

Language revitalization across the South Pacific

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Abstract

In this paper we present a project for fostering language maintenance and revitalization in Brazil. This project is inscribed in a collaboration recently started between Brazil and Australia in the area of language maintenance and revitalization. Similar histories of colonization in these two countries have led to comparable situations of language loss. Based on a three-month immersion experience in Australia, the authors of this paper argue that a Brazilian language maintenance and revitalization project should adopt a broad approach, in which linguists, traditional speakers of minority languages, federal government and civil society interact in order to propitiate an environment in which these languages can flourish back. In this paper we introduce the situation of two endangered and one extinct Brazilian languages and explain how we intend to deal with each of them in a pilot revitalization project. The languages are (i) Umutina, (ii) Yawanawa and (iii) Guató, and the techniques we intend to use in each case are, respectively, (i) language reconstruction based on historical registers and comparison with related languages, (ii) language nest and research of child-directed genres and (iii) emergency documentation.

Australia and Brazil have been shaped by similar colonial histories: by means of superior man-slaughtering technology and infectious diseases, European invaders exterminated most of the indigenous populations and, partially assimilating the survivors, created two of the largest "civilized nations" on the planet. In both countries, it happened as well that a fraction of the indigenous peoples managed to

retain their identity up till current times, though suffering to varying degrees from cultural disruption and linguistic loss.

After a three-month field trip to Australia, which was the first phase of a program of cooperation in language maintenance and revitalization between Brazil and Australia, three Brazilian linguists specialized in Amerindian languages are reporting on a recently

proposed project submitted to CNPq (*Conselho Nacional de Pesquisa*, the Brazilian National Research Council) for the revitalization of three Brazilian languages. The project aims at the integration of a number of spheres that are essential for the development of language programs and linguistic policies across the country. In this paper, we will make a qualitative comparison of language loss, language documentation, and language maintenance and revitalization efforts in Brazil and Australia, emphasizing how the Australian experience has helped elucidate not only methods and techniques in language revitalization, but also the essential and interdependent role of researchers, communities, government, and the general population for the fostering of language programs and linguistic policies.

By means of a cooperation effort between the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Studies (AIATSIS) and the Brazilian National Indigenous Foundation (FUNAI), funded by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), we were immersed in the Australian context of language programs and linguistic policies. For 3 months, we were hosted by AIATSIS and took fieldtrips across the country in which we became acquainted with different programs aimed at the maintenance and revitalization of native languages in varying degrees of vitality. The picture is vast: school-based programs interact with local communities to teach extinct ---or "sleeping"--- Wiradjuri and Woi Wurrung as second languages in New South Wales and Victoria; language centers in South and West Australia employ a number of techniques to work with communities and foster the use and revival of endangered Miriwoong, and Western Desert varieties, as well as resuscitating Kurna and Barngarla; speakers and researchers of vital languages such as Warlpiri in the Northern territory and Kala Lagaw Ya in the Torres Strait Islands struggle against government impositions in order to strengthen their languages and ensure transmission. Not only did we become acquainted with the work that is being carried out in language centers, but also we interacted with academic researchers in the Australian Language Workshop and in seminars at The Australian National University, as well as with the government representatives responsible for the distribution of the national budget for language programs.

Thus, our experience in Australia has elucidated the fact that language maintenance and revitalization efforts necessarily involve and integrate several spheres of society. Linguists and other academic researchers are certainly a central piece in the puzzle. The involvement of researchers with local communities has been responsible, for instance, for the successful development of bilingual programs in schools across the Northern Territory and the publication of thousands of pedagogical books in Aboriginal languages, not to mention the reconstruction of extinct languages from archival sources and the ongoing work of language description and revitalization in language centers and

universities across the country. Besides researchers, however, the effort of language communities is crucial for the maintenance of endangered languages. Speakers of Kala Lagaw Ya and Merriam Mer in the Torres Strait Islands, for instance, are currently struggling with limited government resources to develop two school-based bilingual programs and build a local language center. In addition, it is essential that these efforts of researchers and communities are also aimed at the general population. School-based programs have a crucial role in language maintenance and revitalization because of their capacity to reach beyond indigenous communities. Besides fostering tolerance and wellbeing in the school community, one of the main consequences of educating the general public on indigenous matters is influencing government policy. The government has a central role in language revitalization efforts for it is responsible for the development of national linguistic policies. For instance, in 2014 the Australian Ministry of the Arts allocated a budget of 10 million dollars for the development of language programs, but at the same time, a state law in the Northern Territory imposed that teaching must be solely in English in the first 4 hours of the school day, impairing the development of bilingual school programs.

While discussion and work on language maintenance and revitalization are quite advanced in Australia, with considerable governmental support and numerous language centers and school-based programs across the country, on the other side of the Southern Pacific, most of the efforts aimed at Brazilian indigenous languages have been limited to language documentation, with very little in the way of language maintenance and revitalization. There are at least two notable exceptions, both due exclusively to tribal efforts, without any support either from the government or from external organizations: (i) the Pataxó people of the Brazilian Northeast claim that they have reestablished their long lost language, which they now call Patxohã and (ii) in the Brazilian Amazon, the Yawanawa people have been living a linguistic renaissance triggered by the growth of shamanistic practices, cultural festivals, music and tourism, with the consequent rise of traditional linguistic genres.

The fact that language maintenance and revitalization programs are more advanced in Australia cannot be attributed only to their level of scientific development in this area (which is, nonetheless, notable, as can be apprehended from works such as Hobson et al. 2010). Indeed, the need for language revitalization in Australia is clearly urgent, due to the ever shrinking number of vital languages spoken in the country (see Marmion, Obata, and Troy 2014). In Brazil, on the other hand, there seems to be a notion that the large number of languages currently spoken (150, according to Moore, Galucio, and Gabas Jr. 2008) guarantees their vitality. Not much attention is drawn to the fact that 21% of these languages (also according to Moore, Galucio, and Gabas Jr. 2008) are in risk of disappearing in the short term due to their reduced

number of speakers and/or low rate of language transmission to the younger generations.

In spite of the endangered status of so many native languages, a major challenge we face as researchers in Brazil is the lack of government support for language maintenance and revitalization efforts. The absence of a comprehensive picture of the overall situation of languages across the country halts the development of linguistic policies. All that is known about language vitality comes either from academic research or from data collected in language documentation projects. Even though the Brazilian Constitution guarantees the right of indigenous peoples to speak their languages and have access to bilingual, differentiated education, very little practical efforts have been directed towards this goal by the government. Despite the emphasis attributed by FUNAI to land rights and indigenous cultures ---especially concerning their ritualistic and material forms--- indigenous languages are mostly invisible not only to the Brazilian government but also to the general population. As we discussed previously, these two spheres of society play essential roles in the fostering of language diversity and the development of national linguistic policies, thus our intention to contemplate them in the project in question.

As previously mentioned, most of the work directed at Indigenous languages in Brazil has concerned documentation. There are two main institutions in Brazil that have been supporting language documentation: Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi (MPEG) and Museu do Índio, a branch of FUNAI in Rio de Janeiro. MPEG has teamed with Brazilian and international researchers in the description and documentation of circa 20 Brazilian languages, whereas Museu do Índio's Program for the Documentation of Indigenous Languages (ProDoclin) has been supporting collaborative documentation, the training of indigenous researchers, and the development of pedagogical material for 13 endangered Brazilian languages. Besides these two centers, much work has been conducted by scholars and funded by universities and international documentation programs such as ELDP at SOAS, University of London, and DoBeS, funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.

Apart from these projects aimed at documenting, archiving, and producing materials for a limited number of languages that are still spoken, no efforts have been made towards developing language maintenance and revitalization methodology, or language reconstruction from archival sources. Also, the discussion of national language policies is still at a very early stage in Brazil. The first major action taken towards this effort was the establishment of the National Inventory of Language Diversity (INDL) in 2010. By means of a major national census, the inventory intends to identify, document, and officially recognize the languages of the groups that compose the country's population, taking actions towards maintaining and valuing these languages. The first pilot projects are currently under development and our

submitted project intends to collaborate directly with the inventory and the development of language policies.

Given the embryonic stage of development of government-supported programs, we have submitted a research project to CNPq (*Conselho Nacional de Pesquisa*), the Brazilian National Research Council. As mentioned previously, the project focuses on integrating the numerous spheres of society involved in the fostering of linguistic diversity: researchers, indigenous communities, the government, and the general population. Initially, the project will cooperate with the institutions involved in language documentation in Brazil, especially Museu do Índio, since its three proposers have been part of ProDoclin (Franchetto coordinates the program, Nonato and Souza are project leaders). We will be giving continuity to the model adopted by ProDoclin of developing collaborative research with community involvement and the training and active participation of indigenous researchers in the documentation of their language. In addition to integrating researchers and indigenous communities, our project involves the production of a book aimed at the general population about the indigenous languages of Brazil. Taking into consideration that a recent law makes mandatory the teaching of African and Indigenous cultures in Brazilian schools, this book may also be adopted as pedagogical material across the country. Thus, based on our experience in Australia, our proposal consists of a language revitalization project of three Brazilian languages that collaborates with the governmental sphere through the national inventory of linguistic diversity and attempts to involve scholars, indigenous communities, and the general population. Despite the broad spectrum of the project, our main focus in the following paragraphs will be to describe the situation of each of the languages chosen as objects of revitalization and the methodology to be studied and developed for each of them.

The first language to be contemplated in the revitalization project is Umutina, of the Bororo family, Macro-Jê stock, which has been extinct for decades. Resources on this language are scarce (ISA; Telles 1995), but the community's desire to revive their language as well as the existence of closely related languages that are still spoken and are well documented make the reconstruction of Umutina a possible endeavor. The focus of the work with the Umutina community will be in recreating their language based on archival sources, following the format of numerous Australian language reconstruction efforts. The gaps in historical registers will be complemented by means of comparison with closely related languages such as Bororo (Nonato 2007). This method contemplates mainly the reconstruction of the lexicon, but can also be applied for the reconstruction of the grammar, depending on the interests of the language's traditional owners. Grammatical grafts from Brazilian Portuguese are also a possibility, since this is the language spoken by the Umutina people today.

If compared to Umutina, Yawanawa (Panoan), the second language to be contemplated in the project, is in a very different situation, which reflects the reality of numerous Amazonian communities. The language is spoken by approximately 160 people out of a population of over 600, and transmission has suffered a generational rupture. Most fluent speakers are over 45 years old and with rare exceptions, children are no longer acquiring the language, making Yawanawa a highly endangered language (Souza 2013). Souza has been working on the documentation of Yawanawa for the past 4 years and will give emphasis to language-nest methods in the revitalization of the language. Such methods have been employed, among others, in the revitalization of Austronesian languages Maori and Hawaiian (Hinton and Hale 2001), as well as in the revitalization of Miriwoong, an Australian language from the Kimberly region. The work with Yawanawa will involve a documentary research of genres directed at children (songs, stories, games, lullabies, etc.) and the creation of a daycare in which women who are native speakers of Yawanawa work with young infants, thus reestablishing language transmission and traditional story-telling customs.

Finally, the Guató language exemplifies yet another point on the scale of linguistic vitality. Nowadays it only counts with a handful of elderly speakers. Indeed, it is believed that only 5 people still speak the language, but data on the language and its last speakers are scarce and out of date (ISA). The Guató people were pushed out of their traditional territory in the 1940s and 1950s and afflicted by a series of epidemics, having been officially considered extinct until the 1970's. Today, there are three Guató nuclei in the states of Mato Grosso and Mato Grosso do Sul, as well as several individuals living in the outskirts of cities in the two states. It is estimated that the current Guató population sums circa 374 people (ISA). The focus of the work with Guató will be emergency documentation of the remaining speakers in order to complement the scarce description of the language available in the linguistic literature (Rodrigues 1986), (Palácio 1984).

We returned to Brazil with the conviction that it would be an unfortunate strategy to wait until the situation of our languages is as fragile as that of Australia's before we start thinking about developing language maintenance and revitalization efforts. Programs aimed at the rescue of Brazilian languages are urgent and this is the gap that we intend to fill with the revitalization

project and the continued cooperation with our Australian partners from AIATSIS.

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