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Going public with language: involving the wider community in language revitalisation

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Abstract

This article investigates the representative use of language in public life during initial stages of revitalisation. Based on experience with the Miriwoong revitalisation program the public use of language during the earliest revival stages, along with other strategies, is shown to play a supportive role.

Fishman (1991) introduces a Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale for Threatened Languages which postulates a continuum of eight stages to define different levels of language loss. Stage 8 correlates to a language close to extinction and Stage 1 describes a surviving language. Based on this model one can stipulate a typical process of language revitalisation, starting with language acquisition by individuals progressing to groups of learners in the first two steps, which reflects the situation of the Miriwoong language. While Fishman's scale positions the use of a threatened language in the dominant community at the later stages of revitalisation, the Miriwoong case demonstrates that this strategy can be useful at any point of the process. Though it is acknowledged that a community-based approach leading to diglossia is indispensable for language revitalisation, the symbolic use of a language close to extinction is vital, not only in order to lift its status in the wider community and to strengthen the linguistic identity of its traditional speakers, but also to stimulate active language use in the community.

To illustrate this approach the public use of language as a component of the Miriwoong revitalisation program is characterised. It is demonstrated that, compared to other strategies, the public relations component is the one with the highest cost-efficiency ratio. This contradicts the hypothesis that the inclusion of such activities at an early stage represents a waste of efforts. In conclusion

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the addition of this component is recommended for application in revitalisation programs on a wider scale.

Public language use in Miriwoong revitalisation

Miriwoong, a non-Pama-Nyungan language of the Jarrakan family, can be classified as severely to critically endangered with all fluent first language speakers being aged over 60 years. Of the middle-aged speakers only a handful have a sound knowledge of the language but generally lack grammatical proficiency. The reasons for the gradual loss of Miriwoong can be found in history, including the Stolen Generations period, where people were actively discouraged from using their traditional language by official Australian government policies that were directed towards assimilation. This has led to a massive degradation of the language's status, resulting in a loss of linguistic identity in following generations. With the dominance of English in all domains of daily life and the rise of Kriol, whatever is left of this identity has been suffocated in most speakers to a level where people feel embarrassed to use Miriwoong in public. Members of the younger generation merely know isolated words which also occur in Kriol. Kriol and Aboriginal English nowadays are the first languages for most Miriwoong.

Efforts to preserve and revitalise the Miriwoong language have been made for over two decades and some of these activities have had visible success. Among the projects which have been part of the language program are language documentation, classroom lessons, bush trips, and the creation of employment as an incentive to learn the language. As discussed elsewhere in this volume (Olawsky) one of the more successful initiatives is the organisation of bush trips with elders and young people to enhance language and cultural skills through an experience-based approach.

Because these activities form the backbone of a successful revitalisation program, they consume considerable resources – naturally requiring substantial involvement of human labour and materials that are not always available. Other activities of the Mirima Dawang Woortlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre (MDWg)² were traditionally considered sidelines to its main work, such as the casual inclusion of Miriwoong placenames on a map of the Ord River. In past years, however, the use of Miriwoong terms in public – especially in relation to signage – has gained more significance. What started out as an instance of loose cooperation between MDWg and the Western Australian Department of Water has now grown into partnerships with a variety of agencies and organisations.

As a long-term outcome it is hoped that the wider community will progressively recognise the status of Miriwoong as the legitimate traditional language of the area, one that still plays a fundamental role today. Subsequently the Indigenous community

² The Miriwoong language revitalisation program is conducted by Mirima Dawang Woortlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre in Kununurra. Other details of this program are described in a separate article in this volume (Olawsky).

will be encouraged to exhibit their language, not only in public, but on more basic levels such as at home. The following sections describe how a strategy that I will call *language publicity* is being implemented in the revitalisation process for Miriwoong.

Interpretive signage and bilingual signs in Miriwoong and English

Since 2005 work has been in progress to introduce public signage to relevant areas of Miriwoong country. One example is the erection of interpretative signage at six popular locations in the wider Kununurra area. These signs explain the traditional usage of the respective area in English and provide the Miriwoong placename as well as the Miriwoong words for relevant plants found in the vicinity. Other examples are the development of similar signs for an interpretative walking trail at Mirima National Park, as well as the placement of bilingual 'Don't Litter' signs at various locations around town. Another signage project involves a partnership with the Western Australian Department of Water to create a map of the Ord River system on which placenames are printed in Miriwoong and English.

Welcome speeches

For special public or semi-public events, agencies and organisations have developed a sense of 'political correctness' in that they request a traditional owner of the land to open the event with a short speech, sometimes followed by a cultural performance. The use of Miriwoong language at these openings, even though usually kept very short, helps create public awareness about the traditional language of the area and gives speakers increasing confidence that their use of Miriwoong is sought and acknowledged.

Joint ventures

The involvement in joint ventures between MDWg and government departments or related agencies gives all people involved insight into the traditional values and the efforts made to revive these. By providing assistance to agencies such as Workbase, and similar organisations which may request assistance in implementing initiatives targeting local Indigenous people, awareness about language issues is easily raised. Sometimes this is achieved by suggesting a Miriwoong name or slogan for a new project, scheme, or building. The selection process for a certain name can be rather comprehensive and would often involve a range of language speakers, thereby stimulating the search for specific terms and strategies to combine these in grammatically correct structures.

Language and culture awareness training

Regular one-day language and culture orientation seminars for staff of relevant organisations and other individuals working with Miriwoong people aim to raise awareness about some of the issues associated with the coexistence of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. These seminars also give an overview of the Miriwoong

sound system and orthography and shed some light on language-related issues. In 2008 over 130 key personnel from a range of organisations were part of the training. By involving younger community members as facilitators a transfer of linguistic knowledge occurs through the training.

Media contact

Ethnic divisions and misunderstandings are still prevalent in major parts of the population. Representatives of the revitalisation program liaise with the local media whenever there are positive events to report. Focusing on language- and culture-related achievements by Miriwoong people helps the wider public understand both sides. Language is usually perceived as a positive theme by both media and the wider population and tends to be welcomed by editors and journalists. One of the latest initiatives, due to start this year, is a regular language section in the local newspaper which will feature basic, media-relevant aspects of Miriwoong lexicon and grammar.

Internal language policy

While the above initiatives are examples showing how language is carried into *higher* domains, the open interaction with the general public is a relatively new development in the Miriwoong revitalisation process. Over a decade ago Miriwoong elders concluded that the use of their language should focus exclusively on the native community. In effect, sharing of Miriwoong words and other parts of speech would only be allowed in a limited context. Outsiders would not have indiscriminate access to language materials developed by MDWg but would be required to adhere to predefined protocols in order to obtain access to language materials. In some cases access would not be granted at all, depending on the intended usage.

In essence the issue is one of exercising control over the language, which is understandable from a historic point of view. In a situation where the language is the last thing which has not been taken away from a community, a strong sense of protectionism can easily emerge. Where the reasons for such restrictions are directly related to a cultural perspective of language, such as the link between land and language, a sensitive approach is required so as to avoid breaches of cultural protocol.

At first sight a language policy such as the one described here would appear to be in direct opposition to the otherwise publicity-based approach practised in the revitalisation of Miriwoong. However it must be understood that language publicity exercised by the appropriate speakers is regarded as valuable and important. Appropriate use here implies that the bottom-up model à la Fishman is recognised, in the sense that the Indigenous community receives priority in language learning and language transfer. The community is committed to making their language public in a controlled manner and in ways determined by the traditional authorities. This does not automatically exclude outsiders from learning the language. In recent years the Miriwoong community has become more open to an increased level of language sharing which is reflected by initiatives such as publishing selected language items

through the media. This approach is supported by the community as they are given a sense of ownership by controlling how and where their language is used (see also Kimberley Language Resource Centre, this volume).³

Reversing Language Shift (RLS) and language publicity under review

A notable aspect of Fishman's RLS model is the claim that revitalisation must always proceed from the bottom up, beginning at the grass roots level, as is described by Romaine (2006, p. 451): 'One of the most frequent mistakes activists make is to attempt to reverse the diglossic hierarchy by promoting the minority language in the domains now dominated by the majority language.' In other words, if a minority language (X in Fishman's model) is promoted for use in a high domain (H, that is the domain of the dominant language Y) that would be viewed as a waste of resources and efforts. In this study I will not question the general order of the steps in Fishman's model, however it will be suggested that language publicity is a useful element at any stage of the revitalisation process. I further define this term as an application of any form of the use of X outside the Indigenous community, specifically in public domains. This use does not necessarily coincide with active use on the highest levels, such as in education and government, but includes the promotion of X in less prominent areas of H, such as in public signage and during specific community events. By employing this strategy, X will not pose any threat to the dominant language Y, which would not be expected from a language ranking at Fishman's Stage 7–8 anyway.

One may distinguish direct and indirect strategies aimed at enhancing language use. Direct strategies include typical language-centre activities such as documentation and formal teaching, as well as master–apprentice-style methods that are based on direct language transfer. Language publicity is an indirect method in that it targets marginal domains and audiences but does not involve language teaching at first sight. However the active involvement of language learners in the process indirectly supports the transfer process. In fact all media-prone activities require the organised involvement of language speakers. In this context older and younger speakers work together as they prepare a desired output for a specific project.

Of the numerous strategies and methods used in language revitalisation programs many have some positive effect, especially when applied as part of a structured program tailored to suit an individual language community. However most direct strategies aimed at enhancing language transfer also face serious challenges which can result in a loss of efficiency. To take the Miriwoong case as an example, language lessons in a classroom situation, for instance, strongly depend on the motivation factor. Where learner motivation is poor, this leads to truancy and discontinuity of lessons. Bush trips involving language learning have a high success rate, however they represent a

³ While the restrictions mentioned make an interesting topic to elaborate on, space does not permit their discussion here. At present the revitalisation process is not being affected by these constraints.

very expensive component of revitalisation. The innovative language revival through employment approach (see Olawsky, this volume) is even more costly. In reality most efficient revitalisation strategies require large amounts of funding, an ever-present challenge to any program. In comparison, introducing the endangered language into public life is an exceptionally economical method to promote the language. The question, naturally, is how useful is language publicity?

Is it really a waste of effort?

The RLS model suggests that the use of a critically endangered language in a high domain is a waste of energy and resources. In reality language publicity does not appear to waste any resources. The development of signage, for example, serves as a stimulus to elders contributing their knowledge as they spend time discussing the relevant terms to be used. At the same time young people learn from their input. The result is a series of signs paid for by the shire council or national park management. The community not only gains pride in their contribution but also increases their active engagement with the language.

Media coverage, to name another example, will primarily strengthen the community's linguistic identity as well as raise public awareness. However any media report will have to be based on actual linguistic activity before it goes public. If an activity is worth documenting, why not showcase it? After all, it takes little effort and even less money to produce a newspaper article or conduct a simple interview.

Revitalisation strategies should also pay attention to the status level of a language; what is required at Stage 7–8 may differ from what is required at higher stages of Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS). Arguably, for a language on the verge of extinction, almost anything will do as long as it is part of a structured revitalisation program. Community-based activities remain the backbone of revitalisation but these should be complemented by additional strategies.

Most experts will admit that Australian language revitalisation attempts, whether they follow the bottom-up model or not, have had limited success. After all, families cannot be forced to use a specific language at home. One among many reasons for this is that Indigenous languages do not have the prestige or status they deserve, neither in the Indigenous community nor in the wider public. Where people have given up on reviving their language would it do any harm to implement a single component that aims at strengthening a language from the top down? It is reasonable to assume that if a language receives recognition in the public domain this will also reflect on its status within the (potential) speaker community. Language publicity is bound to increase the motivation of Indigenous people to revitalise and actively use their language. This could be viewed as a reversion of McConvell's (1992, p. 219) conclusion that 'removing Aboriginal languages from public domains like education reduces their status and ultimately threatens their survival'.

Is it accepted?

One has to consider that certain changes have occurred in Australian society making language publicity more feasible. In large parts of the general public, and especially in government circles, it is now regarded as politically correct to acknowledge Aboriginal languages as a matter of national significance (see also Truscott & Malcolm, this volume). As our daily lives are exposed to the ever-present media, and as opinions are shaped and influenced by newspapers and television programs, it becomes almost obligatory to incorporate issues related to endangered languages as well as words from these languages in this domain. Anyone who finds themselves or their activities showcased in the media gains pride and status in the eyes of the wider community – and so does the language. While this opportunity may not have been available previously, the media of our time generally show a greater openness to embracing the issues of minorities. It is a chance not to be missed.

In the Miriwoong case the readiness of organisations and agencies to involve members of the Indigenous community in public events further contributes to lifting the linguistic profile. Though it must be conceded that the motivation behind this is, in some cases, based on a sense of political correctness rather than a genuine understanding of language revitalisation, such events still support the just cause. On most occasions the actual welcome speech would only consist of a simple greeting or a few short sentences in the traditional language, often followed by a translation or explanation in English. The inclusion of Indigenous language is in fact even expected by event organisers. More complex speeches may follow at a later stage of revitalisation where the opportunity arises. Even if at present this component has a predominantly symbolic character rather than being instructive, its value is to be seen in encouraging language identity and to strengthen the active use of the language (see also Amery, this volume).

What is the goal?

Most Aboriginal languages find themselves somewhere near Stage 8 of the GIDS scale (Lo Bianco & Rhydwen 2001). Where are these languages going? If the alternative is between using a language in the public domain and not using it at all, the choice is obvious. Revitalisation can be understood as a relative process. Realistically the goal, for most if not all languages now at Stage 7 or 8, is not to reach Level 1 or 2 where a language such as Miriwoong would rule side by side with English (Lo Bianco & Rhydwen 2001); it would be overambitious to expect this to happen in any society otherwise dominated by a single strong language. As Romaine (2006, p. 456) puts it, domains occupied by H cannot ‘... replace the home as the primary site and agency of language transmission’. A realistic goal is to achieve diglossia where the language is stabilised in lower domains such as home and informal education, but supported by other domains such as the media and other public levels as a tool to promote the lower ones. Eventually these could function as a tool for the language to gradually penetrate lower domains as well.

The goals that publicity may have within a language planning framework include:

- Enhance linguistic identity within the community by raising the profile of the language
- Increase the motivation to learn the language
- Offer innovative, attractive domains of language use to younger speakers
- Increase active language use
- Contribute to language awareness in the wider community
- Lift the status of the language to gain local control of language policies
- Strengthen the general reconciliation process.

Outlook, opportunities and recommendations

The exhibition of Miriwoong language in public life has been progressing over the last few years and has been found supportive of language revitalisation. While Indigenous people have accepted many aspects of modern life they are determined to preserve their traditional values. Language as the core of these values has been carried into parts of the western-dominated environment by creating awareness and displaying language on signs noticed and read by everybody. The development of partnerships between Indigenous people and government agencies is invaluable in lifting the profile of traditional languages in Western society.

Given the current situation in the process of Miriwoong language revitalisation it appears that an additional component – the use of language in public life – should be considered when using Fishman's GIDS in order to structure the revitalisation of threatened languages. The Miriwoong example demonstrates that this can occur even at the early stages of revitalisation. Crystal (2000) lists a number of factors which are designed to strengthen an endangered language. The first factor in this regard is that a language will progress if its speakers increase their esteem within the dominant community. Another factor mentioned relates to the increase of legitimate power of a language community in the eyes of the dominant one. Both factors directly reflect the approach adopted as a component of the Miriwoong language revitalisation program.

The process of revitalisation operates differently in each language community and recommendations should be given based on the individual situation. Differences may apply when contrasting a demographic environment such as a town to an isolated remote community.⁴ For communities that wish to implement the language publicity approach into their existing strategies the following options may be considered:

- newspaper articles reporting about language work
- newspaper or magazine contributions with instructive language content
- language guides

⁴ Miriwoong is a special case as it reflects an outback community in a small-town setting dominated economically and politically by a non-Indigenous population.

- short radio spots
- signage
- interviews
- maps
- working with partners
- welcome speeches at events
- crash course for outsiders and community members (even mixed classes)
- website with language content.

The above can be understood as an open list, as revitalisation programs for other languages may supply further creative ideas related to language publicity. All of the above strategies represent inexpensive and time-efficient ways of promoting the language. Applied as icing on the well-structured revitalisation program cake, these strategies are hardly a waste of effort. The experience of going public in the Miriwoong case casts serious doubts on the claim that a minority language should not be promoted in high domains. Language publicity may not be a major revitalisation strategy but it can play a supporting role for languages which have little to lose.

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