“Our Ancestors Are Happy!”
Revitalistics in the Service of Indigenous Wellbeing

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Abstract

Hallett, Chandler and Lalonde (2007) report a clear correlation between lack of conversational knowledge in the native language and youth suicide in British Columbia, Canada. Whilst their research demonstrates a link between language loss and reduced mental health, there is a need in the 21st century to examine whether there is a correlation also between language gain and improved mental health. To date, there has been no systematic study of the impact of language revival on mental health, partly because language reclamation is still rare, and Revitalistics is in its infancy. Revitalistics is a new trans-disciplinary field of enquiry, proposed by Zuckermann (see e.g. 2012). Revitalistics is far more than Revival Linguistics. It comparatively and systematically studies the universal constraints and global mechanisms on the one hand (Zuckermann, 2009) and culturally relative idiosyncrasies on the other hand (Zuckermann & Walsh, 2011) apparent in linguistic revitalisation attempts across various sociological backgrounds, all over the globe. This paper postulates language as core to a people’s wellbeing and hypothesises that language reclamation often results in mental health empowerment, as evidenced in the case study of the current reclamation project with the Barngarla people of the Eyre Peninsula, South Australia (Zuckermann & Monaghan, 2012).

Introduction

Language is postulated as core to a people’s wellbeing and mental health. The link between poor mental health and suicide has been clearly demonstrated. Furthermore, Hallett, Chandler and Lalonde (2007) report a clear correlation between youth suicide and lack of conversational knowledge in the native language in British Columbia, Canada. “The results reported ... that youth suicide rates effectively dropped to zero in those few communities in which at least half the band members reported a conversational knowledge of their own “native” language.” However, there has been no systematic study of the impact of language revival on mental health and suicide, partly because language reclamation is still rare.

Due to invasion, colonization, globalization and homogenization, there are more and more Indigenous groups losing their heritage. The Barngarla people of Eyre Peninsula are but one example of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples suffering the effects of linguicide (language killing). Their language loss, consequent lack of cultural autonomy and intellectual sovereignty, as well as their dependence on the colonizer’s tongue, increase the phenomenon of disempowerment, self-hating and suicide.

From the last 200 years of systemic racism, abuse and cultural loss Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples suffer greatly from many burdens, including poverty, discrimination, low life expectancy, poor health status and especially high levels of mental health issues (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010a; Purdie, Dudgeon & Walker, 2010). According to King, Smith & Gracey (2009), a strong sense of identity is a necessary condition for mental health however for the majority of Indigenous Australians this is not the case, especially when looking at the statistics of health and mental health.

Language has been identified as one of the key elements that make up ethnic identity (Phinney, 1990). Marginalisation of groups of people can easily be observed through the changes in the language system (Heinrich, 2004). Before the British settlement of Australia there were approximately 330 Australian Indigenous languages but post-colonization there are now only 13 languages groups (4%) which are still going strong (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies & Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander Languages, 2005; Indigenous Remote Communications Association, 2013). By and large, due to white colonization, the Aboriginal people living along the coasts, e.g. in the states of South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales, suffered linguistic more than those living in the Outback.

The Barngarla of the coastal area of the Eyre Peninsula (Port Lincoln, Whyalla and Port Augusta) decided to reclaim their “sleeping beauty” tongue and have worked in close collaboration with Professor Zuckermann since 2011. Studies on the effectiveness of Revitalistics in improving mental health for communities who urgently need to reinstate their own authority in the world, but who currently lack the language and linguistic knowledge with which to do so, have not yet been
thoroughly conducted. While reclaiming the Barngarla tongue through Revivalistics, it is also possible to assess systematically whether language revival can reduce suicide by empowering people and communities and improve sense of identity and purpose.

Revivalistics (including Revival Linguistics and Revivalomics) is a new trans-disciplinary field of enquiry, proposed by Zuckermann (see Zuckermann & Walsh, 2011). It studies comparatively and systematically the universal constraints and global mechanisms on the one hand (Zuckermann, 2009) and culturally relative idiosyncrasies on the other hand (Zuckermann & Walsh, 2011), apparent in linguistic revitalization attempts across various sociological backgrounds, all over the globe. Revivalistics is far more than Revival Linguistics. It studies language revival from various angles such as law (see Zuckermann, Shako-Neoh & Quer, 2014), mental health, sociology, anthropology, politics, education, colonization, missionary studies, music and architecture.

Photo 1: Whyalla, South Australia, 2013. Barngarla participants in one of the Barngarla Aboriginal language reclamation workshops. (The Barngarla people have given their permission to use this photo.)

In 2014, the Second National Indigenous Languages Survey (NILS 2) Report showed the following as the goals of language activities, as viewed by Aboriginal people taking part in the Barngarla revival:

- To help people connect with their language and culture
- To maintain the knowledge of the language among the community
- To improve the understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- To maintain the language as a learned skill
- To increase the use of the language in the target group
- To ensure the maintenance of the language
- To increase language use within a particular setting
- To provide support for language teachers to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages
- To promote the language
- To contribute to the revitalization of the language
- To promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages
- To increase the number of language speakers
- To make decisions about fellow languages

Figure 1: Goals of Language Activities

This paper suggests that there is an urgent need to systematically assess, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the mental health impact of language reclamation on Aboriginal people in Australia, e.g. the Barngarla people of Eyre Peninsula, South Australia. The primary hypothesis is that there will be significant improvements in mental health during the language revival process, reduced suicide ideation (i.e. people would be less likely to come up with the idea of suicide as a possibility), reduced self-harm and reduced instances of suicide. The demographic most at risk of suicidal behaviours are young people and should be a primary focus for studies in this area.

The Current State of Mental Health of Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

Over three quarters of all Australians, who had been diagnosed with a mental illness during their lifetime, had symptoms and a diagnosis before the age of 24 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010b; headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation, 2011). This fact has implications for the Indigenous community as the majority of the population (57%) are under the age of 25 years (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011). Due to the demographic distribution of the Indigenous population and overall disadvantage, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adolescents are more likely to struggle with social and emotional issues than others. These issues influence the ability to maintain positive social and emotional wellbeing. These can include adverse life events such as the death of a loved one, forced removal of a loved one, discrimination, poverty, violence, abuse, gambling problems, incarceration, poverty, educational struggles and trauma (Purdie, Dudgeon & Walker, 2010). For

Data drawn from the NILS 2 Report and analysed by Marmion, Kazuko, & Troy (2014).
example, one third of Indigenous youth have had a grandparent or carer who was forcibly taken away from their family as part of the Stolen Generations; the negative psychological impact is still evident in the higher levels of distress of both the grandparent and subsequent generations (Australian Health Ministers’ Advisory Council, 2012; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011; Dodson et al., 2010). Such cultural dislocation, trauma and loss can be passed down and accumulated in the next generation. The coping with cultural dislocation, trauma and loss are often displayed outwardly by behavioural aspects such as social withdrawal, anger, rage, violence, substance misuse due to high levels of hopelessness, depression, anxiety and complicated mental distress (Dodson et al., 2010; Social Health Reference Group, 2004).

Collective crisis from a loss of identity, loss of purpose, loss of pride, and loss of self-esteem can lead to collective despair and collective suicide (Hunter & Harvey, 2002). In the Northern Territory between the years 2001 and 2011, 75% of all youth suicides aged 10-24 years were Indigenous persons (Hanssens, 2008; Hanssens, 2012). In some communities, such as the Kimberley region in north-west Australia, the rate was seven times higher than the average suicide rate (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2012; Tighe & McKay, 2012). One such community included Mowanjum, an area with a population of 300 people, which suffered five suicides within a few months (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2012). Indigenous communities can suffer from copycat suicides, or suicide clusters, at much higher rates than non-Indigenous communities and often do not have the resources to help people through grief (Hanssens, 2008; Hanssens, 2012).

The rate of suicide in the Indigenous population is almost three times greater than that of the non-Indigenous population. Rates are highest among young people (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011). In 2010, the ABS reported that Indigenous males aged 14-19 years were 4.4 times more likely to take their own lives, and 20-24 year old males were 3.9 times more likely, than the non-Indigenous population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010c). For females it was even higher; Indigenous females aged 14-19 years were 5.9 times more likely, and, aged 20-24 years 5.4 times more likely, to take their own lives (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010c). For every five Indigenous youth, two of them have thought about killing themselves. This is a devastating statistic to comprehend. However, some research has identified key positive factors that can help to bring hope to this dire situation.

Cultural Identity, Language and “Cultural Continuity”

Positive factors which influence psychological wellbeing are few, but several comprehensive studies have helped to highlight key mental health elements that enable Indigenous individuals and communities to succeed in life (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 1997; Purdie, Dudgeon & Walker, 2010; Trewin, 2006; Zubrick et al., 2005). These factors include the knowledge and use of traditional language, connection to land, family connectedness, cultural strength and spirituality.

Hunter and Harvey (2002) explored Indigenous suicide in Aboriginal Australians and Canadians, as well as Inuit and Native American youth and found similar patterns regarding a lack of cultural involvement and suicide (Hunter & Harvey, 2002). Wexler, Diffuvio & Burke (2009) explored reliance in marginalised youth and found that there was a connection between those who had better self-reported wellbeing and those who were actively engaged in their traditional culture. Two of the main issues of cultural transference in the modern era are increased globalization and remaining issues from colonization (de Souza & Rymarz, 2007). This transference of cultural knowledge is known as cultural continuity (de Souza & Rymarz, 2007). The lack of successful cultural continuity or transference can leave new generations feeling lost between cultures and creating an unstable sense of identity (Wexler, 2006).

According to King, Smith & Gracey (2009) a strong sense of identity is a necessary condition for mental health. Language is reportedly the third highest contributing factor to ethnic identity for adolescents and young adults (after a sense of self, and family) (Kickett-Tucker, 2009) yet, in Australia, as a result of extreme linguicide, only 19% of all Indigenous Australians are able to fluently speak their language (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010a). Linguicide has resulted in many Aboriginal people not knowing their heritage, for example, 60% of Indigenous Australians identified with a language group but 35% did not know the specific Aboriginal tribe their ancestors belonged to. This is due to the unfortunate phenomenon of stolen generations and cultural dislocations (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies & Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages, 2005).

Revivalistics in the Service of Aboriginal Mental Health

The current situation reflects the pain and suffering endured by Aboriginal people since European colonization (cf. Sutton, 2009). One fundamental study conducted in 2007 in Canada helped to solidify any doubts about the connection between cultural continuity and mental wellbeing. Halliet, Chandler & Lalonde (2007) matched seven cultural continuity factors and
measured them against reported suicide from 150 Indigenous Inuit communities and almost 14,000 individuals. These cultural continuity factors were self-governance, land claims, education, health care, cultural facilities, police/fire service and language. Of all the communities that this research sampled, the results indicated that those communities with higher levels of language knowledge (over 50% of the community) had lower suicide levels when compared to other communities with less knowledge. From the study, the 16 communities with high levels of native language skills had a suicide rate of 13 deaths per 100,000 people compared to low levels of language with 97 deaths per 100,000. When language skills were coupled with other cultural protective factors (mentioned above), there was an even higher protective effect against suicide.

Those findings suggest that by facilitating the improvement of cultural identity through language, as one factor amongst other cultural protective factors, suicide rates in communities decrease. This could potentially be the case in Australia, as there has been some evidence for supporting this claim as well. In the 2005 study by Zubrick et al., they found that those with higher levels of fluency in their language had decreased emotional and behavioural issues in childhood (Zubrick et al., 2005). Decreased issues in childhood could mean early intervention to improve mental health into adolescence and adulthood. We can speculate therefore from this Australian study that those with fluency in their language, or those who knew at least sufficient knowledge of their native language, had a more stable sense of cultural identity.

The importance of language as a building block for community and individual identity relates directly to Australian Aboriginal people. Language reclamation of “sleeping” tongues is still rare and unique but it is becoming increasingly relevant as people seek to recover their cultural autonomy, empower their spiritual and intellectual sovereignty, and improve their wellbeing. Young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language speakers report lower binge drinking, less use of illicit substances and are less likely to have been a victim of physical or threatened violence compared to those who do not speak their language (ABS, 2012).

Language revival is empowering for those involved, strengthening and validating their sense of cultural heritage; reclamation increases feelings of wellbeing and pride amongst disempowered people who fall between the cracks, feeling that they are neither whitesfallas nor in command of their own Aboriginal heritage. As Fishman (1990) puts it:

The real question of modern life and for RLS [reversing language shift] is ... how one ... can build a home that one can still call one's own and, by cultivating it, find community, comfort, companionship and meaning in a world whose mainstreams are increasingly unable to provide these basic ingredients for their own members.

Zuckermann has noticed some people involved in Indigenous language reclamation, e.g. Kaurna and Barangarla, have improved self-confidence and are more likely to continue with other studies. Anecdotally people have been spurred to begin language reclamation by a personal experience of suicide. Jack Buckskin experienced the suicide of his sister, which led him to begin work on the Kaurna language. Geoff Anderson had severe anxiety and depression before beginning classes to learn his Wiradjuri language; he says it saved his life. Both are now language teachers and have leading roles in language reclamation. Educational success directly translates to improved employability, “closing the gap” and decreased delinquency. These stabilizing factors give formal markers for personal success and enhance feelings of self-confidence and wellbeing.

Cultural Shift Through Revivalistics

Language reclaiming efforts to revive “sleeping” Aboriginal languages are often a result of people seeking to recover their cultural roots and to empower their identity by learning the language of their ancestors (Zuckermann & Monaghan, 2012).

To aid in the endeavor of language revival and reclamation of identity, there is an urgent need to develop linguistic tools and profound transdisciplinary (including evolutionary) understanding to support language reclamation. This paper contributes to the establishment of a new trans-disciplinary field of enquiry: Revivalistics. Revivalistics complements the established field of documentary linguistics, which records endangered languages before they fall asleep. This trailblazing field revises the fields of grammaticography (writing grammars) and lexicography (writing dictionaries) by placing the endangered-heritage people rather than the Western linguists at the centre. Grammars and dictionaries ought to be written for language reclamation, i.e. in a user-friendly way, for communities, not only for linguists. For example, we should avoid high-sounding, often Latin-based grammatical terminology. We should also offer communities a user-friendly spelling. Juxtapose Lutheran missionary Clamor Wilhelm Schlimann’s 1844 user-unfriendly spelling manyara for the South Australian Aboriginal Barangarla (Parnkalla) word for “recovery”. This spelling resulted in the pronunciation manyara (penuilliately stressed and with the initial vowel as in cup) rather than Noonyara. While manyara suits documentary linguists familiar with German and the International Phonetic Alphabet, Noonyara would be preferable from a revivalistic perspective, given that the current mother tongue of the Barangarla people is a form of English, the language of the invader and colonizer.

For linguists, the first stage of any language revival
must involve a long period of observation and careful
listening while learning, mapping and characterizing the
needs, desires and potentials of an indigenous or
minority or culturally endangered community. Only
then can one inspire and assist. That said, there are
linguistic constraints applicable to all revival attempts,
e.g. Hebrew, Barngarla, Kaurna, Ngurrindjeri, Māori,
Hawai‘i, Wampanoag, Manx and Cornish. Mastering
them would help revivalists and First Nations leaders to
work more efficiently; for example, to focus more on
basic vocabulary (lexis) and verbal conjugations
(morphology) than on sounds (phonetics) and word
order (syntax).

The Barngarla revival activities so far constitute a
strong pilot program, from the perspective of Revival
Linguistics (see Zuckermann & Monaghan, 2012). The
Barngarla case study demonstrates the potential for
significant change within the field of historical
linguistics, e.g. by weakening the Family Tree model, a
biological metaphor (see Tree of Life) employed by
linguists that may wrongly imply that a language ought
to have only one parent. Any successful attempt to
reclaim a hibernating language will result in a hybrid
that combines components from the revivalists’ and
documenters’ mother tongues and, of course, the target
language.

Future Directions

There is a need for a longitudinal cohort study with
ongoing language revival intervention. Mental health
before, during and after language revival should be
compared. Language reclamation should be assessed by
measuring the success of the language reclamation
according to linguistic criteria, e.g. fluency in Welcome
to Country, rituals, spelling, translation, speech but also
from the point of view of Indigenous empowerment and
wellbeing. It is not the case that at the end, if any, of the
revival process there is no all-encompassing
native-speaking community that converses in the
revived language in all semantic domains, will it
automatically imply that the revival was a failure. The
revival process is as important as the revival goals.

The hypothesis that there is interdependence between
language revival and assessable benefits such as
personal and community empowerment, improved sense
of identity and purpose, and enhanced mental health,
thus closing the health gap between Indigenous peoples
and others cannot be proved without adequate,
independent assessment. Unless we measure the impact
of the language reclamation process on the mental
health of the participants, as well as on their wider
community, we cannot be sure about the extra-linguistic
success of the language revival.

Acknowledgments

Caryn Rogers, Amy Finlay, Michael Wright, Leonie
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in association with

Ryukyuan Heritage Language Society
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FEL XVIII Okinawa

Indigenous Languages: their Value to the Community

Proceedings of the 18th FEL Conference

Okinawa International University
Ginowan City
Okinawa, Japan

17 – 20 September 2013

Editors:
Patrick Heinrich and Nicholas Ostler
FEL XVIII
Okinawa

Organized by
Foundation for
Endangered Languages
& Ryukyuan Heritage
Language Society

Indigenous Languages: Value to the Community

17.9.2014
Okinawa Convention Center / 沖繩コンベンションセンター
18., 19.9.2014
Okinawa International University / 沖繩國際大學