

8

CULTURAL EXPERTISE AND LANGUAGE

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This chapter focuses on the loss of Indigenous languages as a cause of poor mental and physical health and argues that Indigenous languages are crucial for the wellbeing of their speakers and society. After reading this chapter you will understand the extent to which the loss of Indigenous languages affects the wellbeing of Indigenous populations. In this context, cultural expertise on Indigenous languages helps towards a better understanding of the social, psychological and physical effects of fostering Indigenous languages, with far-reaching implications for the claims of Indigenous rights as well as for policy-making and law-making at a global level.

Keywords: language endangerment, wellbeing, health, Canadian and Australian Aborigines, Ryukyuan

Introduction

Around the world, Indigenous language speakers are shifting from their ancestral language to a majority language. Abandoning ancestral languages for majority languages was once framed as progress and seen as an indicator of successful integration. We now see a reversal of this trend. Supra-national organizations like UNESCO (2020), national and local governments and Indigenous communities seek to revitalize Indigenous languages. Attention has shifted from facilitating the adoption of majority languages to stressing the benefits of speaking ancestral languages (Walsh 2018). Scholars have considered whether

the loss of Indigenous languages is one of the causes of poverty, poor mental and physical health or other social ills that are ubiquitous among Indigenous communities. Studies show that language affects personal and social well-being because different languages provide distinct access to knowledge and practices, but wellbeing is also influenced by the socio-political situations in which language loss occurs. Dorian (1981) observed that language endangerment always occurs in dominated communities. This makes language revitalization an attempt to undo domination and social inequalities (see Srinivasan, Chapter 3 in this volume).

In this chapter, I report on the specific nexus between language and wellbeing. I restrict the discussion to endangered Indigenous languages, but the principle that speaking ancestral languages benefits the speakers' wellbeing also holds true for immigrants (see Chrisman et al. 2017; Burdziej, Chapter 11 in this volume). I discuss three cases: Aborigines in Canada and Australia and Ryukyuan in Japan. They allow us to identify shared phenomena in polities that are different in terms of their history, demographic composition, multilingual and multicultural awareness and language and educational policies. Let me first briefly delineate some key concepts.

Theory and Concepts

Wellbeing is subjective but can be assessed with the help of indicators (Diener, Oishi, and Lucas 2003) and research across societies has helped to identify several variables that affect wellbeing, e.g., health, education, housing, job satisfaction and leisure time. The classical indicators of physical and mental wellbeing have been income, education, employment, living conditions, social support and health systems. Until very recently, language was not considered an indicator of wellbeing.

Research on the nexus between language and wellbeing draws on the sociology of language, which has shown that language has a performative role as a means of doing things and being someone (Bourdieu 1991). For example, bearing responsibility for others and exercising authority are roles that are constructed through discourse. It has also been demonstrated that Indigenous communities are negatively affected by sociocultural displacement: in contrast to the geographical displacement of migrants, Indigenous communities find themselves involuntarily placed in a new sociocultural and political setting (Fishman 1991). Indigenous peoples are often also displaced geographically, which adds another layer of difficulty to their lives: in contrast to migrants, Indigenous peoples have no place to return to if they seek to escape the effects of feeling displaced. Indigenous displacement is the result of domination by the majority to which Indigenous people have to adapt. Sociocultural displacement results in the interruption of Indigenous cultural and linguistic continuity. Urbanization amplifies the trend of displacement of Indigenous peoples (Kirmayer, Tait, and Simpson 2009).

BOX 8.1 BENEFITS OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

How then do Indigenous people benefit from maintaining their language? Mühlhäusler (1996) states that different languages provide speakers with benefits pertaining to economy and knowledge and that every language provides an aesthetic resource. Ancestral languages allow Indigenous communities to place themselves in the world because every language serves as a unique repository of cultural knowledge and thus allows for distinct cultural practices.

Speaking an ancestral language also serves to claim linguistic, cultural and political rights; it makes it possible to maintain protective barriers against the dominant group (the majority) and helps to mitigate a relationship of domination. It helps to (re)produce values, institutions and practices that Indigenous people deem important. Indigenous languages provide their speakers with a range of choices that they do not otherwise have. These choices affect wellbeing.

Language loss plays a role in a number of social ills: Indigenous minorities are likely to suffer from prejudice, racism, poverty, unemployment, language loss, spiritual disconnectedness, family instability, etc. (Stephens et al. 2006). These issues are interconnected and aggravate one another. Racism, for example, undermines educational success. Hence, while educational success translates into social advancement for residents of Hokkaido in Japan, the same does not hold true for Hokkaido's Indigenous people, the Ainu (Onai 2011), as prejudice against the Ainu blocks their access to white-collar jobs. King, Smith and Gracey (2009, 78) write that “language revitalization can be seen [...] as a health promotion strategy”. Cultural and linguistic continuity is therefore seen as a predictor of an Indigenous community's wellbeing.

Language loss also causes a weakening of cultural autonomy. It becomes more difficult to support the community's self-image if majority languages are adopted. Language endangerment results in the loss of cultural knowledge, and this affects how people perceive their position in the world. Communities that have lost their language have difficulties steering their own course into the future. Language loss and cultural change restrict choices for education and governance. They limit access to ancestral land. Without Indigenous language, endangered language communities lose an important legal argument for asserting rights. Language loss also impedes the preservation of cultural artefacts. Therefore, maintaining Indigenous languages is not simply about language. Ghil'ad Zuckermann (2020, 187) argues that language revitalization “will become increasingly relevant as people seek to recover their cultural autonomy, empower their spiritual and intellectual sovereignty, and improve their wellbeing”.

Case Studies

Sociolinguistic research studies socio-economic changes that cause language endangerment. Such research has shown that language endangerment is an effect of power inequality between the majority and minorities (Heinrich 2012). Studies of the effects of language loss on the relevant speech community are rare. In what follows, I report on such research, focusing on wellbeing. Physical wellbeing indicates the health status of an individual, which is mainly influenced by diet, exercise, fitness and stress exposure and management. Physical wellbeing contributes to mental and emotional stability. Mental wellbeing is essentially determined by subjective satisfaction with one's life, self-confidence and engagement with the world (Fletcher 2016).

Australian Aborigines

The proportion of Aborigines in Australia's total population of 25 million stands at 2.8% (650,000). Twelve per cent of Aborigines (52,000) are reported to speak an ancestral language (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2010). There were once 250 distinct Aboriginal languages, of which about 145 are still spoken today. One hundred and ten of these languages are either severely or critically endangered (Moseley 2009). Only 18 Aboriginal languages are spoken by all generations and are safe in the sense that their continued use is assured (Marmion, Obata, and Troy 2014). Eighty-one per cent of Australian Aborigines live in cities today. Their life expectancy is nine years shorter than that of non-Aboriginal Australians. It was 20 years shorter in 1973. Australian Aborigines fall significantly behind the non-Aboriginal population in the Human Development Index (Korff 2022a) which is calculated on the basis of life expectancy, education and the standard of living. The maximum score is 1.0. In 2000, the HDI index for non-Aboriginal Australians stood at 0.858. Cooke et al. (2007) calculated an HDI of 0.674 for Aboriginal Australians, a gap of 0.184.

The Australian Human Rights Commission (2009, 60–65) points out the positive effects of local languages on their communities, including the promotion of resilience, better health and better cognitive functioning. These improve employment options. The Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Affairs (2012) stresses that

language work is close to the heart of many Indigenous Australians, the important role that Indigenous languages play in terms of a connection to culture, kinship, land and family was highlighted during the Commission's inquiry, as was the devastation to communities that results when language is lost.

A longitudinal survey into Aboriginal lifestyles found that traditional ways of life were the strongest predictor for better health outcomes (ANTaR Victoria

n.d.). Not paying attention to the benefits of Indigenous language deprives communities of the opportunity to tap into a range of resources including knowledge of concepts that structure everyday life and beliefs; means of connecting with the immediate cultural and geographic environment; tools for political self-empowerment; and aesthetic materials in the form of songs, stories and literature. However, diversity is poorly reflected in legal provisions, and knowledge about the benefits of speaking an Indigenous language is compartmentalized in academic circles, to the detriment of minorities, whose choices for language and wellbeing are thus further limited.

Language loss and sociocultural displacement correlate with lower educational achievements, lower incomes, shorter life expectancy and less satisfaction with one's own life (Walsh 2018; Zuckermann 2020). Higher rates of suicide have been found among Aborigines who have lost their ancestral language (Korff 2022b). Other than community cohesion and community-controlled healthcare delivery, more physical activity, a healthier diet and limited access to alcohol contribute to improved Aboriginal health and longevity in non-urban communities. These studies all point in the same direction: maintaining endangered languages improves wellbeing. Aborigines know this. In a survey focusing on why they engaged in language revival, 79% answered that they sought "to improve the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders". This rate was higher than that for "to increase the use of the language" (Marmion, Obata, and Troy 2014, 21). Aborigine language activists want to use their language more frequently because doing so improves their lives. These findings have prompted Zuckermann and Walsh (2014) to call for more comprehensive studies. Such research is now underway in the Eyre Peninsula of southern Australia with the Barngarla community, where Zuckermann (2020, 267) observes "that language revival has an empowering effect on the community wellbeing and mental health of [the] people involved".

Aborigines in Canada

Canada has a population of 35 million inhabitants, 1.6 million (4.9%) of whom are Aboriginal or Indigenous peoples. They can be subdivided into three groups: First Nations, Inuit and Métis. The latter are descendants of First Nations women and French-speaking fur traders. The Métis have traditionally spoken Michif, a mixed contact language. Canadian Aborigines constitute about 600 recognized bands, and they speak 70 distinct languages; 210,000 people or 0.6% of the Canadian population report speaking an Aboriginal language (Statistics Canada 2020). Most of these languages are severely or critically endangered, and only three of them (Cree, Inuktitut and Ojibwe) are considered safe (Moseley 2009). Fifty-two per cent of the Aboriginal population lives in cities (Statistics Canada 2017). Aboriginal life expectancy is 17 years lower than that of the total population; suicide rates among the Inuit are 11 times higher than the national average; 60% of Aboriginal children grow up in poverty; school dropout is a persistent

problem; and depression and alcoholism are much higher than the national average (Assembly of First Nations 2007). The Human Development Index rating of Aboriginal peoples is lower than that of the general Canadian population (United Nations 2010). In 2000, the HDI for non-Aboriginal Canadians amounted to 0.900 while that of Aboriginal Canadians stood at 0.815, a gap of 0.085.

Research into the nexus of language and wellbeing reveals that youth suicide rates among First Nations people in British Columbia vary substantially from one community to another, but based on demographic data on Indigenous people, Hallett, Chandler and Lalonde (2007) compared data on language knowledge and youth suicide rates and showed that language use is an indicator of suicide rates (Hallett, Chandler, and Lalonde 2007; Chandler and Lalonde 2009). This quantitative study into wellbeing and language included altogether 150 Indigenous communities, comprising altogether 14,000 individuals. Since all Indigenous minority groups are rather small, bands were grouped into two cohorts: communities where more than 50% have Indigenous language knowledge (16 bands) and communities in which less than 50% have Indigenous language knowledge (136 bands).

According to Hallett, Chandler and Lalonde (2007) and Chandler and Lalonde (2009), youth suicide rates drop to zero in communities where a third of its members report a conversational knowledge of their ancestral language. In addition, Hallett, Chandler and Lalonde determined the predictive efficiency of language knowledge for the rate of youth suicide in comparison with six other factors (self-government, land claims, education, health care, cultural facilities and police and fire services). Correlating data on language knowledge and youth suicide rates shows that “high language knowledge bands averaged 13 suicides per 100,000 [...], while those with lower language knowledge had six times the number of suicides (96.59 per 100,000)” (Hallett, Chandler, and Lalonde 2007, 396). The study concludes that “Indigenous language use, as a marker of cultural persistence, is a strong indicator of health and wellbeing in Canada’s Aboriginal communities” (Hallett, Chandler, and Lalonde 2007, 398).

Language also has an impact on physical health. Oster et al. (2014) reveal that Indigenous language proficiency correlates with lower rates of diabetes. Cultural continuity emerges as a determinant to predict physical health. Wellbeing is compromised by policies of assimilation that leave no room for Indigenous languages. Oster et al. (2014) therefore conclude:

We suggest that interventions aimed at reducing type 2 diabetes rates of First Nations people should work to break down the barriers to cultural continuity and continue the recent revitalization of First Nations cultural reclamation spurred by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

The role of language as a carrier of Indigenous knowledge and its ability to support communities where specific cultural values are reproduced plays a key role. Hence, cultural expertise can provide expert knowledge on how speaking

ancestral languages allows Indigenous people to feel culturally centred, connected and competent, which has positive effects on personal and social wellbeing.

Language Endangerment in the Ryukyu Archipelago (Japan)

Japan has a total population of 125 million inhabitants. Its only recognized minority are the Ainu, whose number is estimated to be somewhere between 30,000 and 200,000, but Japan has several Indigenous languages. Ainu aside, these languages are Hachijo and altogether six distinct Ryukyuan languages. The languages of the Ryukyu Islands and Hachijo are either definitely or severely endangered (Moseley 2009).

Language activists have stressed the necessity of maintaining and revitalizing the Ryukyuan languages by identifying their potential societal functions (Heinrich and Ishihara 2018). For example, during the meeting of the Ryukyuan Heritage Language Society in 2014, members held a round-table discussion which resulted in their listing 12 important functions that make Ryukyuan languages matter (Heinrich, field notes). Eleven of these arguments relate to wellbeing: (1) transmit and promote a deeper reflection of the Ryukyus in Ryukyuan; (2) restore Ryukyuan self-esteem and confidence; (3) promote, in education, Ryukyuan perspectives on language, history and culture; (4) restore cohesion between older and younger generations; (5) familiarize the younger generations with Ryukyuan heritage culture; (6) maintain, strengthen and apply Ryukyuan cultural heritage; (7) contemporize Ryukyuan languages and make them relevant for the future; (8) regain control over Ryukyuan self-image and education; (9) maintain choices for language, identity and culture; (10) stop conformism in Ryukyuan identities and behaviours with models from the Japanese mainland; (11) contribute to communal happiness and wellbeing; and (12) recognize Japan's cultural diversity and promote intercultural tolerance.

Only point 7 out of the 12 aforementioned points alludes directly to language. Otherwise, the potential of Ryukyuan languages and their edge over the Japanese language is seen to lie in the ability of Ryukyuan languages to contribute to community cohesion (4, 5, 9, 11). Ryukyuan languages are seen to be crucial for reconstituting the Ryukyu Islands as a cultural and linguistic centre in their own right (1, 2, 6), and they are significant in efforts to redistribute power between mainland Japanese and the Ryukyuan minority (3, 8, 10, 12). The last point (12) stresses the model character that the Ryukyus could have for the rest of Japan.

Language activists understand that language revitalization requires cultural renewal and societal healing. When I interviewed a 30-year-old Okinawan language learner about the effects of Okinawan language learning, she told me (interview, 16 March 2021):

Studying Ryukyuan totally matches what I am looking for. It really makes me happy to follow my own goals. It has also liberated me. Maybe I studied

English [before] to become American. The same principle applies to Japanese. One studies Japanese to become even more Japanese. Okinawan is different, though. I study it to be myself.

Another interviewee in her 50s who now teaches Okinawan at the university told me (interview, 10 March 2021) that

speaking and teaching Uchinaaguchi [Okinawan] makes people happy. My grandparents, my students. Once I asked students to create a video in Uchinaaguchi for homework. They had a lot of fun. When we showed the videos, the grandparents came, and everybody was really excited. This does not happen in an English class. I received a lot of positive feedback. I felt that using Uchinaaguchi to create something and to communicate made everybody happy.

An Okinawan-as-a-second-language learner in her 40s stated (interview, 9 March 2021) that learning the language was very emotional for her, and that she sometimes needed breaks from it. She continued her language learning nonetheless, because “I am finding the meaning of life for myself. I think everyone should do it. Learning Okinawan was just a starting point. My real goal is life itself”.

Wellbeing emerges as a central argument also among the Ryukyus. In 2006, I asked an Okinawan language teacher if she regretted not having raised her children in Okinawan. She gave me the following answer (interview, 19 July 2006):

We live in a merit society, and all we care about is merit. Merit, merit, merit. And then language needs to adapt to this fixation. With my grandchildren I will not fall into this trap. I will provide them with Okinawan language skinship.

Skinship (*sukinshippu* in Japanese) is a word coined by linking the English word “skin” and the morpheme “-ship” which expresses relations. It refers to intimate, nonsexual relations such as that between parents and children, or between siblings. Hence, this Okinawan language teacher seeks to restore a more intimate tie between the young and the older generations through Okinawan language teaching. Social distance is not something abstract here. She refers to a concrete emotional and psychological intimacy that is fostered through communication in the ancestral language. Her idea of “language skinship” precisely denotes the nexus where language and wellbeing meet.

Conclusion

Endangered-language communities often have a history of “not being well” or “not doing well”. Language revitalization contributes to improving wellbeing. Strengthening endangered languages is an activity that restores self-worth,

self-esteem, self-determination and self-confidence. Language revitalization is a way to regain control. Cultural expertise in language as a systematic understanding of the ways how language and wellbeing intersect requires more research. The results we have so far look promising. Focusing on language and wellbeing offers new insights for overcoming inequalities. Linguists can put their services and knowledge to work in the service of justice and assist in formulating policy guidelines and assisting Indigenous peoples in the assertion of rights. European and US sociolinguistics have made a start with anti-discriminatory engagement (Charity Hudley 2013) and, as Holden (2019) argues for anthropologists, there is no unified position in linguistics, but most linguists studying issues such as migration, indigeneity and language endangerment consider language for its performative role “to get things done and to be someone”. Language loss results in the loss of options and possibilities in this regard. Ensuring that choices for diversity remain free and secure must therefore be given a high priority, and cultural expertise in Indigenous languages can contribute to the acceptance of this as a right in legal settings (Linguapax 2021).

Further Reading

Aboriginal Healing Foundation. 2008. *From Truth to Reconciliation: Transforming the Legacy to Reconciliation*. Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

A massive 400-pages-long volume which features emic approaches to language and wellbeing. Most of the chapters focus on resilience, reconciliation and social justice.

Taff, Alice, Melvatha Chee, Jaeci Hall, Millie Yei Dulitseen Hall, Kawenniyohstha Nicole Martin, and Anni Johnston. 2018. “Indigenous Language Use Impacts Wellness.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Endangered Languages*, edited by Kenneth L. Rehg and Lyle Campbell, 862–83. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Focusing mostly on cases in America, Taff and her associates report on qualitative evidence about the positive effects on health and society that accompany language revitalization. In the final part, this chapter suggests actions to be taken for successful language revitalization.

Zuckermann, Ghil’ad. 2020. *Revivalistics: From the Genesis of Israeli to Language Reclamation in Australia and Beyond*. New York: Oxford University Press.

The only monograph to date on the topic of language and wellbeing. Zuckermann recapitulates language revitalization in Israel in the first half of the book, and he then applies the lessons learned from the Israeli experience to Aborigines and their languages in Australia in the second part.

Q&A

1. What indications do we have that language choices affect wellbeing?

Key: There is a disparity in mental and physical health between Indigenous and non-Indigenous parts of society. Research shows that this is the effect of sociocultural displacement, i.e., of imposition of economic, cultural and political institutions and norms on Indigenous people. In this context, ancestral languages

are often abandoned. This has many negative repercussions on Indigenous communities. Language loss involves the loss of intellectual, economic, aesthetic and political resources. Language loss affects health, restricts choices for language, culture and norms, prevents the maintenance of community cohesion, limits opportunities to redistribute power more equally between the majority and the minority and renders attempts at self-empowerment more difficult. This negatively affects wellbeing. Seen the other way around, language revitalization can be a tool to improve wellbeing.

2. Why is speaking an ancestral language important, given the fact that nobody is left with “no language” if Indigenous people stop using their language?

Key: Language is not only a tool to transmit propositional content. It also has a performative role as a means of being someone and doing things. Being Indigenous (or any other kind of linguistic minority) and speaking one’s own ancestral language affects speakers in terms of what can be said and how, who one can be and what one can do. Ancestral languages provide a cultural and linguistic centre and reproduce norms and values that are central to one’s own community, as well as supporting claims for Indigenous rights.

3. What applications can you imagine for cultural expertise on language, education and the assertion of rights?

Key: Ancestral languages play a role in fostering intercultural tolerance and solidarity for society at large. This makes these languages a resource for the entire society, and they should accordingly be integrated within the education system to further the wellbeing of Indigenous groups. Cultural expertise on Indigenous languages can support dispute resolution and the assertion of rights, as well as lead to legal recognition of Indigenous languages at the legislative level.

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