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Language Maintenance and Revitalisation as Linguistic Justice

In Collaboration with the Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre (David Newry, Agnes Amstrong, Glennis Newry, Jimmy Paddy, Julie Bilminga, Rozeanne Bilminga, Bryan Gallagher, Knut J. Olawsky)[1]

Abstract: This paper discusses Language Maintenance and Revitalisation as Linguistic Justice with two community-initiated and -led Language Documentation Projects on the Indigenous Sign Language and Creole language used in the Miriwoong community in Kununurra, Western Australia. The paper explores how the 'Two-Way' collaboration is important in shaping the process and outcomes of Language Documentation (here Maintenance and Revitalisation). We argue that 'Ground-up' and community-led research is vital to the successful implementation of Language Maintenance and Revitalisation in which Indigenous Methodologies (Yarning, Storytelling, among others) together with methods of Western Sciences are applied. Depending on the needs of the community Language Documentation (as Language Maintenance, Revitalisation or Reclamation) is a way to achieve Linguistic Justice.

In the field of Environmental Justice (henceforth EJ) struggles focus on Biodiversity and Nature Conservation, Climate Justice, Water Justice.[2] We argue that Linguistic Justice (henceforth LJ) is part of Environmental Justice as it advocates for Equity, Accessibility and Inclusion in language and linguistic matters. It is undeniable that language matters play a significant role in many domains in which Justice is sought, e.g. in Native title claims, in the promotion of community resilience, and prosperity, in the economic development and sustainability of regions, in the domain of mental health and Wellbeing, and Repatriation among others.[3]

In the discussion on LJ, we see many different issues being dealt with. Two central issues in LJ relevant to the discussion here are: Children getting access to their own first languages (L1) and taught their L1 in the schooling system and communities of minority languages or less dominant languages in settler colonial societies such as Australia should be able to maintain their Traditional languages and cultures. The basic Human Rights state that every child is entitled

1 All data included within this article belongs to the Miriwoong community, represented by the Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre. David Newry, Agnes Amstrong, Glennis Galbat Newry, Jimmy Paddy, Julie Bilminga, Rozanne Bilminga, and Bryan Gallagher are credited as the Knowledge and Language Owners of MwSL and KnK shared within these pages. As some Elders involved in both projects passed, we have respectfully removed their names. Dany Adone and Anna Gosebrink are responsible for the linguistic analysis of MwSL and KnKriol which was discussed and approved by the community in several steps prior to this paper.

2 Cf. Neil M. Dawson: The Role of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities in Effective and Equitable Conservation.

3 Cf. John Henderson, David Nash: Language in Native Title; Nola Purdie, Pat Dudgeon, Roz Walker: Working Together; Cressida Fforde, C. Timothy McKeown, Honor Keeler: The Routledge Companion to Indigenous Repatriation; Grace Koch: We have the song, so we have the land; Glenn James, Bentley James, Joe Morrison, Douglas Paton: Resilient Communities and Reliable Prosperity; Ghil'ad Zuckermann: Revivalistics; Rob Amery: Warraparna Kaurna.

to "enjoy his or her own culture […], or to use his or her own language".[4] Furthermore, inclusive and equitable quality education is one of the 17 sustainable development goals (SDG) of the United Nations.[5]

This paper is organised as follows. Section two provides an overview of our understanding of what Linguistic Justice means. Section three describes the two projects on two endangered languages in Western Australia: Miriwoong Sign Language, the Traditional Indigenous Sign Language on Miriwoong Country, and Kununurra Kriol, a contact language that emerged during colonisation. These projects highlight the importance of community-led language initiatives, emphasising the central role of community agency in Language Documentation. We argue that these two projects provide evidence for LJ in practice. In section four we chose some examples to shed light on how Language Documentation counts as Linguistic Justice. Section five concludes that Language Documentation is an important contribution in achieving Linguistic Justice when it is conducted the 'right way' that is under Indigenous Governance and collaboration is based on Equity.

Understanding Linguistic Justice

Before we look at LJ, we need to examine what EJ is. Justice being concerned with Equity, recognition and the fair distribution of benefits, burdens and opportunities across society portrays a multidimensional concept reflected in social, cultural and environmental domains. EJ highlights the disparate distribution of profits being the outcome of certain environmental practices such as mining, on the one hand. On the other hand, EJ also addresses the inequity of "who receives the bads"[6] such as pollution, lack of natural resources, and decline of local environmental knowledge.[7] It is to have the right to a healthy environment, which is at the heart of Indigenous Cosmology and Epistemology. The intricate relationship that exists between Land, People and Language[8] and consequently the obligation to care for the Land often expressed as 'Caring for Country' means to manage the traditional natural resources in the right way.[9] A healthy ecosystem is essential to personal Wellbeing, also referred to as 'environmental heritage'.[10] Indigenous People thus see it as their responsibilities to take care of their Country in order to maintain their own health and Wellbeing. In this respect EJ

4 United Nations: United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 30.
5 Cf. United Nations: Sustainable Development.
6 David Schlosberg: Defining Environmental Justice, p. 83.
7 Cf. ibid.
8 Cf. Dany Adone, Bentley James, Elaine L. Maypilama: Indigenous Languages of Arnhem Land.
9 Cf. Sonia Leonard, Meg Parson, Knut Olawsky, Frances Kofod: The Role of Culture and Traditional Knowledge in Climate Change Adaptation; Marie C. D. Adone, Thomas Batchelor, Roxanne Bilminga, Melanie A. Brück, Brian Gallagher, Jimmy Paddy: Caring for dat land…, as mob bin teik keya of dat Kantri longtaim.
10 Robert M. Figueroa: Indigenous Peoples and Cultural Losses, p. 233.

highlights that access to natural resources is not just an environmental issue but a fundamental matter of human rights and Equity.

The close connection between Land, People and Language underlines that Language equally reflects a speaker's cultural values, beliefs and identity.[11] In the context of Linguistic Justice, Language functions as a vehicle through which issues of equality and cultural survival are addressed.

While most approaches agree on Linguistic Injustice being a form of "unequal linguistic equipment",[12] there are different parameters to define Linguistic Justice more precisely. Some frameworks focus on the asymmetry in multilingual contexts, where native speakers of 'peripheral' languages are forced to learn the 'central' language of their area,[13] such as a supraregional lingua franca like English. Van Parijs[14] refers to this type of situation as asymmetric pluri- or bilingualism, which is deeply rooted in the conflict between language dominance and unequal access to economic or educational opportunities. This imbalance could, for instance, be mended by language programmes promoting the teaching and learning of the less dominant languages by means of cost sharing between the learning community and governmental institutions.[15]

Further approaches address LJ from a more legal and egalitarian perspective. The concept of Linguistic Human Rights, for example, argues that the right to use and learn one's native language is a fundamental human right.[16] This concept mainly revolves around the idea that Language functions as a central marker of identity.[17] The breach of Linguistic Human Rights is mainly preceded by forced 'subtractive' rather than 'additive' language learning, where language policies commonly portray the acquisition of a dominant language and the abandonment of the dominated language as being necessary, instead of adding the dominant language to the existing linguistic repertoire.[18] The continuous absence of Indigenous languages in educational curricula is also an example of Linguistic Injustice.[19]

While LJ frameworks show differences in their reasonings for inequitable language rights, there is a clear consensus: linguistic inequalities are a prevalent issue that many marginalised populations encounter.

Linguistic Justice advocates for the rights of communities to maintain and transmit their languages, cultures, and identities and it emphasises recognition and protection of cultural practices and linguistic diversity in the face of dominant powers. The decrease of sustainable living, the shrinkage of environmental knowledge and the decline of Traditional languages are all linked to colonial

11 Cf. Bruno de Witte: Language as Cultural Heritage; Farzad Sharifian: Cultural Conceptualisations in Intercultural Communication.
12 Philippe Van Parijs: Linguistic Justice, p. 60.
13 Cf. ibid., p. 72.
14 Cf. ibid.
15 Cf. ibid., pp. 72 f.; Philippe Van Parijs: Linguistic Justice for Europe and for the World, pp. 59-63.
16 Cf. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas: Communication and Power; id.: Language Policy and Linguistic Human Rights.
17 Cf. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas: Language Policy and Linguistic Human Rights, p. 274.
18 Cf. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas: Communication and Power, p. 145.
19 Cf. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas: Language Policy and Linguistic Human Rights.

practices.[20] The dispossession of lands, a core issue in Environmental Justice, is often linked to cultural and linguistic displacement. This connection between EJ and LJ brings to light the central role LJ occupies in achieving EJ.

Language Maintenance and Revitalisation in Indigenous Australia

The impact of colonisation on the cultural and linguistic diversity in Indigenous Australia is still very present today. Many Traditional Indigenous Languages in Australia have ceased being transmitted intergenerationally. This break in the intergenerational transmission has led to the dramatic endangerment, decrease and disappearance of many Traditional Indigenous Languages. Over 650 spoken languages were once attested and to-date around twelve languages are regarded to be stable and healthy languages, while over 100 are classified as being endangered.[21]

The linguistic landscape of Australia is also characterised by 'young' Indigenous languages, that have arisen during colonisation, such as Creole languages as seen in various communities in the Northern Territory (NT) and Western Australia (WA).

Two studies were conducted in Kununurra, WA: i) Miriwoong Sign Language (henceforth MwSL) which is the Traditional Indigenous Sign Language on Miriwoong Country. It is classified as a critically endangered language, and ii) Kununurra Kriol (henceforth KnK), a young contact-induced language which emerged during colonisation. It is not yet endangered but there are some indicators that it might decreolise with time. KnK now serves as the main means of communication and first language for many of the Indigenous communities.

MwSL is used by both hearing and deaf people in Kununurra community on Miriwoong Land and has been classified as an alternate sign language.[22] The Executive Committee with the Traditional Elders and the language workers at the Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre argued in 2013 that there was an urgent need to document the signs and gestures that they have been using in their daily interaction with other community members together with spoken languages. There has been no publication prior to the publication of the MwSL dictionary and grammar by the community. Vague reference to an existing sign language in the surrounding has been made in several studies.[23] The groundwork consisted of the collection of signs by Indigenous language workers together with a non-Indigenous linguist. The community decided to name this sign language Miriwoong Sign Language. In order to document and recognise the existence of this sign language as a living Indigenous Sign

20 Cf. Robert M. Figueroa: Indigenous Peoples and Cultural Losses, p. 240.
21 Cf. Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts: National Indigenous Languages Report; Doug Marmion, Kazuko Obata, Jakelin Troy: Community, Identity, Wellbeing.
22 Marie C. D. Adone, Agnes Armstrong, Knut J. Olawsky: Miriwoong Sign Language Dictionary, pp. 8 f.
23 Cf. e.g. William B. McGregor: The Languages of the Kimberley, Western Australia.

Language of Australia they applied for an ISO 639-3 Code with SIL. Today MwSL is listed in the Ethnologue[24] and is identified as an Indigenous Sign Language (ISO-639-3: rms). The decision to acknowledge the existence of MwSL is not what all linguists would agree with because of the different views on language. However, what is more important here is that the speakers have taken justice in their hands and made a decision about their languages.

The ongoing work on Kununurra Kriol (KnK) is also a community-based and -led documentation project and KnK distinguishes itself from other Creole languages in the Northern Territory (e.g. Roper River Kriol, Barunga Kriol, Broome Kriol). Based on the existing data, we note differences in the lexicon (e.g. kinship terms, seasons) and minimally in syntax, e.g. in the Verb Phrase (VP) domain (Serial Verb Constructions).[25]

As these projects are community-initiated and -led endeavours, they take place under Indigenous Governance. It starts from the rationale for documenting KnK which came from the awareness of the speakers that KnK might not be at threat now but in the long run it might decreolise due to pressure from English, which theoretically can lead to language disappearance. Also, the community speaking KnK as their L1 was not satisfied with the view that their Creole language has been referred to as a Creole variety spoken in the area. This view goes against the Indigenous view of the Land, People and Language connection which allows Indigenous people to identify themselves as a specific group. Although this Creole language is not a Traditional Indigenous language, it is undeniably a vehicle of Aboriginal identity.

As such this documentation work is a 'ground-up' work initiated by Indigenous People for Indigenous People. Identifying this Creole language as KnK was a bold step in the process of Linguistic Justice. The views of the speakers on their languages are valid and it is important that they are expressed and heard. As non-Indigenous scholars collaborating with Indigenous People, we have a duty to listen to what they have to say about their language, and to accept these views.

Another aspect worth mentioning is the effort of practising the 'Two-Way' collaboration that is bringing together Western and Indigenous Methodologies. The language workers combined concepts within Western Methods such as definitions of sign languages, parameters in the description of signs, and Indigenous Methodologies such as Yarning, Storytelling to describe the sign language. The MwSL dictionary is thus descriptive and by far not exhaustive.

While both projects are under Indigenous Governance, we put much effort to combine Western views with Indigenous views where possible. Here we see the linguists' task to mediate the two worldviews and advise on linguistic matters. Ultimately the decision rests in the hands of the speakers. This endeavour is challenging and time consuming, but at the same time it is a testimony of the struggle for Linguistic Justice in Indigenous Australia. Co-authorship in publications, Acknowledgement of linguistic and cultural Knowledge, Recognition of Language Ownership (a concept foreign to Western Sciences) in Knowledge

24 Cf. David M. Eberhard, Gary F. Simons, Charles D. Fennig: Ethnologue.
25 Cf. Dany Adone, Connor Brown, Anna Gosebrink, Thomas Batchelor, Language Workers at the MDWg (forthcoming).

Co-Creation were also important steps in the 'Two-Way' Collaboration. We also rely on Storytelling, orally transmitted History, Yarning, and Personal accounts, some of the Indigenous Methodologies to co-create and share Knowledge ensuring that the views of the speakers are respected and reflected in the linguistic analysis.

From Language Documentation to Linguistic Justice

The cases of MwSL and KnK illustrate that documentation work is essential for moving towards Linguistic Justice. Fig. 1 illustrates how these programmes are related to each other. Language Documentation is either used in the field as an umbrella term to cover all of these programmes/projects, but it can also be seen as the initial step necessary to save languages. We understand Language Documentation as a general term to cover any type of Maintenance, Revitalisation, Reclamation, Revival work.

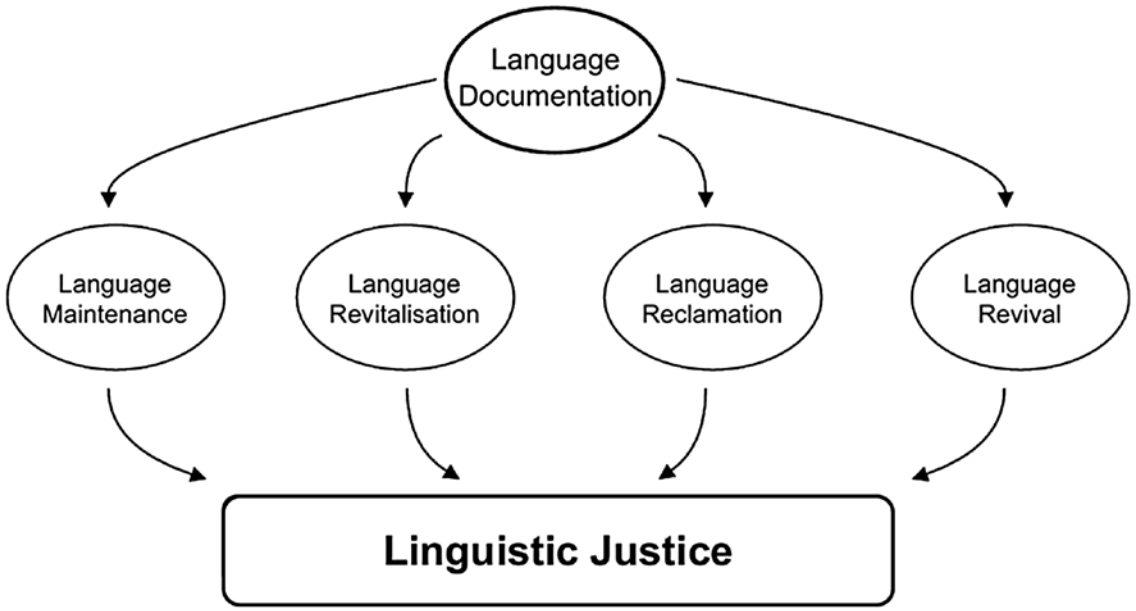

Fig. 1: From Language Documentation to Linguistic Justice

The process of Language Maintenance describes efforts to sustain the language within its current community of speakers, as it commonly stands in competition with a more dominant or a majority language. This programme involves promoting daily use and continuing the transmission of the language, to keep it alive, dynamic and a central tool of communication within the community.[26] In many cases, Language Maintenance can precede Language Revitalisation or Language Reclamation, as it focuses on preserving the language in use before it faces critical endangerment. In the case of KnK maintenance is necessary so that it can stand the pressure from Aboriginal English (an Indigenised English),

26 Cf. Anne Pauwels: Language Maintenance, pp. 719 f.

and Mainstream English which is also used by the white Australian population living in Kununurra.

Language Revitalisation is often understood as going a step beyond Maintenance with the objective of supporting the recovery of a language that is used in significantly less domains or one that has fallen into disuse due to language shift. This may involve various language programmes based on teaching the language to younger generations in order to revitalise language use within the community. We document the language and besides the production of a MwSL dictionary and grammar sketch for the community, several workshops were organised between 2013-2019 to raise public awareness on the existence of this Indigenous Sign Language within the Non-Indigenous community (including teachers, office workers, nurses, police staff). Furthermore, several generations of young people were invited to numerous workshops on MwSL to ensure that they understood the importance of keeping this language alive as language transmission is necessary for language longevity and continuity.

Thus, Language Maintenance and Language Revitalisation in themselves function as foundational steps and evidence for Linguistic Justice in recognising Indigenous languages as valuable Knowledge systems.

Looking into the Future

As the loss of a language goes hand in hand with the loss of cultural Knowledge, any effort to counteract these losses can be understood as a step towards LJ. This paper has showcased two projects whose goals were to maintain and revitalise the languages concerned. Both projects started as community-initiated and community-led work in which the speakers were considered to be best positioned to make decisions on their linguistic and cultural needs. The projects bring to light the importance of Respect, Recognition and Equity in collaboration which are all essential to achieve LJ.

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