

STOP, REVIVE, SURVIVE!/: Lessons from the Hebrew Revival applicable to the reclamation, maintenance and empowerment of minority languages and cultures

Ghil'ad Zuckermann (University of Adelaide)

The revival of Hebrew is so far the most successful known reclamation of a sleeping beauty and is a language movement that has been in progress for more than 120 years. The main aim of this paper is to suggest that there are perspicacious lessons applicable from the relatively successful Hebrew revival to the reclamation, maintenance and empowerment of minority languages and cultures elsewhere. 'Language is power; let us have ours', wrote Aboriginal politician Aden Ridgeway on 26 November 2009 in the Sydney Morning Herald. But many revival efforts have not been supported by a sound theoretical understanding of how successful language revival works. For example, decisions about the appropriate target for language maintenance programmes are too often driven by structural linguistics, where the supposed ideal is intergenerational transmission of the language with all its original structural complexity retained, thus creating unrealistic expectations among the community.

This paper is the first of its kind as it will innovatively draw crucial insights from Israeli, a.k.a. 'Modern Hebrew'. Zuckermann's (2008, 2009, 2010, 2011) research on Israeli demonstrates which language components are more revivable than others. Words and conjugations, for example, are easier to revitalize than intonation, discourse, associations and connotations. We should encourage revivalists and community leaders to be realistic rather than puristic, and not to chastise English loanwords and pronunciation, for example, within the emergent language. The revival of a clinically-dead language is impossible without cross-fertilization from the revivalists' mother tongue(s). Applying such conclusions from Hebrew will assist revivalists in being more efficient, urging them not to waste time and resources on Sisyphean efforts to resuscitate linguistic components that are unlikely to be revivable.

Reversing language shift (RLS) (Fishman 1991, 2001, Hagège 2009, Evans 2010, Walsh 2005, Zuckermann 2011) is of great social benefit. Language revival does not only do historical justice and address inequality but can also result in the empowerment of people whose heritage has been compromised. Some Aboriginal people in Australia distinguish between usership and ownership. There are even those who claim that they own a language although they only know one single word of it: its name. Consequently, some Indigenous Australians do not find it important to revive their comatose tongue. I, on the other hand, have always believed in Australia's very own roadside dictum: 'Stop, revive, survive!'