

Hunting language: A WAYK session in Language Revitalization and Documentation

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Abstract

Academic discussion of the relationship between language documentation and revitalization has largely been limited to strategies for making documentation outputs accessible to language revitalization activists at some unknown point in the future, particularly by developing teaching materials. Conversely, there has been little attention to the possibilities for documentation within revitalization contexts. This reflects a missed opportunity for documentation and language learning to take place simultaneously, during the same sessions with fluent speakers. Taking this opportunity as premise, the question becomes: how best to structure a session to accommodate both documentation and revitalization interests? In response I outline the model implemented by “Where Are Your Keys” (WAYK) and the Unangam Tunuu Speaking, Listening, and Teaching (UTSLT) team of St. Paul Island, Alaska, based on a three-month internship on St. Paul Island in 2017. For the purposes of this article, the key stage of the model is the immersion session in which learners talk to more proficient speakers. This session is guided, firstly, by the principle of using “set-ups”, rather than translation, to “pull language” from more proficient speakers; and secondly by other principles and methodologies of second language acquisition commonly applied in teaching major world languages.

The relationship between language revitalization and language documentation¹³

Academic discussion of the relationship between language documentation and revitalization has largely been limited to strategies for making documentation outputs accessible to language revitalization activists at some unknown point in the future, particularly by developing teaching materials (Palosaari, 2008; Woodbury, 2014). Academics who advocate language maintenance and revitalization often see documentation as chronologically and methodologically prior to revitalization. Brenzinger and de Graaf (2017:19), for example, in their section on language maintenance and revitalization, write that “as a *first step* oral languages need to be analysed and documented” (my emphasis). Even those who have reflected hardest on the relationship between revitalization and documentation - challenging the ethics of a paradigm that prioritizes documentation over revitalization, sometimes against the wishes of speakers and communities, and recognizing that “documentation as it is currently practiced mainly serves the purposes of descriptive and typological linguists” (Nathan & Fang, 2008:177) - still assume this basic separation in space and method between revitalization and documentation. For example, Yamada (2011:4), describes “a process of documentation that directly serves revitalization needs as articulated by language speakers—in this case,

supporting language revitalization with materials for formal teaching.” To make these observations is not to diminish the importance of these ethical and methodological advances in working with endangered language speakers and communities; as long as it is recognized that producing teaching materials is only part of the picture. Indeed, Yamada (2011:2–3) stresses that

[f]ormal teaching ... is only one component of a larger revitalization effort [...] Perhaps we—outsider academics and speech community members alike—can support each other in finding new ways of addressing the needs of all members of a documentation endeavor.

Let us also consider the issue from the perspective of those who prioritize revitalization. Given the above-mentioned prioritisation of documentation, there is less focus on revitalization overall in the academic world, and thus there is less opportunity for change; there is also less published information available about revitalization methodology. Nonetheless, it seems that there has been little attention to the possibilities for documentation within revitalization contexts (Austin & Sallabank, Forthcoming).

All the above reflects a missed opportunity (or many missed opportunities worldwide) for documentation and language learning to take place simultaneously, during the same sessions with fluent speakers: one can take advantage of a supposed “documentation session” to learn a language, and take advantage of a “(language)

¹³In this article I use “documentation” as a shorthand for what many would call “documentation and description” (cf. Woodbury 2011:173–178).

lesson” to document a language. In this article I simply use the term *session*, to collapse the distinction.¹⁴

How to structure a session with fluent speakers to accommodate both revitalization and documentation interests?

If we take the “missed opportunity” outlined above as a premise, our question becomes: how does one structure a session with fluent speakers to best accommodate both documentation and revitalization interests? In response I present the model implemented by Where Are You Keys (WAYK). WAYK is both a method for language learning/teaching and a small organization that has provided language revitalization consultancy for various native communities in Alaska and the Pacific Northwest (Gardner & Ciotti, 2017; Gardner & Ciotti, Forthcoming). The model presented in this article is that implemented by WAYK together with these communities, including with the Unangam Tunuu Speaking, Listening, and Teaching (UTSLT) team of St. Paul Island, Alaska. There are teams working on the revitalization of Unangam Tunuu (also known as Aleut; this name is considered pejorative by some) on St. Paul, Atka, and in the Anchorage metropolitan area (for background information on the language and people see Bergstrand 1997; Jochelson 1990).

The steps of the WAYK model, which are cyclical, are as follows:

1. Learners find gaps in their linguistic knowledge as they practice speaking with each other, with fluent speakers, or as they teach less proficient learners
2. They work out a “set-up”, i.e. a context-rich scenario, to “pull” the needed language from fluent speakers (I elaborate on these terms below)
3. In their next session with fluent speakers they present this set-up and hopefully fluent speakers provide language to solve the communicative need; this is recorded
4. Learners practice the language that fluent speakers provide; this is recorded
5. These learners come up with a lesson plan to later teach the new language to other learners (one of the principles of WAYK being that everybody is both learner and teacher);
6. This lesson plan is tested with the fluent speakers, which is also recorded.

The Venn diagram: choosing what language to pull

The first step is embodied in a simple Venn diagram, drawn large on a poster in the space(s) used for language revitalization. This helps decide what language units to pull next from fluent speakers; a language unit can be any relatively discrete unit of linguistic competence, from a vocabulary item to a syntactic rule. According to this Venn diagram the criteria that a language unit fulfils, in order to be an ideal unit to pull, are:

- language you (the learner) hear often
- language you already have an 80% grasp of
- language that defines proficiency in the target language-culture
- language needed for topics that you regularly talk about

These criteria, clearly, are based more on considerations of second language acquisition (SLA) than language documentation.¹⁵ They are based on the context facing the learner, rather than on theoretical questions elaborated in distant academic settings, since it is well established that for successful acquisition of language units they must be contextually meaningful to learners (e.g. Brown 2001; Omaggio Hadley 2001; Richards & Rodgers 1986). The Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS) methodology, in particular, stresses that they must be of interest to learners (Ray & Seely 2016). The Venn diagram embodies and exemplifies a relationship between documentation and revitalization whereby documentation occurs as a natural byproduct of revitalization.

Even for those who are concerned only with language documentation, this approach is worth considering. It determines the language units that a linguist will be best able to describe accurately; it is methodologically questionable to describe linguistic phenomena if one has seldom heard them and has little grasp on their meaning. With regard to ethics, it defines the language that is of most immediate use to the community. This said, there are also considerations of descriptive or theoretical linguistics that can contribute to the quality of sessions: a linguist familiar with the typology of regional languages may be able to guide learners towards the relevance of certain distinctions.

Learners such as the UTSLT team members typically keep information relevant to the Venn diagram (which language units they’ve heard often, language needed for recurring topics of conversation, etc.) in books similar to the elicitation field notes of linguists except that

¹⁴WAYK refers to this as a “hunt”, which I avoid in this article in order to minimize the new terms introduced. For a reflection on the metaphor of hunting see Leighton 2017.

¹⁵I use the abbreviation SLA to include both “learning” and “acquisition” (Krashen 1982), simply because it seems to be better established as a catch-all term.

translation is avoided in these notes, as in immersion sessions.

Set-up and prove-it: a comparison between pulling language and elicitation

Both language documentation and revitalization require transfer of linguistic knowledge - the knowledge one needs in order to be considered a proficient speaker of a language - from someone who has it to someone who doesn't. This is the fundamental similarity between a language documentation session and a WAYK-style language learning session. Indeed, the basic workflow of sessions carried out by the UTSLT team is similar to that taught on the field methods course at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. However, there are significant ways in which a WAYK-style session differs from many common approaches to language elicitation (as represented in academic discourse), and these differences constitute opportunities for each side to learn from the other.

The first is that a WAYK session is in immersion in the target language. This idea in itself is nothing new to documentary linguistics (e.g. Crowley 2007:154–160; Sakel & Everett 2012:29–34), nor to language revitalization (e.g. Hinton 2013). The second difference concerns “pulling language”: a phrase the WAYK team uses, rather than “elicitation”, to highlight to a methodologically, philosophically, and ethically important difference in how one has fluent speakers speak the target language. Claire Bowern (2008:78) writes that “the most common method of elicitation is to have consultant(s) translate sentences into the target language”. It seems unlikely that this state of affairs in documentary linguistics is really because linguists do not recognize the dangers of translation (see Haviland, 2006 for an overview of such dangers), yet in practice translation is often taken for granted as the main method of elicitation (e.g. Chelliah & de Reuse, 2011:212). The reason for this is perhaps simply that academic linguists, who often have little knowledge of applied linguistics or language teaching, have not thought of many alternative methods for conveying meaning in this situation. Notable exceptions include the visual stimuli developed by the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (Levinson & Enfield 2001); but these are still directed by top-down theoretical concerns, rather than language as it arises in context (see previous section). This is characteristic of the breach in academia between applied linguistics (especially language teaching) and documentary linguistics (Penfield & Tucker, 2011).

Here I provide an example of the WAYK approach using the way in which the author of this article pulled the Quechua morpheme *-lla* (or, to be more cautious, a particular use of the morpheme *-lla*) from a second, more proficient, learner of Quechua. It is important to note that I did not know in advance that *-lla* would be the morpheme used to express the conceptual distinction

at hand. I first laid out a set of three figurines of women, and asked “what are these?” (here I provide questions in translation for ease of exposition), receiving the following answer:

(1) *Warmi-kuna ka-nku*.¹⁶

Then I laid out set of figurines including the woman, a man, a child, and the baby and again asked “what are these”, getting the response:

(2) *Warmi, runa, erqe, wawa, ka-nku*.

I asked “what's the difference?”, pointing to each set in turn. The more proficient speaker gave the following response:

(3) *Warmi-kuna-lla ka-nku*.

I then laid out another set-up, consisting of another two sets of objects, but this time using nonhuman animals. This time I tried to “prove it”, i.e. to use the morpheme on my own first and thereby prove my correct understanding of how it is used. This requires asking for any necessary correction from the more proficient speaker. I repeated the process a third time using kitchen implements. The purpose of these repetitions was to check if animacy makes a difference to the use of the morpheme (it doesn't). Of course, animacy is only one parameter that might be relevant. In the future if there is reason to suspect that a certain use of *-lla* is inappropriate, then more set-ups can be created to test other parameters. Although this relatively simple set-up was invented on the spot, it will often help to work out a set-up before meeting with the more proficient speakers, especially if there are several people involved. This can avoid confusion that is hard to untangle when in immersion at low levels of proficiency, and that can lead to frustration on all sides.

Even for readers interested purely in language documentation, there is benefit in learning how to pull language without recourse to translation. It lessens the influence of the dominant language on the linguist's interpretation of meaning (cf. Bradley 2007) and provides context from which to judge the meaning of an utterance with less direct influence from the dominant language for others who interact with the documentation

¹⁶ Linguists reading may notice the lack of interlinear glossing and translation. I encourage them to try deriving meaning from the description of context given, in line with the methodology presented, although this is admittedly more awkward in written language.

in the future. Relatedly, it may be also be richer in information than a translation, especially when the session is recorded on video as well as audio. From an ethical perspective, it helps to avoid any suggestion that the target language should be able to convey all the same nuances as the dominant language - promoting the view that the language is valuable on its own terms and thereby, perhaps, contributing to language maintenance.

Practising the language: incorporating principles and methodologies from second language acquisition

Following the *set-up* and *prove-it* in Quechua described above, the more proficient speaker and I used the circling technique drawn from Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (Ray & Seely, 2016), whereby one person points at a rock (for example) and asks four questions as follows:

- what's that?
[response: that's a rock]
- is that a rock?
[response: yes, that's a rock]
- is that a rock or is that a tree?
[response: that's not a tree, that's a rock]
- is that a tree?
[response: no, that's not a tree]

This solidifies knowledge of the language unit at hand, including perhaps for the more proficient speaker who may not have spoken the language for some time. (At the same time, for purposes of documentation, it provides more instances of the morpheme used in full sentences, providing information about phonology, prosody, and polar question formation.) This is just one example of a simple technique from a well-known approach to language learning/teaching that can easily be applied in a session. Although such techniques and methodologies may be well known in linguistics departments, and certainly in language classrooms for teaching major world languages, they seem to be less known in contexts of indigenous language revitalization (at least in the Americas). The fact that speakers and learners are not aware of them is unsurprising, given that they generally experience little effective application of SLA theory in school systems. The UTSLT team had little to no experience of learning second languages before their engagement with Unangam Tunuu; the same applies to other heritage learners of indigenous languages in the Americas that the author and the WAYK team have interacted with. In addition, the preconception, held by many such learners, that learning their heritage language is a different business from learning Spanish or Chinese may not help. The fact that documentary linguists, who are often the only kind of

linguist to become involved in such situations, generally do not have relevant SLA knowledge is symptomatic, again, of the breach in academia between applied linguistics and documentary linguistics (Penfield & Tucker, 2011). (A great deal could be done to remedy this gap through, say, a month-long course in teaching English to speakers of languages; little investment, perhaps, for a lifetime of work with speakers of endangered languages.) As such it is unsurprising, though regrettable, that contemporary knowledge of SLA was not fully deployed in the revitalization of Unangam Tunuu (or languages in similar circumstances) until people appeared on the scene who were neither from the community nor from the academic world, but simply had a background in teaching European languages in a classroom setting.

Pushing language, pushing learners up the ladder

The model described so far could in theory be implemented by a single person, or single group of people, who are increasing their own proficiency at the same time as documenting and describing the language. Yet the WAYK philosophy is that everyone is, and should be, a teacher as well as a learner. Although teaching takes away some time that could be used to pull more language, it has the great benefit that by teaching on language, people either cement their linguistic knowledge or become acutely aware of the gaps in their knowledge. In the latter case, learners then have a strong incentive to pull more language from the fluent speakers. Another justification for the philosophy is that in the case of many under-documented and under-described languages, there are very few speakers left. This means that if learners, who are also probably few in number, spend all their time improving their own proficiency and documenting the language, then once the fluent speakers die there will still only be a few speakers in the world (i.e. the learners). This situation may also lead to tension between the few privileged community members who speak and community members who don't.

Thus the fourth step is to work out how to push (i.e. teach) language, also in immersion. This may require little more than teachers acting out the same set-up as they did to pull the language in the first place, then adding on a stage where learners practice using the new language. In fact, part of the benefit of working out a good immersion set-up (steps 2 and 3) is that this also does most of the work of developing an immersion lesson; it kill two birds with one stone.

This stage includes testing the ride with the fluent speakers, which is also recorded, and incorporating any feedback. Testing the lesson in this way is often another

excellent opportunity to document more linguistic information. This is partly because the fluent speakers know that the language they give at this point will be taught on to many others, and may become the standard. More could be said about the techniques used to teach in immersion before the teacher is fluent, but this is a slightly separate topic (Gardner & Ciotti, Forthcoming).

Swimlanes

To summarize all of the steps described above, let us turn to another process tool used in the revitalization of Unangam Tunuu (and originally taken from business management; see Lucidchart 2018). The basic idea of swimlanes is that a language unit starts off as something that only fluent, first-language speakers know; and ends up being something that learners are (a) fully confident in using, and (b) ready to teach others. The physical manifestation of this is that a language unit is written down on paper and pinned to the wall on one side of a room. By the end of the swimlanes process this language unit has made its way over to the other side of the room, going through various stages. As a learner acquires more information about a language unit, they move the unit along the swimlanes. When the set-up is developed, this is added in the form of a script for learners to act out. When the set-up is run in front of the fluent speakers, their reactions are recorded. When the lesson plan is made, this is added. When the lesson is tested with other learners, their feedback is added. So the language unit actually becomes a bundle of papers containing all of this information, including the names of those who were involved at each stage (The UTSLT team has made a form with pre-defined fields for this.) The separate physical identity of each language unit on the swimlanes makes it easy to track its journey to revitalization.

Comparison to existing ideas about language documentation and language revitalization

One fundamental difference between WAYK and other approaches to language documentation is that WAYK aims for language revitalization, with documentation emerging almost automatically as a byproduct. However, this is no obstacle to documenting language. On the contrary, WAYK sessions can be exemplary documentation sessions, for several reasons. The use of carefully designed set-ups makes the meaning of language as clear as possible without recourse to translation. Learner mistakes and fluent speakers' corrections highlight differences between the dominant language and the target language. The fact that learners/documenters are community members (and often even family members) means that they share much cultural common ground with fluent speakers. Taking revitalization as a focus makes community members more likely to be involved, moving a project towards

more ethical frameworks for documentation (Grinevald, 2007; Florey, 2008; Grinevald & Bert, 2011:62).

The fact that the similarity (or potential similarity) between an elicitation session and a language learning session has not received more attention may be because of a pedagogical bias towards having language-learning interactions directed by the more fluent speaker, at least in European cultures and cultures subjected to European colonization. Yet endangered language situations frequently do not lend themselves to this approach, because it is hard for fluent speakers (who are often elderly) to suddenly become effective language teachers. In contexts like this the onus falls on younger language-learners, who often have more linguistic and/or pedagogical training, to take charge of language-learning interactions.

Some may object that the model proposed does not allow for documentation to proceed fast enough in situations where languages are severely endangered, and that in the long run it would serve revitalization interests better to have a fuller documentation and description than to create new speakers who may only reach limited proficiency before the last speakers pass away. This objection may have validity in cases where a language is severely endangered, although it discounts the value of learning in person as opposed to learning from texts and recordings (it also happens not to be an issue in the case of Unangam Tunuu since there is already substantial documentation and description of the language). However, the WAYK response to this objection is the following: make sure that learners of the language learn as quickly and efficiently as possible (by using methods and techniques further described in Gardner & Ciotti, 2017; Gardner & Ciotti, Forthcoming) to the point where there is no time advantage to carrying out documentation rather than the kind of session described in this article - if indeed we can definitively say that there is a time advantage at the moment, which is an open question.

To summarize, language revitalization and language documentation take on rather separate identities in much talk about endangered languages. This is a valid and perhaps necessary step to talking and thinking about these processes; yet it underplays, or overlooks, the basic similarity between language documentation and language learning. This similarity presents a great opportunity for all those fighting language loss.

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