

**Language Revitalization and its Discontents:
An essay and review of**

***Saving languages:
An introduction to language revitalization***

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Introduction

Endangered languages are of obvious interest to linguists, and it is remarkable that recent levels of concern have shown that many of them are more or less committed to doing something to stem linguistic decline. This is a change from earlier hands-off postures that traditionally held it to be neither appropriate nor feasible to intervene in the social life of language; the work of academies, for example, was regularly interpreted as psychologically understandable but linguistically naïve. The older view remains, however, more correct than many modern commentators would have us believe. This is because the newer “ecological” stance generally persists in discussing language as if it were almost a freestanding matter that could and would respond to focused intervention. This is plainly not the case. Wholesale social reworking is too revolutionary for modern ecolinguists; rather, only some selected adjustments are wanted — but this has generally proved unworkable. To intervene on behalf of a threatened minority language, for instance, while leaving intact all the other aspects of social evolution that link the community in desired and desirable ways with the wider world, has generally resulted in failure.

The ecology of language is now very much a growth industry, but it is hard to see that it has done anyone any good — except, of course, for those scholars who have found ample opportunity for publishing arguments on the side of the angels, and for fostering debate, if only amongst themselves. The latter outcome is of course a common one across all sorts of scholarly discourse, but there is surely a special poignancy here, inasmuch as virtually all the writing is

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presumably meant to have applied value, intended to make a real contribution to the lives of those whose “small” languages and cultures are overshadowed by large and overbearing ones. I am tempted to say in all this that — while it is an acknowledged duty of intellectuals to avoid oversimplification, to search out explanatory nuance, to probe with scholarly lancets and not with the blunter instruments wielded in less sophisticated or disinterested quarters — a great deal of the research effort is either misguided, or disingenuous, or both.

The “New” Ecology of Language

Osborn Bergin, the famous Irish philologist, once noted bluntly that “no language has ever been revived, and no language ever will be revived” (see Ó hAilín, 1969, p. 91). On the other hand, Weinreich (1953, p. 108) said that “many ‘obsolescent’ languages have received new leases on life.” Observers of the same linguistic scene can have variant perceptions, too: Ó Domhnalláin (1959) found the educational achievements of the Irish revival “astounding” while Ellis and mac a’Ghobhainn (1971, p. 143) asked us to “remove our gaze from the terrible failure of Ireland.” And, even if the verdict is failure, Dorian (1987) has told us that revival efforts may still prove salutary — in this she was, incidentally, anticipated eighty years earlier by Trench (1907). Cutting across all perceptual and attitudinal perspectives, however, are powerful facts of social life, facts recognized by even the most sanguine enthusiasts for language maintenance, continuity and revival. Even the strongest will-to-revive may be dwarfed by societal pressures. Since languages and their speakers do not exist *in vacuo* and cannot — or *ought* not, at any rate — be treated in isolation from other strands of the social fabric, the whole business of revival is inevitably associated with *internal manifestations of external influence*.

This is precisely where the contemporary and “new” ecological awareness stakes its claim: it purports to offer fresh ways of understanding this social tissue of influence and, by implication, new approaches to linguistic maintenance and revival.¹ These often involve bilingual solutions, in that a continuing bilingualism is generally seen as the most reasonable accommodation for threatened varieties. This is not unreasonable, since the alternative — some monolingual emphasis upon the threatened variety alone — is an increasingly unlikely (and unpopular) course of action. Stability in bilingualism, or diglossia, is not always easily achieved, of course: the influence of those “large” varieties that have backed smaller ones into linguistic corners does not abate with bilingual arrangements.

The narrowed focus of most modern writing on linguistic ecology is upon an environmentalism that makes a specific case for the maintenance of diversity. This is not problematic in itself, and is obviously not an illegitimate stance (although it is not always a sturdy one), but it is surely reasonable to have

some misgivings about an area which styles itself broadly while marshalling its forces along quite specific lines. My central criticism is that language maintenance/revival is always a difficult undertaking, that past efforts have often foundered on the shoals of romantic but unrealistic enthusiasm, and that approaching the topic from a position of initial aesthetic and moral commitment — while understandable and in some circumstances laudable — is neither in the best traditions of disinterested scholarship nor likely to realize long-term success.

Different types and degrees of linguistic restoration can be put under the general rubric of “revival” (or, to use the term favoured by Grenoble and Whaley, “revitalization”). It follows, then, that we must turn our attention here to some specifics. We might ask, for example if revitalization efforts must always imply vernacular oral maintenance? Could a language preserved in written form, but spoken by few (or none) on a regular basis, be considered “maintained”? The answer must surely be yes, if only because such preservation could theoretically be a basis for future expansions. In most instances, of course, maintenance and rejuvenation *do* imply a continuity of some ordinary spoken medium and this, in turn, highlights the importance of uninterrupted domestic language transmission from one generation to the next. If this transmission is sustained, then language maintenance — at some level — is assured; if the transmission falters or ends, on the other hand, then the language becomes particularly vulnerable and its maintenance threatened. This is another way of saying that the home is probably the most important of all language *domains* — a point repeatedly, and correctly, stressed in the literature. Less often emphasized, however, is the logical (and, indeed, *ecological*) ramification that, for the continuation of this central domestic domain, there must generally exist extra-domestic settings within which the language is necessary or, at least, of considerable importance.

Relatedly, not all domains are of equal weight or value in terms of supporting linguistic continuity. While it is difficult to be categorical here, it is possible to identify — for a given variety, at a given time, in a given context — what one might call *domains of necessity*. These domains are related to the most pivotal aspects of people’s lives, and so one would frequently single out settings such as the home, the school and the workplace. On the other hand, domains in which participation is voluntary, or sporadic, or idiosyncratic, are not likely to be so important for broad language maintenance. The maintenance of a language is on a surer footing if it, and it alone, is required in domains of central and continuing salience.

The central issue here is easily stated: how can language maintenance be achieved; how can decline and discontinuity be halted; how can some sort of revitalization be effected? There are two major and inter-related factors involved, one tangible and one more subjective. The first (as I have just men-

tioned) is the continuing existence of important domains within which the use of the language is necessary. These domains depend, of course, upon social, political and economic forces, both within and (especially) without the language community. Although the details vary from case to case, issues of general relevance include linguistic practicality, communicative efficiency, social mobility, and economic advancement. These four constitute the greatest advantages associated with “large” languages, and the greatest disincentives for the maintenance of “small” ones. In many cases of language contact between varieties that are unequal in important ways, some bilingual accommodation is usually sought, but bilingualism itself can be an unstable and impermanent way-station on the road to a new monolingualism. Formal language planning on behalf of beleaguered languages can often do very little to stem the forces of urbanization, modernization and mobility, the forces that typically place a language in danger and which lead to language shift. Of course, linguistic standardization and modernization efforts are always theoretically possible, but they are not always practicable, nor do they necessarily change in any substantial way the status-based balance of dominance among competing forms. “Small” varieties that have developed to national-language levels (for example, Somali and Guaraní) remain less broadly useful than English and Spanish.

It should be remembered that, historically and linguistically, change rather than stasis is the norm. Environments alter, people move, and needs and demands change: such factors have a large influence upon language. The desire for mobility and modernization is, with some few notable exceptions, a global phenomenon. Whether one looks at the capitalist world or the erstwhile communist one, at contemporary times or historical ones, at empires or small societies, at immigrant minorities or indigenous groups, one sees a similarity of pressures that take their toll, force change, and throw populations into transitional states that may have unpleasant consequences (at least in the short term). Language decline and shift are generally *symptoms* of contact between groups of unequal political and economic power; they are effects of a larger cause, and it follows that attempts to arrest them are usually very difficult. One does not cure measles by covering up the spots; one cannot maintain a language by dealing with language alone. A logical approach to maintenance and revival, to the halting of decline and shift, is to unpick the social fabric that has evolved and then reweave it in a new pattern. This is, again, theoretically possible (consider revolutionary upheavals), but it is significant here that most who are concerned with language maintenance or revitalization usually want only *some* reworking of social evolution, not wholesale revolution (see also above). The most typical manifestations in this regard involve a desire for the rejuvenation of a flagging language to be coincident with the various benefits and mobilities afforded by participation in (or next to) the “large” culture whose incursions have brought about the decline in the first place. It is a considerable

understatement to say the fulfillment of such desires is a difficult and delicate undertaking.

Intangible Power

The more intangible or subjective factor in maintenance and revival efforts — and certainly the more interesting from a socio-psychological viewpoint — is the matter of the collective *will* to stem discontinuity, to sustain vigor in the face of the factors just discussed. The objection is sometimes made that, since language decline is often a reflection of relative social inequality, it is unrealistic to expect that threatened cultures and sub-cultures can exercise much power or actualize their desires. In general terms, this is true, and the evidence is all around us. There are, however, some subtleties here that are worth exploring, some nuances that the broad-brush perspective may efface. In his discussion of the decline of the Scottish Gaelic, Durkacz (1983) charted the familiar territory of linguistic retreat in the face of advancing English. But he also pointed out that acquiescence in at least some facets of language shift — notably in educational settings — coincided with strong resistance to other manifestations of anglo-pressure: the parents who were apparently willing enough for their children to be educated through English were at the same time quite capable of protest when non-Gaelic-speaking ministers were sent to preach to them, and protest became violent and more or less constant where land-management matters were concerned.

While the Highland Scots increasingly came to associate the English language with employment, prosperity and modernity, Durkacz shows that Scottish Gaelic and other Celtic varieties gradually took on other connotations; he mentions “childhood, song and dance”. This is, in fact, much too simplistic: it implies relatively light attachments for an immature, unsophisticated past that must be left behind. The reality, for both indigenous and immigrant minority groups, involves rather stronger linkages, rather more poignant social balance sheets. Nonetheless, choices are made and linguistic associations reflect these. If we stay with the Celtic languages, we find that early nineteenth-century Irish became more and more linked with “penury, drudgery and backwardness” (Ó Danachair, 1969, p. 20). Self-perceptions of Gaelic in Nova Scotia were described in almost exactly the same words by another commentator — the language implied “toil, hardship and scarcity”; English, by contrast, was a medium of “refinement and culture” (Dunn, 1974, p. 134). From the time of the earliest emigrations, Campbell (1948, p. 70) added, settlers in the new world “carried with them the idea that education was coincident with a knowledge of English”.

I am making no judgments here as to the accuracy or, indeed, the desirability of such views. I only wish to point out that perceptions of languages — and

the aspirations and actions that rest upon them — are based upon comparative assessments and that, as resistance in other quarters indicates, there is evidence for the exercise of some choice here, even in subaltern populations.

There are more recent demonstrations of the importance of linguistic will and desire. In contemporary America, for instance, the market-place makes increasing accommodations to speakers of nonstandard or non-English varieties. Clearly, there is no altruism involved here but, rather, a desire to reach important potential customers. If such customers — Spanish speakers in California, say — can wield the power of the purse, why not also the power of the ballot-box, of the educational amendment, of the Californian proposition on bilingual education? And if such power is exercised in some quarters but not in others, then it is reasonable to assume that rational assessment leads to discrimination in judgments — and, of course, to attempt to illuminate the bases of this.

If the sufficiency of will required for the exercise of power has, historically, been more evident in some areas than in others, if groups who make obvious use of their collective clout in economic contexts (for example) seem not to be so demanding in others, an obvious question arises. Why are people who go to the barricades for some things more acquiescent in others — in matters of language shift, for example? There is, of course, simple inertia, an inherent problem wherever passivity is to be galvanized into action. There are clear reasons for this, most of them having to do with lack of sufficient awareness coupled with the economic and pragmatic imperatives that affect ordinary life (for everyone, of course, but probably more centrally for those who are of subordinate or disadvantaged status). It often proves difficult or impossible, then, to translate a rather inert goodwill into something more dynamic. (Language revival efforts are typically characterized by a small group of activists nervously glancing over their shoulders to see how many of their alleged adherents are following them.) It is also possible for populations to have been “taken in”, as it were, by mainstream groups, so that they no longer know or trust their own linguistic and cultural instincts. Many years ago, Lambert and his associates — drawing upon earlier social-psychological work showing how negative, authoritarian and prejudiced evaluations of stigmatized social and religious groups were sometimes replicated *within* these groups themselves — described a “minority-group reaction” by which “small” linguistic communities may come to accept that their language has less favorable connotations than those of some larger surrounding population (Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner and Fillenbaum, 1960; see also Gardner and Lambert, 1972).

These sorts of explanations imply a *general* group inadequacy that action in *specific* arenas makes less plausible.² Nonetheless, it is clear that “the lack of will to stop shrinking is an intrinsic characteristic of a shrinking language community” (Fennell, 1981, p. 30). An acquired frailty of will is perhaps a more general manifestation of Lambert’s finding; it is certainly a deeper and

more subtle manifestation than any superficial listlessness and, even if it is only restricted to some areas of life, it presents a gritty problem. It reflects, in fact, powerful factors already touched here, notably the contact between unequal groups, communities or systems, and the socioeconomic changes set in train by this contact.

If *will* is a quantity that can be galvanized in some circumstances, how important is it? At a recent language symposium in Landau, Fishman argued that it was an imprecise concept, and that examples of its explanatory power are hard to delineate (a very curious stance for him to adopt; see below). There are cases that seem very obvious, however. After enduring long years of sociopolitical and religious paternalism, the francophone population in Québec experienced a *révolution tranquille*, transformed and modernized itself, and assumed the provincial mastery that its inherent strength had always promised; an important corollary of the transformation was linguistic engineering on behalf of a French language considered to be at risk. Spolsky has commented upon this situation in a discussion on language policy: he writes of francophones beginning to become “conscious of English dominance” (2004, p. 196). Elsewhere he uses terms like “commitment” and “ideological support” (p. 205), states bluntly that “language policy is about choice” (p. 217) and emphasizes the importance of the “perception” of sociolinguistic situations (p. 219). These usages are not all (or always) synonymous with *will*, but they all suggest how important convictions, attitudes and perceptions are in matters of language maintenance and revitalization.

Other more immediately relevant examples also suggest themselves. At the Landau conference just mentioned, for instance, Fishman (2004) gave a chatty plenary address, part of which consisted of a list of many intangible aspects of sociological and linguistic power—virtually all of which could just as easily have been described in terms of the operation of *will*.³ More pointedly, he made reference to the decision in his own family to create and maintain a Yiddish-speaking home. This is quite obviously an illustration of conscious will-power at work, of a decision taken on grounds of conviction rather than practical necessity—and a personal reflection of that broader and often-expressed argument about the importance of regular family transmission of languages from one generation to the next (see above). If one family can make certain language choices, then others might do so as well—consider the efforts of Ben-Yehuda in Israel—and to be able to extrapolate from the family to the community would clearly be of the greatest impact in the life of “threatened” varieties. Indeed, as Spolsky has pointed out, while application of any language policy requires a community, that community can be “of whatever size . . . ranging from a family . . . [to] nation state or regional alliance” (2004, p. 40).

In fact, Fishman has made frequent reference to *will* in his own writings; throughout his volume on the reversal of language shift, for example, he returns repeatedly to the theme in one form or another. Thus, he observes that the success of the re-vernacularization of Hebrew rested upon “the rare and largely fortuitous co-occurrence of language-and-nationality ideology, disciplined collective will, and sufficient social dislocation” (1991, p. 291). In discussing efforts on behalf of Frisian, he says that “the basic problem seems to be in activating this [passive] goodwill” (p. 180). Bemoaning the disregard of the “moral and spiritual dimensions of modern life” (p. 387) in his treatment of language-shift reversal, Fishman sees the movement as helping to re-establish “local meaning” in the face of a “mechanistic and fatalistic” outlook (p. 35). Successful reversal involves involvement in “the qualitative emphases” (p. 8) of contemporary life. And, in an earlier piece, Fishman wrote approvingly (in a discussion of Herder) of those peoples who have not “capitulated to the massive blandishments of western materialism, who experience life and nature in deeply poetic and collectively meaningful ways” (1982, p. 8).⁴

The invocation of the concept of will is surely also accurate when we consider the actions of those strongly committed to the protection of at-risk languages. These nationalists, activists and enthusiasts are typically few in number but fiercely committed to their linguistic cause. Consider the Cornish and Manx revivalists, or those native anglophones who move to the *Gaeltachtaí* of Ireland and Scotland, or those who carry the banners for Gaelic in Cape Breton Island, and so on; there are many apposite cases here. The other side of this coin—and the one that often gives the activities of revivalists their poignancy—must obviously be the will of those who choose *not* to move to minority-speaking enclaves, or to bring up their children in some threatened medium, or to otherwise encourage it. It might be thought that this second category is not particularly interesting or illuminating, representing merely passivity, *non-exercise* of will, or a decision to not make a decision, to drift along in the current of some “mainstream”. Of course, such groups are very important, if only because they so often outnumber the others. As well, there are contexts in which conscious decisions unfavorable to minority languages, on the part of potentially important players, are equally illustrative of the power of active will.

It is a testament to the depth and sensitivity of the German symposium to which I have already referred that one of the most important of these contexts—the post-colonial setting—was extensively discussed, notably by Africans and africanists. It was frequently pointed out, for example, that one consequence of colonialism is that the elites in newly-independent countries have typically been educated abroad; their training is usually undertaken in the language of the former colonizers and they often continue to value that language more highly than indigenous varieties. When it comes, then, to encouraging

local vernaculars and their development, or opting for the mediums of education, the mindset of those in power is — or so it is alleged — still stuck in a linguistic rut; the operation of *their* will stifles local languages (even perhaps their own mother tongues). Given the great divides that often exist between the rulers and the ruled, the implication is that a change in that mindset, a recalibration of that will, could have profound consequences for those large numbers who are linguistically and educationally excluded from the corridors of power, whose languages remain widely used but unfairly reined in. It is, of course, of the greatest significance that the exercisers of will in these circumstances are indigenous individuals themselves — elite maybe, and socioeconomically far removed from the vast majority of their compatriots but, nonetheless, unquestionably *of* the place. They are not callous outsiders whose language policies, however reprehensible, are understandable in the traditional colonial context; they are people of whom more might have been expected and, indeed, people who have often fulfilled the expectations of them in other arenas of social and political life.⁵

Intervention and Revitalization

Given the formidable attractions associated with “large” languages and “large” societies, it is not surprising that *active* moves for language maintenance are typically found only among a relatively small number of people. There are, of course, practical reasons why the masses (particularly in “small” societies) find it difficult to involve themselves in revival efforts, even if they are generally sympathetic — their collective *will*, then, often remains of a broad but passive nature. To galvanize this rather inert quantity has always been the most pressing issue for language activists. Many years ago, in commenting upon efforts to sustain and reinvigorate Irish, Moran (1900, p. 268) made a point which is still relevant in many quarters: “without scholars [the revival] cannot succeed; with scholars as leaders it is bound to fail”.

Linguists and other language scholars have traditionally seen a “naturalness” in most cases of language decline and shift that precludes any useful intervention, even if it were thought broadly desirable (see Bolinger, 1980). Some contemporary commentators, however — particularly sociolinguists and sociologists of language — have not shied away from engagement in the “public life” of language. Fishman is a good example. This self-proclaimed “founding father” of sociolinguistics makes no secret of his own commitment here, and has (1990, 1991) devoted considerable attention to the question of “reversing language shift” — an undertaking he deems a “quest” of “sanctity”. “Reversing language shift” is a term, incidentally, which has suggested to some a new approach; in fact, it is an unnecessary neologism in a field already cluttered with too many, about which there are endless definition, redefinition and

argument. *Revival* could replace all such terms; of course, the different levels and degrees of revival activity must then be specified in given circumstances, but the term itself is quite reasonably applied in all the linguistic contexts in which its use has been debated.

The term “revival” can reasonably cover all sorts of language situations, and most hair-splitting terminological exercises are both unnecessary and inefficient. (Question: when is a language revival not a revival? Answer: when it is a restoration/rebirth/renewal/renaissance/rejuvenation/revitalization/re-introduction/resurrection/reversal of shift. Well, at least they all start with “r”). Relatedly, the uniqueness of different language situations does not arise through the presence of important elements and attitudes found nowhere else; on the contrary, there are very familiar features that crop up again and again. The uniqueness of each setting lies, rather, in the particular combinations and weightings of these contextual features. This suggests typological possibilities that I have explored elsewhere (Edwards, 2006).

Fishman’s contribution to the revival literature lies in the addition of dispassionate argument to a strong personal commitment to the defense of languages at risk. But, as in the writings of many other “revivalists”, the lines of demarcation between scholarship and involvement often become blurred. For example, just as Douglas Hyde, the famous Irish revivalist and statesman, equated anglicization with a hated modernity, so there are elements in Fishman’s work that suggest that language revival is associated with a hope that earlier values might also be reawakened. Thus he speaks of the reversal of language shift as a force against the banalities of modernity, against “market hype and fad” (1991, p. 4). He is concerned about a contemporary “peripheralization of the family” (p. 375), and he bemoans the current disregard of “moral and spiritual dimensions” (p. 387). In all this, however, Fishman detects no orientation to the past; indeed, he admits that “there is no turning the clock back” (p. 377). Still, phrases like those just quoted do rather suggest that he might, after all, like to see the clock run back a bit, that his sympathies lie with some mythical “better” or “small-is-beautiful” past. This sense is reinforced when we find the author describing the reversal of shift as also “reversing the tenor, the focus, the qualitative emphases of daily informal life” (p. 8) or, more bluntly, as “remaking social reality” (p. 411). The tension between past and present leads Fishman to see advocates of shift reversal as “change-agents on behalf of persistence” (p. 387). What ought one to make of these curious phrases?

Matters of scholarship and advocacy have been examined in a well-known little exchange in the pages of *Language*. Krauss began with a pointed argument that continues to set the tone for much of the contemporary debate: linguists will be “cursed by future generations” if they do not actively intervene to stem the “catastrophic destruction” now threatening nine out of ten of

the world's languages (1992, pp. 7–8). Traditional emphases on varieties of linguistic documentation are seen to be insufficient; social and political action and advocacy are required. Linguists must go well beyond the usual academic role of description and documentation, Krauss argued, “promote language development in the necessary domains . . . [and] learn . . . the techniques of organization, monitoring and lobbying, publicity, and activism” (p. 9). A response by Ladefoged supported a continuation of the linguist-as-disinterested-scientist role; adopting this more traditional stance, he noted that the linguist's task is to present facts, and not to attempt to persuade groups that language shift is a bad thing *per se*. Not all speakers of threatened varieties, Ladefoged parenthetically pointed out, see their preservation as possible or even always desirable; thus

One can be a responsible linguist and yet regard the loss of a particular language, or even a whole group of languages, as far from a “catastrophic destruction” . . . statements such as “just as the extinction of any animal species diminishes our world, so does the extinction of any language” are appeals to our emotions, not to our reason. (Ladefoged, 1992, p. 810)

A third participant in this exchange was Dorian, who noted that all arguments about endangered languages are political in nature, that the low status of many at-risk varieties leads naturally to a weakened will-to-maintenance, that the loss of any language is a serious matter, and that the laying out of the “facts” advocated by Ladefoged is not a straightforward matter, since they are inevitably intertwined with political positions. At the very least, Dorian noted, this is an “issue on which linguists' advocacy positions are worth hearing” (1993, p. 579; fuller details here can be found in Edwards, 1994). We have, indeed, heard more and more of these positions; besides a burgeoning accumulation of chapters and articles, useful collections include those of Dorian (1989), Robins and Uhlenbeck (1991), Brenzinger (1992, 1998), Grenoble and Whaley (1998), Hinton and Hale (2001), Ureland (2001), Janse and Tol (2003), and Cunningham, Ingram and Sumbuk (2006).⁶ There are also several important monographs, including those by Crystal (2000), Nettle and Romaine (2000), Batibo (2005) and Tsunoda (2006); and some “popular” treatments, too — see Dalby (2002) and Abley (2003).

Apart from publications dealing with endangered varieties, there are several organizations devoted to the preservation of diversity, to the “ecological” perspective, to active intervention in behalf of threatened languages. They include the Endangered Language Fund, the Committee on Endangered Languages and Their Preservation, and Terralingua: Partnerships for Linguistic and Biological Diversity (all based in the United States), the Foundation for Endangered Languages (in England), Germany's *Gesellschaft für bedrohte Sprachen*, and the International Clearing House for Endangered Languages (Japan). Similar concerns motivate the European programs of Linguasphere

and the *Observatoire Linguistique* (Dalby, 2000) as well as those whose more pointed purpose is language-rights legislation.

It is clear that this is a very contentious area. What some would see as inappropriate and unscholarly intervention, others would consider absolutely necessary. Any combination of scholarship and advocacy is fraught with potential danger, but one might reasonably argue that one of the “facts” to be presented to groups and policy-makers is the very commitment of at least some in the academic constituency. Groups whose languages are at risk might profit from the knowledge that the issues so central to them are also seen as important by “outsiders”. At the end of the day, though, we should remember that the actions of linguists — whether fervently pro-maintenance in tenor or more “detached” — are likely to pale when compared with the realities of social and political pressures. These realities should at least suggest a sense of perspective.

Historical Revivalism

There is a considerable number of accounts — widely scattered both temporally and by discipline and rigor — of specific language-revival efforts, and so one might think Nahir’s (1977) observation that there has been little scholarly reporting somewhat surprising. He argues — on the basis of his own definition of revival (“an attempt to turn a language with few or no surviving native speakers back into a normal means of communication”: 1984, p. 301) — that this is due to the small number of revival attempts themselves. If we were to adopt a somewhat broader perspective, however, we would see that there have been quite a few attempts at language revival. Ellis and mac a’Ghobhainn’s (1971) rather flawed survey clearly demonstrated that many groups suffering some form of language pressure have struggled against it; they discuss twenty examples, ranging from Albanian to Korean.

The spectrum of revitalization attempts is an extensive one, although useful generalities can be extracted from the historical record. Here I can only mention one or two. The first has to do with the context rather than the content of revival efforts, and is simply that these efforts are typically seen to be belated. There are good reasons for this. For example, where populations are governed by conquering groups, any reasonable attention to the linguistic practices of the natives often comes as an historical afterthought; enlightened language policies are often countenanced only after political hegemony is felt to be secure and once some interest has developed in firmly and permanently “converting” the resident population. It is common, indeed, to find native-language policies adopted as an expedient to linguistic, religious and other forms of assimilation. In a sentiment echoed in many other settings, and at many other times, we find an early nineteenth-century commentator on the

Irish scene noting approvingly that the use of Irish would actually hasten its decline, since an educated populace would obviously come more quickly to realise the advantages of English (Dewar, 1812).

A second generality involves the antiquarian interests of many earlier revivalists, and the relatively late realization that the dwindling group of native speakers might be of importance. The “last” Cornish speaker, the legendary Dolly Pentreath of Mousehole, died in 1777 but formalised concern for Cornish took another century to gear up. Sometimes, too, scholarly and literary interests are simply not accompanied by much concern for native speakers. Matthew Arnold had a deep interest in Celtic literature, an interest that co-existed with a desire for the rapid disappearance of spoken Welsh and the full assimilation of all Celtic populations (Arnold, 1883). Indeed, the study of languages safely dead, or on the way to extinction, or whose remaining speakers are at some remove (literally or psychologically), is altogether a neater scholastic exercise than is actually coming to grips with breathing specimens. Although there were still many speakers of Irish by the time the revival effort began, the literary researches of the revivalists were not inconveniently challenged: by the 1880’s, only about fifty people were literate in Irish. Remember, too, the formidable Miss Blimber in Dickens’s *Dombey and Son*:

She was dry and sandy with working in the graves of deceased languages.
None of your live languages for Miss Blimber. They must be dead — stone
dead — and then Miss Blimber dug them up like a ghoul. (Chapter 11)

The Contribution of Grenoble and Whaley

I turn now to the book that has prompted this brief overview of linguistic revitalization, and I should begin with an admission or two. I know both authors, and have great respect for their work in sociolinguistics and allied fields: I have read it with pleasure and profit. They have invited me to speak at their university, and they have made favorable reference to my own work in an earlier treatment of endangered varieties (Grenoble and Whaley, 1998). And, indeed, I share their affection and concern for linguistic diversity. In terms of academic interest, however, we must surely go beyond attitude and preference; and, as I conceive it, undertakings in applied linguistics should attend to two central matters. First, we should make unsparing efforts to assemble and interpret the facts as fully, as accurately and as disinterestedly as possible; second, we should constantly ask ourselves if our investigations have resulted in — or, more importantly, *could* result in — significant and useful interventions. It seems to me that preference and selectivity have often interfered with the first of these matters, and that — in part because of that interference — there is little evidence of helpful transfer from academic insights to on-the-ground activity.⁷

In their preface (p. ix), Grenoble and Whaley make a number of basic points:

- (a) while language loss often arises from similar conditions in different settings, this does not imply that revitalization efforts can be standardized across contexts;
- (b) most such efforts have failed;
- (c) where success has been achieved, the efforts of the people themselves have always been crucial;
- (d) the role of “outsiders”, while often important, is never sufficient;
- (e) official language policies are of importance;
- (f) the relationship between the use of a particular language and speakers’ economic well-being is central.

These points form a framework that is then amplified upon in the main text. All are clearly both important and accurate, as my previous discussion has implied. If we were to read a little more into point “e”, and suggest that—in democratic regimes, at least—official policies are ultimately, if not immediately, reflections of consensus, then the overall import of these introductory points is that the intangible but powerful quality of *will* is indeed paramount. This is of course significantly associated with more tangible quantities (see point “f”, for instance)—and the obvious conclusion is that it is of little use to discuss the social life of language, much less thorny particulars like maintenance and revitalization, in isolation from other aspects of human life.

After presenting various schemes by which language vitality and language endangerment might be assessed, Grenoble and Whaley turn to the global nature of language decline, arguing that the phenomenon, while always present, has grown in recent years. The recognition of minority rights is also of expanding interest; for a critical commentary, see Edwards (2003). Together, these two factors account for the increased attention to revitalization, and they provide an answer to the question that the authors pose about why we should care about endangered varieties: there are perceived issues here of fairness and equality, bolstered by the belief that linguistic diversity is ever and always a good thing in itself, each language reflecting a unique perspective on the world, and so on. Grenoble and Whaley provide useful and pertinent details about official language policies in a number of jurisdictions, including the European Charter that deals with regional and minority languages, a charter that, it is hoped, will be brought to apply across the continent. They recognize of course that policy can mean lip-service only; this is obviously true when we consider educational policy, for example—there is a long history, in many settings, of providing some level of support for a minority language so as to expedite bilingualism and, ultimately, the decline of the original local variety.

Towards the end of the book, Grenoble and Whaley refer indirectly to official policy once again, when they note that, “although states may have the obligation to protect linguistic rights, it is the responsibility of individuals to use them” (p. 180). A point that I have made expands upon this matter. While it is quite easy — often lip-servingly easy — to provide for various sorts of rights to use language, it is rather more difficult to ensure that minority-language speakers can expect to be understood. The first condition can be legislated, the second cannot (except, of course, in selected interactions between individuals and bureaucracy); and the first without the second is a rather empty commodity. I am not suggesting that the right to use one’s own language when corresponding with government in various forms is without substance. I *am* suggesting, however, that without a broader context in which one’s variety can function more or less normally, the future for that variety is not bright.

Also important is Grenoble and Whaley’s discussion of attitudes — because here we come to another manifestation of intangible but potent factors in which the socio-psychological postures of those within and without an endangered-language community have important consequences. They also touch upon religion, claiming that it is a factor “commonly overlooked” in discussions of revitalization. This may be true in a narrow academic focus, but the intertwining of religion with language has of course been of the greatest historical moment in virtually all language-contact settings. One of their case studies, inserted here, is of Cornish — a very curious choice, to be sure, given both the history and the current status of that variety. Grenoble and Whaley note that it is a “relatively well documented” case but, for richness of discussion and detail, almost any of the other Celtic varieties would have better illustrated the important factors in decline; as for illustrating revival efforts, the Cornish context is, again, a much more restricted one. This is not to say that Cornish is uninteresting, nor that an examination will fail to reveal points of generalizable value — but simply that there are much richer tapestries that could have been provided as exemplars.

A couple of chapters are given over to revitalization models, virtually all of which are heavily weighted with educational programs and formal linguistic interventions in orthographic, lexical and other technical matters. As part of this discussion, Grenoble and Whaley refer to the “handful” of people who are typically actively involved in these efforts and, while limited cohorts can obviously achieve great things, there is an inherent fragility to any sort of movement that relies upon a small number of committed enthusiasts. In many “at-risk” settings, there is a combination of factors — a small number of actual (and regular) speakers, low levels of local interest in revitalization, and a tiny base of external commitment and expertise — that hardly bodes well for sustained development. Also important in this connection is the question of literacy in an endangered language. As I have argued elsewhere, literacy is often a double-

edged sword: it implies a sort of sophistication, it often increases perceived linguistic prestige, and it is, of course, associated with modernity, progress and material advancement; but history also reveals that, as literacy opens new doors for physical and social mobility, so it may actually facilitate the decline of the local in the face of broader attractions. That is why (as the authors discuss) there have been arguments *against* literacy for “small” language communities. It is one thing to argue for the qualities of oral cultures, but it is surely another—and a dangerous and condescending other, at that—to entertain the idea that the maintenance of a local vernacular might reasonably be bought at the expense of literacy; see Edwards (2002).

After a useful discussion of basic issues, models and programs, after the treatment of several revitalization contexts (in Cornwall, New Zealand, Canada, Russia and Hawaii), and after more detailed consideration of important matters of orthography and literacy, of power and rights, of standardization and local usage, Grenoble and Whaley turn, in a final chapter, to what is the most pivotal part of their contribution: a discussion of the practicalities involved in community language revitalization. They begin by emphasizing the obvious—but often neglected—matter of accurately ascertaining existing contours: the number of speakers, the social circumstances of their language, the type and degree of support it possesses, and so on (see Edwards, 2006).

On a related point, it is good to read that the authors themselves, when discussing external-to-the-community “macro” variables, note that these are often overlooked, “but are of central concern” (p. 178). Indeed, given what I have said here, we can understand that they are of the *greatest* concern, and a much stronger set of statements would have been appropriate here, since any failure to fully come to grips with external facts, pressures and attitudes is tantamount to treating language in isolation—the cardinal sin committed in so many treatments in the area.

The authors spend considerable time in this final chapter on matters of literacy, of adequate materials and teaching resources, of properly trained and committed teachers, of accommodations with the wired world, of survey and assessment instruments, of program evaluation. They also outline the appropriate and realistic roles that outside linguists and other experts can play, they touch briefly upon the “missionary-linguists” of the Summer Institute of Linguistics and other like bodies, and they even refer to the anti-outsider and anti-expert attitudes that have come to exist within some communities. The last few pages present a handy “checklist of procedures” involved in setting up a revitalization program. The authors acknowledge their debt to Fishman’s set of steps for “reversing language shift” (1991)—but, like his arrangements, theirs is a bloodless and artificially neatened affair. We are shepherded from the initial assessment stage (of the language, of the community resources, goals, and so on) to a consideration of “potential obstacles and strategies for

overcoming them”, to evaluation procedures—with one or two steps along the way in which literacy, resource materials, and teacher education are specifically singled out for attention.

Grenoble and Whaley have given us another useful volume on the highly-charged topic of language decline and revival—indeed, theirs is more comprehensive, more fluently constructed, and better written than most. However, as I have tried to suggest in this piece, the real issues here are deep, complex, historically convoluted and—above all—not essentially linguistic at all. The real matters have to do with the sociopolitics of group contact and conflict, and the linguistic consequences of this are, therefore, symptomatic: they do not constitute a phenomenon that can be worked on in isolation. I have no hesitation in recommending Grenoble and Whaley’s book to the attention of the scholarly community, but I am afraid that our continuing failure to recognize and to grapple with underlying issues will continue to restrict this community’s impact upon others.

Notes

- ¹ For fuller critical discussion, see Edwards, 2002, 2004.
- ² Think again of that Highland resistance to the clearances that coincided with what was no doubt a grudging acceptance of English. And, within the confines of language matters *tout court*, think of the simultaneous acceptance of English at school and spirited rejection of it in the kirk.
- ³ The collection by Pütz, Fishman and Neff-van Aertselaer (2006) presents a number of papers from that German meeting, and Fishman’s is among them; his printed chapter, however, is very different from his plenary address of the same title.
- ⁴ I reproduce these extracts to make my point about the importance of *will*, not (of course) to indicate any agreement with such romanticized, ineffective and possibly dangerous sentiments; see also the next section here.
- ⁵ Some of the poignancy here has been expressed by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, whose decision to write in G?k?y? and not in English is an important part of the backdrop to his many impassioned pleas for the linguistic and cultural “decolonizing” of the African mind—and to his indictment of those in power whose minds apparently remain colonized; see Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1993). But his is not the only possible stance available to enlightened minds. Chinua Achebe spoke for many African authors when he discussed the advantages of writing in English rather than in his mother tongue (see Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 1986).
- ⁶ As a “practical” manual, the Hinton and Hale book is the closest in spirit to the Grenoble and Whaley monograph under consideration in this essay; the latter acknowledge it in their preface.
- ⁷ I write “in part” here because I am not at all convinced that, even if our investigations were much more fully-fleshed than is typically the case, they could expect to create much of a stir beyond the academic cloisters. Recall Kedourie’s observation (1960, p. 125) that “it is absurd to think that professors of linguistics . . . can do the work of statesmen and soldiers”.

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