



Revivalistics: From the Genesis of Israeli to Language Reclamation in Australia and Beyond.

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Zuckermann, G. 2020. New York, OUP, 2020. 326 pp., ISBN 9780199812790 (pbk), ISBN 9780199812776 (hbk).

This groundbreaking linguistic manuscript is wide-ranging in its scope, covering specifically Hebrew, Israeli and Barngarla but with references to Chinese, Russian, German, Italian and many other languages. I focus in this review on the Barngarla chapters, since that is my area of familiarity.

How does language reclamation in far western South Australia relate to Israeli? Zuckermann, himself a native of Israel, explores in the early chapters “whether it is possible to revive a no-longer spoken language” (pp. 44–111) and how such reclamation, quite apart from its reflection of “cross-fertilization from the revivalists’ mother tongue(s)” (p. xxvii), has a distinct bearing on the maintenance and strengthening of the speakers’ identity. I am not equipped to comment to any meaningful extent on the first part of the book, which systematically analyses the Hebrew reclamation. But I can claim some familiarity with Barngarla and their homeland, having been appointed as an anthropologist by the Federal Court in 2013 as expert witness in the Barngarla native title claim. As an anthropologist working with the people for the previous nine years as well, I can certainly speak to their identity and to their certainty concerning their land and culture: a certainty which could only have been further cemented through the re-acquisition of their mother tongue.

Zuckermann, a poly-linguist, is currently Chair of Endangered Languages in the University of Adelaide and has been behind a major push to “revive” Barngarla: one of Australia’s many comatose, Aboriginal languages. Zuckermann calls these languages “Sleeping Beauties”. Why the juxtaposition in one linguistic work of these two vastly different languages and cultures, Israeli and reclaimed Barngarla? Zuckermann seeks to use the experience of the Hebrew revival to assist Barngarla, and through Barngarla, other Australian and global languages, in the process of revival. This is not the first Aboriginal language to undergo revival, but Zuckermann’s remarkable achievement came at the time, and arguably assisted in the process, of the recognition of the Barngarla people’s native title. Indeed, the Federal Court judge presiding over the Barngarla’s native title hearing, Justice John Mansfield, noted that the Barngarla’s active pursuit of language revival—empowered by Zuckermann’s renewed “revivalist” efforts—was a clear indication of their continued connection with their land and culture. This was despite the separation that many had endured as “Stolen Generation” children of the 1960s and 70s, when they were forcibly removed by the State to homes in Adelaide, far distant from their native Eyre Peninsula in South Australia’s west.

Zuckermann describes language, after author Russell Hoban, as a “palimpsest”: a multi-layered structure which reflects the development of societies and cultures throughout their histories. In both cases—Hebrew and Barngarla—therefore, this palimpsestic quality would allow for the building work



that has been done on the foundations of records of earlier manifestations to develop further a continuing organism, or a “species” (p. 2), reflecting its current universe. This universe, in the case of the Barngarla, includes the influences of “living” Western Desert languages, as well as English. The cultural influences of pre-colonial fishermen and others on the shores of the Eyre Peninsula, of the government and church officials responsible for the “Stolen Generations”, led to the morbidity of the Barngarla language in the 1960s and finally, to the native title claim for the land that, according to the terms of the Native Title Act 1993, was always theirs but, ironically, needed them to prove it. It is an accumulation of these factors, these “layers”, Zuckermann is suggesting, that has led to the enthusiasm of this particular generation of Barngarla and their children to breathe life into their ancient “Sleeping Beauty” tongue.

Zuckermann starts with a critical consideration of the development of Israeli—a language that, like the new Barngarla, is the result of “reclamation”, that is it was no one's mother tongue at the beginning of the revival. In his words, a “phoenicuckoo cross” (p 30) between a phoenix (being Hebrew, spoken in biblical times) and a cuckoo (Yiddish), with elements of the thieving magpie from other languages (Polish, Russian, Arabic, English etc.) As Zuckermann notes, Jesus himself spoke Aramaic, not Hebrew. So unlike Barngarla, the last known speaker of which died in the early 1960s, Hebrew was one of Zuckermann's “Sleeping Beauties” (p. 1) from the 2nd century AD until the end of the 19th century.

So Israeli, as Zuckermann presents it, is a “beautiful” hybrid (p. 23). Barngarla, a Thura-Yura language, though without doubt susceptible to influences from other Aboriginal languages, was not, pre-1960, likely to be definable as “hybrid”. Since then, however, it has been open to “linguicide” at the hands of various Australian governments and authorities, and more recently—ever since Aboriginal people were “allowed” to speak their own languages—to “glottophagy” (pp. 186–190) from “stronger” languages such as Pitjantjatjara, a non Thura-Yura, Western Desert tongue which has been gradually adopted as a lingua franca by Aboriginal people in southern Australia who, perhaps, would rather be heard speaking an Aboriginal language than English.

Zuckermann advocates acceptance of “hybridism” rather than “purism”, with a recognition that to be reclaimed and remain a living, accreting language, loanwords and grammatical cross-fertilizations are unavoidable, particularly from the revivalists' mother tongues. Zuckermann's revivalistics “discards any imprisoning purism prism ... Hybridization results in new diversity, which is beautiful.” (p. 209). Three of the main advantages that Hebrew had over Aboriginal languages as a candidate for revival, Zuckermann records, were in its documentation, its prestige and its nationalistic power—all attributes which are lacking in Aboriginal languages in Australia (pp. 192–193). But there are, Zuckermann counters, some advantages on the side of Aboriginal revivalists, including “deontological” reasons, among which he enumerates issues addressing inequality, reasoning that language is “far more important than land” (pp. 193–194) to the people. Another advantage, he reasons, is government support, which he contrasts with the situation in Palestine prior to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

In discussing the merits and the methodologies of revivalistics, Zuckermann uses what he calls “LARD”, or the “Language Revival Diamond” (p. 212), marrying the four interdependent components for language revival: Language Owners, Education, the Public Sphere and the Linguistic profession. He makes the important point that none of these can achieve language revival by operating alone, and points to efforts in Australia that have failed due to such solo attempts. There is no space to consider each component in this review, but to take linguistics: Zuckermann makes it clear that the discipline can help, not just in the analysis of languages and their revival prospects but in “neutralizing the Western semantic bias involved in reconnecting with ancient Aboriginal traditions using English” (p. 217). One word—jukurrpa, commonly “(The) Dreaming” (p. 218)—can usefully sum this up, in

that linguistics can ensure that the meaning conveyed by this concept can embrace more than a single English word.

Revivalistics is a masterpiece that is both scholarly and social-minded. Its last chapter presents a compelling analysis of the link between language revival and improved wellbeing and mental health. Jenna Richards, a Barngarla woman from Port Lincoln, wrote: "Personally, I found the experience of learning our language liberating and went home feeling very overwhelmed because we were finally going to learn our "own" language. It gave me a sense of identity and I think if the whole family learnt our language then we would all feel totally different about ourselves and each other cause it's almost like it gives you a purpose in life."

And as Barngarla woman Evelyn Walker wrote following one of Zuckermann's Barngarla reclamation workshops: "Our ancestors are happy!"

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