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Book review: The Routledge Handbook of Language Revitalization

ROBBIE PENMAN

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Robbie Felix Penman

Department of Anthropology, University of Montreal

Hinton, Leanne, Leena Huss & Gerald Roche. (eds) 2018. *The Routledge Handbook of Language Revitalization*. New York: Routledge.

1. Overview

The volume under review, *The Routledge Handbook of Language Revitalization*, is part of the *Routledge Handbook in Applied Linguistics* series, and is described by the publisher as 'the first comprehensive overview of the language revitalization movement'. In attempting to cover the topic of language revitalization as a whole its scope is indeed broader than most works in the field, and it provides an overview that should be welcome, at this point, given the time elapsed since the last publications of such scope (Hinton & Hale 2001; Grenoble & Whaley 2006). The Handbook is divided into two main sections: 'Issues of Theory and Practice' (Part 1) and 'Regional Perspectives: Decolonizing and Globalizing Language Revitalization' (Part 2). In the following review, Part 2 is addressed first and in greater detail, since it constitutes the Handbook's most important and most original contribution to the field of language revitalization.

2. Regional Perspectives: Decolonizing and Globalizing Language Revitalization (Part 2 of Handbook)

The introduction to Part 2 is one of the most significant contributions to the Handbook, and Part 2 as a whole is an excellent illustration of developments in language revitalization in the last decade or so. The fact the section titles refers to 'decolonization' of language revitalization shows a growing recognition of colonizing practices that continue within movements that have often been exempt from such scrutiny (Rivers 2013). This exemption may have resulted from an assumption that language revitalization is 'by

definition' a practice of decolonization. The relative lack of such scrutiny in the past is a reflection of the separation between linguistics and other relevant fields of theory and practice (e.g. anthropology); Part 2 of the Handbook demonstrates that recent critiques focused on the issue of decolonization have had an increasing influence on language revitalization.

More specifically, the introduction to Part 2 (by Gerald Roche) centers on the privileged position of Europe and certain European settler colonies (North America, Australia, and Aotearoa/New Zealand) in the language revitalization literature – an evident bias of the field since its very beginnings. This bias, to my knowledge, has never been addressed as directly and incisively as here, where it is considered primarily in terms of access to resources for language revitalization. The Handbook's response to this bias is apparent in the subsection on the Americas, where more space is deliberately given to contributions concerning Latin America (as opposed to Canada and the U.S.). This strategy seems well-justified on the principle that *a priori* there is just as much to learn from Latin American experiences as from Canadian/U.S. ones, and that a strategy of positive discrimination is required, otherwise an unequal distribution of resources will continue to make Canadian/U.S. experiences more visible.

Nonetheless, there is a series of questions of a rather different order concerning the bias towards North America, Australia, and Aotearoa, which are not addressed in this section (understandably, perhaps, given the nature of a handbook). The focus on these areas of the world in the revitalization literature is not only a result of global inequality in resources available for language revitalization. It is also related to: (a) the degree of linguistic and cultural difference between European colonizers and indigenous inhabitants at the moment of European-indigenous contact; (b) the degree of endangerment of the languages; (c) the degree of indigenous linguistic diversity within each of these areas at the beginning of colonization, at least in the case of the Americas and Australia; and (d) the post-materialist values of the wealthy settler societies in which endangered language communities are embedded (Wilson 2011). Conditions in these settler colonies are significantly different from elsewhere in the world in one or more of these aspects. A positive outcome from the publication of this Handbook would be to promote further conversation about these issues, which result from factors more complex than the relative wealth of different endangered language communities.

Beier & Michael's insightful contribution in Section 2.4 'The Americas' regarding the Iquito community (in the Peruvian Amazon) highlights a dilemma surrounding the application of the 'language revitalization concept' to different contexts: does one accept an infinitely flexible definition of revitalization (which includes only symbolic usage) in order to avoid imposing a European (or Māori, or Hawaiian, or North American) understanding of the concept? They argue that 'efforts to revitalize the

language that are focused on developing communicative competence as typically understood by linguists are misplaced', since the Iquito community members generally seek 'symbolic, revocable affiliations with the language in specific situations' (408).

It is promising to see a discourse of decolonization applied to language revitalization in general, yet some contributions go further and investigate (de)colonizing dynamics in more specific instances. Section 2.3 on the Arctic makes an original contribution by examining 'Methods adopted from the Wider World' (language nests, the Master-Apprentice approach, Welsh-style language centres) versus 'Revitalization Methods Originating in the Sámi Community' (357-359). Another example comes from work in endangered language (EL) lexicography (203):

> It is extremely common for the glosses to be short (even single-word) translations. This is the single biggest problem in EL lexicography for language revitalization; it may unwittingly encourage learners to assume a simple one-to-one mapping between matrix-language and EL vocabulary.

May & Hill's chapter on Aotearoa in Section 2.2 shows another influence of decolonizing discourse on language revitalization, this time concerning intersectionality between marginalized groups. It asks: what is the position of immigrant (in this case Pasifika) languages in contexts of indigenous language revitalization, especially in cases where the receiving country may be (or may soon be) the only place where people speak these languages? This reflection is timely in light of the demographic changes in Europe and its settler colonies that have become increasingly important in the years preceding the publication of the Handbook.

It is to be hoped that the Handbook's attention to the European/North American/Australian/Māori bias in language revitalization will encourage others to follow up on this issue, given the enormous influence it has on both practice and theory in the field. In addition, the global discourse on language revitalization is structured to a great extent according to the dominant languages used for communication between members of different endangered language communities (e.g. English in communication between speakers of Inuit and Welsh). These dominant languages play a fundamental role in structuring communication about language revitalization (what proportion of the literature, media outputs, conferences, and educational opportunities regarding language revitalization is accessible to those involved in language revitalization in, for example, Latin America, Russia, or China who speak no English?). This is an issue that, one might expect, linguists, linguistic anthropologists, and so on, would be well-placed to deal with.

3. Issues of Theory & Practice (Part 1 of Handbook)

There is a good variety of topics covered in this Part (including language-specific case studies, some of which are in fact among the most insightful chapters, such as O'Regan on Māori (§10) and Zahir on Lushootseed (§15)), although not all of this variety is represented by the subsection titles:

1.1. Language Revitalization in Context

1.2. The Role of Institutions

1.3. Revitalization through Education

1.4. Language Revitalization in the Household

1.5. New Methodologies for Language Learning

1.6. Literacy, Language Documentation, and the Internet

1.7. Special Representations of Language

This grouping of topics is similar to that found elsewhere in the language revitalization literature (e.g. education – household – language learning), with some innovations (e.g. grouping 'Literacy, Language Documentation, and the Internet' together). Some of these subsections are more internally coherent (e.g. 'Revitalization through Education') than others (e.g. 'Language Revitalization in Context'); however, each subsection (e.g. §1.1) has its own introduction, which is helpful in conveying the editors' thinking behind the grouping. In some cases this provides a thought-provoking new approach to thinking about language revitalization, as with the role of institutions in the exchange of ideas and practices regarding revitalization.

Beyond the explicit grouping of topics, there is some comparison of concepts specific to language revitalization (e.g. language nests) and examination of the ways these are adapted to specific contexts (e.g. not paying participants in Oaxacan language nests, 392). Such comparison is valuable given that there has not even been much discussion in the literature regarding the translation of basic language revitalization terminology between, for example, English and Spanish (let alone between Māori and Quechua).

Section 1.5 'New Methodologies for Language Learning' provides a good introduction to contextual differences that determine appropriate pedagogical strategies – and a particularly striking contrast between the Root Word Method (§14) and more communicative approaches. On the other hand, the section is largely limited to methodologies already well-known in language revitalization (e.g. Master-Apprentice); exceptions are Zahir's chapter on Lushootseed (§15), containing psycholinguistic analysis and advice for language nests, and Green & Marcle's chapter on the Root Word Method applied to Mohawk (§14). Another approach to addressing this topic would have been according to pedagogical issues, rather than 'institutionalized' methodologies. Cutting across all the contributions in this section is a question

regarding the perception and practice of language learning/teaching: is it helpful to see language learning/teaching as merely preparation for an imagined future moment when the language is 'revitalized'? Or would it be better to see that learning/teaching contexts are in fact a substantial (and sometimes the only) 'actual use' of the language at present, and thus to see these contexts themselves as 'the revitalized/revitalizing language'? There are many connections to be made here both with applied linguistics and with decolonization theory.

Lastly, the Section 1.6 on 'Literacy, Language Documentation, and the Internet' contains a timely reflection on the relationship between documentation and revitalization by Austin & Sallabank, and on ethics by Dorian. Spence's chapter on 'Learning languages through archives' addresses an issue of increasing pertinence as 'native' speakers of endangered languages continue to pass on: the fact that learners of these languages are thus obliged to find non-communicative ways to learn.

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