Revitalising Indigenous Languages and Cultures: A Global Perspective

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Indigenous Languages

Thanks and absolution to: Julia Sallabank

Preamble

- Today's talk contains reflections based on literature research, and primary work with Indigenous communities to document and revitalize languages in Australia

- Some theoretical and practical suggestions about developing policies and actions for maintenance and revitalization of languages and cultures, mostly at individual, family, and group levels

Structure of presentation

- Global and local linguistic diversity
- Threats to diversity
- Language shift – processes and causes
- Reversing language shift?
- Implications for language support and revitalisation
  - What can individuals and families do?
  - What can communities do?
  - What can researchers do?
  - What can groups/institutions do?
- Conclusions

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Languages of the World

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WORLD LANGUAGES   DEVELOPMENT   ENDANGERMENT   STATISTICS   ABOUT

Explore The Languages Of The World

Ethnologue contains information on 7,097 known living languages.

Begin by clicking World Languages in the page header or using one of the Browse By indexes in the page footer.

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Global distributions are skewed

- The actual size of populations who speak these 7,000 different languages is often hard to calculate, but it varies widely, from over 1 billion to just a single individual

- the top 6 largest languages in the world today are: Mandarin Chinese, Hindi/Urdu, English, Spanish, Arabic, Bengali

Distribution of languages (Ethnologue)

What continents have the most indigenous languages?

Asia has the most indigenous languages, closely followed by Africa.

Combined, they account for nearly 2/3 of the world's languages. Myriad factors – terrain, cultural history, the spread of ancient civilizations – play into how many languages have originated within a certain area.

Percentage of the world's languages, by region

- Pacific 18.5%
- Europe 4%
- Americas 15%
- Africa 30%
- Asia 32%
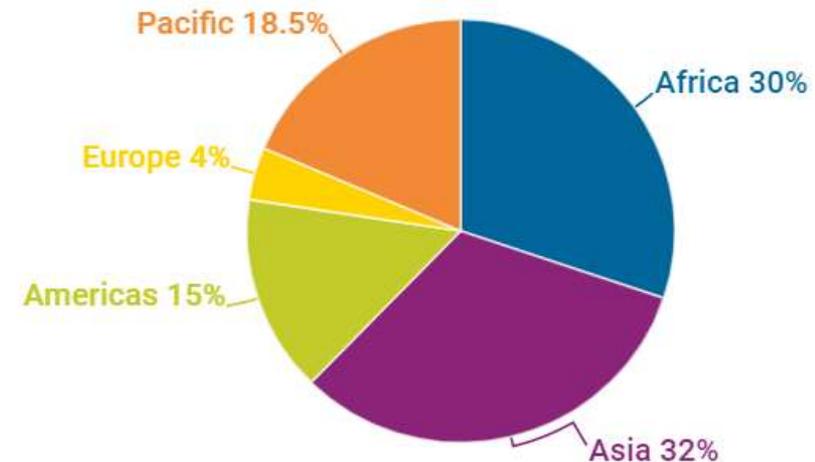
Speaker community profiles

1. intergenerational language transmission
2. percentage of speakers within total population (**not** absolute numbers)
3. domains and functions of languages in use
4. language attitudes and ideology of wider community, including recognition and status
5. speakers' ideologies and attitudes toward their own language (pride, shame etc.)

See also Unesco factors, EGIDS

Typology of language situations

- **Viable** (**safe, strong**) - spoken by all age groups, learnt by children, actively supported (can be large or small populations)

- **Endangered** - socially and economically disadvantaged, under heavy pressure from larger language, spoken by reducing population and could disappear without community support

- **Moribund** - languages no longer learnt by children with few older speakers, little social function

- **Extinct** - no native speakers

Alliance for Linguistic Diversity

Indigenous languages hot spots
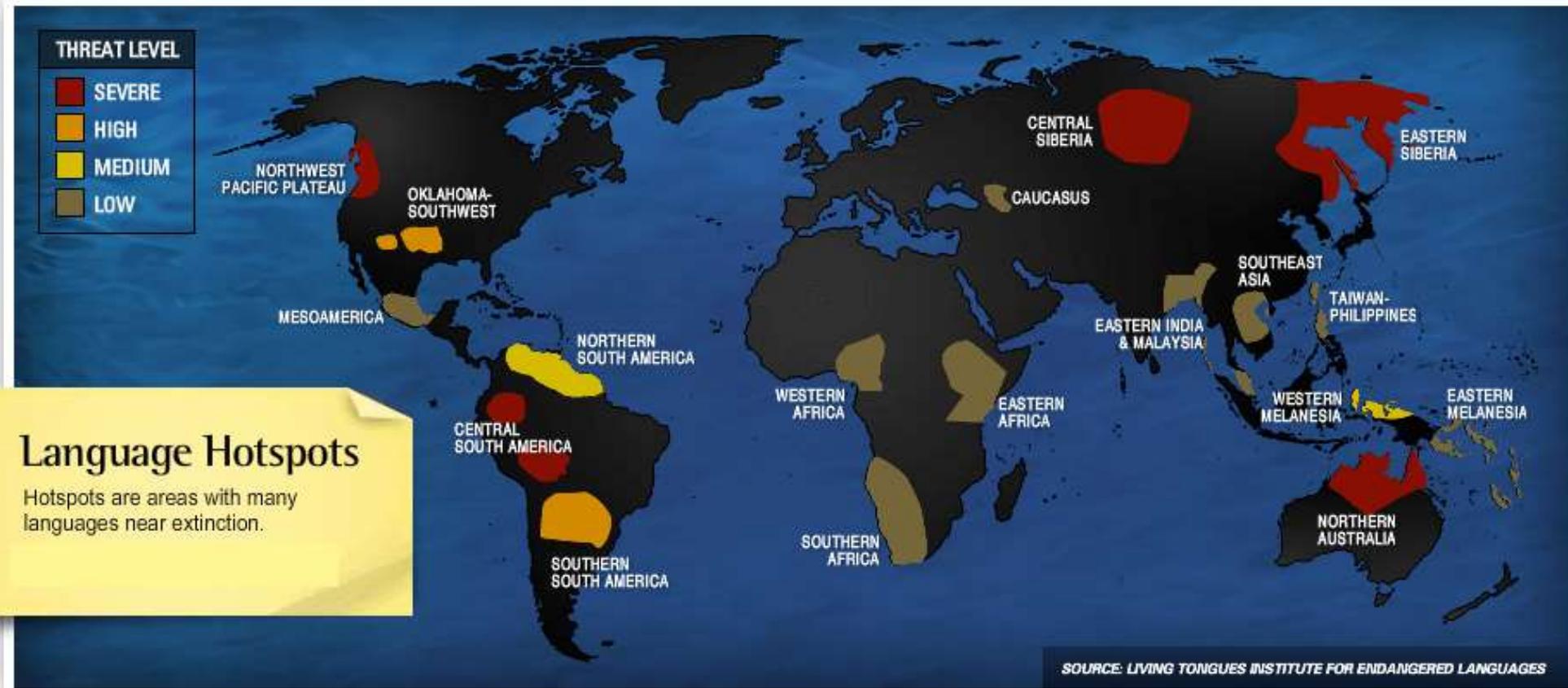
Language shift

- Some languages have become extinct as a result of wars, genocide, disease or loss of population, e.g. Great Andaman

- Many languages have seen a radical reduction in speaker numbers in past 40 years across many regions of the world, often within one or two generations, as speakers shift to dominant languages with more economic, social, political power

- increasing age profiles of remaining speakers — lack of transmission to children

- *Endangered Languages Project* (Hawaii) estimates one language is lost every 2.5 months

Causes of language shift

Highly variable across communities and contexts

1. *Demographic* – population reductions, intermarriage, changes in family structure, relocation
2. *Socio-economic* – change in life-style, increased external communication, employment, migration for work, education or access to services
3. *Political* – pressure to adopt local/national languages and conform to cultural expectation via, e.g. education, discrimination, access to services

Causes of language shift 2

4. *Attitudes* – internal (within minority) and external (within local majority, and/or regional and national) Bradley & Bradley (2002, 2019) identify as main driving force

- Internal
    - Positive to minority language can lead to maintenance
    - Negative to minority language can lead to shift
- External
    - Negative to minority language can emphasise shift OR lead to reaction and maintenance as push-back
    - If not negative, mostly laissez-faire ("it's your problem")
    - Rarely, positive to minority language supports maintenance

Causes of language shift 3

5. *Ideologies and beliefs* (Austin & Sallabank 2014)

- "an ideology can be defined as a system of widely shared ideas, patterned beliefs, guiding norms and values, and ideals accepted as truth by a particular group of people" (Steger 2003: 03)

- language ideologies: "morally and politically loaded represent-ations of the nature, structure, and use of languages in a social world" (Woolard 2021) or "socioculturally motivated ideas, perceptions and expectations of language, manifested in all sorts of language use" (Blommaert 1999: 1)

Language ideologies

Characteristics:

- Socially constructed and shared
- Unconsciously accepted (tacit, taken-for-granted)
- Speakers often unaware of actions and reactions based on their socio-culturally inculcated beliefs
- based on deep-seated predispositions and strongly held ways of thinking and perceptions concerning:
  - language **practices** (what people do, or believe they do) and
  - language **policies** (what people ***should*** do).
- "assumptions about language statuses, forms, users, and uses that, by virtue of their 'common sense' naturalization, contribute to linguistic and social inequality" (McCarty 2011:10)

Possible responses

- Actively **encourage language shift** by speaking the dominant language and **not speaking** the heritage language – adopt the hegemonic ideology

- Be **apathetic** and don't care – "I don't use the language with my children but I hear it spoken in the village so someone else must be teaching it to their children"

- **Reject personal responsibility** and leave it up to other people, schools, or organisations to "look after the language"

- **Take responsibility** to do something positive in your own family (develop a language policy)

- Take an **active role** in promoting the language and culture, locally and in wider situations ("language activist")

- Organise and **create structures** to support the language and culture

Why do anything?

- connecting with ancestors, the past, and cultural heritage, helping with identity;
- healing from personal or historical trauma;
- building and strengthening community;
- developing knowledge and culture, especially ecological knowledge and traditions;
- improving well-being, physical and mental health;
- cognitive benefits of mother-tongue education and multilingualism;
- serving as a solid basis for adding other languages and intercultural communication skills

What can individuals and families do?

- Parents should discuss and make plans before children are born, if possible – "family language management"

- Speak languages and pass on the cultures to children – if the children respond in the more powerful language be persistent and insist

- In mixed families where parents speak different languages adopt the OPOL policy ("one parent one language")

- Children are experts at learning languages and can easily grow up with 2 or 3 languages (or more). They can learn dominant languages **outside** the house (school, play, institutions)

What can local groups do?

- Collect information about local language situations (assess the language ecology) and identify who speaks what to who when where and why

- Explore factors that affect language shift or maintenance, including attitudes and ideologies

- Look at possible ways to address the underlying social, political, economic, health, welfare, and social justice factors that trigger language shift

- Share information with others – let people know what is going on in the community. Learn from and share stories with other communities

What else can we do?

- Bring the language **out of the home** to become part of the wider community language landscape – put up signage in multiple languages to make them visible in order to valorise local languages

- **Create contexts** where the local languages and cultures can be used and given positive value, e.g. cultural festivals, performances, interaction spaces (for games, chat, information exchange, social media)

- Be careful not to focus on the past and **hyper-traditionalise** the language and culture ("the good old days") – this will turn younger people off and make it seem the language is not "modern"

Language Landscape – Cree in Canada

March 2013 workshop, 4 generations

Writing songs

ngapa-ngapa pirna ngariyi
ngarrimatha wakarayi
thalara pirna kurdayi
ngayanarni mithanhi
daku pirna thana
matya ngayana pankiyilha
ngapa pirna ngakayi
parru pirna pakarna

Lots of water is coming down
A flood is coming
Lots of rain is falling
In our country
There are big sandhills
So we are happy now
Lots of water is flowing
And big fish (are coming) too

Language revitalisation

- Policies and actions taken to:
  - Increase the number of speakers of a language
  - Increase the number of domains (contexts) in which the language is used

- Several types of approaches:
  - Language nests
  - Master-apprentice programme
  - Small group interactions around tasks with a common goal, promoting inter-generational exchange

Language revitalisation

- Language camps or holidays
- Informal language and culture lessons
- Formal language lessons – use in education
    - Language as a subject – usually little time per week
    - Bilingual education – teaching in two languages, usually transition models
    - Immersion education – teaching in the minority language

Language revitalisation

- Requires good documentation and description of the language to establish orthography (spelling), design curriculum, and develop materials

- Linguists and other researchers can help with specialist knowledge in collaboration with local teachers, community members, cultural experts

- Materials development can take place with the learners, e.g. children develop learning materials in class

- Adults should be part of the revitalisation process – do not put all the responsibility for responding to language shift onto the children

Indigenous revitalisation

- revitalisation can be embedded within a broader ideology and politics of resistance (to past injustice) and reconciliation (for future)

- goals for language revitalisation need to be tailored to community ideologies for achievable outcomes that do not discourage people and turn them off from language learning

- major outcomes are also **non-linguistic** and relate rather to perceived improvements in social well-being, self-esteem, confidence, reducing truancy from school, and improving employment opportunities ("we've got a language, it's on the internet, just like French or Mandarin")

- language revitalisation and support can assist with dealing with trauma and social-psychological challenges for communities (see Olko 2021 project "language as a cure")

Very useful free open access resource

https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/revitalizing-endangered-languages/ADCBBA31190F259BA13525C769E92A9A
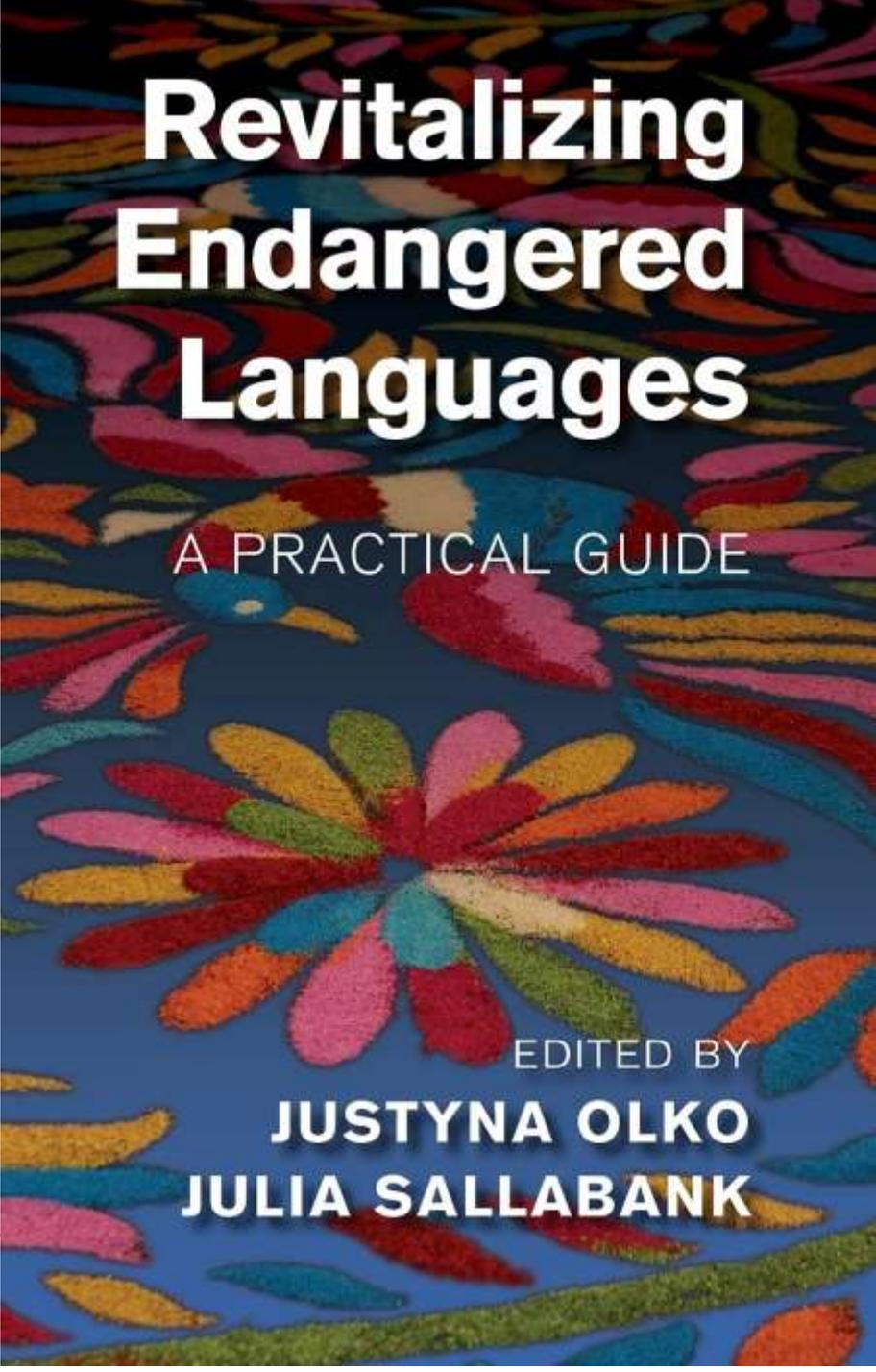
Conclusions

- In a globalised world, no country or location is isolated, and no country can escape linguistic and cultural issues/rights

- No country or region can afford to adopt a mono-cultural ideology – political, social and economic costs are high, and missed opportunities are too great

- Understanding language shift, loss, and maintenance fundamentally requires understanding attitudes, beliefs and ideologies about language value, meaning, structure, and use

- Responding to language shift and loss must involve individuals, families, groups, organisations, institutions

- **Do not** rely on school as the place to support and revitalise languages – it needs to be embedded in the daily lives of people, groups, locations (language landscape), activities

Conclusions

- There is a need for better education and information about the values and benefits of multilingualism and multiculturalism for individuals, families, policy makers

- Co-operation, collaboration, empowerment is essential – intercultural communication becomes paramount

- Dangers of ghetto and siege mentality on several sides

- Need more training at all levels to deal with socio-politics of language and cultural developments, including training in ethical, moral, and social justice aspects

- Local, regional, and global opportunities exist to contribute to the continuation of richness of world's linguistic and cultural diversity, reaffirm identities, while opening avenues for communication and increased respect for Indigenous, minority, and endangered languages

Thank you!

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