

Language Documentation and Description

ISSN 1740-6234

This article appears in: *Language Documentation and Description*, vol 9. Editor: Julia Sallabank

Review of 'Speaking of endangered languages: Issues in revitalization' (Anne Marie Goodfellow, ed)

JULIA SALLABANK

Cite this article: Julia Sallabank (2011). Review of 'Speaking of endangered languages: Issues in revitalization' (Anne Marie Goodfellow, ed). In Julia Sallabank (ed.) *Language Documentation and Description*, vol 9. London: SOAS. pp. 221-230

Link to this article: <http://www.elpublishing.org/PID/109>

This electronic version first published: July 2014



This article is published under a Creative Commons License CC-BY-NC (Attribution-NonCommercial). The licence permits users to use, reproduce, disseminate or display the article provided that the author is attributed as the original creator and that the reuse is restricted to non-commercial purposes i.e. research or educational use. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

EL Publishing

For more EL Publishing articles and services:

Website:	http://www.elpublishing.org
Terms of use:	http://www.elpublishing.org/terms
Submissions:	http://www.elpublishing.org/submissions

‘Speaking of endangered languages: Issues in revitalization’, edited by Anne Marie Goodfellow, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009

Reviewed by Julia Sallabank

Although the number of books on endangered language documentation is increasing, language revitalisation remains an under-researched and under-theorised field. I was therefore keen to read this collection of case studies of language revitalisation projects.

As stated in Chapter One, which also functions as the Introduction,¹ ‘[T]he contributing authors do not come from a single discipline or background: some are anthropologists and linguists, while others are educators and local people concerned with what they see as problems for the maintenance of indigenous languages in today’s world where languages and cultures are in constant contact’ (p.1). While this provides an interesting range of viewpoints, it also results in varied levels of critical distance among the papers.

Some themes which recur in the chapters are overviewed in the Introduction. This chapter discusses to what extent linguists and anthropologists should take into account, and become involved in, ‘historical, social, political and ideological contexts of language use rather than focusing purely on language documentation’(p. 3). The editor, Anne Marie Goodfellow, states that the multidisciplinary nature of this book contradicts Newman’s (2003) stance against ‘linguistic social work’ (i.e. linguists spending time on activities of value to communities, such as creating teaching materials, rather than focusing on linguistic description). She claims that the authors ‘share ... a commitment to indigenous communities in their efforts to have local languages and cultures continue in whatever form they may take’ (p. 21). This is a somewhat loaded statement which combines three issues: (1) Authors’ support for indigenous communities; (2) Authors’ support for communities’ efforts to preserve local languages and cultures; (3) ‘in whatever form they may take’ implies that both authors and communities accept the inevitability of language change in the process of language shift and revitalisation. As will be discussed below, the

¹ The Contents list and Chapter 1/Introduction are available online as a publicity flyer at <http://www.c-s-p.org/flyers/978-1-4438-1238-2-sample.pdf> (accessed 14 April 2011).

third point may not necessarily be true for all authors and community members (see Chapters Three, Twelve and Thirteen).

Several of the authors come from the communities in question and some are native speakers of the languages they discuss; indeed, many of the case studies consist of very personal accounts. However, the theme of author stance is not discussed in any great detail in the chapters, but rather the authors' commitment to 'saving' endangered languages is taken for granted. It might be interesting to compare the relative numbers of 'grass-roots' movements vs. outside linguist-led vs. officially supported movements which are discussed in the volume,² but this is not stated in most cases – even whether there is government funding needs to be deduced from the activities described. Even the nature of an author's link with a community is not always clear. This might indicate that the line between 'insider activists' and 'external researchers' is blurring. Most of the authors are not shy of declaring their own views: 'I believe that ...' occurs several times. This can be seen as refreshing frankness and acceptance of the impossibility of impartiality in such contexts; but it might also be criticised as implying a lack of analytical detachment or evidence-based analysis regarding a language's situation.

Another key theme cited in the Introduction is the historical dimension of language endangerment and revitalisation; most of the chapters include a historical overview (possibly at the instigation of the editor as it is not always well integrated into individual chapters). The Introduction argues that whereas anthropologists and linguists such as Newman have conventionally been interested primarily in 'traditional' cultures and language forms, several of the papers in this book discuss to what extent 'cultural preservation and reconstruction' is compatible with 'adapting to new social environments', and how this impacts both on how languages develop, and on strategies for revitalisation (which will be discussed further below). A related theme which runs throughout the book, especially toward the end, is that of intergenerational language change and how language revitalisation could/should engage with it. Goodfellow's own interest in this issue is evidenced by her earlier paper with Pauline Alfred (2002), in a collection edited by two of the contributors to this volume.

My reading of the collection has identified some other recurring themes which are not highlighted in the Introduction. Several of the chapters discuss languages which have no or very few fluent native speakers remaining, and how to go about language revitalisation in such circumstances: especially how or whether to develop a language which is no longer in daily use yet also not fully

² I would like to thank Peter Budd for this observation.

documented. Another emergent theme is the need for a language community to maintain a language in current use. This may seem obvious, but how to build and sustain such a community is a major issue in the design and implementation of effective language revitalisation measures. Several of the chapters provide counter-examples or challenges to received wisdom from previous literature in this regard.

As Goodfellow states in her Introduction, ideological issues, such as current debates on language boundaries and ecologies, may not be discussed overtly in the chapters, but they are constantly present as undercurrents in all considerations of language revitalisation processes and outcomes. This needs to be borne in mind when reading the chapters, especially those which appear to be more descriptive.

The case studies start in Chapters Two and Three, which are mainly concerned with historical circumstances of language shift and revitalisation efforts in particular North American contexts. Chapter Two describes a school curriculum to promote a ‘multilingual present’ on Fort Belknap Reservation, Montana, USA, ‘not necessarily seen as replacing English, but rather coexisting with defined and specific purposes’ (p. 41). The chapter seems to carefully avoid discussing any potentially problematic factors, the possibility of which is only hinted at in the very last sentence.

Chapter Three introduces the theme of intergenerational language change, which recurs throughout the book. I was particularly struck by a quotation from a Navajo elder (Parsons-Yazzie 1996, cited on p. 59):

Our grandchildren are buying things that we grandparents do not use, do not know how to use or just have no use for. That is why we are having a hard time communicating with our grandchildren. It is like living in two different homes. We do not know how to name the things that are in our grandchildren's home, so we have a hard time living there and we have a hard time talking with them. If our grandchildren would get used to simple things again, then we will be able to speak the same language again and live in the same home again.

Not only does this provide a charmingly cantankerous alternative to the usual stereotype of Navajo elders, but it struck a chord with me regarding issues which are increasingly arising in my own research (and that of others): how to interest young people in traditional language and culture, while reconciling elders’ often conservative and purist views with the linguistic and cultural needs of potential new users of the languages. It is sobering to read that although Navajo has the largest number of speakers of all Native American languages, and several immersion programmes, a 1995 survey found that only four percent of kindergartners were ‘reasonably competent five-year-old speakers of Navajo’ (Holm and Holm 1995, cited on page 58). While the chapter is somewhat

disjointed and does not have a Conclusion, the main message seems to be that elders, parents, schools, and young people themselves all have responsibility for, and a role in, language maintenance; and that schools should build on, rather than contradict, traditional language and culture. This is, however, not an original finding, and indeed the chapter consists largely of a literature review rather than original research.

Chapter Four, ‘Aboriginal³ Languages and Literacies: A Reflection on Two Cases’ by Barbara Burnaby, discusses themes arising in the context of two Indigenous groups in northern Canada, the Innu and the Inuit, who although they have much in common, are distinctive in terms of culture, economy and history. This has led to differing responses to missionary evangelisation and literacy development, and different degrees of language maintenance and shift. Burnaby challenges the criteria used in Fishman’s (1991:92) well-known ‘Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale’ (GIDS) and by international development agencies, according to which

degrees of minority language strength or resiliency [*sic.*] are described in terms of functions which the language retains in the minority community. Many of these functions reflect those which one would expect in a large, urbanized society. For groups such as the Innu or Inuit, this begs the question of the compatibility of these functions with their social structures.

However, Burnaby also recognises that both communities suffer from the worst effects of Westernisation – unemployment, poverty, substance abuse, etc. But a return to traditional economic and cultural practices is no longer an option, so Indigenous people need to accommodate to mainstream education and work skills. Burnaby also discusses the role of literacy in Indigenous languages, noting that in these two cases it ‘would seem to be either of no use in stemming the language pressure from an incoming, strong civic and economic power or an actual detriment’ (p. 93). She calls for more research into the role of literacy as a real tool for communications, especially with regard to its effect on the development of language use in the community over time.

This argument forms an interesting counterpoint to the dominance of schools in much language revitalisation literature. Attempts to teach the Cree language are the focus of Chapter Five, which goes into considerable detail on methods used and their comparative success in the ‘move away from an English deficit orientation to a Cree language maintenance position’ (p. 117).

³ The term ‘Aboriginal’ is used in Canada, as in Australia, where many authors from other parts of the world would now prefer ‘Indigenous’ (usually with a capital I).

Community control of the curriculum is identified as a key factor in the Mushkegowuk community's ability to re-orient schools from a factor in language decline to a tool for revitalisation. This again is a recurring theme in the book, but is also not a new finding (e.g. Hornberger 2008 has a similar theme).

Chapter Six describes Indigenous language maintenance in the urban centre of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico. Urbanisation is usually seen as a contributor to language shift, but in this context the concentration of Indigenous peoples in the city (both for economic reasons and to escape conflict) has supported the creation of a unifying 'Pan-Maya' movement. This movement encompasses social, political and cultural elements, and is an example of how language issues are inevitably embedded in wider factors (and may not even be the prime motivation of revitalisation movements).

Chapter Seven links to this theme in that it discusses the reintegration of language into the preservation of other cultural traditions, in this case Aztec dance in New Mexico. The focus is on keeping traditions alive, i.e. symbolic ethnicity: no native speakers of Nahuatl remain in this area, and the language use is mainly formulaic (although the materials produced are intended to lead to increased use). There is thus a slight dissonance between this chapter and others which stress the need to promote active language use in communities; there is a general lack of discussion of the aims of language revitalisation in particular contexts.

In Chapter Eight, George Ann Gregory describes the use of a computerised corpus as a 'powerful tool' and 'important resource' to reverse language loss and reunite the Choctaw nation, who 'became a scattered people' through US government policies. This is the first real mention of documentation in this book. As with the Pan-Maya movement and Aztec dance, 'reversing language shift' (in Fishman's terms) is however not the main aim: 'Efforts to revitalize the Choctaw language can best be served by encouraging the learning of the language as an identity marker for all Choctaw' (p. 166). An accessible corpus is seen as all the more vital since the approach of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, to offer Choctaw lessons rather than immersion schooling, is seen by Gregory as likely to 'continue the decline of the language' (p. 168). However, the corpus (which does not yet exist) is envisaged as consisting largely of texts written in Choctaw rather than transcribed and analysed recordings of speech. The rest of the chapter is devoted to a discussion of these texts. The lack of standardised spelling is seen as problematic since part of the aim is to unite dispersed Choctaw groups, although it should be possible for a documentary corpus to cope with variations.

Chapter Nine, 'A language to call my own', describes attempts to revitalise a South Island (i.e. minority) variety of Māori in New Zealand. The project 'One thousand homes, one thousand dreams' specifically tries to follow

Fishman's (1991) advice to focus on language transmission in the home rather than through school. This is a rare example in the literature on language revitalisation: as Romaine (2006: 450) notes, 'it is hard to find an example of a RLS [reversing language shift] movement which has followed Fishman's advice of securing home transmission and attaining stable diglossia before proceeding to higher levels [of the GIDS].' The project aims to persuade 1000 families to use Māori in their homes, and at the time of writing had over 950 families registered. The author is nevertheless candid about problems: although the target number of families has nearly been reached, 83 percent had only beginner level knowledge of the language, and 'only 6% have placed themselves in groups 4 and 5 where they are able to hold basic conversations in the language in largely familiar contexts' (p. 196). The author, Hanna O'Regan, stresses the need for 'long term sacrifice and commitment', but notes that stated commitment is not necessarily reflected in rates of participation, especially in the context of other pressures of daily life.

Other constraints include human and financial resources, and resistance from some quarters to maintenance of the southern dialect as a local identity marker in preference to the majority North Island variety. A related problem is the lack of fluent traditional speakers of the Kāi Tahu dialect, and consequent gaps in linguistic knowledge, documentation and vocabulary. One way that this is being addressed is through conscious language engineering from historical records. As stated by O'Regan (p. 196):

The result of this work will be the creation of a new variation of the language as certain patterns, phrases and words that can be identified are chosen to be incorporated into the vernacular. Those elements that remain obscure, despite being an obvious part of the parent language, will more than likely be excluded from the new language because of uncertainty regarding their usage.

O'Regan does not go into details, nor does she discuss reactions to such a strategy (although she describes the position of the group working on this as 'unenviable'). However, the theme is returned to in Chapters Twelve and Thirteen.

Chapter Ten describes incipient revitalisation of Rapa Nui (Easter Island), where activists have consciously tried to follow methods used in the revitalisation of (majority) Māori. It is written by Marta Hotus Tuji, a local campaigner who is passionate not only about language but about political and environmental issues, which, as seen elsewhere in this issue of *LDD*, cannot be ignored by those interested in sustainable language revitalisation.

Chapter Eleven has an interdisciplinary focus with regard to methodology. It uses Participatory Action Research (PAR), a technique common in the fields of applied anthropology, education (which of course forms part of many language

revitalisation programmes, as here) and development studies. PAR is described as ‘a series of activities to generate dialogue about community opinions on the current state of Lummi [Pacific Northwest, USA] language education, determine interest in modifying those programs, and inform the nature of those modifications’ (p. 213); it thus echoes current ‘best practice’ in language documentation (e.g. Gippert et al. 2006), which also stresses the involvement of local communities. However, the research as described consists only of focus group discussions without an ‘action’ element, i.e. experimenting with and evaluating a procedure. A large section of the chapter is taken up by a historical overview, not only of the situation of Lummi but of the wider context of language policy in the USA, and then by a description of the research and analysis methods. This means that the results are summarised somewhat cursorily and drily; it would have been interesting to see examples of actual responses from community members, and of revitalisation activities.

Chapter Twelve, by Gary Holton, returns to the issue of language change. Holton points out that a language will only remain alive if it is used by a community. In the case of moribund Alaska Athabascan languages such as Tanacross, this entails rebuilding a speaker community with second-language learners or ‘re-activated’ latent speakers. Holton asserts that ‘the greatest barrier to language Athabascan learning [*sic.*] is what Dorian (1994:246) has termed “purism”’:

The conventional view of language maintenance assumes a static view of language. While Alaska Athabascan languages may be unlikely to be retained in the same form and with the same range of uses, it may nonetheless be possible for these languages to be relearned in new forms for new purposes ...

In most Alaska Athabascan communities where language relearning is in progress, the new form of language is radically different than the old, both in structure and domain of use. This change reflects more than just linguistic evolution; rather, relearning language involves a deliberate, if not always conscious, effort to repurpose language for certain ends.’ (p. 238-9)

This is a major source of debate in many language revitalisation movements, and Holton’s solution is more radical than many would countenance: accepting, and even encouraging (or managing) the creolisation processes common in language shift in order to facilitate language learning: e.g. the reduction or elimination of verbal inflection for aspect (producing what some elders call ‘easy language’).

A further suggestion in Holton’s chapter, to standardise the relearned language across dialects, also recognises the reality that dialectal variations are frequently lost in language revival; however, for some of those involved in language revitalisation (such as in Chapters Nine and Thirteen) the very reason

for learning an ancestral language is its value as a marker of distinct local identity. Holton therefore suggests making distinct dialectal features optional for more advanced learners. He claims that such strategies will encourage the development of an active, sustainable new language community.

I found this chapter one of the most interesting in the book, and have used it as a basis for discussion in my lectures on language revitalisation. Unfortunately, it would have benefited from more editing, as it includes a certain amount of repetition and infelicitous turns of phrase (e.g. ‘The door of opportunity has already been unlatched through the efforts of current language revitalization efforts’, p. 264).

Goodfellow’s own chapter (Thirteen) continues the themes of community control of language curricula and language change. The chapter focuses on the Gut’sala dialect of Kwak’wala on Vancouver Island, western Canada, which like many of the languages discussed in this book is extremely endangered. The community-controlled school wishes to incorporate elicited narratives from the remaining ten fluent speakers into teaching materials, although, as Goodfellow (p. 267) stresses,

the language taught in the school will be a variety of Gut’sala different from the one spoken in the past. ... If this is not recognized, then surely attempts at indigenous language maintenance will be deemed failures and these languages will ultimately cease to be spoken in any form.

The chapter then charts a detailed history of attempts at assimilation of native people and culture in this area, and describes the current language situation. Because of elders’ own education experiences, they prefer teaching vocabulary items such as colours, numbers, days of the week, which learners tend to use with English phonological and grammatical rules. Like Holton, Goodfellow lists numerous examples of change between the usage of younger (under 25 years) and older speakers (40+). Goodfellow observes that ‘older speakers often criticize younger speakers, of any language (including English)’ (p. 283), and that Boas similarly noticed older people criticising ‘certain morphological structures in the speech of younger peoples’ in the area at the end of the nineteenth century. She calls for the development of materials which take into account current usage, while recognising that this position ‘is not popular with everyone involved in Native language maintenance, but I think it is the only viable option if these languages are to continue’ (p. 283). The ideology of the author is thus clear, but the views of the last fluent traditional speakers are assumed rather than examined in detail, and they are not given a voice in the discussion.

The last paragraph of the chapter serves as a very short conclusion to the book. Here too the editor’s assumption (apparently shared by many of the authors) that language is an essential element of individual and group identity is

overtly stated; this issue is not discussed in the volume, but it is not necessarily a given, in light of the rate of language shift in the world.

It might have been useful for students of the field (in a broad sense, including linguists and language advocates) to invite a discussant to draw together the emerging themes and viewpoints; but this is already a fairly long book.

Grenoble and Whaley (2006: ix) observed that most efforts at language revitalisation so far have been unsuccessful (although such an assessment begs the question of how 'success' is evaluated). The examples in this book, many of which describe work in progress, suggest that it is too early to tell in many instances. It will be very interesting to follow developments over the next 10–20 years to see, for example, whether the Kotahi Mano Kāika project in South Island, New Zealand, succeeds in fostering home use of Māori among its thousand member families, and whether Gary Holton's students succeed in creating new sustainable Alaska Athabascan language communities.

This book consists of 289 pages divided into 13 chapters (each with its own References), short biodata of contributors, and a short but useful overall Index. It is published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing, a relatively new publishing house which was set up to provide a peer-reviewed alternative to commercial publishing houses for academia.⁴ The design is minimal and the typesetting is relatively unattractive, which gives a less professional look to the book. One example of this is that the final proofs do not appear to have been read by a fresh human eye, so there are annoying desktop publishing-induced typos such as a capital C appearing instead of dashes, and a trema (two dots) instead of the macron characteristic of Māori.

As with most collections of papers, there are some I find more useful than others: particularly those from which activists and researchers working on other languages can draw insights in order to re-examine their own practices and assumptions.

An observable fact that this book illustrates is the proliferation of movements for language revitalisation around the world: it includes case studies from the USA, Canada, Mexico, New Zealand and the Pacific (although there are none from Africa or Asia, a topic that deserves discussion in its own right). More and more, it seems, community members and language activists are motivated to 'do something' to keep their languages in use. All too often they launch into activities without what Fishman (1991) called 'prior ideological

⁴ although its website no longer mentions this, but stresses its professionalism and author satisfaction (http://www.c-s-p.org/about_us.htm, accessed 13 March 2011)

clarification' about reasons, goals and outcomes, what exactly they want to 'save', or awareness of successes and problems elsewhere. Any publication which provides examples and analyses in a format accessible to other communities is a welcome addition to the field.

Goodfellow, Anne Marie (ed.) 2009. *Speaking of Endangered Languages: Issues in Revitalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

References

- Dorian, Nancy. 1994. Purism vs. compromise in language revitalization and language revival. *Language in Society* 23:479-494.
- Fishman, Joshua A. (ed.) 1991. *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Gippert, Jost, Nikolaus Himmelmann & Ulrike Mosel (eds.). 2006. *Essentials of Language Documentation*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Goodfellow, Anne & Pauline Alfred. 2002. Maintaining indigenous languages in North America: What can we learn from studies of pidgins and creoles? In Barbara Burnaby & Jon Reyhner, eds. *Indigenous Languages Across the Community*. Flagstaff: University of Arizona.
- Grenoble, Lenore A. & Lindsay J. Whaley. 2006. *Saving Languages: An Introduction to Language Revitalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holm, A., & Holm, W. 1995. Navajo language education: Retrospect and prospects. *Bilingual Research Journal* 19 (1), 141-167.
- Hornberger, Nancy H. (ed). 2008. *Can Schools Save Indigenous Languages? Policy and Practice on Four Continents*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Newman, Paul. 2003. The endangered languages issue as a hopeless cause. In Mark Janse and Sijmen Tol (eds.), *Language Death and Language Maintenance: Theoretical, Practical and Descriptive Approaches*, 1-14. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Parsons-Yazzie, Evangeline. 1996. Perceptions of selected Navajo elders regarding Navajo language attrition. *Journal of Navajo Education* 13 (2), 51-7.
- Romaine, Suzanne. 2006. Planning for the survival of linguistic diversity. *Language Policy* 5, 441-473.