On history and success in language revival

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Can a language be brought back to life based solely on written documentation? In short: yes, but under specific conditions, and with a loose definition of "revived".

Language revival and revitalization, or "revivalistics" as proposed by Israeli linguist Ghil'ad Zuckermann (2020a), is as complex as it is important, touching on issues both within and outside of linguistics. Intensive study of a lost or declining language reconnects communities (including both spoken and signed languages) with the knowledge of their predecessors, which empowers communities and improves mental health outcomes (Zuckermann, 2020b).

This paper explores the most salient of those issues by examining cases of revival attempts, drawing parallels, and defining success in the revival context. The language vitality scale described in the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group for Endangered Languages paper "Language Vitality and Endangerment" (Graaf, 2003) will serve as a reference point for discussing language stability. See Appendix 1 for the full scale. Essentially, languages of high prestige that are well-documented, used in all domains, taught widely in schools, with high numbers and percentages of L1 (native) speakers, recognized by relevant government authorities, have the highest probability of remaining in stable use. Languages with deficiencies in any of those areas are at risk of decline, already declining, or some degree of dead or extinct. The paper emphasizes the importance of an individualized, context-based approach to revival in which no language should be treated based on its vitality scores alone.

To begin, there must be a distinction made between the terms "revival" and "revitalization": language revival is the resuscitation of a language with no living L1 speakers,

considered dead or extinct by the UNESCO scale (Grenoble & Whaley, 2009). Revitalization is the reversal of decline in a language that is still alive but unsafe or endangered, such as Basque (Grenoble & Whaley, 2009). There have been numerous attempts to revive languages with no living L1 speakers. While it's not possible to generalize, it is possible to review cases and extract patterns.

Most of these revival attempts have been performed with languages with little widespread modern cultural relevance, inconsistent documentation, and whose last L1 speaker died in the last 200 years (Zuckermann, 2020a). The attempts result in a small population of L2 (second language) speakers with the rare L1 child (BBC, 2010). They are often languages with a heritage connection to a modern ethnic group seeking reconnection with their linguistic and cultural past, which they were unable to preserve due to many possible historical factors (Zuckermann, 2020a). Notable examples include Cornish in the UK, Chochenyo in the USA, and Barngarla in Australia (Grenoble & Whaley, 2009). Two prominent exceptions to this pattern are Sanskrit and Hebrew. Sanskrit is the liturgical language of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, whose last L1 speaker died in the 12th century (Hindustan Times, 2015). Its modern L2 population is about 2 million, mostly residing in India and within the Indian diaspora population (Hindustan Times, 2015). Hebrew is the liturgical language of Judaism whose last L1 speaker died in the second century CE (Bar-Adon, 1975). It now has an L1 population of 5 million, an L2 population of 4 million, and is the official language of Israel (Bar-Adon, 1975). What accounts for the differences in revival outcomes between Hebrew, Sanskrit, and the smaller languages?

Hebrew's success can be attributed to three main factors: 1) its worldwide historically religious use in the Jewish diaspora population long after its decline as a vernacular L1; 2) the sociopolitical climate at the time of its revival during the Zionist movement favoring Jewish

nationalism in the late 19th–early 20th centuries; and 3) a genuine communicative need among groups of recently settled Jewish people in Palestine during the Zionist movement with different L1s; their only common L2 was classical Hebrew (Bar-Adon, 1975). For almost two thousand years the language was well-documented in Jewish religious texts and literature, used in prayer, and even served as a *lingua franca* amongst Jewish travelers and merchants (Bar-Adon, 1975); it could even be argued that classical Hebrew never fully "died", but simply lost its L1 speakers while maintaining immense cultural relevance. UNESCO (Graaf, 2003) considers such documentation to be a significant factor in language vitality.

Hebrew became a *lingua franca* for Zionist groups and the population of Palestine, eventually growing to become the L1 of the entire nation of Israel (Bar-Adon, 1975). Part of the spread is due to the inception of *kibbutzim,* intentional agricultural communities with Zionist principles where use of Hebrew in daily life was highly encouraged (Zuckermann, 2006). The full resurrection of Hebrew as a language was not the objective, but a byproduct of a greater movement, unlike the explicit revival efforts of the smaller languages mentioned previously and even Sanskrit (Zuckermann, 2020a). While some overt effort was necessary in order to standardize and modernize Hebrew for contemporary use, it was born from a genuine need for effective widespread communication throughout a nation (Bar-Adon, 1975).

Essentially a case of linguistic right-place, right-time, this circumstance is virtually non-replicable in today's world. The dead and endangered languages of today face the challenges of globalization, majority language domination, and marginalization of minority groups at an unprecedented scale (Zuckermann, 2020b). Most communicative needs are filled by the dominant societal language, which hinders the progress of less-relevant languages (Grenoble & Whaley, 2009). Sanskrit is perhaps the only other language comparable to Hebrew in terms of historical

use, prestige, significance, and quality of documentation. The efforts made to revive Sanskrit have been fairly similar, although on a much larger scale, to those made in the smaller languages. There are Sanskrit learning centers, university programs, and promotional bodies around the world which have succeeded in cultivating a substantial L2 population (Hindustani Times, 2015). But in the absence of a true communicative need, Sanskrit falls short in fostering an L1 population. Any L2 Sanskrit speaker, especially in India, also speaks one or several other languages that fulfill their communicative needs–Hindi, English, and possibly many others. L2 Sanskrit speakers have little incentive, therefore, to use Sanskrit as their children's L1 when they could give them a much more practical language instead.

An issue that can contribute to the decline of a language or the success of a revival/revitalization attempt is a language's ability to be used in multiple domains–is its lexicon broad enough to discuss contemporary topics and allow its speakers to progress with the times (Graaf, 2003)? This issue is prevalent in every language revival and helps explain why Sanskrit, Cornish, Dalmatian, Barngarla, and Chochenyo among others struggle to take hold as L1s in the modern world. This is a bone of contention among scholars and language users–should the speech community work to maintain linguistic purity, or give in and embrace necessary change?

Hebrew has an interesting set of factions relating to this issue: some scholars believe that Hebrew rose from the dead during the Zionist movement and continued as it was when it died as an L1 almost 2000 years ago (Zuckermann, 2006). Some believe that modern Hebrew is actually Yiddish relexified, known colloquially as "Yiddish with Hebrew words" (Zuckermann, 2006). Ghil'ad Zuckermann goes even further afield and argues that modern Hebrew doesn't deserve to be called Hebrew at all, but rather "Israeli", given the tremendous degree of foreign linguistic

influence he sees (Zuckermann, 2006). The degree to which a revived language differs from the original language, then, must be considered when defining success in a revival project.

What other tools can we use to measure the success of a revival project? What counts as revival? The level of success achieved by Hebrew, different as it is from its original form, is unrealistic for the vast majority of languages. A change in status on the UNESCO scale is a good starting point; it recognizes smaller changes and milestones in a language's growth. But how far? Should a language have L1 speakers to be considered revived? This paper argues that, in the spirit of the UNESCO vitality scale, success should be determined by the speech community on an individual level through specific objectives determined during the planning process. It is fundamental for the language to serve the purposes of its speakers, not of any other party.

To answer the initial question, it's important to emphasize why languages are revived in the first place–to preserve knowledge of the world, for the benefit of a speech community. Could any extinct language be taken from a few scribbles on a stone tablet to the official language and L1 of a prominent nation? The answer is overwhelmingly no. With a starting point of dedication, time, quality documentation, and quality education, a revived language might expect intermediate L2 fluency in a small group of very interested parties. An L1 generation is unlikely without the use of isolation methods such as the *kibbutz* to bring people of various L1s together and create a communicative need. Even then, there would certainly be competition from dominant world languages such as English and Spanish, which are already lexically prepared to handle contemporary communication. However, if a given group considers an L2 population to be a revival success, then it is certainly possible to revive a language from written documentation alone. The key is the sociolinguistic context: what the language comes from and what the present looks like for its users.

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Appendix 1: Language vitality scale by the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group for Endangered Languages

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	Speaker Population
safe	5	The language is used by all ages, from children up.
unsafe	4	The language is used by some children in all domains; it is used by all children in limited domains.
definitively endangered	3	The language is used mostly by the parental generation and up.
severely endangered	2	The language is used mostly by the grandparental generation and up.
critically endangered	1	The language is used mostly by very few speakers, of great-grandparental generation.
extinct	0	There exists no speaker.

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	Proportion of Speakers Within the Total Reference Population
safe	5	All speak the language.
unsafe	4	Nearly all speak the language.
definitively endangered	3	A majority speak the language.
severely endangered	2	A minority speak the language.
critically endangered	1	Very few speak the language.
extinct	0	None speak the language.

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	Domains and Functions
universal use	5	The language is used in all domains and for all functions
multilingual parity	4	Two or more languages may be used in most social domains and for most functions.
dwindling domains	3	The language is in home domains and for many functions, but the dominant language begins to penetrate even home domains.
limited or formal domains	2	The language is used in limited social domains and for several functions
highly limited domains	1	The language is used only in a very restricted domains and for a very few functions
extinct	0	The language is not used in any domain and for any function.

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	New Domains and Media Accepted by the Endangered Language
dynamic	5	The language is used in all new domains.
robust/active	4	The language is used in most new domains.
receptive	3	The language is used in many domains.
coping	2	The language is used in some new domains.
minimal	1	The language is used only in a few new domains.
inactive	0	The language is not used in any new domains.

Grade	Accessibility of Written Materials
5	There is an established orthography, literacy tradition with grammars, dictionaries, texts, literature, and everyday media. Writing in the language is used in administration and education.
4	Written materials exist, and at school, children are developing literacy in the language. Writing in the language is not used in administration.
3	Written materials exist and children may be exposed to the written form at school. Literacy is not promoted through print media.
2	Written materials exist, but they may only be useful for some members of the community; and for others, they may have a symbolic significance. Literacy education in the language is not a part of the school curriculum.
1	A practical orthography is known to the community and some material is being written.
0	No orthography available to the community.

Degree of Support	Grade	Official Attitudes toward Language
equal support	5	All languages are protected.
differentiated support	4	Minority languages are protected primarily as the language of the private domains. The use of the language is prestigious.
passive assimilation	3	No explicit policy exists for minority languages; the dominant language prevails in the public domain.
active assimilation	2	Government encourages assimilation to the dominant language. There is no protection for minority languages.
forced assimilation	1	The dominant language is the sole official language, while non-dominant languages are neither recognized nor protected.
prohibition	0	Minority languages are prohibited.

Grade	Community Members' Attitudes toward Language
5	*All* members value their language and wish to see it promoted.
4	*Most* members support language maintenance.
3	*Many* members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss.
2	*Some* members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss.
1	Only *a few* members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss.
0	*No one* cares if the language is lost; all prefer to use a dominant language.

Nature of Documentation	Grade	Language Documentation
superlative	5	There are comprehensive grammars and dictionaries, extensive texts; constant flow of language materials. Abundant annotated high-quality audio and video recordings exist.
good	4	There are one good grammar and a number of adequate grammars, dictionaries, texts, literature, and occasionally updated everyday media; adequate annotated high-quality audio and video recordings.
fair	3	There may be an adequate grammar or sufficient amount of grammars, dictionaries, and texts, but no everyday media; audio and video recordings may exist in varying quality or degree of annotation.
fragmentary	2	There are some grammatical sketches, word-lists, and texts useful for limited linguistic research but with inadequate coverage. Audio and video recordings may exist in varying quality, with or without any annotation.
inadequate	1	Only a few grammatical sketches, short word-lists, and fragmentary texts. Audio and video recordings do not exist, are of unusable quality, or are completely un-annotated.

undocumented	0	No material exists.