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Revivalistics

Language Reclamation and Aboriginal Wellbeing

Abstract: Revivalistics is a new comparative, global, trans-disciplinary field of enquiry studying comparatively and systematically the universal constraints and global mechanisms on the one hand, and particularistic peculiarities and cultural relativist idiosyncrasies on the other, apparent in linguistic reclamation, revitalization and reinvigoration across various sociological backgrounds, all over the globe. This article introduces revivalistics, and postulates heritage language as core to people's wellbeing, spirituality and happiness. Hallett, Chandler and Lalonde reported a clear correlation between lack of conversational knowledge in the native tongue and youth suicide. However, so far there has been no systematic study of a correlation in the other direction, i.e. the impact of language revival on empowered wellbeing, improved mental health and reduction in suicide. This is partly because language reclamation is still rare. This article hypothesizes that just as language loss increases suicide rate, language gain reduces suicide rate, improves wellbeing and increases spirituality. The article focuses on the Barngarla Aboriginal language of Eyre Peninsula, South Australia. Barngarla became a Dreaming, Sleeping Beauty tongue in the 1960s. It belongs to the Thura-Yura language group, which is part of the Pama-Nyungan language family, which includes 306 out of 400 Aboriginal languages in Australia, and whose name is a merism derived from the two end-points of the range: the Pama languages of northeast Australia (where the word for 'man' is 'pama') and the Nyungan languages of southwest Australia (where the word for 'man' is 'nyunga'). The author of this article has been facilitating the Barngarla reclamation since 14 September 2011.

Revivalistics is an emerging global, transdisciplinary field of enquiry studying comparatively and systematically the *universal* constraints and global mechanisms on the one hand,¹ and *particularistic* peculiarities and cultural relativist idiosyncrasies on the other, apparent in linguistic reclamation, revitalization and reinvigoration across various sociological backgrounds, all over the globe.²

What is the difference between reclamation, revitalization, and reinvigoration? All of them are on the revival spectrum. Here are my specific definitions:

- *Reclamation* is the revival of a 'Sleeping Beauty' tongue, i.e. a no-longer natively spoken language, as in the case of Hebrew, Barngarla (the Aboriginal language of Eyre Peninsula, South Australia), Wampanoag, Siraya and Myaamia.
- *Revitalization* is the revival of a severely endangered language, for example Adnyamathanha of the Flinders Ranges in Australia, as well as Karuk and Walmajarri.
- *Reinvigoration* is the revival of an endangered language that still has a high percentage of children speaking it, for example, the Celtic languages Welsh and Irish, and the Romance languages Catalan and Quebecoise French.

1 Cf. Ghil'ad Zuckermann: Language Contact and Lexical Enrichment in Israeli Hebrew; id.: Hybridity versus Revivability; id.: Revivalistics: From the Genesis of Israeli to Language Reclamation in Australia and Beyond.

2 Cf. Ghil'ad Zuckermann, Michael Walsh: Stop, Revive, Survive; id., Michael Walsh: Our Ancestors Are Happy.

Language endangerment has little to do with absolute numbers. Rather, it has to do with the percentage of children within the language group speaking the language natively. A language spoken natively by 10 million people can be endangered (as, say, only 40 per cent of its kids speak it). A language spoken natively by 3 000 people can be safe and healthy (as 100 per cent of its kids are native speakers).

Fig. 1 describes the difference between reclamation, revitalization and reinvigoration:

Reclamation	Revitalization	Reinvigoration
There are NO native speakers when the revival begins.	Severely endangered. The percentage of children within the group speaking the language natively is very low, e.g. 0 per cent, but there are still adults speaking the language natively.	Endangered. The percentage of children within the group speaking the language natively is lower than 100 per cent.
e.g. Hebrew, Barnagarla, Wampanoag, Siraya, Myaamia; Tunica (Central and Lower Mississippi Valley, USA)	e.g. Adnyamathanha, Karuk, Walmajarri	e.g. Welsh, Irish, Catalan, Quebecoise French

Fig. 1: Comparison of Reclamation, Revitalization and Reinvigoration

Needless to say, reclamation, revitalization and reinvigoration are on a *continuum*, a cline. They do not constitute a *discrete* trichotomy. That said, the distinction is most useful. For example, the Master-Apprentice (or Mentor/Apprentice) method can only be used in the revitalization and reinvigoration, not in reclamation. This method was pioneered by linguist Leanne Hinton at the University of California, Berkeley,³ who had been working with a wide range of Native American languages spoken or in some cases remembered or documented across California. In many cases, she was working with the remaining handful of ageing fluent speakers of languages such as Karuk.

It is a difficult proposition to ask an elderly speaker to come into a school classroom and teach children when they themselves are not trained teachers and, in some cases, may never have had an opportunity to attend school themselves. Even if they were able to teach their languages in a school setting, will this really ensure that their language continues into future generations? Probably not. What is more effective is to ensure that highly motivated young adults who are themselves owners-custodians of the language gain a sound knowledge of and fluency in their language.

3 Cf., e.g., Leanne Hinton: *Flutes of Fire*.

This is achieved through the Master-Apprentice (or Mentor/Apprentice) approach: A young person is paired with an older fluent speaker – perhaps a granddaughter with her grandmother – and their job is to speak the language with each other without resorting to English. It does not matter what they do – they can weave baskets, go fishing, build houses, or fix cars together – so long as they speak the language with each other.⁴

Revivalistics is *trans-disciplinary* because it studies language revival from various angles such as law, mental health, linguistics, anthropology, sociology, geography, politics, history, biology, evolution, genetics, genomics, colonization studies, missionary studies, media, animation film, technology, talknology, art, theatre, dance, agriculture, archaeology, music,⁵ education, games (indirect learning), pedagogy,⁶ and even architecture.

Consider architecture. An architect involved in revivalistics might ask the following ‘location, location, location’ question, which is, of course, beyond language:

- Should we reclaim an Indigenous language in a natural Indigenous setting, to replicate the original ambience of heritage, culture, laws, and lores?
- Should we reclaim an Indigenous language in a modern building that has Indigenous characteristics such as Aboriginal colours and shapes?
- Should we reclaim an Aboriginal language in a western governmental building – to give an empowering signal that the tribe has full support of contemporary mainstream society?

Why should we reclaim dormant languages?

Approximately 7 000 languages are currently spoken worldwide. The majority of these are spoken by small populations. Approximately 96 per cent of the world’s population speaks around 4 per cent of the world’s languages, leaving the vast majority of tongues vulnerable to extinction and disempowering their speakers. Linguistic diversity reflects many things beyond accidental historical splits. Languages are essential building blocks of community identity and authority.

With globalization of dominant cultures, homogenization and Coca-colonization, cultures at the periphery are becoming marginalized, and more and more groups all over the world are added to the forlorn club of the lost-heritage peoples. One of the most important symptoms of this cultural disaster is language loss.

A fundamental question for revivalistics, which both the tax-paying general public and the scholarly community ought to ask, is why does it matter to speak a different language? As Evans puts it eloquently in the introduction to his book ‘Dying Words’:

you only hear what you listen for, and you only listen for what you are wondering about. The goal of this book is to take stock of what we should be wondering about as we listen to the dying words of the thousands of languages falling silent

4 Cf. Ghil’ad Zuckermann: Revivalistics.

5 Cf. Catherine Grant: Music Endangerment.

6 Cf. Leanne Hinton: Language Revitalization and Language Pedagogy.

around us, across the totality of what Mike Krauss has christened the 'logosphere': just as the 'biosphere' is the totality of all species of life and all ecological links on earth, the logosphere is the whole vast realm of the world's words, the languages that they build, and the links between them.⁷

Evans ranges over the manifold ways languages can differ, the information they can hold about the deep past of their speakers, the interdependence of language and thought, the intertwining of language and oral literature.⁸ Relevant to revivalistics, it concludes by asking how linguistics can best go about recording existing knowledge so as to ensure that the richest, most culturally distinctive record of a language is captured, for use by those wanting to revive it in the future.⁹ Brenzinger emphasizes the threats to knowledge on the environment,¹⁰ conceptual diversity as a crucial loss in language shifts.¹¹

The following is my own trichotomy of the main *revivalistic* reasons for language revival. The first reason for language revival is ethical: It is right. The second reason for language revival is aesthetic: It is beautiful. The third benefit for language revival is utilitarian: It is viable and socially beneficial.

Ethical Reasons

A plethora of the world's languages have not just been dying of their own accord; many were destroyed by settlers of this land. For example, in Australia, we owe it to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to support the maintenance and revival of their cultural heritage, in this instance through language revival. According to the international law of human rights, persons belonging to ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities have the right to use their own language (Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)). Thus, every person has the right to express themselves in the language of their ancestors, not just in the language of convenience that English has become.

Through supporting language revival, we can appreciate the significance of Indigenous languages and recognise their importance to Indigenous people and to Australia. We can then right some small part of the wrong against the original inhabitants of this country and support the wishes of their ancestors with the help of linguistic knowledge.

7 Nicholas Evans: *Dying Words. Endangered Languages and What They Have to Tell Us*.

8 Cf. *ibid.*

9 Cf. Matthias Brenzinger: *Language Death*; *id.*: *Endangered Languages in Africa*; *id.*: *Language Diversity Endangered*; Nick Enfield: *Dynamics of Human Diversity*.

10 Cf. Matthias Brenzinger, Bernd Heine, Ingo Heine: *The Mukogodo Maasai*; Bernd Heine, Matthias Brenzinger: *Plants of the Borana (Ethiopia and Kenya)*

11 Cf. Matthias Brenzinger: *Conceptual Loss in Space and Time*; *id.*: *Vanishing Conceptual Diversity*; *id.*: *Sharing Thoughts, Concepts And Experiences*.

Aesthetic Reasons

The linguist Ken Hale, who worked with many endangered languages and saw the effect of loss of language, compared losing language to bombing the Louvre: "When you lose a language, you lose a culture, intellectual wealth, a work of art. It's like dropping a bomb on a museum, the Louvre".¹² A museum is a repository of human artistic culture. Languages are at least equally important since they store the cultural practices and beliefs of an entire people. Different languages have different ways of expressing ideas and this can indicate which concepts are important to a certain culture.

For example, in Australia, information relating to food sources, surviving in nature, and Dreaming/history is being lost along with the loss of Aboriginal languages. A study by Boroditsky and Gaby found that speakers of Kuuk Thaayorre, a language spoken in Pormpuraaw on the west coast of Cape York, do not use 'left' or 'right', but always use cardinal directions (i.e. north, south, east, west).¹³ They claim that Kuuk Thaayorre speakers are constantly aware of where they are situated and that this use of directions also affects their awareness of time.¹⁴ Language supports different ways of 'being in the world'.

Such cases are abundant around the world. An example of a grammatical way to express a familiar concept is 'mamihlapinatapai', a lexical item in the Yaghan language of Tierra del Fuego in Chile and Argentina. It refers to 'a look shared by two people, each wishing that the other would offer something that they both desire but have been unwilling to suggest or offer themselves'. This lexical item, which refers to a concept that many have despite lacking a specific word for it in their language, can be broken down into morphemes: 'ma-' is a reflexive/passive prefix (realized as the allomorph 'mam-' before a vowel); 'ihlapi' 'to be at a loss as what to do next'; '-n', stative suffix; 'ata', achievement suffix; and '-apai', a dual suffix, which has a reciprocal sense with 'ma-' (circumfix).

Two examples of concepts that most people might never imagine are (1) 'nakhur', in Ancient Persian, refers to 'camel that will not give milk until her nostrils have been tickled'. Clearly, camels are very important in this society and survival may have historically depended on camel milk; (2) 'tingo', in Rapa Nui (Pasquan) of Easter Island (Eastern Polynesian language), is 'to take all the objects one desires from the house of a friend, one at a time, by asking to borrow them, until there is nothing left';¹⁵ (3) 'bunjurrbi', in Wambaya (Non-Pama-Nyungan West Barkly Australian language, Barkly Tableland of the Northern Territory, Australia), is a verb meaning 'to face your bottom toward someone when getting up from the ground'.

Such fascinating and multifaceted words, *maximus in minimis*, should not be lost. They are important to the cultures they are from and make the outsiders reflexive of their own cultures. Through language maintenance and reclamation

12 The Economist, 3 November 2001.

13 Cf. Lera Boroditsky, Alice Gaby: Remembrances of Times East.

14 Cf. *ibid.*

15 Cf. Adam J. De Boinod: The Meaning of Tingo; Adam J. De Boinod, Ghil'ad Zuckermann: Tingo.

we can keep important cultural practices and concepts alive. Lest we forget that human imagination is often limited. Consider aliens in many Hollywood films: despite approximately 3.5 billion years of DNA evolution, many people still resort to the ludicrous belief that aliens ought to look like ugly human beings, with two eyes, one nose, and one mouth.

Utilitarian Benefits

Language revival benefits the speakers involved through improvement of well-being, cognitive abilities, and mental health;¹⁶ language revival also reduces delinquency and increases cultural tourism. Language revival has a positive effect on the mental and physical wellbeing of people involved in such projects. Participants develop a better appreciation of and sense of connection with their cultural heritage. Learning the language of their ancestors can be an emotional experience and can provide people with a strong sense of pride and identity.

There are also cognitive advantages to bilingualism and multilingualism. Several studies have found that bilingual children have better non-linguistic cognitive abilities compared with monolingual children¹⁷ and improved attention and auditory processing: the bilingual's "enhanced experience with sound results in an auditory system that is highly efficient, flexible and focused in its automatic sound processing, especially in challenging or novel listening conditions".¹⁸

Furthermore, the effects of multilingualism extend to those who have learned another language in later life and can be found across the whole lifespan. This is relevant to the first generation of revivalists, who might themselves be monolingual (as they won't become native speakers of the Revival Language). The effects of non-native multilingualism include better cognitive performance in old age,¹⁹ a significantly later onset of dementia,²⁰ and a better cognitive outcome after stroke.²¹ Moreover, a measurable improvement in attention has been documented in participants aged from 18 to 78 years after just one week of an intensive language course.²² Language learning and active multilingualism are

16 Cf. Ghil'ad Zuckermann, Michael Walsh: *Our Ancestors Are Happy*; Ghil'ad Zuckermann: *Revivalistics*, chapter 9.

17 Cf. Ágnes M. Kovács, Jacques Mehler: Flexible learning of multiple speech structures in bilingual infants.

18 Jennifer Krizman, Viorica Marian, et al.: Subcortical encoding of sound is enhanced in bilinguals and relates to executive function advantages, p. 7879.

19 Cf. Thomas H. Bak, Jack J. Nissan, Michael M. Allerhand, Ian J. Deary: Does Bilingualism Influence Cognitive Ageing?

20 Cf. Suvarana Alladi, Thomas H. Bak, Vasanta Duggirala et al.: Bilingualism delays age at onset of dementia, independent of education and immigration status.

21 Cf. Suvarana Alladi, Thomas H. Bak et al.: Impact of Bilingualism on Cognitive Outcome after Stroke; Avanthi Paplikar, Shailaja Mekala, Thomas H. Bak et al.: Bilingualism and the Severity of Post-Stroke Aphasia.

22 Cf. Thomas H. Bak, Madeleine R. Long, Mariana Vega-Mendoza, Antonella Sorace: Novelty, Challenge, Practice.

increasingly seen as contributing not only to psychological wellbeing but also to brain health,²³ with a potential of reducing money spent on medical care.²⁴

Further benefits to non-native multilingualism are demonstrated by Keysar et al. They found that decision-making biases are reduced when using a non-native language, as follows:

Four experiments show that the ‘framing effect’ disappears when choices are presented in a foreign tongue. Whereas people were risk averse for gains and risk seeking for losses when choices were presented in their native tongue, they were not influenced by this framing manipulation in a foreign language. Two additional experiments show that using a foreign language reduces loss aversion, increasing the acceptance of both hypothetical and real bets with positive expected value. We propose that these effects arise because a foreign language provides greater cognitive and emotional distance than a native tongue does.²⁵

Therefore, language revival is not only empowering culturally, but also cognitively, and not only the possibly-envisioned native speakers of the future but also the learning revivalists of the present.

Language loss and youth suicide in British Columbia, Canada

Language is postulated as core to people’s wellbeing. But it is one thing to have a qualitative statement about the importance of language for mental health; it is another to have the statistical, quantitative evidence that governments so often require to implement policies that will affect cultural and social wellbeing.

One fundamental study, conducted in 2007 in British Columbia, Canada, began that evidence gathering: Hallett, Chandler and Lalonde reported a clear correlation between youth suicide and lack of conversational knowledge in the native tongue.²⁶ They matched seven cultural continuity factors and measured them against reported suicide from 150 Indigenous Inuit communities and almost 14 000 individuals. These cultural continuing factors were self-governance, land claims, education, health care, cultural facilities, police/fire service and language. Of all the communities that research sampled, the results indicated that those communities with higher levels of language knowledge (over 50 per cent of the community) had lower suicide levels when compared to other communities with less knowledge.

The 16 communities with high levels of language had a suicide rate of 13 deaths per 100 000 people, compared to low levels of language which had 97 deaths per 100 000. The suicide rate in high-language communities was six times lower than the other communities. When coupled with other cultural protective factors, there was an even higher protective effect against suicide. Hallett, Chandler and Lalonde demonstrated that youth suicide rates dropped to zero in those

23 Cf. Thomas H. Bak, Dina Mehmedbegovic: Healthy Linguistic Diet.

24 Cf. Thomas H. Bak: Language Lessons to Help Protect against Dementia.

25 Boaz Keysar, Sayuri L. Hayakawa, Sun Gyu An: The Foreign-Language Effect, p. 661.

26 Cf. Darcy Hallett, Michael J. Chandler, Christopher E. Lalonde: Aboriginal Language Knowledge and Youth Suicide.

few communities in which at least half the members reported a conversational knowledge of their own native tongue.

That landmark research was the first to study the correlation between language knowledge and mental health. However, so far there has been no study of a correlation in the other direction, i.e. the impact of language *revival* on *improved* mental health and *reduction* in suicide. This is partly because language reclamation is still rare.²⁷

This article hypothesizes that just as language loss *increases* the suicide rate, language gain *reduces* the suicide rate, improves wellbeing and increases happiness.

Language reclamation increases emotions of wellbeing and pride amongst disempowered people, who fall between the cracks, feeling that they are neither 'whitefellas' nor in command of their own Aboriginal heritage. As Fishman puts it:

The real question of modern life and for RLS [reversing language shift] is [...] how one [...] can build a home that one can still call one's own and, by cultivating it, find community, comfort, companionship and meaning in a world whose mainstreams are increasingly unable to provide these basic ingredients for their own members.²⁸

The language revival process is as important as the revival goals. The reward is in the journey. Fig. 2 shows that more Aboriginal Australians see 'improving wellbeing' as more important than 'increasing language use' (79 per cent vs. 70 per cent/65 per cent, respectively).

Language revival and empowered spirit in Australia

Due to invasion, colonization, globalization, and homogenization, there are more and more groups losing their heritage. Linguicide (language killing) results in the loss of cultural autonomy, intellectual sovereignty and spirituality.²⁹ The dependence of the linguicided group on the colonizer's tongue further increases the phenomena of disempowerment, self-loathing and suicide.³⁰

According to the 2008 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) Social Survey, 31 per cent of Indigenous Australians aged 15+ experienced high or very high levels of psychological distress in the four weeks prior to the interview. This is 2.5 times the rate for non-Indigenous Australians.

I arrived in Australia in 2004. My main goal has been to apply lessons from the Hebrew revival, of which I have been an expert, to the reclamation and empowerment of Indigenous languages and cultures. Throughout my revivalistic

27 Cf. James B. Waldram: *The Persistence of Traditional Medicine in Urban Areas*; Michael J. Chandler, Christopher E. Lalonde: *Cultural Continuity as a Protective Factor against Suicide in First Nations Youth*.

28 Joshua A. Fishman: *Language Loyalty, Language Planning, and Language Revitalization*, p. 90.

29 Cf. Ghil'ad Zuckermann: *Revivalistics*.

30 Cf. Nicholas Biddle, Hannah Swee: *The relationship between Wellbeing and Indigenous Land, Language and Culture in Australia*; Malcolm King, Alexandra Smith, Michael Gracey: *Indigenous Health*.

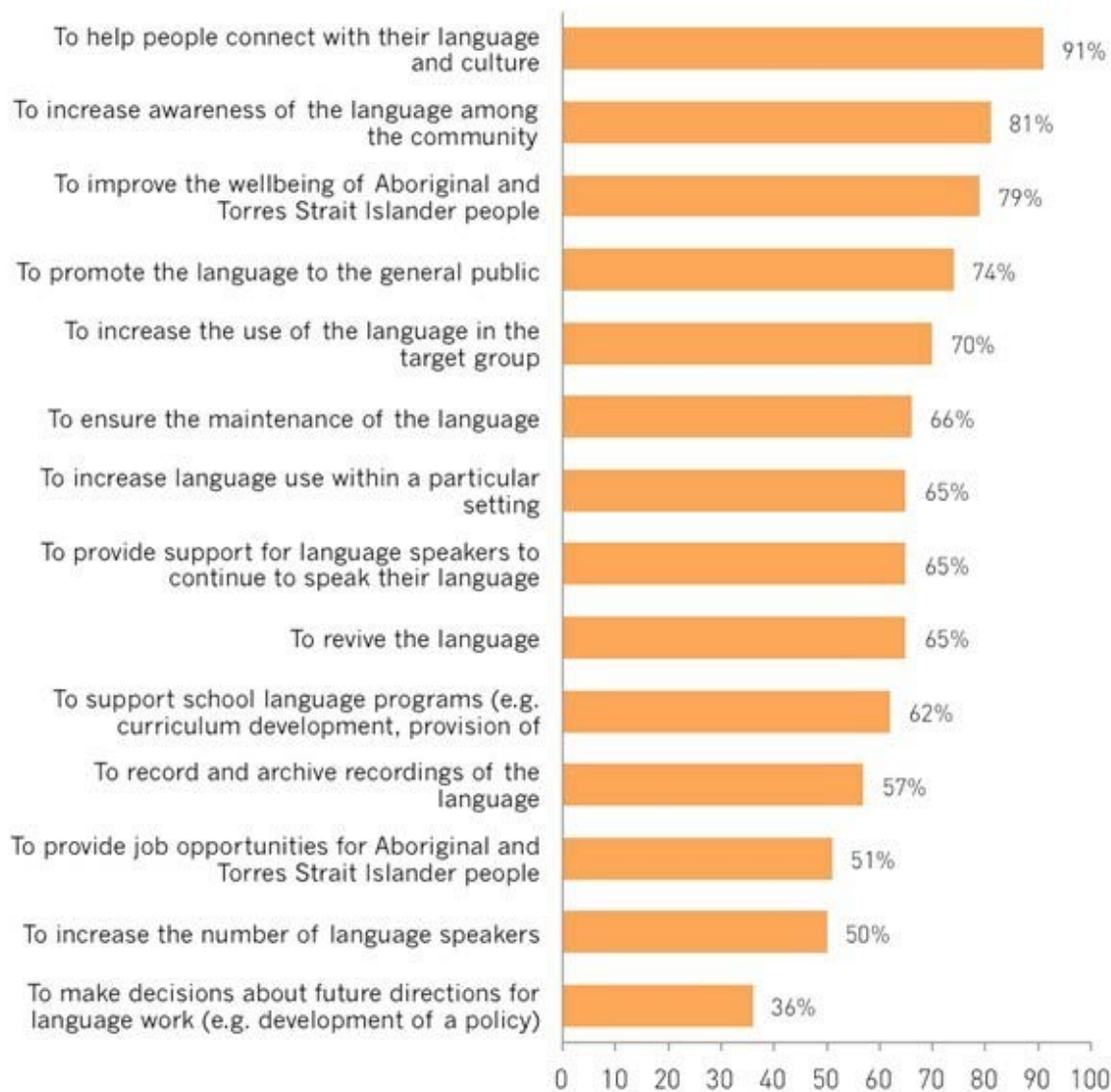


Fig. 2: Goals of Language Activities; Data drawn from the Second, most recent, National Indigenous Languages Survey (NILS2) Report and analysed by Marmion, Obata & Troy (2014)

activities in the field in Australia and globally (e.g. China, Thailand, New Zealand, Namibia, South Africa, Canada, Israel, Norfolk Island and Cook Islands), I have noticed, *qualitatively*, that language reclamation has an empowering effect on the community wellbeing and mental health of the people directly involved, as well as on their extended families. Participants in my language reclamation workshops have developed a better appreciation of, and sense of connection with, their identity and cultural heritage.

A practice known as singing to the sharks was an important ritual in Barnjarla Aboriginal culture in Eyre Peninsula, South Australia. The performance consisted of men lining the cliffs of bays in the Eyre peninsula and singing out, while their chants were accompanied by women dancing on the beach. The aim was to enlist sharks and dolphins in driving shoals of fish towards the shore, where Barnjarla fishermen in the shallows could make their catch. This technique expired when the last speaker of Barnjarla passed away in the 1960s.

The Barngarla Aboriginal Language of Eyre Peninsula, South Australia

Barngarla is a dreaming, sleeping beauty tongue belonging to the Thura-Yura language group, which also includes Adnyamathanha, Kuyani, Nukunu, Ngadjuri, Wirangu, Nawoo, Narangga, and Kurna. The name Thura-Yura derives from the fact that the word for ‘man, person’ in these languages is either ‘thura’ or ‘yura’ – consider Barngarla ‘yoorá’. The Thura-Yura language group is part of the Pama-Nyungan language family, which includes 306 out of 400 Aboriginal languages in Australia, and whose name is a merism derived from the two end-points of the range: the Pama languages of northeast Australia (where the word for ‘man’ is ‘pama’) and the Nyungan languages of southwest Australia (where the word for ‘man’ is ‘nyunga’). According to Bouckaert et al., the Pama-Nyungan language family arose just under 6 000 years ago around Burketown, Queensland.³¹

Typically for a Pama-Nyungan language, Barngarla has a phonemic inventory featuring three vowels ([a], [i], [u]) and retroflex consonants, an ergative grammar with many cases, and a complex pronominal system. Unusual features include a number system with singular, dual, plural and superplural (‘warraidyá’ ‘emu’; ‘warraidyábilí’ ‘two emus’; ‘warraidyárrí’ ‘emus’; ‘warraidyáilyarránhá’ ‘a lot of emus’) and matrilineal and patrilineal distinction in the dual. For example, the *matrilineal* ergative first person dual pronoun ‘ngadlaga’ (‘we two’) would be used by a mother and her child, or by a man and his sister’s child, while the *patrilineal* form ‘ngarrinyí’ would be used by a father and his child, or by a woman with her brother’s child.

During the twentieth century, Barngarla was intentionally eradicated under Australian ‘stolen generation’ policies, the last original native speaker dying in 1960. Language reclamation efforts were launched on 14 September 2011 in a meeting between the author of this article (Professor Ghil’ad Zuckermann) and representatives of the Barngarla people.³² During the meeting, I asked the Barngarla representatives if they were interested in reclaiming their Dreaming, Sleeping Beauty tongue and improve their wellbeing, mental health, cultural autonomy, intellectual sovereignty, spirituality and education. They told me: “We’ve been waiting for you for fifty years!”

Since then, I have conducted dozens of language reclamation workshops for more than 120 Barngarla people. The primary resource used has been a dictionary, including a brief grammar, written by the German Lutheran missionary Clamor Wilhelm Schürmann.³³

Published resources for Barngarla, non-existent ten years ago, are now emerging. Three examples are ‘Barngarlidhi Manoo’ (‘Speaking Barngarla Together’,³⁴ a Barngarla alphabet book/primer compiled by Ghil’ad Zuckermann in

31 Cf. Remco R. Bouckaert, Claire Bowern, Quentin D. Atkinson: The Origin and Expansion of Pama-Nyungan Languages across Australia.

32 Cf. Ghil’ad Zuckermann: Revivalistics.

33 Cf. Clamor W. Schürmann: A Vocabulary of the Parnkalla Language. Spoken by the Natives Inhabiting the Shores of Spencer’s Gulf.

34 Cf. Ghil’ad Zuckermann: Barngarlidhi Manoo.

collaboration with the nascent Barngarla revivalistic community) as well as ‘Mangiri Yarda’ (‘Healthy Country’: Barngarla Wellbeing and Nature)³⁵ and ‘Wardlada Mardinidhi’ (‘Bush Healing’: Barngarla Plant Medicines).³⁶

In May 2013, my Barngarla learners expressed clear feelings of empowerment during an interview on SBS ‘Living Black’ Series 18, Episode 9 (Linguicide) about the Barngarla revival.³⁷

In January 2023, Barngarla woman Shania Richards was interviewed by BBC World News (‘Bringing dead languages back to life, People fixing the World’) about language revival and mental health.³⁸

In 2017, Alex Brown, I, our team and the Barngarla Aboriginal people were awarded a grant from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) to assess *quantitatively* (rather than *qualitatively*) the correlation between language revival and mental health. As Brown said:

What scientists hold stock in is only what they can measure. But you can’t measure the mind or spirit. You can’t weigh it, you can’t deconstruct it. But only if we do, will they see that Aboriginal people are spectators to the death of their culture, their lives [...]. We watch as our culture dies. How are you going to measure that?³⁹

The quantitative instruments we employ have already been validated: ‘Health and Wellbeing Survey Instrument’ consists of already-validated questionnaires selected from the ABS National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Health & Social Survey and the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC). Most importantly, however, the wellbeing measurement must be created together with the Aboriginal people themselves. And what we have done so far is exactly that: We have so far determined – together with the Aboriginal people themselves – how to assess their wellbeing. Indigenous assessment offers both an enhanced understanding of psychological constructs in their cultural context and the potential to enrich universalistic psychological models.

As Cheung and Fetvadjev argue, the need for Indigenous assessment tools that are sensitive to the cultural context becomes increasingly apparent with globalization and international mobility trends.⁴⁰ The inadequacies of translating Western tests that “coax the observed pattern behaviour to fit the imposed model and ignore the local conceptualization of the observed pattern of behaviour” have been recognized by cross-cultural psychologists.⁴¹ After all, establishing test equivalence and local norms for standardized translated tests demands considerable efforts in building a research program. Instead of ‘cutting one’s toes to fit the [imported] shoes’, there would be a greater incentive to develop Indigenous psychological tests that fit the local needs.⁴² It is not only professional ethics

35 Cf. Ghil’ad Zuckermann, Emmalene Richards: Mangiri Yarda.

36 Cf. Ghil’ad Zuckermann, Evelyn Walker: Wardlada Mardinidhi.

37 See NITV: Living Black.

38 See BBC: Bringing dead languages back to life, People fixing the World.

39 Personal communication with the author.

40 Cf. Fanny M. Cheung, Velichko H. Fetvadjev: Indigenous Approaches to Testing and Assessment, p. 334.

41 Fanny M. Cheung, Shu Fai Cheung, Sayuri Wada, Jianxin Zhang: Indigenous Measures of Personality Assessment in Asian Countries, p. 280.

42 Cf. Fanny M. Cheung, Weiqiao Fan, Shu Fai Cheung: From Chinese to Cross-cultural Personality Assessment.

that stipulate the use of culturally relevant and psychometrically reliable and valid tests; in some countries, such as South Africa, it is a legal requirement to adhere to such criteria.

The main purpose of our NHMRC project has been to assess the effectiveness of language reclamation in improving mental health.⁴³ Key outcomes also include the following:

- Establishing the first formal test of a causal relationship between language revival and mental health.
- Providing a model for language revival to be used by communities all over the world. My MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) 'Lang101x: Language Revival: Securing the Future of Endangered Languages' has so far attracted 20000 learners from 190 countries. On average I receive an email message once a week from a minority or an indigenous group, e.g. from Africa and South America, hoping to reclaim its language.
- Promoting language rights globally, e.g. by defining Aboriginal languages as the official languages of their region and by proposing 'Native Tongue Title',⁴⁴ the enactment of an ex gratia compensation scheme for the linguicided tribes. Although some Australian states have enacted ex gratia compensation schemes for the victims of the 'Stolen Generations' policies, the victims of linguicide are largely overlooked by the Australian Government. Existing competitive grant schemes to support Aboriginal languages should be complemented with compensation schemes which are based on a claim of right. I believe that language is more important than land (cf. 'Native Title'), despite its intangibility.

While continuing to support the reclamation of Barngarla (I am currently training Barngarla people to teach Barngarla, replacing me), I hope to prove systematically that there is an interdependence between language revival and important benefits such as personal and community empowerment, improved sense of identity and purpose, and enhanced mental health, thus closing the health gap between Indigenous peoples and others. The systematic measuring of these significant aspects of life has the potential to create a change not only in Australia but also all over the globe.

Concluding remarks

More and more indigenous and minority communities seek to reinstate their cultural authority in the world. However, many of them lack not only their heritage language but also the revivalistic knowledge required for language reclamation.

One should listen to the voice of Jenna Richards, a Barngarla Aboriginal woman who took part in my Barngarla reclamation workshop in Port Lincoln, South Australia, on 18-20 April 2012. She wrote to me the following sentence in an unsolicited email message on 3 May 2012:

43 Cf. Leda Sivak, Seth Westhead et al.: *Languages Breathes Life*.

44 Cf. Ghil'ad Zuckermann, Michael Walsh: *Our Ancestors Are Happy*.

Personally, I found the experience of learning our language liberating and went home feeling very overwhelmed because we were finally going to learn our “own” language, it gave me a sense of identity and I think if the whole family learnt our language then we would all feel totally different about ourselves and each other cause it’s almost like it gives you a purpose in life.

As Barngarla woman Evelyn Walker wrote to me following the same reclamation workshop: “Our ancestors are happy!”

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