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The role of teaching in language revival and revitalization movements

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Abstract

Teaching is the main or even only way to pass on ancestral languages when intergenerational language transmission no longer takes place. The main reason for the interruption of natural language transmission is an increasing weakening of community bonds due to intermarriage, migration, and mobility. The formal or informal teaching of ancestral languages is therefore at the core of language revival and language revitalization movements. The article reviews favorable conditions and supportive factors for the teaching of ancestral languages from different parts of the world, and highlights the important role of dedicated community members in these endeavors.

Introduction

This discussion reviews the role of formal and informal teaching in selected language revival and revitalization movements across the world. Language teaching is employed by most language revitalization movements and, in fact, all language revival movements. When natural intergenerational language transmission in the home domain is interrupted, language teaching remains the only way to pass on ancestral languages to younger generations. Favorable conditions and supportive factors for community-based language teaching that aims at revitalization or revival of ancestral languages include competent speakers and/or extensive high-quality archived language data, a conducive sociopolitical environment including supportive language policies, monetary incentives linked to competence in the language, and ancestral languages being crucial for psychological and physical well-being. Most importantly,

such language movements must have at least one highly motivated community member who is able to encourage the acquisition of the ancestral language and its use within the community.

Going back only a few thousand years, teaching is a rather recent mode of language transmission in human history. For example, with an uninterrupted teaching record of Ge'ez for over 2,000 years, Ethiopia claims to have one of the longest traditions in formal education (Wedekind, 1994). Over the past few hundred years, with the rise of modern nation-states, government-controlled formal language teaching has aimed at spreading standard varieties and establishing them within national contexts. With that, the formal teaching of officially recognized varieties of languages became an instrument of political and economic dominance and control within nation-states. In Hawai'i and Okinawa, the American and Japanese occupiers, respectively, employed formal language teaching to eliminate the indigenous Hawaiian and Ryukyuan languages in their attempts to linguistically homogenize their nations (see Heinrich, 2012; McCarty, 2013). Today, national educational structures can be used to foster or revitalize indigenous ancestral languages.

The teaching of threatened languages

Language revival refers to cases in which languages are no longer spoken by a community and are then revived as community languages through formal or informal language teaching. Thus, intergenerational transmission of the language was interrupted for some time and has since been reestablished. Well-known examples of language revival are Hawaiian (Brenzinger & Heinrich, 2013) and Hebrew (Fellman, 1973). *Language revitalization*, by contrast, refers to cases in which a threatened language is still spoken by a community, but actions have been undertaken to foster the use and strengthen the transmission of these languages. These languages may have different degrees of language vitality, ranging from vulnerable, such as Akie (Heine, König, & Legère, 2016), to almost extinct, such as Nluu (Shah & Brenzinger, 2017). Examples of language revitalization efforts by communities include those of Uchinaguchi (Bairon, Brenzinger, & Heinrich, 2009) and Khwe (Brenzinger, 2018).

Two forms of language teaching are distinguished in this discussion: language teaching in formal and informal settings. Both forms of language teaching contrast with the natural intergenerational language transmission that takes place in the home environment. While formal teaching is controlled by governmental or other authoritative bodies, informal language teaching is community-based, often carried out by community members who are not

necessarily formally qualified teachers. Threatened languages are taught in quite different teaching settings: in *language nests* with immersion schooling, such as Maori and Hawaiian (Okura, 2017), as subjects in governmental or private schools, or as extracurricular classes in community venues.

This article discusses the roles of highly motivated speakers, the importance of language documentation, and the availability of teaching materials for the transmission of threatened languages. Indigenous languages of ethnolinguistic minorities are taught in fundamentally different sociopolitical environments. The teaching of indigenous languages in economically developed countries, such as Hawaiian in the United States, Maori in New Zealand, Walpiri in Australia, and Jejueo in South Korea, is often, but not always, politically and financially supported by provincial and/or national governments. By contrast, the teaching of indigenous languages in economically developing countries, such as Khwe in Namibia, Naro in Botswana, Safaliba in Ghana, Nluu in South Africa, and Rama in Nicaragua, seldom receives official support. On the contrary, such community teaching efforts can trigger oppressive measures by governments.

Highly Motivated Speakers

Many of the language revitalization movements were initiated and championed by “language icons,” that is, highly motivated and dedicated individual speakers.

Larry Kimura is referred to as the grandfather of the Hawaiian revival movement. He publicized the use of Hawaiian via radio broadcasts back in the 1960s when Hawaiian was no longer used in daily communication. The crucial turning point for the revival of Hawaiian, however, was the establishment of formal schooling structures with Hawaiian as the medium of instruction in the mid-1970s (Brenzinger & Heinrich, 2013).

Eleonora Rigby (alias Miss Nora) brought back Rama as a community language in Nicaragua. She launched a “one-person revitalization programme” (Grinevald & Pivot, 2013, p. 187) in the 1980s and continued to dedicate her life to the revitalization of the language until her death in 2001. Being nonliterate, she nevertheless considered her involvement in the formal teaching of the language as crucial for the survival of Rama (Grinevald & Pivot, 2013).

Fija Bairon ran his own radio program in Uchinaguchi for many years and contributed significantly to the revival of this Ryukyuan language spoken on the Okinawan island of Japan. He produced teach-yourself YouTube videos for the language and taught Uchinaguchi language courses at universities in Japan, Hawai'i, and Germany (Bairon et al., 2009).

In Southern Africa, the late David Naudé and Bothas Marinda taught the Khwe orthography in community workshops in Namibia, Botswana, and South Africa from the mid-1990s onward. The two then-young men were pivotal in fostering the use of Khwe and in spreading literacy among community members, and Bothas also produced some Khwe reading materials (Ociepka & Marinda, 2009). Writing their language became important in empowering the Khwe people to counter the negative stereotypes that they were subjected to and that many of them had come to accept. The ability not only to speak but also to write Khwe is perceived by the Khwe as being crucial in overcoming their low self-esteem. Despite severe poverty, hunger, political discrimination, and social marginalization that the community faces, John Mbeleko, one of the community members, has been teaching Khwe literacy skills to children for the last 20 years (Brenzinger, 2018, p. 50).

Katrina Esau, alias Ouma Geelmeid/Queen Katrina, aged 85 (at the time of this writing), has dedicated her life to the teaching of N|uu / N|ng. With four remaining elderly speakers, N|uu, the last of the Indigenous Click languages once spoken by the former hunter-gatherers of South Africa, is on the verge of extinction. Everyday conversations in N|uu stopped more than half a century ago, but due to Katrina's deep desire and firm devotion to the maintenance of her mother tongue, she became the protagonist of the N|uu language revival movement. For the last two decades, she has been teaching N|uu to children from the neighborhood in her makeshift school, assisted by her granddaughter, Claudia du Plessis, and in more recent years, by David van Wyk (Shah & Brenzinger, 2017).

The above-mentioned “guardians” of languages (see Coulmas, 2016) are considered to be the “best” speakers of their ancestral languages and, in some cases, are even granted the authority to define the standard variety of a language, which is then taught in schools. Different types of speakers, such as semispeakers, (re-)learners, and second language speakers, can also play important roles in the teaching of ancestral languages. Bradley van Sitters, for example, one of the leading figures of the Khoisan revivalist movement in Cape Town and a second language

speaker of his ancestral language, has been teaching Khoekhoegowab since 2014 (Brown & Deumert, 2017).

Language Documentation and Teaching Materials

Language data in archives and academic publications (i.e., grammars, dictionaries and text corpora of different genres) are crucial resources in the development of teaching materials for moribund languages, especially when there are few or no fully competent speakers remaining who can be involved in the process or at least consulted.

In 1893, when the Hawaiian Kingdom was incorporated by the United States, all Hawaiians were fluent in the indigenous language. The ban on Hawaiian-medium education by the United States in 1896 marked the beginning of the decline of Hawaiian, and by the 1940s, Hawaiian had ceased to be the medium of natural conversations on the islands. The Hawaiian language revival movement, which began in the 1970s, benefitted from the central role that the Hawaiian language played in the kingdom.

Hawaiian literacy in the mid-nineteenth century resulted in a large corpus of written Hawaiian encompassing a wide range of genres, which are still accessible today. The archives also hold a large number of “archival speakers” that is, deceased Hawaiian speakers who have been recorded. These Hawaiian audio documents include phonograph cylinder recordings of the nineteenth century but also interviews conducted by Larry Kimura, whose enormous collection (*Ka Leo Hawai'i*) contains a total of 625 hours of language material. The curriculum for Hawaiian-medium schools used this wealth of language data to develop learning and teaching materials of an exceptionally high standard (Wilson & Kamanā, 2001, p. 169). (Brenzinger & Heinrich, 2013, p. 303)

Comprehensive language corpora such as those for Hawaiian and Hebrew are rare, and archived language data for endangered languages is generally rather limited. This is even more the case on the African continent where language documentation conducted by missionaries, explorers, colonialists, and (later) linguists began only a few hundred years ago. Most of the 2,000+ African languages are not used as official media of instruction in formal education; nevertheless, they remain vital oral media of communication of communities.

Many of the 300–400 severely endangered African languages spoken by small communities are no longer acquired naturally through intergenerational language transmission; in these cases, language teaching becomes the main mode of language acquisition. Triggered by initiatives of UNESCO and other organizations, increasing numbers of ethnolinguistic minorities are demanding recognition and the teaching of their languages. First steps in such endeavors are the development of community orthographies for previously unwritten languages and these initiatives require the support and input from linguists, for example, in establishing the sound inventory of languages (Jones & Mooney, 2017).

On request by †Khomani community members, alphabet charts, language posters, and a Nluu reader (Shah & Brenzinger, 2016) were produced by members of the Centre for African Language Diversity (CALDi) at the University of Cape Town. Results from extensive research by several scholars have been published over the past 20 years, but very few of these language recordings and documents are in a format that is accessible to community members. These studies, however, formed the basis for the development of Nluu language teaching materials. Since Katrina is the last mother tongue speaker of Nluu teaching her language, the aforementioned educational materials were based on her idiolect and tailor-made for her teaching needs (Shah & Brenzinger, 2017).

Transmission of Threatened Languages

While mother tongues generally continue to be acquired in the home domain through intergenerational language transmission, threatened languages are increasingly learned as additional languages through teaching.

Despite the fact that Akie was described as being on the verge of extinction almost a century ago (Maguire, 1928/1948, p. 10), this language, spoken by hunter-gatherers in the Maasai plains of Tanzania, continues to be the community language of about 300 members. The maintenance of Akie as the community's language relies to a large extent on a close relationship of the speakers with their deceased relatives, who can interfere in all aspects of their lives, including causing diseases or even death. This truly vital communication with ancestors can only be conducted in Akie, which is the main motivation for the community members to continue to speak their ancestral language. Akie is acquired by children naturally in their home environment and within the community without formal or informal language teaching (König, Heine, & Legère, 2017; Heine et al., 2016).

By contrast, Nl̥uu was abandoned by most members of the †Khomani community when the last speakers were forced to shift to Afrikaans as their new mother tongue some 70 years ago. Many of the hunter-gatherer communities of Southern Africa were wiped out by commandos in a genocide in the second half of the 19th century (De Prada-Samper, 2012, p. 186). The remaining communities were forced into linguistic and cultural assimilation. Katrina Esau recalled that farmers no longer allowed their workers to use Nl̥uu on their farms, and for that reason, she did not speak her ancestral language for most of her life (personal communication, January 2015). In communicating with the other remaining speakers, Katrina regained competence in Nl̥uu. Today, the only way to learn Nl̥uu is through the extracurricular language classes that are offered by Katrina on her premises. While the language maintenance activities receive substantial backing from the community, outside support from the government would be essential for the establishment of viable and sustainable language teaching structures.

Hawaiian-medium schools are at the core of the Hawaiian revival movement, and formal educational structures have been established up to tertiary level; even doctoral dissertations can be written and defended in Hawaiian (Brenzinger & Heinrich, 2013). According to Fishman (1991), schools can play only a limited role, if any, in the revival and revitalization of ancestral languages. He emphasized that “without intergenerational mother tongue transmission ... no language maintenance is possible. That which is not transmitted cannot be maintained” (Fishman, 1991, p. 113). However, the revival of Hawaiian demonstrates that language teaching in fact can be the main means of regaining language competence in an ancestral language by a community. Hawaiian is acquired in schools through formal education and spreads from there into other domains, including homes. Wilson and Kamanā (2009, p. 371), founders of the revival movement, argued that for the reintroduction of a lost language, “the logical place to begin ... is the school.” The development of high-quality and relevant educational materials, as well as enthusiastic teachers, is at the core of the success of the movement. Graduates of the Hawaiian-medium schools benefit from a sympathetic cultural environment in the state of Hawai’i and the deep appreciation among most Hawaiians for their ancestral language. The excellent reputation of the Hawaiian-medium schools with its solid teaching and high standards provides job opportunities to the graduates; in addition, jobs in many sectors increasingly require competence in Hawaiian. The formal teaching of the language over the last 40 years has produced thousands of new Hawaiian mother-tongue

speakers. In the long run, however, sustainability in the use of the Hawaiian ancestral language requires its use in the home and other domains (Brenzinger & Heinrich, 2013).

Conclusion

The increasing weakening of community bonds due to intermarriage, migration, and mobility might be considered the most serious threat to the maintenance of ancestral languages (Brenzinger, forthcoming). Fostering competence in community languages can offer an important strategy in the reaffirmation of community bonds (e.g., Khwe) or in creating and establishing even new community identities (e.g., Nluu, Hawaiian). Worldwide movements of marginalized communities reclaim identities, often with reference to ancestral languages. This does not necessarily lead to the restoration of lost ancestral languages as media of daily communication; symbolic use of these languages is often considered sufficient as a marker of group identity. Language titles for ancestral languages are put forward, and Zuckermann and Walsh (2016, p. 94) claimed that “there is a positive correlation between language reclamation and increased personal empowerment, improved sense of identity and purpose as well as reduced cases of depression.” Even ancestral languages with no living speakers – based on archived material – can be taught to and relearned by their descendants.

For threatened languages to be maintained, individuals have to commit themselves to the use of their ancestral languages in communication with other community members. The teaching of threatened languages by dedicated and charismatic activists such as Katrina Esau and Larry Kimura is in response to the collapse of the natural transmission of their ancestral languages; under these circumstances, teaching them is the main or only way to revive these ancestral languages as spoken media of communication. Threatened languages that are naturally transmitted, such as Akie, are becoming increasingly rare.

Some of the above-mentioned language guardians (and others in the past) established formal structures for the teaching of ancestral languages (see Coulmas, 2016). For a large number of African languages and most threatened languages worldwide, adequate teaching strategies still need to be developed. Ultimately, for these languages to survive, younger generations have to continue to commit themselves to learn, actively use, and teach their ancestral tongues.

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