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Commentary: Beyond endangerment in Indigenous language reclamation

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1. Introduction¹

In 1999, Native Hawaiian language scholar-activist Sam No'eau Warner, writing about *kuleana* – the ‘right, responsibility, and authority of Indigenous peoples to speak and make decisions for themselves’ – pointed out that language issues are ‘always people issues’ (Warner 1999:89).² It is not sufficient, Warner stressed, to fight to save a disembodied ‘thing’ called language. Rather, language revitalisation and reclamation are about *people* working together to (re)build community, (re)connect generations, and shape preferred community futures. All this is work, Warner envisioned, ‘that would lead to true equality, authenticity in the empowerment of a people ... and social justice for all’ (Warner 1999:89).

Warner’s words resonate with the deeply peopled work represented in this special issue of *Language Documentation and Description*. In intent, design, implementation, and outcomes, the contributors show that language reclamation goes ‘beyond endangerment’ – and even ‘beyond revitalisation’. The authors illuminate the multilayered, place-based processes through which this occurs, from repurposing archival resources and linguistic documentation for local community-driven goals (Wesley Y. Leonard, Mary Hermes & Mel M. Engman, Ruth Rouvier) to constructing alternative paradigms of collaborative, inclusionary ideologies that counter purist/monolingualist ones (Haley De Korne) to partnering university and community language education resources and programming (Ewa Czakowska-Higgins, Strang Burton, Onowa McIvor & Aliko Marinakis) to opening ‘new worlds of possibility’ via personal language activism (Nancy H. Hornberger) to radically reframing the

¹ I thank Haley De Korne and Wesley Y. Leonard for inviting me to give the original discussant commentary on the papers presented at the 2014 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, from which parts of this commentary are drawn. The title, ‘Beyond Endangerment’, has its roots in Wyman, McCarty & Nicholas 2014.

² Warner attributed this insight to his late colleague at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, Dr. Charlene Sato.

rhetoric of endangerment and revitalisation itself (Jenny L. Davis). This is fundamentally political work, say De Korne and Leonard in introducing this special issue, in which people ‘negotiate control over linguistic authority, knowledge production, and self-definition through their linguistic practices’ (De Korne & Leonard 2017:7).

This perspective places language reclamation squarely in the context of the settler colonial state and ‘erase and replace’ settler logics: ‘Erase Native languages, replace with English. Erase Native religions, replace with Christianity’, and so on (Lomawaima & McCarty 2006:xxii). Thus, Leonard writes, reclamation is ‘a type of decolonisation ... [that] links language work with the underlying causes of language shift’ (Leonard 2017:19). It is, in Davis’s words, a ‘decolonial act of breath-taking resistance, resilience, and survivance’ (Davis 2017:54).

With this as an overarching framework, in the remainder of this commentary I explore three qualities that stand out in these deliberately political acts: *relationality*, *well-being*, and *self-determination*. While all three qualities are reflected across the articles, I do not intend them to be analytically or pragmatically discrete or complete. To the contrary, they are overlapping, co-entailed, and ever in process with myriad other sociolinguistic, sociocultural, and sociopolitical processes that are local, regional, and global in scale. I focus on these qualities because they provide mutually reciprocal lenses into the complexity of ‘an active practice of supporting and pursuing language reclamation’ (De Korne & Leonard 2017:7) – its complications, commitments, and, as aptly described by Hermes and Engman (2017:62), inevitable ‘messiness’.

2. Relationality

How does the work of language reclamation serve to construct and connect relationships? Years ago, when I was working as a curriculum developer at the Diné (Navajo) Rough Rock Demonstration School,³ an elder whose grandchildren attended the school said to my Diné colleagues and me: ‘If a child learns only English, you have lost your child.’ Those words have stayed with me over the years, and I view them as anchors in the nexus of relationality, well-being, and self-determination in language reclamation work. At the heart of the peopled efforts presented in this volume is the desire and commitment not to ‘lose’ the next generation – or the next or the next or the next – or the ties that bind present and future generations with those who

³ This is now Rough Rock Community School.

have come before. A key goal of this language-centered work is strengthening intergenerational ties.

In many cases this begins with individual change agents. Leonard's three case studies, Hornberger's three portraits, De Korne's examples of two Zapotec teachers, Czaykowska-Higgins and colleagues' work with community-based language teachers, Hermes & Engman's account of Ojibwe 'conversationalists', and the elder participants in Rouvier's narrative all represent, to quote Hornberger, 'the power of individual Indigenous people in shaping language landscape, policy, and assessment, and the implementational and ideological paths and spaces opened up for themselves and others as they do so' (Hornberger 2017:172).⁴

Yet, in each case, individual actions are embedded in social networks based on shared histories, struggles, aspirations, and identifications. The collective quality of this work is reflected in such groups as the *Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival* in Leonard's case study of L. Frank; the Bolivia-based PROEIB-Andes master's program for Indigenous educators in Hornberger's portrait of Neri Mamani; the village classrooms in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec studied by De Korne; the University of Victoria's five language revitalisation programme partnerships with Indigenous communities described by Czaykowska-Higgins and colleagues; the *Karuk Speakers Circle* gatherings presented by Rouvier; and Hermes and Engman's examination of collaborative Ojibwe-language documentation that fosters relationships among community members, teachers, and linguists, blurring the lines between all of those roles. Rouvier analyses this as the re-creation of speaker communities, 'including spaces and times for the language to live, and relationships between members of the community that are built and maintained through the language' (Rouvier 2017:107).⁵ 'Language revitalisation and reclamation is necessarily a community undertaking', state Czaykowska-Higgins et al. (2017:156). In her analysis of language endangerment rhetorics, Davis emphasises the importance of focusing on 'Indigenous languages as elements embedded in communities, histories, and spaces rather than extracted from them'. Language endangerment (and reclamation) do 'not occur within sociopolitical vacuums' (Davis 2017:54). Leonard concurs, calling for a critical, bottom-up, ecological approach that 'begins with community histories and contemporary needs ... determined by community agents' (Leonard 2017:19).

⁴ For more on this in Native North American contexts, see the discussion of 'the power of individual revitalizers' in Linn & Oberly (2016:149-153).

⁵ Additional examples of 're-creation' efforts discussed by Rouvier appear in McCarty et al. (2006).

3. Well-being

Reading and listening to these accounts, one cannot help but be moved by their affective qualities and the clear connections between language and well-being.⁶ Leonard, quoting Paiute tribal historian and language activist D, notes that a single word in the Indigenous language can take on immense emotional and spiritual meaning (Leonard 2017:27). Quoting Tongva language activist L. Frank, Leonard shares her view that ‘language is about feelings; it’s not about orthographies’ (Leonard 2017:25). Rouvier speaks of the ways in which language revitalisation and reclamation can benefit elder speakers, not only in terms of linguistic knowledge but ‘other forms of well-being’, especially ‘when their needs and contributions [are] prioritised’ (Rouvier 2017:93). Davis cites Mojave poet and language activist Natalie Diaz, who explains that Mojave words to describe emotions ‘are literally dragged through our hearts ... So we will never lightly ask, *How are you?* Instead we ask directly about your heart’ (cited in Davis 2017:49). In a forthcoming publication, Diaz describes how Mojave language reclamation work helped learners find the Mojave expression for love, *kaavanaam*, an embodied gesture of tenderness and care. ‘To regain a language is many things’, Diaz observes, ‘one of which is to regain the verbal and gestured language of tenderness, and the autonomy to love ourselves’ (in McCarty et al. forthcoming).

In this regard the articles in this special issue join a growing body of research and practice on the relationship between language reclamation and well-being. For example, the *Healing Through Language Project* is an Endangered Language Fund partnership with Native American language reclamation programmes to assess their health benefits. The myaamia reclamation work referenced in Leonard’s article is a partner in this, which also highlights the benefits to the academic well-being of Miami college students who gain ‘deeper learning about tribal culture and language’ (Mosley-Howard et al. 2016:437; see also Whalen, Moss & Baldwin 2016).⁷ The NSF-funded *Child Language Research and Revitalization Working Group*⁸ (coordinated by Ruth Rouvier) reports that the act of documentation itself can trigger language reclamation efforts that support ‘cultural knowledge and pride, spiritual coping, and healing practices’ (Child Language Research and Revitalization Working Group 2017:15). The *Arctic Languages Vitality Project*, an initiative by six Arctic Indigenous organisations, is

⁶ I take a broad view of well-being to include intellectual, emotional, linguistic, cultural, physical, spiritual, and, in certain contexts, academic well-being.

⁷ For more on academic well-being in language reclamation work, see Hornberger (2008); May, Hill & Tiakiwai (2004); and McCarty & Nicholas (2014).

⁸ Supported by National Science Foundation Grant No. 1500720.

advancing a ‘new conceptualization’ of language revitalisation as a ‘health promotion strategy’ (Grenoble & Whaley 2017). For Arctic Indigenous peoples, say researchers associated with the project, ‘knowledge of their ancestral language is a central component of well-being’ (Grenoble & Olsen, Puju 2014:1). Based on extensive work in Aboriginal Canadian communities, researchers from the Universities of Oxford, British Columbia, and Victoria report that Aboriginal-language knowledge – identified as a ‘marker of cultural persistence’ – corresponds strongly with the health and well-being of Aboriginal youth (Hallett, Chandler & Lalonde 2007:398). In fact, these researchers report that teen suicide dropped to zero in communities in which there was active use of and support for the Indigenous language.

This emerging body of research indicates that there is far greater urgency in language reclamation work than is reflected in the ‘race-against-time’ rhetoric of language extinction, finely critiqued in Davis’s paper. This suggests several pressing issues for future inquiry:

- How can a language reclamation framework help us better understand the connections between Indigenous knowledges and ways of being – including language practices – and individual and communal well-being?
- How can understandings of language reclamation and well-being be applied to community-specific needs, goals, and projects?
- What role can education – in and out of schools and across the lifespan – play in strengthening the relationship between language, culture, and well-being?

4. Self-determination

By definition, 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) – is an expression of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. It is, De Korne and Leonard state, an explicitly ‘power-conscious’ approach to language endangerment (De Korne & Leonard 2017:6). The articles in this special issue take this up in distinct but complementary ways, asking – and answering – who controls Indigenous language and community/cultural futures?

De Korne asks, ‘Who decides how a language should be learned? Who determines what counts as a language and who is recognised as a speaker?’ (De Korne 2017:123). By ‘choosing to define what Zapotec is, who can speak it, and how to use it together’, she says, Indigenous teachers and their students practice ‘language reclamation as a process of self-definition and community affirmation’ (De Korne 2017:131). Similarly, Hermes and Engman describe

the ways in which community-driven language documentation challenges hegemonic expectations of who and what constitute linguistic expertise and community-based knowledge. Reversing the dominant-language-and-culture directionality of authority and power, they ask what ‘trainers have to learn’ from Indigenous-language speakers (Hermes & Engman 2017:79). Czaykowska-Higgins and colleagues show that building partnerships into university programming and curriculum design from the outset ‘dethrones’ the assumption that Western European institutions ‘hold all the linguistic and cultural expertise’ (Czaykowska-Higgins et al. 2017:155). Rouvier likewise demonstrates that prioritising the concerns of master speakers opens space for ‘both the masters and apprentices to guide the methods, and shape the content produced’ (Rouvier 2017:106).

None of this comes about easily or without cost. Hornberger’s portrait of Sámi language teacher-researcher-advocate Hanna Outakoski, for instance, shows that she is ‘stretched in her many roles and responsibilities’ and that those roles ‘are sometimes at odds with those as parent and intergenerational transmitter of her language’ (Hornberger 2017:171). That the *Teachers’ Package* developed at the University of Victoria ‘did not benefit the language instructors to the extent hoped’, is acknowledged by Czaykowska-Higgins et al. (2017:154). And the Karuk and Ojibwe examples show that, by assuming ‘a priori what will happen, and when’ (Hermes & Engman 2017:79), externally funded projects can remove control from the Indigenous community members who the projects are intended to serve. At the same time, external funding is often a necessary catalyst and logistical support for these language reclamation efforts.

The work here raises questions for research, policy, and practice foreshadowed in Warner’s (1999) call for *kuleana* in Indigenous-language revitalisation:

- What would a language reclamation (i.e., decolonising) approach to external funding look like? For example, how might this approach alter external funder conceptions of what counts as (a) language, how language(s) should be learned, and how speakerhood is defined?
- How can a language reclamation approach be built into bottom-up *and* top-down language planning and policy? Put differently, how can bottom-up and top-down be conjoined in a critical, power-conscious way that addresses the root causes of language shift?

5. Concluding reflections

In this brief commentary I have only skimmed the surface of the themes of relationality, well-being, and self-determination in the language reclamation

work presented in this volume, posing a few questions that appear ripe for further inquiry and that have implications for local, national, and international language planning and policy. My understandings are from the point of view of a non-Indigenous ally. Additional lines of research and practice might address the potential of the language reclamation framework developed here to inform language work in other oppressed and minoritised-language settings such as the ‘new speaker’ movement in the European Union (involving Manx Gaelic, Irish, Welsh, Galician, Corsican, Francoprovençal/Arpitan, and Catalan, among others), and the cross-fertilisation of both streams of research (see, e.g., O’Rourke, Pujolar & Ramallo 2015; O’Rourke & Walsh 2018).

The research presented in this special issue moves us forward in conceptualising language shift, sustainability, endangerment, and revitalisation in paradigm-altering ways. Foregrounding the historical and political in present-day cases, and ethnographically detailing contemporary language reclamation practices refocuses us on people – their relationships, desires, and rights to self-determination, choice, and personal and collective well-being.

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