Revitalising Indigenous Languages

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How to Recreate a Lost Generation

Marja-Liisa Olthuis, Suvi Kivelä and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas

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TOOVLÁŠ UÁPISOLMOOŠ

Kal tun lah ovddii nääl.
Jieh tun lah ennuvgin muttum
kyevtlov ivveest.

Mut lii-uv tust
kielâ muttum?
Mon kielânsun
tuu kolgâččij tiervâttiđ?

SÄMMILÂŠ NÄÄLI

Kukken jo uáinám:
tuste lii sämmilâš nääli.
Tun lah mahtte
uápis olmooš,
veik jiem tieđegin
tuu noomâ.

Mut jiem mun kuittâg
eeđâ tuin maiden.
Mun ervidâm:
tun jieh määti
sämikielâ.

A FORMER ACQUAINTANCE

Indeed, you are like before.
You haven't changed so much
in about twenty years.

But have you gone through
a language change?
In what language
should I greet you?

A SAAMI LOOKALIKE

From far away I already see:
you look like a Saami.
You are like
an acquaintance
even if I don't know
your name.

But I won't
say anything to you.
I guess:
you don't speak
Saami.

Matti Morottaja, in *Sápmelaš*, 1983, with the pseudonym Andârâs Roggejävri, translated by Suvi Kivelä and Marja-Liisa Olthuis, 2012

NOTHING

Nothing stays longer
in our souls
than the language we inherit.
It liberates our thoughts
unfolds our mind
and softens our life.

Paulus Utsi (born 1918), 1996: 111, translated by Roland Thorstensson

Contents

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Note from Marja-Liisa and Suvi: We are especially happy and grateful that Tove joined us in writing this book. Her advice, remarks, experience and wisdom have been invaluable. She has encouraged us and pushed us to move forward when we have really needed her support. Furthermore, she has given us a special perspective that we believe will come through to the reader. That perspective, we hope, raises our AS case to another level where it can be connected with all those thousands of other Indigenous languages and their speakers that are struggling for survival. Tove's decades of extensive, persistent and humane struggle (indeed, combat) for the rights of minority and Indigenous languages receive our deepest respect. We have never met anyone who has such wide networks and contacts reaching out to every corner of the globe. For us, Tove is a role model and a now a dear friend; she has a big heart and a strong spirit, and that combination makes it possible to move mountains.

Note from Marja-Liisa: I would like to thank Suvi for joining as a co-author. I had only a tedious planner's vision of the CASLE programme on my desk and, to be honest, I did not see myself documenting anything at all. I had no idea of how everything worked out in the classroom or in the field from the viewpoint of a student. I had only the reports of the instructors and

the written student feedback from each course. I desperately needed a descriptive student view. I think Suvi as a journalist has given a very moving account and a great deal of spirit to this book. Now, after reading the parts that she wrote, I have an idea of how CASLE really worked in practice, and how the graduates experienced the programme. Suvi, *tieđâlii teevstâ čäällim oovtâst tuin lii lamaš hirmâd suotâs. Takkâ tunjin ennuv*!

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We wish to donate any royalties from the sale of this book to *Anarâškielâ servi*, the Aanaar Saami Association, to contribute to the further revitalisation of the AS language and culture.

This book is dedicated to all Indigenous people in the world. Our message to you is this: revitalise your language!

Note

(1) *Note from Carol*: I am so happy that Marja-Liisa, Suvi and Tove offered me the privilege of reading and commenting on the language (and the content!) of this book, which I think is a huge contribution to the field of language revitalisation as well as generally to our understanding of how multilingual education benefits learners and communities. I am honoured to have been a small part of this process, and I have the utmost admiration and respect not only for the authors but also for all of the participants in this valiant revitalisation process. I wish you all the very best!

1 Introduction

This book has a positive message: it *is* possible to revitalise a seriously endangered language! Instead of people just stating that a language is extremely endangered and feeling sad about it, or merely working to describe and archive it, the language *can* be given new life! New first- as well as second-language speakers and new environments where the languages can be used can emerge. The degree of endangerment can be lowered, even when languages which are numerically very small will of course always remain endangered. This book tells the story of one such language, Aanaar Saami (AS), spoken only in Finland by some 350 speakers today. Others who are interested in numerically small languages may become inspired. It is hard work, though. Dedicated individuals are needed, but in fortunate circumstances even a few people can make a huge difference.

If one puts one's trust in a state to do the job – even a state such as Sweden which superficially seems to support Indigenous and minority languages through signing and ratifying international and regional human rights instruments – a language may disappear before the necessary state measures are put in place. The following quote comes from an official report by the Swedish church entitled *Våga vara minoritet. En rapport om minoritetsrättigheter i Sverige 2012* [*Dare to Be Minority. A Report on Minority Rights in Sweden 2012*]:

> Children's right to learn their minority language is, however, not guaranteed within the Swedish educational system. This poses a serious threat to the survival of the national minority languages and violates the obligations in minority conventions. If this is not corrected immediately, as the Council of Europe has repeatedly urged Sweden to do, there is a grave risk that the acutely endangered minority languages will not survive. This is particularly true for the smaller Saami varieties. (Svenska Kyrkan, 2012: 4, our translation)

Info Box 1 Criticism of Sweden's Current Minority Policies and Practices, gives some more examples of critique from the summary of this Swedish report, especially in the field of education. In Norway the educational rights situation is much better and in Finland it is somewhat better than in

Sweden. Many measures in support of Indigenous languages have been and are being taken in several Latin American countries and in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Some practical measures to use learners' home languages in education are in place, even if haphazardly, in many countries in Africa and in some Asian countries, especially India and now also in Nepal (see, for example, articles in Skutnabb-Kangas & Heugh, 2012; Skutnabb-Kangas *et al.*, 2009; see also Kosonen, 2009; McCarty, 2012; Rubagumya, 2009; Walter & Benson, 2012). Despite these positive developments, the criticism of Sweden could be applied to more or less every country in the world. Even though most necessary measures are *not* in place in Sweden, however, the educational rights of Indigenous/tribal children as a whole are, in our estimation, better in the three Nordic countries (Finland, Norway and Sweden) than anywhere else in the world.

It is realistic to claim that Indigenous/tribal, minority and minoritised (hereafter ITM) languages are disappearing at a faster rate today than ever before in human history (see Info Box 2 Language Endangerment). *Much* more attention is needed if we want the world's almost 7000 spoken languages and many sign languages (nobody knows their number) not only to survive but to develop and prosper – to become 'normalised' in the way AS may be on its way to achieving. Many people agree on this – but what *can* be done?

There are many experiments and suggestions, most of them very small scale. Some of them have been summarised in the chapters and Info Boxes in this book. The references here (and in the very large bibliography at http://www.tove-skutnabb-kangas.org/en/Tove-Skutnabb-Kangas-Bibliography.html) give further hints. However, the kinds of measures described in this book regarding AS are new and innovative.

According to the 2009 *Ethnologue* count (see Info Box 3 The Situation of the World's Languages) 5348 of the world's 6909 languages had fewer than 100,000 speakers, and 3524 languages had fewer than 10,000 speakers. Many of these languages, especially in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, are still spoken, by both adults and children, and may be transferred to children at least for the next couple of generations. For at least half of them, however, maybe up to 90–95%, this transfer may stop before the end of this century.

Our conviction is that most ITM languages have been and are being killed. They disappear as a result of linguistic and cultural genocide (see Info Box 4 Linguistic and Cultural Genocide in Education), not as a result of any kind of 'natural' language death or as an 'inevitable' result or side-effect of what is called modernisation and/or globalisation. There are people who think that the disappearance of small languages is good. Many people think that both individuals and groups benefit from this language shift, especially economically, and that the small languages are not important, neither for the speakers and their identities, nor for the world in general (see Info Box 5 Ethnic Identity and Language). However, most ITMs who have been able to

express their views seem to disagree completely with this opinion. We have collected just a few of their views in Info Box 6 Indigenous Views. Joshua Fishman's (1997) book, *In Praise of the Beloved Language. A Comparative View of Positive Ethnolinguistic Consciousness*, gives many examples. It is very clear to us, from our own experience, worldwide networks and reading, that most of those groups/peoples who are aware of the fact that their languages are endangered and may disappear *do* want to revive and revitalise their languages. They do manifestly *not* want them to disappear.

However, many groups seem to 'wake up' very late. Suddenly they realise that their children no longer speak or even understand the ancestral language. This may come as a surprise to them – somehow they have thought that their languages would of course continue to live forever; it is beyond their imagination that this might not be the case.

Starting a revival or revitalisation process presupposes that the group has enough material and psychological resources for it, including a solid knowledge base and preferably a network of contacts with other revitalisers. Revitalisers can learn from each other, even if all solutions have to be extremely context sensitive. Some basic principles can be deduced, even though there are no one-size-fits-all solutions.

Many of the revival/revitalisation experiments in 'Western' countries have been with languages that have already ceased to be spoken, or languages that have only a few elderly speakers. This will most probably be the situation for most of the endangered languages (regardless of the degree of endangerment – see UNESCO's categories in Info Box 2 Language Endangerment) before the end of this century. At the point when few or no children speak the language, language nests for children with their elders' support have been started in many places, with the Māori in Aotearoa/New Zealand and the Hawai'ians in the USA (who started only a couple of years later) being models for inspiration (see Info Box 7 Language Nests and Info Box 12 Advice From Revitalisation in Hawai'i). Similar nests using the endangered language as a day-care language will probably be started by/for many other endangered languages in the near future. Often the young caretakers in language nests are second-language speakers (i.e. not 'native' speakers) of the language; they work alongside native-speaker elders. Following the language nests, schools or classes with the ITM language as the main medium of teaching may be started (see Info Box 8 Immersion Programmes). Ideally, this could later lead to the endangered language becoming (one of) the mother tongue(s) of the next generation, not only in terms of internal identity but also in terms of at least some other criteria for identifying a mother tongue (see Info Box 9 Mother Tongue Definitions).

However, a serious question that all language revitalisation groups are facing is this: who will be the teachers, the caretakers, those who are language models? In general, where are all those (including parents) who make it possible for children, youth and adults to start or to continue using the