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0521816211 - Saving Languages: An Introduction to Language Revitalization

Lenore A. Grenoble and Lindsay J. Whaley

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## Saving Languages

Language endangerment has been the focus of much attention over the past few decades, and as a result a wide range of people are now working to revitalize and maintain local languages. This book serves as a general reference guide to language revitalization, written not only for linguists and anthropologists, but also for language activists and community members who believe they should ensure the future use of their languages, despite their predicted loss. Drawing extensively on case studies, it sets out the necessary background and highlights central issues such as literacy, policy decisions, and allocation of resources. Its primary goal is to provide the essential tools for a successful language revitalization program, such as setting and achieving realistic goals, and anticipating and resolving common obstacles. Clearly written and informative, *Saving Languages* will be an invaluable resource for all those interested in the fate of small language communities around the globe.

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*An Introduction to Language Revitalization*

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## Preface

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This book is designed for readers of various backgrounds who are interested in the fate of small language communities around the globe: linguists, anthropologists, and academics in other disciplines; language activists, missionaries, humanitarian workers, policy makers, and educators; journalists and researchers; students; and visionaries who believe that it is possible to hear their language spoken for many centuries to come in the face of many who claim otherwise. With this diversity of readers in mind, our goal was to write a book that would serve as a general reference guide to language revitalization, providing the necessary background, highlighting the central issues, indicating common obstacles, and pointing to sources of further information.

Our own experiences with language revitalization efforts have come primarily through fieldwork in east Asia on several Tungusic languages (all of which are undergoing rapid loss in the number of native speakers), and secondarily through long-term relationships and professional collaborations with fieldworkers and activists in Africa, South America, and North America, particularly the United States. This background has sensitized us to several important facts. First, although many similarities can be found in the causes of language loss around the world, this does not mean that similar approaches to language revitalization can be taken. There are simply too many differences in the political, social, and economic situations facing, say, a community in northern China versus one in southern Africa to make blanket statements about how revitalization should be carried out. Second, an honest evaluation of most language revitalization efforts to date will show that they have failed. There have been enough success stories to warrant optimism about the possibilities of taking a moribund (or extinct) language and moving it to a more vital state, but this is atypical. Creating an orthography or producing a television program for children in a local language is a major accomplishment in its own right, but it will not revitalize a language. A longer-term, multifaceted program, one which requires a range of resources and much personal dedication, is needed. Third, government policies affecting language use in public (or even

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private) realms are one of the two most basic forces that hinder (or help) language revitalization, the other being the connection that people make between language use and economic well-being for their family. Finally, where successes do occur in language revitalization, they result, perhaps without exception, from the efforts of people who want to speak a local language, and want their friends and neighbors to as well. Even with the best of intentions, an outsider entering into an endangered language situation with the goal of “saving it” will fail. This is not to say that outsiders do not have something important to contribute, such as linguistic expertise, connections to funding sources, moral support, and so on. They do, and their contributions are often vital to a program. But, that said, it is the members of the community where the revitalization is going on who need to be highly invested in the outcome. They need to control decision making; they need to take ownership of the effort and construct the revitalization program which suits their ambitions, needs, and resources.

The lessons from our own experience have greatly influenced the content and tone of this book. We have tried to present practical recommendations without giving the sense that there are guaranteed methods to language revitalization. We have tried to underscore the complexity of factors that must be addressed in expanding the domains where a local language is spoken without overwhelming the reader. And we have tried to keep in mind the balance between thoughtful planning in revitalization and the urgency facing speech communities where fewer and fewer people speak a language that used to be widely employed.

The chapters are designed to be read in succession or individually. The first two chapters of the book outline the conceptual framework in which we understand language endangerment and revitalization. Chapter 3 discusses different models for language revitalization, and Chapter 4 provides information coming from individual case studies as a way to connect the abstractions from the beginning chapters to actual practice. Chapters 5 and 6 address two major issues in language revitalization: literacy and orthography development. We have devoted two entire chapters to these issues because so many linguists and activists see literacy as a fundamental requirement for successful revitalization, yet the issues behind literacy and orthography development are so complicated that they are rarely discussed in depth in the literature on language endangerment. Chapter 7 provides a step-by-step account of how a community can assess its needs, commitment, resources, and goals, and then, based on these factors, how they can go about establishing the appropriate language program. We anticipate that some readers may want to begin the book with this chapter, skipping the background, and then go back to fill in the picture with the details of existing programs. The chapter is accordingly written to be read



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either following the background information of Chapters 1 to 6 or in anticipation of it.

The present work is by no means the only resource on language revitalization. There are many. Hinton and Hale's (2001) *The green book of language revitalization in practice* is perhaps the closest in spirit to our own work and contains a wealth of insights from people who have been deeply involved in designing language revitalization programs. Joshua Fishman, of course, has been instrumental in raising awareness about language endangerment and how communities can counteract the forces that lead to language shift. His 1991 book *Reversing language shift: Theoretical and empirical foundations of assistance to threatened languages* is already a classic and should be read by anyone with interests in the question of language revitalization. There are many collections of articles that explore the issues surrounding revitalization. Three of the more recent are Fishman (2001), Bradley and Bradley (2002), and Janse and Tol (2003). There are also a number of excellent books and articles dealing with language revitalization in specific regions of the world. Three that we have found highly instructive are: Amery (2000), King (2001), and Hinton et al. (2002).

We have worked with a number of people in preparing this book and would like to extend a special thanks to Scott Anderson, Chuinda Andicha, Oliver Bernstein, Nadezhda Bulatova, Er Dengguo, Kristen Foery, Elizabeth Gannes, He Qinghua, Manuel Hugo, José Juncosa, Kristina Kleutghen, Fengxiang Li, Denise McBeth, Tori Minor, Jauquin Najandey, Pablo Tsere, Laura Vacca, Rafael Vega Tsetsem, Luis Wamputsik Chinkias, and Tara Wharton. We are especially grateful to the many members of the Evenki, Oroqen, Solon, Hawaiian, Māori, Mohawk, and Shuar communities who have given so freely and willingly of their time and knowledge to help make this a better book. We would like to thank Andrew Winnard for his support for this project and for pushing us to finish the manuscript. Finally, we are indebted to Matthias Brenzinger for providing the photograph used on the front cover of the book.