

Reappearing Voices: Modern-Day Language Revival

AP Capstone Seminar

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## **Reappearing Voices: Modern-Day Language Revival**

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century and continuing into the 21<sup>st</sup> century there have been several language revival movements. The most notable of these movements was the revival of Hebrew. However, Hebrew was not the only language to be revived. Linguists have been studying Aboriginal, Irish, Welsh, Chickataw, Navajo, and other native languages in an effort to revive dying languages. Some researchers and linguists believe that these efforts will either fail completely, or they will fail to restore the languages to what they once were. The language of Hebrew, which went out of the vernacular for approximately one thousand seven hundred fifty years<sup>1</sup>, is the most notable example of a revived language and the most prominent in history. Hebrew can also be linked, whether in failure or success, to other revival efforts posing the question: How might dead languages be revived, and what is the reasoning for it?

Linguists and researchers across the globe have been trying to recreate the Hebrew languages' successful comeback with other lesser-spoken native languages. According to Ghil'ad Zuckermann and Michael Walsh, linguists at the Universities of Adelaide and Sydney, "The revival of Hebrew is so far the most successful known reclamation of a sleeping tongue and is a language movement that has been in progress for more than 120 years."<sup>2</sup> Linguists around the world are applying the techniques used in the revival of Hebrew to dying, or dead native languages. One such instance is the "reclamation, maintenance, and empowerment" of aboriginal languages and their cultures in Australia. Aboriginal people are not necessarily concerned with preserving their

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<sup>1</sup> Zuckermann, Ghil'ad, and Michael Walsh. "Stop, Revive, Survive: Lessons from the Hebrew Revival Applicable to the Reclamation, Maintenance and Empowerment of Aboriginal Languages and Cultures." *Australian Journal Of Linguistics* 31, no. 1 (January 2011): 111-127. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 27, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> See above 1

language or customs and do not see many “positive outcomes.” Modern-day linguists believe “this is the result of shortage of sufficient [...] funding, lack of technical expertise, and lack of integration of school- based programmes with community language programmes.”<sup>3</sup> Because the Aboriginal people’s language(s) are relatively unknown, this has caused them to become isolated from the general English, or mainstream language-speaking society. Zuckermann and Walsh believe “some Aboriginal people will go from being dysfunctional [...] to well-balanced, positive people.”<sup>4</sup> They state by reviving the Aboriginal language(s), and creating a better way for Aborigines to communicate, both the community and Australian society will benefit.<sup>5</sup>

Language is not the only thing being revived; native cultures are also being brought back, with varying degrees of success. In Ireland and Wales, the languages of Irish Gaelic and Welsh are being brought back along with the long-thought outdated customs and traditions. According to Paul O’Leary, a history professor at the University of Aberystwyth in Wales, in a little more than a century, the Irish language has declined rapidly due to emigration and famine, then come back due to the hard work of language researchers and linguists. “Although numerical decline had already begun by that date, the shattering impact of famine in the 1840s and large-scale emigration undermined the fabric of Irish-speaking society. [...] The speed and dimensions of this change meant that

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<sup>3</sup>Zuckermann, Ghil’ad, and Michael Walsh. "Stop, Revive, Survive: Lessons from the Hebrew Revival Applicable to the Reclamation, Maintenance and Empowerment of Aboriginal Languages and Cultures." *Australian Journal Of Linguistics* 31, no. 1 (January 2011): 111-127. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 27, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> See above 3

<sup>5</sup> See above 3 & 4

Irish was clearly an endangered language. By comparison, the key period of numerical decline in Welsh was the first half of the twentieth century.”<sup>6</sup>

According to language professor Kari A. B. Chew, the Chickasaw Nation located in Oklahoma has been losing its language – Chikashshanompa’ – and culture due to “colonization and forced assimilation [...] leading to devastating and rapid language decline.”<sup>7</sup> The natives of the Chickasaw Nation do not pass on their language leading to decline. The children learn Chikashshanompa’ as a second language, if at all, causing the number of speakers to dwindle and become primarily the elderly. “In 1994 there were an estimated one thousand Chikashshanompa’ speakers. Currently, there are about seventy remaining speakers, all of whom are elders.”<sup>8</sup> The elder Chickasaw natives have realized how dire their situation has become and they are trying to fix it, unlike the Aboriginals in Australia.

Chickasaw families have become the key component in making the Chikashshanompa’ language more widely spoken again. The Chickasaw’s have taken it as their responsibility to pass on their language so they do not completely lose their cultural and linguistic identities. “Language is a precious gift, and, as recipients, Chickasaws are responsible to attend to language by continuing to speak it.”<sup>9</sup> The overwhelming support for revival and reclamation by the Chickasaw community has led to a successful increase in the number of new, young speakers. The Chikashshanompa’

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<sup>6</sup> O’Leary, Paul. "Public intellectuals, language revival and cultural nationalism in Ireland and Wales: a comparison of Douglas Hyde and Saunders Lewis." *Irish Studies Review* 17, no. 1 (February 2009): 5-18. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 27, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Chew, Kari A. B. "Family at the Heart of Chickasaw Language Reclamation." *American Indian Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 154. *MasterFILE Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 27, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> See above 7

<sup>9</sup> See above 7 & 8

language is both socially and culturally important for not only the Chickasaw people, but other native people as well.

A specific example for the futuristic lens would be the Navajo language reclamation. The Navajo language and people can best be remembered for their wartime contributions as the Navajo Code Talkers in World War II. As the society industrialized further, the Navajo language started to dwindle, especially since it was a word-of-mouth language. Teresa L. McCarty, Mary Eunice Romero, and Ofelia Zepeda discussed the revitalization of the Navajo language, and the purpose of language in their article “Reclaiming the Gift: Indigenous Youth Counter-Narratives on Native Language Loss and Revitalization”. Many of the indigenous Navajo speakers feel their language makes them special and gives them a sense of importance: “It is said that when the languages were created, language identified the people—who we are, where we came from, and where we are going [...] This sentiment is widely shared among Native speakers. “My language, to me [...] makes me unique [...] makes me Navajo [...] makes me who I am.”

<sup>10</sup> Current speakers of the Navajo language define their language as a part of their identity. However, before the arrival of European colonists there around three to five hundred native languages were spoken, but after Europeans arrived that number decreased to around a little over two hundred languages.<sup>11</sup> “Only 34 are still being naturally acquired as a first language by children [...] 84 percent of all Indigenous languages in the United States and Canada have no new speakers to pass them on.”<sup>12</sup>

Native languages such as Navajo have been in a gradual slow decline in recent decades,

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<sup>10</sup> McCarty, Teresa L., Mary Eunice Romero, and Ofelia Zepeda. "Reclaiming the Gift: Indigenous Youth Counter-Narratives on Native Language Loss and Revitalization." *American Indian Quarterly* 30, no. 1-2 (December 1, 2006): 28-48. *ERIC*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 1, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> See above 10

<sup>12</sup> See above 11

but with the perseverance of the current speakers and the feeling of cultural identity that goes along with the language, the Navajo speakers will reclaim their language.

Several linguists and language researchers have come to the conclusion that not enough indigenous languages are being saved, while some believe that the revival does not bring the languages back to what they once were. Russ Rymer, author of the article “Vanishing Voices,” does not describe, or explain that linguists are currently putting forth any effort to save languages. He states, “One language dies every 14 days. By the next century nearly half of the roughly 7,000 languages spoken on Earth will likely disappear, as communities abandon native tongues.”<sup>13</sup> Rymer goes on to list several languages that are in danger of going extinct: Tuvan (Siberia in Russia), Aka (Central Africa), and Seri (Mexico). However, these three endangered languages are all very similar to the Chikashshanompa’ language. The Chickasaw people are acquiring more speakers by actively speaking and teaching to younger generations. The Chickasaw are not allowing their language to go extinct whereas the other groups will not actively save their language and culture.

Other linguists blame the revival of Hebrew, which has become the basic outline for language revival, for the shortcomings in other language revivals. Ghil’ad Zuckermann and Michael Walsh do not believe that the comeback of Hebrew was a complete success. “The factors leading to the partial failure of the Hebrew revival have little to do with a lack of motivation or zealotry, or with economic or political variables [...] were not as linguistically sophisticated as contemporary linguists.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Rymer, Russ. "Vanishing Voices." *National Geographic*, July 2012. Accessed January 28, 2016. <https://drive.google.com/a/k12.leanderisd.org/>

<sup>14</sup>Zuckermann, Ghil'ad, and Michael Walsh. "Stop, Revive, Survive: Lessons from the Hebrew Revival Applicable to the Reclamation, Maintenance and Empowerment of Aboriginal Languages and

Linguists that think this because modern-day Hebrew is so different from ancient Hebrew and that it has become a “hybrid language” because new words were added to an ancient language to make it fit into modern times.<sup>15</sup>

Christina Eira, a linguist with the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages, reviewed and responded to Zuckermann and Walsh’s article “Stop, Revive, and Survive.” Eira believes, for the most part, that language revival can benefit from Hebrew’s successful example as well as ways of accepting revived language. She did however state that “it is surely both premature and a little simplistic to propose that the pathway and results for reviving one language could provide the model for all others.”<sup>16</sup> She claims that while the revival of languages is being partially done correctly, she does not believe Aboriginal languages should be compared to Hebrew because they are too different.

While the Hebrew language revival is often considered different from other endangered languages, it can be used as a universal template. Languages, especially dead or dying ones, are all slightly different, but essentially containing common principles. The most effective way to revive a relationship is for the community, specifically families, to pass their language and cultures on to younger generations and inspire

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Cultures." *Australian Journal Of Linguistics* 31, no. 1 (January 2011): 111-127. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 27, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Zuckermann, Ghil'ad, and Michael Walsh. "Stop, Revive, Survive: Lessons from the Hebrew Revival Applicable to the Reclamation, Maintenance and Empowerment of Aboriginal Languages and Cultures." *Australian Journal Of Linguistics* 31, no. 1 (January 2011): 111-127. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 27, 2016).

<sup>16</sup>Eira, Christina. "'One Size Fits All'? A Response to Zuckermann and Walsh 'Stop, Revive, Survive: Lessons from the Hebrew Revival Applicable to the Reclamation, Maintenance and Empowerment of Aboriginal Languages and Cultures'." *Australian Journal Of Linguistics* 31, no. 1 (January 2011): 129-136. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 27, 2016).

younger generations to learn. “When even a single language falls silent, the world loses an irredeemable repository of human knowledge.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> McCarty, Teresa L., Mary Eunice Romero, and Ofelia Zepeda. "Reclaiming the Gift: Indigenous Youth Counter-Narratives on Native Language Loss and Revitalization." *American Indian Quarterly* 30, no. 1-2 (December 1, 2006): 28-48. *ERIC*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 1, 2016).



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