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[Review of: T. Tsunoda (2005) Language endangerment and language revitalization: an introduction]

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DOI

[10.1558/sols.v2i1.167](https://doi.org/10.1558/sols.v2i1.167)

Publication date

2008

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Sociolinguistic Studies

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Flores Farfán, J. A. (2008). [Review of: T. Tsunoda (2005) Language endangerment and language revitalization: an introduction]. *Sociolinguistic Studies*, 2(1), 167-173.
<https://doi.org/10.1558/sols.v2i1.167>

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***Language endangerment and language revitalization.
An introduction. Tasaku Tsunoda (2005)***

Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. pp. xvi + 307.
ISBN: 3110176629

Reviewed by José Antonio Flores Farfán

Conceived not only for social scientists in general, especially for linguists, anthropologists and educators, but presumably appealing to a larger audience, *Language endangerment and language revitalization* (LELR) constitutes a good introductory textbook to the field, touching upon a number of relevant issues also for language activists and community members alike. The book presents an overview of most topics related to language endangerment and revitalization. Central issues considered include the causes and the continuum of endangerment that leads to language shift, together with a review of a number of methods for language revitalization.

Tsunoda reminds us that only since the 1970s linguists started paying attention to the threat of language endangerment. Tsunoda worked with moribund languages in Australia, which has a number of implications. First and foremost, treating all endangered languages as moribund languages may have the perverse effect of contributing to their demise. The endangerment continuum comprises many different situations including most languages worldwide, although in varying and very different degrees. The set of priorities in the endangered research agenda has had the ironic effect of favouring the investigation of languages which are reaching the tip of extinction, against developing a program

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towards the maintenance of still viable languages, in a preventive (Crystal 2004) or sustainable linguistics effort.

An extremely reduced number of speakers, characteristic of the Australian situation, also raise the question of what constitutes or not a linguistic community, an extreme example of which is Tsunoda himself being the last speaker of Warrungu. With this in mind, and only as a topic for future research, LRLE suggests the need for a finer typology of speakers in endangered settings. The classifications should go beyond the common proficiency and age variables, including the acquisition and stylistic use of the language, which would allow distinguishing more than only active versus passive individuals, rather identifying a wider range of speakers, including on the one hand of the continuum, semi- (Dorian 1977) quasi and pseudo-speakers (cf. Flores Farfán 1998), along with, on the other hand, plentiful, specialized, or possessors of the language (cf. Evans 2001). This invites us to reconsider some notions that are sometimes taken for granted in linguistics, as well as the ideologies that nurture its practice, namely: Who judges who is and what counts as a (fluent or not) speaker of a language? This also concerns the quality, reliability, credibility and accuracy of data in the field of endangered languages, a problematic issue as well. It does not depend on technical, 'objective' views on language, but most of all on language ideologies, for example a monolingual or purist ideology. In the interactive negotiations of speakers' and researchers' identities, an individual may want to convey a specific profile, depending on specific circumstances. Foreign talk is a case in point reported precisely for Australia (Evans 2001), in which speakers are so cooperative with linguists that they create a specific register designed to please them, also suggesting a playful approach to language in which the question of who studies whom becomes a central issue (cf. Flores Farfán 2006).

Since Tsunoda's direct examples stem from almost extinct languages, the risk of treating all endangered languages as moribund languages is indeed a problematic point. This also becomes clear while discussing methods for language documentation: '...endangered languages are not longer used as a medium for communication, and it is no longer possible to record them in their natural setting.' (p. 240). The distinction between an endangered albeit viable versus an almost extinct language is an important and valuable one that is missing in LELR. Despite the fussy and narrow use of the term endangered language, Tsunoda's discussion suggests that methods of documentation need not to be separated from the revitalization process. On the contrary, the design of a documentary project can at the same time impact the actual status and future of an endangered language, revitalizing it. In other words, empowering members of the community in order to document a formerly extremely endangered, even an almost extinct language is possible. For instance, the

previously mentioned study by Evans (2001) considers the linguist an emergent key new member of a language community, especially in places with very few speakers, as in Australia.

Likewise, with respect to definitions of what counts (or not) as linguistic data, Tsunoda seems to be much more tolerant than Dixon, who has eliminated words from his Wyawaygi vocabulary for which he could not find confirmation. On the contrary, Tsunoda considers other possible interpretations, such as conceiving them as performance 'errors', indicative of a variation due to a change in progress related (or not) to language contact; all more interesting possibilities than simply discarding data as unreliable. Embracing the documentary perspective in linguistics, Tsunoda suggests opposing prescriptivist and purist approaches. These, rather than fostering the use of endangered languages, have mostly tended to promote language shift (cf. e.g. Hill and Hill 1986). In this sense, Tsunoda is right in stressing that linguists should mobilize in favour of endangered languages, avoiding 'purist' ideologies which divide not only scholars from members of the communities but most importantly communities themselves.

Asking a number of theoretical and empirical questions of interest for linguists, Tsunoda stresses that language death is one of saddest aspects of human history, which ironically provides an excellent opportunity to investigate issues not present in 'normal' languages, such as the mirror image between child language (or the history of a language) and language shift; the levelling of paradigms in terms of simplification and reduction posing the (universal or not) limits of language change, and issues of (extreme) obsolescence and attrition characteristic of almost extinct languages, all topics are mentioned and at times treated to a certain extent in LELR. Maybe due to such pessimistic view on language endangerment and most of all revitalization, there are topics totally absent from the discussion; namely, the emergence of innovations viewed as survival strategies for the continuity of an endangered language. Even when speakers might often be overwhelmed by linguistic insecurity and reproduce negative ideologies towards disappearing varieties, at times contact facts are likely to be perceived quite differently, precisely as survival strategies favouring the continuity of the language. This already points to the potential dissonances between professional linguists and speakers of a language regarding specific facts. Another good example is what Tsunoda considers the primary task of a fieldworker: writing down a grammar, which is not necessarily, if at all, the priority set up from the point of view of speakers of a specific community.

Even when accepting that the main purpose of fieldwork is to produce the traditional triad grammar, vocabulary and texts, which Tsunoda seems to advocate, there is no discussion whatsoever of the different types of grammars that could be produced for different audiences. Such approach is partially

compensated by suggesting publishing raw data (pp. 246–7), echoing an emergent practice in documentary linguistics (cf. Gippert et al. 2006), which pursues to make direct data available in different formats, mostly in digital archives. Regarding the training of fieldworkers, Tsunoda opposes developing only partial training of students in isolated fields of linguistics, rather appealing to a holistic approach, in a well balanced manner, paying attention to the social context of fieldwork, an outstanding issue, especially when concerned with the emergent field of language revitalization. But training should not be conceived as a way of patronising speakers of endangered languages.

Thus a revitalizing agenda should consider closing the gap between different interests and perceptions, conciliating at times extremely different set of priorities and potential conflicts. For example, for the Australian context, Evans (2001) has pleaded for an indirect, oblique method of language revitalization, in which the interests of linguists and speakers coincide and are indeed complementary. Documentation can thus be thought of as an incentive to trigger the reactivation of a language by speakers of almost extinct, weakening and healthy albeit endangered languages, motivating participation for instance by encouraging these speakers to become mentors of the linguist in the acquisition of the language, producing positive effects on its social upheaval. On the contrary, forcing interrogative methods on speakers, a common approach in elicitation, may have undesired effects, imposing and perpetuating asymmetrical power relationships, even favouring language shift.

The field of language revitalization requires an intervention approach from the bottom up to reverse language shift, stabilising endangered languages. Such an ‘applied’ approach entails a commitment to the communities’ interests and perspectives and poses a number of political and ethical dilemmas. For instance, authorship and the research model to develop language revitalization as a successful endeavour, require the active participation of the community. Thus re-balancing power relationships in the research in language revitalization invites a new type of relationship between linguists and speakers, devising a much more democratic interaction in which speakers are no longer considered ‘informants’, but rather consultants or co-authors. In this respect, the field of language endangerment, revitalization and documentary linguistics requires a holistic approach, which in fact Tsunoda advocates, making explicit the ethical codes that guide research, highlighting issues as controlling research by the communities and the accessibility of its results, granting permissions, producing educational materials, warranting intellectual property rights, respecting individual as well as any other privacy rights (e.g. not recording sacred chants), avoiding ‘academic theft’ (p. 252) and exploitation.

Despite the book’s at times too synthetic presentation, running the risk of oversimplification, it has the merit of stressing key issues as the nature of the

also new and emergent field of language documentation, which distinguishes itself from received, 'descriptive', approaches in linguistics. It allows the newcomer to these fields to see the overall picture of the premises that guide documentary linguistics and its relationship to the revitalization program. For instance, quoting relevant sources, it distinguishes between language documentation and descriptive linguistics, the later being a specialist's exercise reduced to a narrow audience, namely professional linguists, against pursuing to produce open and extensive archives of endangered languages, useful for a number of different users. These include professional scholars and community members alike, and even the general public, striving to mobilize such resources in favour of the defence and promotion of endangered languages and their communities.

However briefly, most of the new approaches of language revitalization are presented with an essentially optimistic view of the future of endangered languages. This perspective is most welcome in a field often characterized by discouragement and distress. Indeed, the opportunity to recover linguists' documentation of a language to reactivate its use, as the author himself had the privilege to do for a community in Australia, is truly exhilarating. Even though Tsunoda's direct examples stem from such setting, where most languages are moribund (90% of the Australian linguistic heritage is at best only a memory), reaching the brink of extinction, such facts do not prevent the author from suggesting, however schematically, a critique of the narrow, one-sided nature of the scales that have been proposed to understand language shift (e.g. Fishman 1991). In this sense there is evidence, for instance in Mexico, that the postulated stages can overlap in a single region and period of time (cf. Flores Farfán 2000). Although this does not seem to be the case in Australia, Tsunoda states that Fishman's scale is irrelevant to understand the situation of moribund languages in Australia, adding a stage, something partially true as it refers to extinct languages viewed from an Anglo or Eurocentric perspective. Yet no attempt is made to situate such a scale in terms of the recovery and revival of language use, an interesting possibility suggested by his work, although not made theoretically explicit. This throws doubt on his presumed efforts to revive one of the extinct languages he has worked with, or at least pinpoints the fragility of the situation of such languages. Moreover, agreeing with Tsunoda that language revitalization faces a number of problems at the societal level, a remedial conception is probably not the most adequate one to address them, and should not privilege an ethnocentric approach stemming from outside the communities, a from a top-down approach. For instance, suggesting 'remedies' such as standardization or even the 'necessity' of a writing system could cause more problems than solutions at the community level, as documented in different parts of the world (cf. e.g. Mühlhäuser 1990).

Even when orthographic development might contribute to the empowerment of a specific community, it may also play against language maintenance, generating internal conflicts.

All in all, LELR reviews most of the terminology for the study of endangered languages and in this sense is fairly useful; for example, stressing that language endangerment is a matter of degree, based on a series of biological metaphors pursuing to capture the complex nature of the ecology of language endangerment and revitalization, putting together in one place different methods for language revitalization, including the famous Maori language nest program, a total immersion type method, variants of which are the neighbouring and the total response method, together with the bilingual method, the telephone method of Alaska and the radio one in Japan; the also well known master-apprentice method, the multimedia method, along with the two-way education method, the formulaic, the language reclamation and the adoption method, all last 3 directed to revive extinct languages. Methods of revitalization do not necessarily correlate with the degree of endangerment. For instance, the multimedia method could be applied to healthy languages, not only to weakening, moribund or extinct ones, as Tsunoda suggests (p. 201 and following). What becomes clear is that language revitalization cannot be reduced to technical matters, but requires an approach that goes beyond language itself, appealing to issues such as social justice and economic prosperity.

In his concluding remarks, Tsunoda admittedly summarizes (sic!) the missing topics of his overview on language endangerment and revitalization. Although again just in passing, he introduces a crucial topic which comprises much of the challenges the new approaches on language endangerment and revitalization require; namely, revisiting the set of priorities established not only by the urgency of documenting swiftly fading away languages, but most of all overcoming a museum-like view on endangered languages and cultures, establishing more democratic guidelines in the making of research, developing the academic quests not only for the sake of the profession, but first and foremost benefiting the members of the communities. Doing research with community members and not on isolated endangered languages as objects of study requires involving speakers as active subjects in language documentation that goes beyond a detached, presumed apolitical, recording of the language.

In closing Tsunoda stresses that the criteria set up by most prominent scholars on language endangerment are still overwhelmingly oriented towards developing linguistic description, not even language documentation, responding more to the interests of the discipline than to the possibility of recasting the communities' interests and perspectives, or what he calls, somewhat schematically 'the wish of the community' (p. 253). In practice linguists activities are permanently negotiated with community members, constituting part of the micro-politics of

research – a fact that in a way makes his final remark regarding the avoidance (or not) of linguists to participate in political activities somewhat naïve and even irrelevant. Language revitalization is and has always been political action, as shown for instance by Catalan sociolinguistics, historically always conceived as militant sociolinguistics.

As suggested here, fulfilling the different needs of speakers and scholars is absolutely compatible. After all the linguists' responsibility and commitment should not become inharmonious with the communities' expectations regarding the use of an endangered language. On the contrary, as linguists we should start thinking that contributing to their revitalization is an essential part of the job. Promoting good practices in language revitalization should not be obliterated if we are to think of a better future for the languages and people of the world. In this sense, a final recommendation is at stake. Translating the book and putting it in an accessible free format such as the internet would become a crucial asset for young speakers of endangered languages and the general public to the field, thus contributing to the defence of the world's intangible heritage.

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