

Toward Designing and Implementing Language Revitalization Programs in Academia and Community

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Abstract

People of the world speak diverse languages and develop different worldviews accordingly. However, due to diverse reasons many of these languages are dying, inducing widespread language shift and loss among their speakers. As languages embed their speakers' unique epistemologies and ontologies, their loss triggers the loss of those epistemologies and ontologies, among other things. To avoid that, language revitalization (LR) programs have been designed and implemented in academia and communities to help revive and maintain endangered languages. Thus, it is vital to explore to what extent these LR programs provide for the linguistic and cultural needs of their stakeholders. It is advocated that language revitalizers avoid over-generalizing among communities, consult and incorporate Indigenous peoples and their communities in their LR programs, and design and implement LR programs based on the Indigeneity and features of each language and the community in which it is spoken.

Keywords

Indigenous, Language Shift, Language Loss, Language Revitalization Program, Academia, Community, Success

1. Introduction

There are many different people in the world who speak at least one of the many languages, which despite their extant differences are similar in creating diverse worldviews. A worldview shows the ways a person looks at the world and is a representation of a thought or a channel through which their ways of thinking are revealed. In the worldview of Bakhtiari Indigenous people of Iran, *tash* or fire is a highly respected thing, and one must take great care when they put it

out, usually by sprinkling water on it, as they might offend the family that the fire belongs to. That gives us Bakhtiari a knowledge or worldview that distinguishes them from a non-Bakhtiari.

Although there are diverse languages spoken in the world, a considerable number of them may not be handed down to the next generations, implying the profound impacts that their loss will bring along. Language loss happens because of voluntary and involuntary reasons where speakers choose not to speak their language anymore or are forced out of it. Based on my own immediate experience, I have witnessed many Bakhtiari people who voluntarily choose not to speak their language or evade exposing their children to their language. This is because of the unpleasant experiences, among other reasons, that the parents of those children had while growing up in a city and away from their community in which they speak their language. Additionally, Indigenous children in the US and Canada were enforced into residential schools where they were banned and punished for speaking their Indigenous languages as school officials considered tradition “the Enemy of Progress” (Reyhner & Eder, 2004: p. 18). This, along with other reasons, has induced language shift and loss amongst the Indigenous peoples of North America.

Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars address language shift and loss through designing Language Revitalization (LR) programs in the community and academia. As the existing academic research methodologies emanate from western ways of knowing (Kerr, 2014), their incorporation into research might habituate researchers’ ways of thinking so that they exclude heterogeneous points of view. This is due to learners’ experiences of a system different from their own ways of knowing and worldview. Given that, researchers design studies and include other systems and epistemologies in them. It is with that regard that this paper briefly explores language shift and loss before it taps into the concept of successful LR, while advocating the incorporation of not only an appropriate methodology, but *one* based on the worldview of *the* peoples involved in the program.

2. Language Shift and Language Loss

Evans (2010) defines language loss as the gradual loss of a language where the speakers of a dominated language eventually lose their language proficiency, knowledge systems and cultures. There are external and internal reasons to language loss, where some of the external reasons inducing language loss are colonization and death (Hinton et al., 2018); assimilation policies and residential schools (Gessner et al., 2014); disease, genocide and forced relocation (McIvor & Anisman, 2018); and world economic growth (Amano et al., 2014). Language loss happens when the required education is offered in a dominant language (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006) and its social and linguistic domination leads to a decrease in the number of speakers and contexts of the weaker languages (Shaul, 2014).

On the other hand, internal language loss happens when individuals believe their language is of a low prestige and is not worth speaking or handing down to future generations (Hinton et al., 2018). As they fear to be ridiculed by the speakers of the dominant language, the speakers of the minority language will willingly step away from their mother tongue and incline toward the dominant and prestigious language in that context. A prominent case would be the said example of the Bakhtiari people who voluntarily abandon their language or limit its use to their close-knit family circles.

Despite this favor shown as a result of a speaker's own choice, the writer argues that language shift happens prior to language loss, and takes side with Sariwaara, Uusiautti, and Määttä (2013) who believe that language shift is more precisely a consequence of the unequal treatment of minority and Indigenous languages by non-Indigenous societies. In other words, language shift happens when schools and their medium of instruction emphasize standardization in the development of literacy (Cru, 2017). It happens when the education is delivered in a dominant language, and the speakers of minority/less dominant languages are educated in a system which is not only based on a different pedagogical philosophy but is delivered in a different language. Furthermore, Meek (2012) argues language shift occurs when there is a violation in the social structures and intergenerational transmission of a language that leads to a decrease in the number of its speakers. Ghanbari and Rahimian (2020) highlight the role that elites of a country play in inducing language shift and loss which leads to the dominance of a language over other languages in a multilingual context, such as Iran. They further that, when Iran fell to the Muslim Arabs, Iranian elites promoted the Persian language in Iran, which led to its dominance over other languages in Iran.

Language shift happens prior to language loss unless there is an external force that forces people out of their language via different means of coercion. That way, the speakers of a less dominant or minority language shift toward a more dominant one. Similarly, it happens when Indigenous and minority people leave their communities in the pursuit of higher education and adopt the dominant language in their societies (Huaman & Stokes, 2011). While investigating the language loss among the Sami people of Sweden, Nutti (2018) blames the education system, Sami teachers and parents who encourage their children to learn Swedish as their children need to compete in Swedish language to go to university. In the study done on the status of the Bakhtiari language in Ardal, a city in the Charmahal & Bakhtiari province in Iran, Taheri-Ardali (2015) argues that the more educated a Bakhtiari person is, the less proficient they seem to be in the Bakhtiari language. It is with that regard that, Hinton (2010) argues when a dominant language replaces another one for political and social reasons, it encourages monolingualism under the pretext of the common good for everyone.

Moreover, when Europeans settled in the Americas, Indigenous peoples were introduced to a new way of living and thinking that disregarded their Indigenous epistemologies and induced a widespread language loss among them in the

way that only 70 out of the 450 languages in Canada are being spoken (McIvor & Anisman, 2018). This period is divided into three stages. During the first stage, called *guns, germs, and steel*, Indigenous peoples were introduced to new diseases, massacred, displaced from their lands, mandated to live on reservations away from their native territories, and assimilated into European and American ways of living. This, in the US, led to the foundation of the first boarding school in 1879 in Philadelphia to assimilate Indigenous peoples to the dominant culture. In the second stage, known as *relocation*, Indigenous peoples were offered jobs away from their communities and in distant locales and were forcibly assimilated to fulfill *termination*, the redistribution of reservation land to non-Indigenous individuals. Stage three is known as the period of language loss and has continued to date through increasing non-Indigenous population growth, developing economic opportunities, and other modes of technology and discrimination against Indigenous peoples (Coronel-Molina & McCarty, 2016).

Furthermore, Fontaine (2017) explores the Indigenous language loss in Canada and argues that Canada's policy to extinguish Indigenous languages and culture began in the *British North American Act* of 1867. Based on this, politicians began to devise policies for assimilation and provided the federal government with the jurisdiction to legislate on issues related to Indigenous peoples and their lands. As a consequence of this assimilation legislation, Indigenous children were taken away from their families to be taught English or French and undergo a process of acculturation to the ways of the white man.

3. Language Revitalization

Considering language shift and loss, LR programs are developed and implemented to revive and maintain endangered or lost languages. That is because there is little doubt about the importance of revitalization of languages, and there exists a positive relationship between speaking Indigenous languages and having good health (Hinton et al., 2018), and between Indigenous land, language, and culture and the general wellbeing of Indigenous speakers (Oster, Grier, Lightning, Mayan, & Toth, 2014). Additionally, there is a reduced level of diabetes (Oster et al., 2014) and suicide (Hallett et al., 2007) among the First Nations of Canada who can speak their Indigenous language. Jenni et al. (2017) report that cultural and spiritual healing, gaining positions of leadership in an Indigenous community, and using the language as a coping mechanism can have positive effects on the wellbeing of Indigenous learners.

Hinton et al. (2018) define LR as the rejuvenation of a language that has been decreasing or fallen out of use, and Costa (2016) defines it as the linguistic emancipation of a language to reinforce its structure and use and the position of its speakers. As LR programs are being devised and implemented, it is logical to investigate their success stories and the extent to which they have provided the needs of their stakeholders. However, as Indigenous peoples are similar in their differences, a successful LR program may mean differently for different peoples.

In that regard, Hinton (2015) believes success is a matter of small steps and requires not only passion and dedication from inside the community, but it needs tribal recognition from outside the community. Additionally, Reyhner and Lockard (2009) argue LR programs begin from within Indigenous communities and are established around their goals, indicating that a LR program relies on the Indigeneity of the peoples in the program.

3.1. Successful LR from a Community Perspective

Upon the arrival of European settlers to the Americas, Indigenous peoples (along with their languages and pedagogies) were regarded as inferior and mandated to send their children to residential schools to be educated in European languages and sciences. That excluded Indigenous peoples from their communities and imposed them on decontextualized non-Indigenous knowledges. Long after the tragic stories of Indigenous learners in residential schools, it is highlighted that Indigenous peoples' voices be heard and their Indigenous languages and communities be incorporated into LR programs.

Indigenous peoples have resisted the linguistic genocide of their languages (McCarty, Borgiakova, Gilmore, Lomawaima, & Romero, 2005) through developing LR programs. Given that, Fishman (1991) emphasizes the role of the community in the revival of Indigenous and minority languages as it is in the community that an intergenerational transmission of a language occurs. Loewen and Suhonen (2018) argue that an LR program is based on the Indigenous curricula to decolonize Indigenous communities and expose Indigenous learners to their Indigenous holistic pedagogy. That way, an LR focuses on the ethical concerns of Indigenous worldviews, Indigenous behaviour, and the needs of a given community (Lafrance & Nicholas, 2010). Thus, LR program developers incorporate Indigenous knowledges, methodologies, communities, and elders in their curricula to create speakers who are not only fluent but well-informed about their Indigeneity (Reyhner & Lockard, 2009). As a result, learners will learn and hand down their languages along with their epistemologies and ontologies to their next generations. McGregor and Claxton (2014) argue this is because the community is a haven that provides enough exposure for learners, exposes them to their holistic education and enables them to communicate in their language. Additionally, an LR program connects learners to their cultural backgrounds, life experiences and community members' ways of living and provides opportunities to incorporate elders in LR programs (Gilbert & Tillman, 2017).

Furthermore, an LR program revitalizes the Indigeneity of the people through a holistic implementation of Indigenous stories (Archibald, 2001), environmental topics (Hunter, 2005), and songs and traditions (Battiste & Henderson, 2009). For instance, while Nutti (2018) implements the Sami LR program on the Sami's grouse hunting theme of trap making, snow-depth measurement, and traditional body measurement, Hopi language program in Arizona is designed so that Hopi children learn their Indigenous language, identity, and values through *qatsitwi*,

or Hopi cultural practices and ceremonies (McCarty & Nicholas, 2014).

3.2. Successful LR from an Academic Perspective

Hinton et al. (2018) state that regarding the history of Indigenous languages and the role of academic institutions in their loss, universities can be change agents in revitalizing Indigenous languages. As there is a relationship between LR and decolonization, universities provide opportunities for Indigenous peoples to protect their languages and knowledges so that they can better govern themselves (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). Universities and communities have been co-operating through designing and implementing LR programs even though they offer only a partial solution to language endangerment (Hermes et al., 2012). Language revitalizers investigate what an LR in academia is for different peoples and provide amenities and opportunities for them to incorporate their Indigeneity in such programs. That is a vital part in connecting Indigenous communities and academia because based on the study by Pidgeon (2016), 8% of First Nations students in Canada attain post-secondary education. This low attendance could be attributed to diverse reasons such as education systems as they are “extensions of settler colonial logics and power structures” (Jacob, 2017: p. 2). However, countries such as Canada have made progress toward Indigenization and the inclusion of Indigenous peoples and communities in their academia (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018).

As indicated in the previous section in this paper, LR programs are based on the Indigeneity of the people involved in the program and avoid overgeneralizing amongst them. That is because even though there are similarities among Indigenous peoples, they are different from each other (Rice, 2005), and thus these differences must be considered by LR developers.

Based on Glenn (2015), Indigenous LR programs in academia build effective relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges and provide frameworks to incorporate the role that Indigenous peoples and their Indigeneity play in academic contexts. Those relationships provide opportunities for Indigenous communities to work within their own Indigeneity so that their next generations will be informed about their background and move within that. Hinton (2015) argues that a successful LR is a matter of small steps in developing materials to support the Indigenous peoples, and Cru (2017) states success could mean reviving some Mayan vocabularies even if it is used in a music song.

Moreover, Owiny, Mehta, & Maretzki (2014) argue that an LR program sheds light on the fact that Indigenous knowledges and non-Indigenous knowledge come from different sources. However, it is vital to incorporate those knowledges in curricula, because based on a study in Hawai'i, learners thrive in a culture-based education (Kana'iaupuni et al., 2017).

According to McGregor (2012), LR programs include Indigenous materials, elders and educators in their curricula. They rebuild Indigenous cultures and reconnect Indigenous peoples to their worlds and languages (Matsunaga, 2016),

and provide opportunities to embed Indigenous cultural values and languages in their curricula. A curriculum is designed and implemented in Alaska in which Indigenous parents and educators collaborate in teaching mathematics through Indigenous cultural values (Hinton et al., 2018). Additionally, LR programs are mindful of the differences among Indigenous peoples and incorporate cultural values in their curricula through establishing long relationships with academic institutions (McGregor & Claxton, 2014).

There are limitations that, if removed, would contribute to more effective development of future LR programs in academic institutions. Czaykowska-Higgins et al. (2017) state that the existing academic regulations constrain the employment opportunities of Indigenous instructors. As the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges in academia may not be favored by everyone, it is effective to design locally developed mixed curricula that encompass Indigenous teachings and provide opportunities for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to mutually learn from each other. Therefore, when designing the Indigenous language revitalization programs at the University of Victoria, Czaykowska-Higgins et al. (2017) argue that modifications are done to re-design the program to be more flexible and incorporate Indigenous mentors more.

4. Conclusion

Indigenous and minority languages are endangered due to various reasons. That has encouraged language revitalizers to design and implement LR programs to revive Indigenous and minority languages along with their epistemologies and ontologies. However, considerations must be taken to improve the success of the said LR programs in the community and academia in providing the needs of their stakeholders. This paper briefly discussed language loss and shift and presented an account of consideration of what success entails in LR programs in academia and the community.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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