

12 Making Links

Learning from the Experience of Others in Language Revitalisation

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Introduction

Over recent decades, many individuals, communities, peoples, and nations worldwide have been trying to ‘revitalise’ their languages, namely to keep using them despite great pressure to switch to more widely spoken languages such as English, Spanish, Chinese and so on. Across roughly the same time period, we have seen the emergence of new kinds of cooperation, communication, networking, solidarity, or ‘making links’ (we generally keep to the term ‘cooperation’ throughout this chapter). Think, for example, of the Zapatista movement in Mexico and its international links, or the many instances of Basque-Mapuche solidarity, such as the organisation Millaray, which operate on the basis that these two peoples have similar struggles. Yet there is not much overlap between these two types of initiative. In many cases, it seems that endangered language (EL) activists carry out their work in relative isolation from other EL communities, despite the fact that thousands of other language communities worldwide are in the same situation. Similarly, most cooperation initiatives of the Zapatista kind do not directly address language endangerment and revitalisation.

In this chapter, we draw attention to those few initiatives that are working in the intersection between language revitalisation and international cooperation (using ‘international’ in the broadest sense, to include unrecognised nations). We explain why working in this intersection is a good idea; we then look at some of the features that define cooperation for language revitalisation, before going on to highlight some of the features that make for especially effective cooperation.

Advantages to Cooperating with Other EL Communities

We believe there are at least four ways in which EL communities can benefit from communication and cooperation with other EL communities.

First, language endangerment can be emotionally painful, and language revitalisation can be hard work with little reward. These two burdens are

often made worse by being borne in isolation: EL communities are often isolated in some way, even if not always geographically. In fact, it is often thanks to this isolation that the language has survived up until now, but isolation can also mean isolation from other EL communities. However, when a member of one EL community connects with one from a different EL community, they may realise that their community is not the only one struggling with language endangerment.

Different EL communities go through different stages of activity and passivity. Connecting a community that has little 'revitalisation momentum' to another that is full of activity can inspire enthusiasm for revitalisation in the first community. For example, language activists in the Basque Country, where some people perceive revitalisation momentum to have stagnated, have felt the benefit of connecting with Indigenous language activists from Latin America, where language revitalisation is, in some ways, a more recent phenomenon.

Second, the field of language revitalisation is very young in human history. There is no 'ABC' of language revitalisation and there are few success stories. Therefore, it is vital for those involved to learn from each other.

Third, revitalisation may be easier if EL communities share resources (methodologies, staff, materials, software, etc.) or even implement initiatives together (e.g. applying for major funding together).

Fourth, linked to the third point, when EL communities join forces they can improve their prospects for lobbying large institutions and have more success in putting language revitalisation on the political agenda.

What Are Cooperation and Communication?

The following six points help to distinguish cooperation-oriented initiatives from other kinds of language revitalisation initiatives, although the boundary inevitably blurs in places: the concept of language revitalisation has emerged out of the connections between EL communities around the world (think, for example, of the Māori language nests which have inspired similar projects worldwide). We also recognise that people in different EL contexts may consider different factors relevant, and so these six points sometimes highlight ways in which initiatives can vary. Under each heading we also provide suggestions for starting, or furthering, cooperation, and communication.

Direct Contact between EL Communities

We consider cooperation to involve direct contact between representatives of different endangered language communities, for example between

members of two different nations in North America (one author witnessed such a visit during a language camp). We believe it is important to hear about the experiences of other communities ‘from the horse’s mouth’ rather than through the filter of a third party, especially since this third party is often associated with an institution of power built upon European colonialism, at least in the Americas, Australia and Aotearoa (New Zealand). In saying this, we would like to bring language revitalisation a little more in line with decolonisation and grassroots solidarity in other fields, an idea developed by Khelselim Rivers of the Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh (Squamish) Nation in Canada in his talk on ‘Decolonizing Language Revitalization’.¹

Nonetheless, a third party, often a university, can play a role in bringing about direct contact between speakers from different EL communities. The Foundation for Endangered Languages conferences, the Congreso de Lenguas Indígenas in Chile, and the International Conference on Language Documentation and Conservation are three such events we know of. In such situations it is essential to bear in mind the historical relationship between EL speakers and the institution in question. For example, at academic conferences we have heard some speakers acknowledging, at the beginning of their talk, that they represent a colonial institution.

It is worth considering whether cooperation occurs between just two EL communities, or between three, four, or even more. For example, there have been links for many years between Basque and Mapuche language activists in the Basque Country (Spain/France) and the Wallmapu (Chile/Argentina) respectively. In terms of three-way cooperation there have been links between Mi’kmaw, Gaelic, and Acadian revitalisation efforts in Nova Scotia (Canada). Other initiatives are designed to create links between members of many different EL communities, such as HIGA! 2nd Summit of Young Speakers of Minoritized Languages. This was held in July 2018 in the Basque city of Gasteiz and for four days seventy young language activists from thirty-two different language communities from around the world attended workshops, shared their experiences, and strengthened relationships that could promote future cooperation in language revitalisation.

We suggest: Take advantage of any existing opportunities to meet activists from other EL communities (often through third parties), and/or take the initiative in making links yourself. It may take several tries before you find someone with whom you can establish a good relationship: don’t give up!

¹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcekBQceyN8

One-to-One Contact, NGO-to-NGO Contact, Ministry-to-Ministry Contact

As soon as a member of one EL community begins a conversation with a member of another, this could be seen as communication or cooperation. Indeed, much valuable exchange of experiences arises from such encounters: for example, Mick Mallon from Ireland helps Inuktitut teachers in language pedagogy, teaches Inuktitut himself, and is regarded as one of Canada's top scholars in the academic study of Inuktitut.² However, it seems to us that the majority of cooperation initiatives probably occur with the involvement of NGOs or similar organisations, such as The Language Conservancy, Mugarik Gabe, or the Endangered Language Alliance.

There are also some instances of communication and cooperation at a more institutional level, such as the First Peoples' Cultural Council (FPCC), which coordinates much language revitalisation work between First Nations in British Columbia, Canada. One rare example on an international scale is the agreement to cooperate on language policy signed between the CONADI in Chile and the representatives of the Vice Secretariat of Language Policy from the Basque Autonomous Community.³ While some initiatives are thought of as more 'top-down', e.g. The Network for Promoting Linguistic Diversity, others are more 'bottom-up', e.g. Mapuche language camps.

We suggest: Think carefully about the pros and cons of going through a larger organisation. If it will be helpful, how exactly? Sometimes it is politically necessary, although not helpful; but accepting this (at least for the time being) is better than having political controversy jeopardise the initiative. How much time and effort will you need to invest in the organisational framework, for instance communicating with a government ministry and following all of their procedural requirements, and will it be worth it?

Each of these levels of cooperation can help in different ways, and it will depend on the EL community which level is most appropriate and most valuable. One author's experiences in both Mapuche and Yanesha territories (the former in Chile and Argentina, the latter in Peru) provide an example of this. In the Yanesha case, all interested parties considered the Yanesha Federation a crucial institution for any project involving the Yanesha language, and the Federation seemed to have widespread

² www.cbc.ca/radio/thesundayedition/the-sunday-edition-november-26-2017-1.4417692/how-a-rascally-irish-immigrant-became-one-of-canada-s-top-scholars-of-inuktitut-1.4417724

³ www.habe.euskadi.eus/s23-edukiak/es/contenidos/informacion/20132016_legealdia_dok/es_def/index.shtml#6876

recognition as legitimately representing the Yanasha. By contrast, in the Mapuche case there is no such organisation and contacts are much more one-to-one.

This chapter is not the place to discuss all of the possible activities that can come under the umbrella of language revitalisation. Instead, in this section, we outline only those activities that EL communities have engaged in when working together, in the cases we know of. We have categorised these under the headings of training, reflection/evaluation, art, and language policy. By training we mean activities where EL communities share skills relevant to any aspects of revitalisation, from second language learning/teaching to awareness raising. An example of training is the diploma in language revitalisation strategy run by the Basque NGO Garabide, which has been attended mostly by participants from Latin American Indigenous groups.

Training activities aim to share established best practices in revitalisation strategy, for example the principle of not spending all your energy trying to make the language an official language while ignoring the fact that parents are no longer speaking the language to their children. By contrast, other initiatives focus on identifying, reflecting upon, or evaluating best practices. Many academic initiatives have this focus. One example is Hitzargiak (Summit of Good Practices in Language Revitalization), a project designed to encourage the exchange of ideas between EL communities in Europe. Slightly less academic is Hitz Adina Mintzo, a seminar on minoritised languages organised by Oihaneder, the House of the Basque Language.

A rather different kind of approach is seen in artistic activities, where participants from different language communities reflect on their language (s) through art and draw motivation from hearing about other experiences. An excellent example of this is Wapikoni Mobile, which is a First Nations film studio in Quebec that supports Indigenous directors in producing films, often in Indigenous languages. Other examples of such initiatives, which we leave the reader to look up at their leisure, include the Last Whispers project, TOSTA, European Capitals of Culture (a more top-down initiative), Europa bat-batean (Summit of Sung Improvised Poetry genres, a more bottom-up initiative), or Celtic Neighbours/Y Fro (a culture-related regional entity).

Lastly efforts to influence language policy are a distinct kind of activity. This includes demonstrations against oppressive language policy, legal efforts to change language legislation and initiatives to monitor language policy and language rights such as the European Network for Language Equality (ELEN) or Linguoresistencia.

There can be much overlap between training, reflection/evaluation, art, and language policy. For example, an event focused on the language may

raise awareness, provide opportunities for speakers to meet each other and use the language, stimulate people to reflect on revitalisation strategy, and also include artwork to inspire people.

We suggest: Different resources are needed in different EL contexts. For example, some EL activists may be enthusiastic about teaching the language but need more effective language teaching methodology; others may be the opposite. Some may be so caught up in the day-to-day activities that they have no time to reflect whether they are putting their time and energy to the most effective use; others may be the opposite. So it is important to assess community needs first, and structure cooperation so that it addresses the most urgent needs. This might even mean choosing which EL community you cooperate with according to whether it has expertise in the area needed: for example, the Catalan initiative Taller d'Espai Linguistic Personal (TELP) seems to be unique in offering workshops focussing on language choice in daily interaction. Once you have identified these needs, you can then think about what activities best address them.

Long-Lasting, Tangible Outputs from Cooperation: Language Materials, Films, Legal Documents

Sometimes communication and cooperation between EL communities results in tangible outputs such as language materials, films, and legal documents. Unlike the activities mentioned above, these may outlast the link between two particular EL communities. Some examples of films are:

- Beltzean Mintzo and ArNasa Txikitxak, two documentaries by Garabide on the sociolinguistic situation of Latin American Indigenous communities,
- The documentary Don de Lenguas, an attempt by Spanish state TV (RTVE) to inform Spanish citizens about language diversity within its territories and
- The documentary Yezhoù, by the Breton language activist Morgan Lincy Fercot, who travelled around Europe for almost a year visiting minoritised language communities, discovering local language revitalisation initiatives and interviewing local people.

Although media outputs may be designed to influence majority communities, we have observed that they have an important impact on other EL communities. For example, Basque documentaries on language revitalisation have received attention within revitalisation movements in Indigenous Latin America.

Other initiatives are, or result in, legal documents, such as the Protocol to Ensure Language Rights or The European Charter for Regional or Minority

Languages, developed by the Council of Europe, which has played a fundamental role in language revitalisation in Europe. We consider these a form of cooperation since they result from an exchange between EL communities on their language rights.

We suggest: If you are producing outputs of this kind with other EL communities in mind, consider which will give most ‘bang for your buck’, i.e. be most useful to as many other EL communities as possible. For example, in producing the documentary *ArNasa Txikitxak*, filmed in Spanish, subtitled in Basque, and covering a wide variety of Latin American Indigenous groups, Mondragon University created something accessible to EL activists throughout Spanish-speaking Latin America.

Regional, National or International Cooperation: Who to Cooperate With?

Cooperation and communication may occur entirely in the place where people speak, or spoke, the languages in question, particularly in cases where EL communities live in the same or nearby territories, e.g. Tehuelche, Mapuche, and Welsh in Chubut, Argentina, or Mi’kmaw, Gaelic, and Acadian in Nova Scotia, Canada. Some instances of cooperation and communication occur at an international or intercontinental level, such as solidarity between the Basque Country and Latin America. Others occur at a more regional level, such as the many instances of solidarity within North America, within Latin America (e.g. PROEIB in the Andes), or between peoples of the Atlantic coast (e.g. the Atlantic Meeting). Others operate at a national level, in cases where there are multiple languages spoken within the country, e.g. *NETOLNEW* for Indigenous languages in Canada. Still others occur between EL communities of a particular language family, e.g. the Celtic League or North American Association of Celtic Language Teachers. This may be the case even if the language family has expanded beyond its traditional geographical boundaries, e.g. Gaelic in Scotland and Nova Scotia or Welsh in Wales and Chubut. Solidarity may also happen in geographical locations alien to EL speakers/activists. For instance, the First Symposium of Minority Languages and Varieties of the Iberian Peninsula was held in Alcanena, where mainly Portuguese is spoken (Minderico is spoken just a few kilometers away).

We suggest: Consider carefully who you can keep up a long-term connection with. We have seen cases where language activists were in touch with Basque language activists on another continent but were unaware of revitalisation efforts for immigrant languages going on in their own town. Not only is a local connection more sustainable ecologically (avoiding international flights etc.), but it is likely to be more sustainable

socially. A long-distance trip might be exciting, but how much will you be able to keep up long-distance contact, realistically? Activists operating in the same place also tend to better understand the context that their neighbour has to deal with. To give a simple example, Mapuche, Quechua and Haitian activists in Chile understand how the Chilean governmental grants for cultural activities work. Of course, they are also likely to share a common dominant language, e.g. English in the case of Gaelic, Mi'kmaw, and Acadian activists.

We recognise that our understanding is strongly shaped by our geographical focus on Europe and the Americas, and particularly by cooperation between the two. At the same time, this geographical bias is not coincidental. It is a result of the uneven distribution of resources between EL communities in Europe as distinct from EL communities elsewhere. We hope that in the future others will be inspired to undertake and write about similar kinds of cooperation in other regions of the world, e.g. links between the Ainu in Japan and other EL communities, about which we know little.

Cooperating and Communicating Online

The Internet is an important medium for cooperation and communication: take, for example, the many Facebook groups created with the aim of language revitalisation. Social media is a major asset for language revitalisation and networking, as it enables individuals to interact with others and share experiences, organise activities, and learn about a greater number of initiatives, events, and people.

We suggest: Think carefully about what kind of cooperation can be carried out online. This might range from everything to nothing. For example, in the case of language learning/teaching methodologies, we believe it is essential to cooperate in person, as learning/teaching is such a holistic experience. Generally we believe strongly in the value of cooperation in person, because we believe in the continuing importance of using the language in face-to-face communication even if, ultimately, you would like to be using your language in all areas of life. Other contexts for language use (e.g. written, film) are secondary in promoting revitalisation, although they can be very important supports.

What Leads to Effective Cooperation and Communication

In this section, we outline factors that have seemed to help cooperation and communication in the cases we know of, and expand these into suggestions for EL activists who are interested in working with another EL community. However we wouldn't want our readers to be discouraged

from communicating with another EL community just because they do not tick all of these ‘boxes’; all EL communities are different and an issue that is crucial in one context may be less important in another, and vice versa.

Finding People Who Are Interested in Language Revitalisation in the Other Community and Establishing a Productive Relationship

There is no point trying to engage in cooperation with an EL community where everyone has decided they are not interested in language revitalisation. Similarly, even if there are people interested in revitalisation, there is no point trying to engage in cooperation if nobody is interested in cooperation. Cooperation may often begin with a simple inquiry and, over time, links between the communities may strengthen.

We suggest: Look for people in another community that are already most active in language revitalisation. These are likely to be the people you will find anyway, since they are the people you will be able to track down. This could be by word of mouth, searching for relevant groups online, or by contacting a third party such as a linguist or anthropologist who knows the community. Look for people who have already shown an interest in connecting with other EL activists. There are not many such people; so don’t rule out cooperation just because you can’t find anyone. Meeting someone with whom you establish a productive relationship is probably more important than anything else.

The Historical Relationship between the EL Communities

Cooperation and communication seem to be most likely between EL communities that have suffered under the same colonial power, e.g. speakers of Mi’kmaw, Gaelic and Acadian French in the English-speaking British colonial system. However, cooperation between people who have suffered under the same colonial power but in different ways, especially speakers of European ELs versus other ELs, must be aware of these differences and take them into account. One must also acknowledge the fact that speakers of European ELs were themselves part of the European colonisation of the Americas and elsewhere.

If the relationship between two EL communities dates back a long time, then cooperation and communication are likely to be more effective and enduring. For example, Catalans and Basques have cooperated for decades in language revitalisation and this is partly due to a shared struggle with the same two states, Spain and France.

Nowadays, perhaps the most common situation that brings together speakers of ELs is migration to the same city, in which case they share a common experience of migration. The Endangered Language Alliance in New York and Toronto are initiatives to facilitate cooperation in this situation.

We suggest: Look for people who have an experience of language endangerment that is similar to yours. Acknowledge any important differences in the experience of language endangerment and revitalisation, but do not let these differences stand in the way of communicating and collaborating.

A Shared Language

EL communities that have been subject to the same colonial power (e.g. Spain) usually also face the same dominant language (e.g. Spanish). Clearly, having a common language makes cooperation and communication a lot easier: for example, in 2016 Inuit visitors to Wales learning about Welsh revitalisation were able to communicate through English.⁴ Unfortunately, this common language is often precisely the dominant language against which you are struggling, meaning that your cooperation involves yet more time speaking that dominant language; nevertheless, this may be a price worth paying in the long term, if the cooperation is fruitful.

In a few cases people manage to cooperate without using the dominant language, e.g. Hitz Adina Mintzo, the series of talks on EL issues that is mostly held in Basque, or the Casa Amaziga de Catalunya (for Catalan-Tamazight cooperation) that seems to operate in Catalan. Although this turns cooperation into another opportunity actually to use an EL, it may not be realistic for most EL activists to learn a second EL on top of their own. On the other hand, in some cases (such as Irish and Scottish Gaelic, or the Algonquian languages in Canada), the similarity between minority languages may make this task much easier.

We suggest: Prioritise cooperation where you have a shared language, even if this shared language has to be the dominant language.

Success in Language Revitalisation

It seems that EL communities that are relatively successful in revitalising their language are those most likely to be found engaging in cooperation (e.g. Māori and Basque). Naturally, these are the communities that others want to engage with, in order to learn from their experience. There are other

⁴ www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/welsh-inuktitut-save-language-inuit-canada-wales-1.3904064

communities with reportedly successful experiences, such as the Mohawk community in Kahnawà:ke, Quebec, but we do not know enough about cooperation in these contexts to comment.

We suggest: We agree that there is much to learn from ‘success stories’, and recommend looking for these; they are not all well known, and you will likely have to visit the area yourself to decide how successful revitalisation is. At the same time, there is much to learn from less successful experiences, and this may help you avoid falling into the same traps.

Degree of Language Endangerment/Revitalisation

It seems that cooperation has happened most often between EL communities that have similar levels of language endangerment which are generally quite low levels by global standards. For example, there is a similar situation in Wales and the Basque Country, with around three million inhabitants and 700,000 speakers of the minority language in both cases, strong institutional support, well-developed bilingual education, and widespread opportunities to learn the language as a second language.

We suggest: EL communities facing similar levels of language endangerment are more likely to be able to help each other, so we would generally advise collaborating with such communities.

However, this is not always the case. A good example is Professor Ghil’ad Zuckermann’s contribution to Aboriginal Australian language revitalisation, in which he draws lessons from the Hebrew experience, the revitalisation of Hebrew being perhaps the most successful case of language revitalisation in human history, while Australian languages are among the world’s most endangered. There are some lessons to be learnt about language revitalisation that have little to do with the level of endangerment, for example, recognising that influence from the dominant language(s) on the ‘revitalised’ language is inevitable.

Other Shared Projects and Interests

Besides a shared degree of language endangerment/revitalisation, EL communities may have other shared interests. Both Corsican and some Guernesiais activists advocate using writing systems with multiple norms; both Asturians and Yucatec Mayas want their state to declare their languages official; there are issues with both Inuktitut and Cree languages in choosing between the Latin alphabet and Canadian aboriginal syllabics; and both Inuit and Welsh activists are concerned with regional autonomy in connection to language policy.

We suggest: Look for specific shared interests within your general interest in language revitalisation. Being specific about these interests and starting with specific questions may help both communities to support each other more efficiently.

Other Cultural Factors

Besides the shared experience of oppression by a particular power, and besides sharing a common language, two EL communities may have other cultural features that ease, or complicate, cooperation and communication. For example, although there is a shared history of Spanish and Spanish-language colonisation in Chile and Colombia, there are significant cultural differences between the two countries which may create challenges in communication between Indigenous groups from each country. Conversely two EL communities may find communication easy despite not sharing much history.

We suggest: These other cultural factors are rather hard to define or anticipate, so we can only suggest being aware that they may arise, perhaps unexpectedly.

Resources Available

Resources are a deciding factor in being able to engage in communication and cooperation. Travelling, accommodation, material resources, taking time off paid work, delivery costs, and so on require a certain economic position. EL communities from Europe are greatly over-represented in this chapter because of their economically privileged position relative to other EL communities.

We suggest: It is important to evaluate realistically the resources you have available to engage in communication and cooperation. Moreover, we believe that it is an ethical responsibility for EL communities with greater resources to cooperate with less well-resourced communities, especially since these well-resourced communities in Europe were also implicated in the colonisation that led to language endangerment in the Americas and elsewhere (think of the Basque role in the colonisation of Latin America, or the Scottish in Canada). These well-resourced communities, who benefit from the educational systems of European states and are close to global centres of language-related research, also tend to have access to precisely the resources that less-resourced communities want, such as expertise in second-language teaching/learning or language documentation.

Globalisation and ‘Connectedness’

Some EL communities are more present than others on the Internet and at events related to language revitalisation, and it is these better-connected communities that seem to be the most likely to engage with other EL communities. The best-connected communities also tend to be the communities that are best-off economically, although the correlation isn’t perfect. For example, Mapuche language activists are probably some of the best connected within South America. These well-connected EL communities may already serve as regional ‘hubs’ for language revitalisation activity to some extent.

We suggest: Take advantage of any such ‘hubs’. For example, for a non-Mapuche language activist in Chile it may make sense to connect with Mapuche language activists first, in order them to connect with other EL communities, simply because Mapuche activists in Chile are well connected to the ‘wider world’ of language revitalisation.

Some international funding bodies actively encourage EL communities to engage in cooperation, as is the case with the SMiLE funding scheme. In fact, some of the projects that have previously been awarded SMiLE funding involve cooperation between communities, and this was encouraged in the call for applications.

Final Thoughts

In writing this chapter we have aimed to (1) create awareness of cooperation for language revitalisation, a phenomenon that has received little attention within the field of language revitalisation; (2) argue for the benefits it can bring to language revitalisation; and (3) suggest factors that make cooperation and communication easier and more productive.

We hope that this inspires EL speakers/learners/activists who are not yet involved in cooperation to think about the possibility. In particular, we are thinking of cases that offer good opportunities for cooperation that have not yet been taken up. For example, there is an inspiring story to tell regarding the revitalisation of French in Quebec. Quebecois language activists would have relative economic freedom resources to pursue such initiatives; and Quebecois of European descent share a common language (French) with Indigenous people in Quebec itself, as well as French Guyana, and French-speaking Africa. Yet we know of no initiatives to share that experience with other groups facing language endangerment (although we would be very happy to be corrected on this).

In our experience cooperation and communication are possible for any member of an EL community who has the opportunity and motivation to

contact members of another. One author, himself a speaker of a minority language, was in contact with members of other EL communities even before working and doing research in the field.

Similarly, we hope that this chapter also provides encouragement to those few who are already engaged in such cooperation, as we believe they are doing invaluable work. We also hope to bring the world of language revitalisation a little closer to a global conversation about cooperation, or solidarity, between peoples or social groups suffering oppression and discrimination. We believe that this, too, is essential to avoid any tendency to ethnocentricity ('I want to speak my language but those immigrants should stop speaking theirs!') and for ensuring the ethical foundations of language revitalisation as a field of thought and action.

FURTHER READING

- Garabide, a Basque NGO that works on language revitalization with Indigenous language activists mainly from Latin America, www.garabide.eus.
 Wapikoni Mobile, a First Nations organisation in Quebec that works with Indigenous film directors across Canada, Latin America, and elsewhere, www.wapikoni.ca.
 Y Fro/Celtic Neighbours, a network supporting cooperation between minority language communities across Europe, www.celtic-neighbours.eu/y-fro.html.

12.1 Networking and Collaboration between Speakers

John Sullivan

The Instituto de docencia e investigación etnológica de Zacatecas (IDIEZ, see Capsule 8.5) held its first interdialectal encounter in 2011. We invited about twenty native speakers representing ten different variants of Nahuatl, as well as a few non-native speakers who had attained fluency, to participate in a five-day workshop.

There were three goals:

- (1) allow speakers from different regions to experience the monolingual space we had been developing at IDIEZ;
- (2) test the commonly held belief that the many variants of Nahuatl were mutually unintelligible;
- (3) open a forum for speakers from different regions to share their experiences, thus breaking down the barriers of geographical distance that had prevented this in the past.

We began our activities by issuing two rules for participation in the workshop: first, everyone must speak in their own variant of Nahuatl, with no use of Spanish; and second, no fighting over contentious topics such as orthographic standardisation (see Chapter 14). We then proceeded, in Nahuatl, to propose, discuss and set the topics that would be covered during the five days. This was especially important,

because in the past, meetings of speakers of Indigenous languages in Mexico had always been held in Spanish, and organised by government institutions that determined the topics of discussion beforehand.

We got off to a rocky start. The participants were not accustomed to using their language outside of their homes and communities. And those who were, had learned that this needed to be immediately followed by a translation into Spanish. Words, expressions and structures specific to the variant of one person were met by laughter and puzzlement on the part of those who spoke different variants. But in a very short period of time everyone adapted to the monolingual but multi-variant space. Spontaneous conversations sprang up, comparing and contrasting ways of expressing different things in each variant. And most importantly, the mutual intelligibility between variants was high enough to permit five days of animated, monolingual discussion on a wide range of topics, including identity, revitalisation, rituals and local festivals, ways of greeting, education, immigration, grammatical terminology, linguistic policy, intergenerational language transmission, and gender issues.

We have continued with the encounters, always experimenting with new formats and content. In 2017, for example, the Engaged Humanities project of the University of Warsaw, SOAS and Leiden University, along with Indigenous activists, invited native speakers of Nahuatl to participate in a revitalisation field school held in San Miguel Xaltipan, Tlaxcala, working alongside revitalisers of endangered languages from all over the world. The concluding activity was a monolingual academic conference in which speakers of many variants of Nahuatl gave papers on their current projects in curriculum development, teaching methodology, scientific research, revitalisation and art. Engaged discussion followed each talk and performance (see also Capsule 1.4).

The interdialectal encounter is an important way of getting native speakers of different variants of endangered languages who are geographically isolated from each other together to share problems and experiences, exchange ideas, and plan collective projects. We will begin experimenting with videoconferencing technology in order to reduce the cost and increase the frequency and coverage of these encounters.

Finally, oral speech is not the only vehicle for communication among speakers of Nahuatl variants. Writing in all of its manifestations (artistic, academic, personal and commercial genres, social media, etc.) is an important tool for linguistic interaction. However, in order for this to work with maximum efficiency in the Nahuatl context, IDIEZ promotes orthographic standardisation based on the aspect of the language that unifies its variants, morphology rather than sounds, which differ not only from variant to variant, but often from village to village and town to town.

12.2 The Engaged Humanities Project and Networking for Language Revitalisation

Justyna Olko

Networking opportunities can emerge from large-scale projects that cross boundaries between academia and communities. An example is our *Engaged Humanities* (ENGHUM) project funded by the European Commission within Horizon 2020 in



Figure 12.2.1 Mixtec, Ayuuk, and Nahua activists at the field school of the Engaged Humanities project, Mexico. © Engaged Humanities Project, University of Warsaw

2016–2018. It was carried out by a consortium from the University of Warsaw, SOAS University of London, and Leiden University, with direct participation by speakers of many Indigenous and minority languages. We organised and carried out together a number of practically oriented activities: summer schools, field schools and field stays, workshops and cultural and dissemination events (see Figure 12.2.1). They provided networking between representatives of ethnic minorities from Poland (speakers of Wymysiöeryś, Lemko, Kashubian, Silesian and Masurian), other parts of Europe (speakers of Guernesiais, Sámi, Sylheti, Manx, Catalan, Greko, Euskara/Basque) and from Latin America (Makushi, Mixtec, Ayuuk, Pipil/Nawat), Asia (Buryat, Uruk, Tai, Zaiwa) and Africa (Izõn).

A good example of intense networking and mutual learning was our 2016 Field School in Wilamowice. It involved a meeting of activists, scholars, experts, and users of almost twenty minority languages and nonstandard linguistic varieties from all over the world. Its forty-five participants came from fourteen countries on four continents. All of them became very engaged not only in joint activities focusing on fieldwork, developing teaching materials for a local community or creating a project for a local museum, but they also participated in the social life of Wilamowice. They carried out a series of workshops for a local school, investigated local language attitudes, and focused on their own languages, cultures, or writing systems and visited local senior citizens' houses. The empowerment resulting from this intense cross-cultural and multilingual networking was deeply felt both by visitors and – also in the long term – by the local community struggling to revitalise its language.



Figure 12.2.2 Justyna Majerska-Sznajder and Tymoteusz Król, revitalisers of Wymysiöeryś, greeted by a speaker of Nahuatl. San Miguel Tenango, Mexico. © Engaged Humanities Project, University of Warsaw

A similar idea guided our Field School in San Miguel Xaltipan (Tlaxcala, Mexico) in 2017. This two-week event was organised in a Nahuatl-speaking zone and participants included speakers of various variants of the Nahuatl language. Nahuatl was also one of the working languages throughout the Field School alongside Spanish. Speakers of other Indigenous languages of Mexico, including Yucatec Maya, Ayuuk and Mixtec, were also among participants. Also gathered in San Miguel Xaltipan were a number of scholars working on language documentation and language revitalisation, as well as language activists from Catalonia, El Salvador, Italy, Mexico, Poland, United Kingdom and USA (see Figure 12.2.2). Our activities included workshops on language documentation techniques and tools, creation of teaching materials and practical fieldwork training in, with, and for collaborating communities. The field school was also an opportunity for the exchange of experiences and making valuable contacts with fellow language activists working in language revitalisation in other parts of the world.

Thus, INTENSE NETWORKING among speakers of endangered languages from communities all over the world was one of the most important and enduring

outcomes of the project. Bringing people together and stimulating the exchange of experiences and ideas has helped create long-lasting links and '**communities of practice**' that are crucial for language revitalisation initiatives.

We have made some documentaries about our ENGHUM field schools which are available to view online:

'Amo miquiz totlahtol. Our language will not die':

<https://youtu.be/xSp4AMiOIWU>

Field school in Wilamowice:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=0yveONt5kuM

