervening through both personal and professional decisions. Their strategies range from use of Indigenous languages in professional spaces, advocacy for multilingual education policies, and negotiation of the way language practices are conceptualised and measured in research. By linking personal forms of advocacy to wider political contexts, Hornberger illustrates the social and negotiated nature of policy, showing how individuals create their own language politics through their daily actions. Even though tackling language inequalities in political spheres can be challenging and discouraging at times, as Hornberger notes, it can also be pivotal and rewarding. These portraits show that there are many ways for individuals to make a positive change in the language politics that impact marginalised communities.

The volume concludes with an overview of and set of observations on all the papers by Teresa L. McCarty.

3. Towards a critical turn in language endangerment work

Disciplinary reflection and the search for effective practices have been important parts of language documentation and studies of language endangerment throughout the history of the disciplines that focus on this work. As activists, researchers, teachers, and learners engaged in issues of language endangerment, the authors in this volume call for a continuation of

this trajectory through critical analysis of what we are saying and doing in light of the power relations in our personal and professional contexts. Certain social inequalities may seem daunting and beyond our ability to shift, but if we neglect to consider them and instead attempt to de-politicise our work by separating linguistic and social concerns, we may inadvertently reinforce these inequalities, as the papers in this volume point out. Similarly, if we fail to critique essentialised ethnic categories, monolingual norms, and colonial-origin knowledge hierarchies, they will continue to be reproduced.

Through this volume we hope to provide models for critical approaches to language endangerment work. Beginning with recognition of the multiple factors that contribute to the devaluing and displacement of certain ways of communicating, the papers demonstrate the need to examine our own commitments, choices, and capacities as we engage in this attempted social change. Certain choices apply primarily to members of language communities, such as where and how to make one's language and culture audible and visible, while other choices are relevant to everyone engaged in linguistic research or advocacy, such as which perspectives and languages to include in institutional programs and policies. Each of the papers makes clear that Indigenous languages and cultures do not exist in isolation, and achieving positive intercultural relations – in which other cultures are respectful towards Indigenous ways of speaking and being – is an important goal. A future in which marginalised language learners and speakers are respected will need to be a multilingual future, one in which there is social and political acceptance for the use of multiple languages in all public and private spheres. The concepts, social structures, and practices that have been established under colonialism and other forms of political domination in the past need to be actively challenged in order to create different dynamics in the present and future. A critical approach to language endangerment recognises that social change cannot occur without bottom-up endeavors through which the structures that are contributing to inequalities are identified, questioned, and renegotiated or dismantled.

As linguists, educators, politicians, and others continue to pursue the promotion of endangered languages, it is crucial that a wider range of actors and factors be brought into the discussion, in particular drawing attention to the power relations that are negotiated in disciplinary and social spaces. For example, we invite readers to consider questions like the following. What institutional policies could change to make more room for multilingualism? What Indigenous or lesser-spoken languages could be included more prominently within our institutions' programs or linguistic landscapes? How can research or teaching help to support further education or use of local languages in status-raising domains? How can we advocate for the opportunity to learn or use Indigenous languages in prominent social domains? Whose voice, perspective, or position is not being taken into account in our work? No one action will 'solve' language endangerment, but

each can make a meaningful contribution. Consideration of a wide range of factors and actions is important if language documentation and other scholarly practices are to make contributions towards reclaiming agency and epistemological power among endangered language communities.

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