

Revivalistics — a new comparative, global, transdisciplinary field of enquiry

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Abstract

Revivalistics is a new comparative, global, trans-disciplinary field of enquiry studying comparatively and systematically the *universal* constraints and global mechanisms on the one hand (Zuckermann 2003, 2009, and importantly 2020), and *particularistic* peculiarities and cultural relativist idiosyncrasies on the other, apparent in linguistic *reclamation*, *revitalization* and *reinvigoration* across various sociological backgrounds, all over the globe (Zuckermann 2020, Zuckermann and Walsh 2011, 2014). Too many documentary and descriptive linguists mislead themselves to believe that they can easily be revivalists too. But there are two crucial differences between revivalistics and linguistics, which are at war between themselves: first, whereas linguists put the *language* at the centre, revivalists put the *language custodians* at the centre. Second, whereas in documentary linguistics the Indigenous/minority people have the knowledge of the language, in revivalistics the revivalist is the one with that knowledge.

Given that the Aboriginal/minority people are the language custodians, and given that the language custodians are at the centre of the revivalistic enterprise, the revivalist must be extremely sensitive. A revivalist is not only a linguist but also a psychologist, social worker, teacher, driver, *schlepper*, financial manager, cook, waiter, babysitter, donor etc. A revivalist must possess four characteristics: a heart of gold, “balls” of steel, the patience of a crocodile/saint, and the agreement to serve as a punchbag. Needless to say: the best-case scenario is that in which the revivalist happens to be the custodian/owner of the very language being revived (see e.g. in the case of Myaamia¹). But this is unfortunately rare these days, especially in Australia.

Language revival is similar to co-parenting. But the revivalist is only a step-father. The important biological mother is the Indigenous/minority community. If you are the step-father and your spouse, who is the biological mother, makes what you perceive to be a mediocre decision with regard to your children, you cannot just disapprove of it. After all, the children are your spouse's more than they are yours. You must work together for the best possible outcome. Similarly, if the community supports a decision that is not linguistically viable, the revivalist can try to inspire the community members, but must accept their own verdict. That would be difficult for a linguist with poor social skills. This article first introduces cross-cultural communication and then revivalistics, explores its trans-disciplinarity and various benefits, and provides examples from the field that demonstrate the complexity of the revivalist's work and how the revivalist's work is different from that of the documentary linguist.

Introduction: Cross-cultural communication

Respect is a *sine qua non* of good communication, no matter to whom you

are talking. Yet, even if you are respectful, it is important to be aware of various cultural differences regarding style of conversation and communication discourse.

1 An [indigenous Algonquian](#) language spoken in the United States. [Ed.]

Western vs Aboriginal communication

For example, by and large whilst typical Western conversational interaction is both “dyadic” and “contained,” traditional Australian Aboriginal conversational interaction is both “communal” and “continuous.” In dyadic Western communication, which is usually between two people, the talk is directed to a particular individual. People face each other, eye contact is important, and the control is in the hands of the speaker.

In communal Aboriginal communication, on the other hand, the talk is not directed to a specific individual but is rather “broadcast.” People usually do not face each other, eye contact is less important, and the control is in the hands of the hearer.

In contained Western conversation, the talk is packaged into discontinuous bits. For example, when one asks a question, one expects an immediate answer. Another example: One turns on the TV when one would like to watch it.

In continuous Aboriginal conversation, on the other hand, one is not expected to answer a question immediately. Furthermore, one can come up with the answer to the question much later, and without mentioning the question. The TV is turned on upon acquisition and remains on until caput.

“British” vs “Mediterranean” communication

But even within dyadic cum contained so-called Western communication, there are various differences, e.g. between “British” and “Mediterranean” styles of discourse. For example, as a generalization, “British” communication is “passive-aggressive,” and telling bluntly a person what you think of him/her is considered the ultimate crime. “Mediterranean” communication, on the other hand, is diametrically opposite, and

is considered “aggressive” by “British” communicators. For example, backstabbing within “Mediterranean” communication is considered the ultimate crime; asking people affronting questions is acceptable, and seen as promoting open and honest dialogue. Honesty is cherished; vacuous politeness is despised.

What is passive-aggressive?

The following two “voice” triads (active — passive — passive-aggressive) constitute a humorous, linguistic way to explain to those unfamiliar with “passive-aggressive” culture what “passive-aggressive” is all about.

Active: I love your language revival.

Passive: Your language revival is loved by me.

Passive-Aggressive: I love how you feel the need to revive a language.

Active: You ate all the chocolates.

Passive: All the chocolates were eaten by you.

Passive-Aggressive: You ate all the chocolates; no worries, it’s absolutely fine; I can see chocolate is very important to you.

Revivalistics

Revivalistics is a new comparative, global, trans-disciplinary field of enquiry studying comparatively and systematically the *universal* constraints and global mechanisms on the one hand (Zuckermann 2003, 2009, 2020), and *particularistic* peculiarities and cultural relativist idiosyncrasies on the other, apparent in linguistic reclamation, revitalization and reinvigoration across various sociological backgrounds, all over the globe (Zuckermann and Walsh 2011, 2014).

What is the difference between reclamation, revitalization, and reinvigoration? All

of them are on the revival spectrum. Here are my specific definitions:

- *Reclamation* is the revival of a “Sleeping Beauty” tongue, i.e. a no-longer natively spoken language, as in the case of Hebrew, Barngarla,² Wampanoag,³ Siraya⁴ and Myaamia.
- *Revitalization* is the revival of a severely endangered language, for example Adnyamathanha of the Flinders Ranges in Australia, as well as Karuk and Walmajarri.
- *Reinvigoration* is the revival of an endangered language that still has a high percentage of children speaking it, for exam-

ple the Celtic languages Welsh and Irish, and the Romance languages Catalan and Quebequoise French.

Language endangerment has little to do with absolute numbers. Rather, it has to do with the *percentage* of *children* within the language group speaking the language *natively*. A language spoken natively by 10 million people can be endangered (as, say, only 40% of its kids speak it). A language spoken natively by 3,000 people can be safe and healthy (as 100% of its kids are native speakers).

Figure 1 describes the difference between reclamation, revitalization and reinvigoration:

Reclamation	Revitalization	Reinvigoration
There are NO native speakers when the revival begins.	Severely endangered. The percentage of children within the group speaking the language natively is very low, e.g. 0%, but there are still adults speaking the language natively.	Endangered. The percentage of children within the group speaking the language natively is lower than 100%.
e.g. Hebrew, Barngarla, Wampanoag, Siraya, Myaamia; Tunica	e.g. Adnyamathanha, Karuk, Walmajarri	e.g. Welsh, Irish, Catalan, Quebequoise French

Figure 1: Comparison of Reclamation, Revitalization and Reinvigoration

Obviously, reclamation, revitalization and reinvigoration are on a *continuum*, a cline. They do not constitute a *discrete* trichotomy. That said, the distinction is most useful. For example, the Master-Apprentice (or Mentor/Apprentice) method can only be used in the revitalization and reinvigoration, not in reclamation. This method was pioneered by linguist Leanne Hinton at the

University of California, Berkeley (see, e.g., Hinton 1994), who had been working with a wide range of Native American languages spoken or in some cases remembered or documented across California. In many cases, she was working with the remaining handful of ageing fluent speakers of languages such as Karuk. It is a difficult proposition to ask an elderly speaker to come into a

2 The Aboriginal language of Eyre Peninsula, South Australia.

3 From southeastern Massachusetts [Ed.]

4 A [Formosan language](#) spoken until the end of the 19th century by the indigenous [Siraya people](#) of [Taiwan](#) [Ed.]

school classroom and teach children when they themselves are not trained teachers and, in some cases, may never have had an opportunity to attend school themselves. Even if they were able to teach their languages in a school setting, will this really ensure that their language continues into future generations? Probably not. What is more effective is to ensure that highly motivated young adults who are themselves owners-custodians of the language gain a sound knowledge of and fluency in their language. This is achieved through the Master-Apprentice (or Mentor/Apprentice) approach: A young person is paired with an older fluent speaker — perhaps a granddaughter with her grandmother — and their job is to speak the language with each other without resorting to English. It does not matter what they do — they can weave baskets, go fishing, build houses, or fix cars together — so long as they speak the language with each other (Zuckermann 2020).

Revivalistics is *trans-disciplinary* because it studies language revival from various angles such as law, mental health, linguistics, anthropology, sociology, geography, politics, history, biology, evolution, genetics, genomics, colonization studies, missionary studies, media, animation film, technology, talknology, art, theatre, dance, agriculture, archaeology, music (see Grant 2014), games (indirect learning), education, pedagogy (see Hinton 2011), and even architecture.

Consider architecture. An architect involved in revivalistics might ask the following “location, location, location” question, which is, of course, beyond language:

- Should we reclaim an Indigenous language in a natural Indigenous setting, to replicate the original ambience of heritage, culture, laws, and lores?

- Should we reclaim an Indigenous language in a modern building that has Indigenous characteristics such as Aboriginal colours and shapes?
- Should we reclaim an Aboriginal language in a western governmental building — to give an empowering signal that the tribe has full support of contemporary mainstream society?

Why should we invest time and money in reclaiming “Sleeping Beauty” languages?

Approximately 7,000 languages are currently spoken worldwide. The majority of these are spoken by small populations. Approximately 96% of the world’s population speaks around 4% of the world’s languages, leaving the vast majority of tongues vulnerable to extinction and disempowering their speakers. Linguistic diversity reflects many things beyond accidental historical splits. Languages are essential building blocks of community identity and authority.

With globalization of dominant cultures, homogenization and Coca-colonization, cultures at the periphery are becoming marginalized, and more and more groups all over the world are added to the forlorn club of the lost-heritage peoples. One of the most important symptoms of this cultural disaster is language loss.

A fundamental question for revivalistics, which both the tax-paying general public and the scholarly community ought to ask, is why does it matter to speak a different language? As Evans (2010) puts it eloquently in the introduction to his book *Dying Words*:

you only hear what you listen for, and you only listen for what you are wondering about. The goal of this book is to take stock of what we should be wondering about as

we listen to the dying words of the thousands of languages falling silent around us, across the totality of what Mike Krauss has christened the “logosphere:” just as the “biosphere” is the totality of all species of life and all ecological links on earth, the logosphere is the whole vast realm of the world’s words, the languages that they build, and the links between them.

Evans (2010) ranges over the manifold ways languages can differ, the information they can hold about the deep past of their speakers, the interdependence of language and thought, the intertwining of language and oral literature. Relevant to revivalistics, it concludes by asking how linguistics can best go about recording existing knowledge so as to ensure that the richest, most culturally distinctive record of a language is captured, for use by those wanting to revive it in the future (see also Brenzinger 1992, 1998 and 2007a; Enfield 2011). Brenzinger emphasizes the threats to knowledge on the environment (Brenzinger, Heine & Heine 1994; Heine & Brenzinger 1988), conceptual diversity as a crucial loss in language shifts (Brenzinger 2006, 2007b, 2018).

The following is my own trichotomy of the main *revivalistic* reasons for language revival. The first reason for language revival is ethical: It is right. The second reason for language revival is aesthetic: It is beautiful. The third benefit for language revival is utilitarian: It is viable and socially beneficial.

Ethical reasons

A plethora of the world’s languages have not just been dying of their own accord; many were destroyed by settlers of this land. For example, in Australia we owe it to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to support the maintenance and revival

of their cultural heritage, in this instance through language revival. According to the international law of human rights, persons belonging to ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities have the right to use their own language (Article (art.) 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)). Thus, every person has the right to express themselves in the language of their ancestors, not just in the language of convenience that English has become.

Through supporting language revival, we can appreciate the significance of Indigenous languages and recognise their importance to Indigenous people and to Australia. We can then right some small part of the wrong against the original inhabitants of this country and support the wishes of their ancestors with the help of linguistic knowledge.

Aesthetic reasons

The linguist Ken Hale, who worked with many endangered languages and saw the effect of loss of language, compared losing language to bombing the Louvre: “When you lose a language, you lose a culture, intellectual wealth, a work of art. It’s like dropping a bomb on a museum, the Louvre” (*The Economist*, 3 November 2001). A museum is a repository of human artistic culture. Languages are at least equally important since they store the cultural practices and beliefs of an entire people. Different languages have different ways of expressing ideas and this can indicate which concepts are important to a certain culture.

For example, in Australia, information relating to food sources, surviving in nature, and Dreaming/history is being lost along with the loss of Aboriginal languages. A study by Boroditsky and Gaby (2010) found

that speakers of Kuuk Thaayorre, a language spoken in Pormpuraaw on the west coast of Cape York, do not use “left” or “right,” but always use cardinal directions (i.e. north, south, east, west). They claim that Kuuk Thaayorre speakers are constantly aware of where they are situated and that this use of directions also affects their awareness of time (Boroditsky and Gaby 2010). Language supports different ways of “being in the world.”

Such cases are abundant around the world. An example of a grammatical way to express a familiar concept is *mamihlapinatapai*, a lexical item in the Yaghan language of Tierra del Fuego in Chile and Argentina. It refers to “a look shared by two people, each wishing that the other would offer something that they both desire but have been unwilling to suggest or offer themselves.” This lexical item, which refers to a concept that many have despite lacking a specific word for it in their language, can be broken down into morphemes: *ma-* is a reflexive/passive prefix (realized as the allomorph *mam-* before a vowel); *ihlapi* “to be at a loss as what to do next;” *-n*, stative suffix; *-ata*, achievement suffix; and *-apai*, a dual suffix, which has a reciprocal sense with *ma-* (circumfix).

Two examples of concepts that most people might never imagine are (1) *nakhur*, in Ancient Persian, refers to “camel that will not give milk until her nostrils have been tickled.” Clearly, camels are very important in this society and survival might have historically depended on camel milk; (2) *tingo*, in Rapa Nui (Pasquan) of Easter Island (Eastern Polynesian language), is “to take all the objects one desires from the house of a friend, one at a time, by asking to borrow them, until there is nothing left” (see De

Boinod 2005; De Boinod & Zuckermann 2011); (3) *bunjurrbi*, in Wambaya (Non-Pama-Nyungan West Barkly Australian language, Barkly Tableland of the Northern Territory, Australia), is a verb meaning “to face your bottom toward someone when getting up from the ground.”

Such fascinating and multifaceted words, *maximus in minimis*, should not be lost. They are important to the cultures they are from and make the outsiders reflexive of their own cultures. Through language maintenance and reclamation we can keep important cultural practices and concepts alive. Lest we forget that human imagination is often limited. Consider aliens in many Hollywood films: despite approximately 3.5 billion years of DNA evolution, many people still resort to the ludicrous belief that aliens ought to look like ugly human beings, with two eyes, one nose, and one mouth.

Utilitarian benefits

Language revival benefits the speakers involved through improvement of wellbeing, cognitive abilities, and mental health (see Zuckermann and Walsh 2014; chapter 9 of Zuckermann 2020); language revival also reduces delinquency and increases cultural tourism. Language revival has a positive effect on the mental and physical wellbeing of people involved in such projects. Participants develop a better appreciation of and sense of connection with their cultural heritage. Learning the language of their ancestors can be an emotional experience and can provide people with a strong sense of pride and identity.

There are also cognitive advantages to bilingualism and multilingualism. Several studies have found that bilingual children have better non-linguistic cognitive abili-

ties compared with monolingual children (Kovács & Mehler 2009) and improved attention and auditory processing (Krizman et al. 2012: 7879): the bilingual’s “enhanced experience with sound results in an auditory system that is highly efficient, flexible and focused in its automatic sound processing, especially in challenging or novel listening conditions.”

Furthermore, the effects of multilingualism extend to those who have learned another language in later life and can be found across the whole lifespan. This is relevant to the first generation of revivalists, who might themselves be monolingual (as they won’t become native speakers of the Revival Language). The effects of non-native multilingualism include better cognitive performance in old age (Bak et al. 2014), a significantly later onset of dementia (Alladi et al. 2013), and a better cognitive outcome after stroke (Alladi et al. 2016; Paplikar et al. 2018). Moreover, a measurable improvement in attention has been documented in participants aged from 18 to 78 years after just one week of an intensive language course (Bak et al. 2016). Language learning and active multilingualism are increasingly seen as contributing not only to psychological wellbeing but also to brain health (Bak & Mehmedbegovic 2017), with a potential of reducing money spent on medical care (Bak 2017).

Further benefits to non-native multilingualism are demonstrated by Keysar et al. (2012: 661). They found that decision-making biases are reduced when using a non-native language, as following:

Four experiments show that the “framing effect” disappears when choices are presented in a foreign tongue. Whereas people were risk averse for gains and risk

seeking for losses when choices were presented in their native tongue, they were not influenced by this framing manipulation in a foreign language. Two additional experiments show that using a foreign language reduces loss aversion, increasing the acceptance of both hypothetical and real bets with positive expected value. We propose that these effects arise because a foreign language provides greater cognitive and emotional distance than a native tongue does.

Therefore, language revival is not only empowering culturally, but also cognitively, and not only the possibly-envisioned native speakers of the future but also the learning revivalists of the present.

Revivalistics vis-à-vis documentary linguistics

Too many documentary and descriptive linguists mislead themselves to believe that they can easily be revivalists too. But there are two crucial differences between revivalistics and documentary linguistics, which are at war between themselves, resulting in the *Revivalistic Paradox*:

1. Whereas linguists put the *language* at the centre, revivalists put the *language custodians* at the centre
2. Whereas in documentary linguistics the Indigenous/minority people have the knowledge of the language, in the revivalistic case of reclamation, the revivalist is the one with that knowledge.

Given that the Aboriginal/minority people are the language custodians, and given that the language custodians are at the centre of the revivalistic enterprise, the revivalist must be extremely sensitive.

Needless to say: the best-case scenario is that in which the revivalist happens to be the custodian/owner of the very language being revived (see e.g. in the case of Myaamia). But this is unfortunately rare these days, especially in Australia.

A revivalist must master cross-cultural communication (see Introduction). A revivalist is not only a linguist but also a psychologist, social worker, teacher, driver, *schlepper*, financial manager, cook, waiter, babysitter, donor etc. A revivalist must possess four characteristics:

1. a heart of gold,
2. “balls” of steel,
3. the patience of a crocodile/saint, and
4. the agreement to serve as a punchbag.

Consider the following *real* examples from Aboriginal Australia:

1. Seat of emotions: Although the professional revivalist knows, with ample evidence, that the seat of emotions in a specific Aboriginal language is the *stomach*, contemporary indigenous custodians — influenced (subconsciously) by the colonizers’ English — tell me that they feel, as the traditional owners of the languages, that the *heart* is the seat of emotions within the traditional language.
2. Neologization: Although the revivalist may think that neologisms would be beneficial for the revival (for example, as children would like to have a word for “computer” or “app”), an Aboriginal tribe told me that they decided not to neologize (for the time being) until everyone knows all the traditional words being reclaimed.
3. Swear words: Although the revivalist might think that swear words would be beneficial for the revival (for example, as

people would like to express frustration), an Aboriginal tribe asked me to censor such words from the dictionary.

4. One-to-one correlation between signifiers and referents: Although the revivalist has no problem with homophony and polysemy, an Aboriginal custodian told me that she wanted a system of one word — one meaning.
5. Spelling: Although an Aboriginal tribe decided to stick to B, D and G (knowing that P T and K are not distinct phonemes in their language), some opted to continue to use P and K in a specific name within that language.

Finally, whilst a linguist writes dictionaries and grammars for other linguists, the revivalist must ensure that their lexicography and grammaticography are tailored for lay people. In revivalistics, dictionaries and grammars must be written for the language custodians, in an accessible, user-friendly way.

Concluding remarks

Language revival is similar to co-parenting. But the revivalist is only a step-father. The important biological mother is the Indigenous/minority community. If you are the step-father and your spouse, who is the biological mother, makes what you perceive to be a mediocre decision with regard to your children, you cannot just disapprove of it. After all, the children are your spouse’s more than they are yours. You must work together for the best possible outcome.

Similarly, if the community supports a decision that is not linguistically viable, the revivalist can try to inspire the community members, but must accept their own verdict. That would be difficult for a documentary linguist with poor social skills.

Unlike what too many linguists believe, language revival is *not* a stage within the career of a documentary or descriptive linguist. Revivalistics is a distinct field, with different requirements. For example, whilst an Asperger's can be a great language typologist and a wonderful documentary linguist, s/he cannot be a revivalist.

More and more indigenous and minority communities seek to reinstate their cultural authority in the world. Revivalistics can assist them in doing so. One should listen to the voice of Jenna Richards, a Barngarla Aboriginal woman who took part in my first Barngarla reclamation workshop in Port Lincoln, South Australia, on 18–20 April 2012. She wrote to me the following sentence in an unsolicited email message on 3 May 2012:

Personally, I found the experience of learning our language liberating and went home feeling very overwhelmed because we were finally going to learn our “own” language, it gave me a sense of identity and I think if the whole family learnt our language then we would all feel totally different about ourselves and each other cause it’s almost like it gives you a purpose in life.

As Barngarla woman Evelyn Walker (née Dohnt) wrote to me following the same reclamation workshop: *Our ancestors are happy!*

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